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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

Number 5

<http://farms.byu.edu>

Etruscan Gold Book from 600 B.C. Discovered

The Bulgarian National Museum of History in Sofia, Bulgaria, recently placed on public display an ancient book comprising six pages of 23.82-karat gold (measuring 5 centimeters in length and 4.5 centimeters in width) bound together by gold rings. The plates contain a text written in Etruscan characters and also depict a horse, a horseman, a Siren, a lyre, and soldiers. According to Elka Penkova, who heads the museum's archaeology department, the find may be the oldest complete book in the world, dating to about 600 B.C.

The content of the book suggests that it was made for the funeral of an aristocrat who was a member of the Orpheus cult.¹ The Greek philosopher Pythagoras spread the beliefs of the cult (which originated in Thracia) in southern Italy and among the neighboring Etruscan tribes. Accord-

ing to Penkova, about 30 pages from Etruscan books are known from elsewhere, but only in single sheets. The Bulgarian find is the only complete version.

An 87-year-old Bulgarian man from Macedonia, who wishes to remain anonymous, donated the book to the museum. He had discovered the treasure in a tomb unearthed 60 years ago when he was a soldier working on the construction of a canal along the Strouma River in southwestern Bulgaria. According to Bozhidar Dimitrov, director of the museum, the find has been authenticated by experts in Sofia and London. Bulgarian professor Valdimir Georgiev is working on a translation of the text.

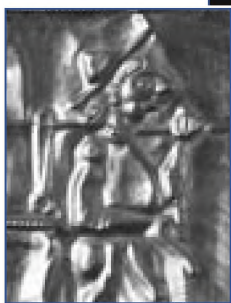
The find is significant to Latter-day Saints because the book was prepared about the time Lehi and his family left Jerusalem² and generally fits the description of the Book of Mormon plates given by Joseph Smith in his letter to John Wentworth:

These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long, and not quite so thick as common tin.

They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters, and bound together in a volume as the leaves of a book, with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book

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Like the Book of Mormon record, this diminutive book from about 600 B.C. found in Bulgaria was written on gold plates held together by rings. AFP/Getty Images



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Confession of Sins before Execution

Alma 1:15 records the execution of Nehor for the murder of Gideon:

And it came to pass that they took him; and his name was Nehor; and they carried him upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he was caused, or rather did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death.

The concept of having a condemned man confess his sins before being executed is intriguing. Since the man is doomed, why would he cooperate with the authorities by detailing his crime? With no hope of leniency for confessing, what could he possibly gain?

The answer may lie in the regulations followed by Jewish religious authorities in the time of Christ. One of the tractates of the Mishnah describes in detail the procedures used by the Sanhedrin in capital cases, from the value of eyewitness testimony to the various means of execution.¹ A major provision concerning confession is described thus:

When he [the condemned man] was about ten cubits from the place of stoning they used to say to him, "Make thy confession," for such is the way of them that have been condemned to death to make confession, for every one that makes his confession has a share in the world to come. (*M Sanhedrin* 6.2)²

The passage then cites Joshua 7:19 as precedent for this provision. When Achan was condemned to be stoned for his sin,

Joshua said unto Achan, My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession unto him; and tell me now what thou hast done; hide it not from me. And Achan answered Joshua, and said,

Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and thus and thus have I done.

The Mishnah makes it clear that although the confession would not alter the decision of the court, it would be taken into consideration in the final judgment that would be made by God. This seems to be the reasoning in another Book of Mormon account, in which a man named Sherem was guilty of teaching falsehood. Although the Nephite authorities did not intend to execute him, the Lord smote him, "insomuch that he fell to the earth" (Jacob 7:15).

And it came to pass that [Sherem] said unto the people: Gather together on the morrow, for I shall die; wherefore, I desire to speak unto the people before I shall die. And it came to pass that on the morrow the multitude were gathered together; and he spake plainly unto them and denied the things which he had taught them, and confessed the Christ, and the power of the Holy Ghost, and the ministering of angels. And he spake plainly unto them, that he had been deceived by the power of the devil. And he spake of hell, and of eternity, and of eternal punishment. And he said: I fear lest I have committed the unpardonable sin, for I have lied unto God; for I denied the Christ, and said that I believed the scriptures; and they truly testify of him. And because I have thus lied unto God I greatly fear lest my case shall be awful; but I confess unto God. And it came to pass that when he had said these words he could say no more, and he gave up the ghost. (Jacob 7:16–20)

Sherem's words make it clear that his confession was "unto God" as well as a means to acknowledge to others that he had been teaching false ideas about God. It may be significant that Sherem asked the people to gather "on the morrow" to hear his confession before he died, for the Mishnah notes that a man found guilty of a capital crime could not be executed until the day following the judgment (*M Sanhedrin* 5.5).³

We do not know the nature of the “ignominious death” that Nehor suffered, but in view of the Mishnaic requirement that the place of stoning be at least twice as high as a man so that the culprit could be pushed over the edge before being stoned (M *Sanhedrin* 6.4),⁴ it is interesting that Nehor was brought to the top of the hill to be executed. Of the various approved methods of execution, stoning was required for “[him] that beguiles [others to idolatry], and [him] that leads [a whole town] astray” (M *Sanhedrin* 7.3).⁵

The location of Nehor’s execution atop a hill may be behind the statement that he made his confessions “between the heavens and the earth.” But that expression may have something to do with calling heaven and earth to witness, as in several Old Testament passages (Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28). Ze’ev W. Falk, an expert on Jewish law, noted that public confession before execution was intended to “effect the atonement” and to assure the judges that their verdict was correct.⁶

Because the Mishnah was not compiled until the second century A.D., it seems clear that we should not expect all of its provisions to have existed in the ancient kingdom of Judah, from which the prophet Lehi fled more than seven centuries earlier. But the close parallels between these Book of Mormon accounts and the Mishnah suggest that the legal procedures discussed here may have predated the Babylonian captivity.

Notes

1. The Mishnah was compiled by Rabbi Judah the Prince (A.D. 137–219) from oral traditions.
2. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1938), 390.
3. *Ibid.*, 389.
4. *Ibid.*, 390.
5. *Ibid.*, 391.
6. Ze’ev W. Falk, *Hebrew Law in Biblical Times*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Press; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 53.

By John A. Tvedtnes

Brown Bag Report

With fall semester under way at Brigham Young University, we look forward to keeping you abreast of another round of Institute-sponsored brown bag lectures. These presentations, which are not open to the general public, enable researchers to share their expertise and findings with their peers in related fields and to receive constructive input. Following are reports of three such presentations from earlier this year.

Mission of BYU’s Religious Studies Center

BYU professors of ancient scripture Terry B. Ball and Richard D. Draper discussed the work of BYU’s Religious Studies Center. Ball spoke of the RSC’s mission of supporting scholarship that teaches and preserves the doctrine and history of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He also mentioned his botanical research in the Dhofar region of Oman, where some LDS scholars locate the Old World Bountiful. His collection of Arabian Peninsula vegetation, now housed at BYU, is the best herbarium of its kind in the United States, a “valuable research tool for archaeobotanists,” he said.

Draper, managing director of the RSC’s publications office, said the center occupies a special niche in LDS publishing with its studies on culture, history, scripture, and doctrine that are of “value to the kingdom but of sufficient academic register that commercial publishers are not interested in them.” He described how the center has expanded its mission by adding devotional materials to its book list and by producing a newsletter and a journal, the *Religious Educator*, among other publications.

The Atonement and the Strengthening of Communities

Thomas B. Griffith, legal counsel for BYU, discussed the concept of “at-one-ment” as it relates to building communities founded on the rule of law and on belief in human dignity and worth. Noting the example of Enoch’s people, he said the highest form of spirituality is when the effects of the atonement unite people to do good not only in their own families and congregations but also in the larger community. The capstone of Joseph Smith’s divine tutoring was his understanding that every church activity must be done with the

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Institute Researchers Share Findings at LDS Apologetics Conference

Three Institute researchers were among the speakers at the fifth annual FAIR conference, held August 7–8 at Utah Valley State College, in Orem, Utah. Founded in 1997, the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to providing sound information and research that support the doctrine, beliefs, and practices of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, particularly on matters that are challenged by unbelievers.

“The purpose of FAIR is not to debate, argue, or contend with critics of our faith,” noted Scott Gordon, the organization’s president. “Our goal is to help members and investigators of the church deal with the issues that the critics raise.”

The Institute was well represented in the discussions of such issues at the conference. Matthew Roper, a resident scholar with the Institute, addressed the question of whether Latter-day Saint attitudes have recently taken a drastic shift regarding the origin of American Indians. Some critics have charged that church leaders and writers long thought Lehi and his descendants to be the sole ancestors of the Indians and that

such attitudes changed only in the face of recent archaeological and DNA studies.

Roper shared statements from church leaders and other knowledgeable Latter-day Saints throughout church history that support the idea that other peoples were already in the Americas when Lehi’s group arrived there. A First Presidency–approved statement from the 1950s, for instance, said that Book of Mormon peoples were “among” the ancestors of modern American Indians.

The Book of Mormon itself contains internal evidence for the existence of cultures contemporaneous with the Nephites and Lamanites. Jacob’s account of contention among his people, for example, may suggest that the Nephites had already joined with other groups or that Sherem was not a member of Lehi’s family, Roper said. Further, such phrases in the Book of Mormon as “the people of Nephi” and “the people who were now called Lamanites” suggest that Lehi’s family mingled with other populations already present in the area. Lehi himself declared that “the Lord hath covenanted this land unto me, and to my children forever, and also *all those who should be led out of other countries* by the hand of the Lord” (2 Nephi 1:5).

Taking up a related issue, senior resident scholar John Tvedtnes responded to charges of racism in the Book of Mormon. He pointed out

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The Desert Libraries of Timbuktu

The Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution have opened an exhibit titled “Ancient Manuscripts from the Desert Libraries of Timbuktu,” the famous trading town at the edge of the Sahara Desert in Mali. The manuscripts include Qur’anic teachings, mathematics, physics, medicine, and astronomy.

But this may be just the tip of the iceberg. According to Abdelkader Haidara, executive director of Timbuktu’s Mamma Haidara Commemorative Library, there may be a million such manuscripts in the 22 private libraries of Timbuktu, most

of them held by descendants of the original owners. Looking beyond that city to the rest of Mali and to neighboring countries such as Mauritania, Niger, and Burkina Faso, Haidara estimates that there may be 100 libraries with five million manuscripts. Some of the manuscripts had been buried to protect them from the wars that ravaged the area prior to European colonization.

James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, noting that medieval Arabic medicine was far ahead of European practices, suggested that some of these manuscripts might shed light on the history of diseases that originated in Africa, such as HIV and ebola. (See the article posted at <http://www.sciscoop.com/story/2003/6/26/7135/87226>.)

The New World Promised Land's Economic Base

A majority of people in the modern world are absorbed in performing their daily work, conceived in terms of jobs, money, food, and other things practical and economic. Would it have been different for the Nephites or Lamanites? Not really. The center of their daily concerns, too, was “making a living.” But what that meant differed greatly from what we mean by the expression.

We read that, among the Nephites, “the men [did] till the ground, and raise all manner of grain and . . . fruit.” Meanwhile, the women did “spin, and toil, and . . . work all manner of . . . cloth of every

kind.” By dint of such labor, the Nephites “did prosper in the land” (Mosiah 10:4, 5).

In Book of Mormon times, an agrarian life was crucial to a satisfactory society. When grain was insufficient, famine prevailed (see Alma 3:2; 4:2; Helaman 11:5–6; 3 Nephi 4:3, 6). Most people farmed. Yet nothing in the book suggests that the people prepared or cultivated the land using anything other than their own hands. Although “flocks and herds” were kept, it seems that they were used mainly for food (see, for example, 3 Nephi 3:22; 4:4).

The farmers had to produce in order to feed and clothe their families as well as the “thousands . . . , yea, and tens of thousands, who [did] sit in idleness” (Alma 60:22). The latter group no doubt consisted of

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A Call for Emendations

from Royal Skousen, editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

As I have been working on the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, people have occasionally written or talked to me about passages in the Book of Mormon that seem strange or difficult. A good many have made specific suggestions about emendations (or revisions to the text). Surprisingly, a large percentage of these have ended up being correct or have led me to come up with an appropriate emendation.

Most of these suggestions have also been worthy of treatment in volume 4 of the critical text (which will deal with the analysis of textual variants in the Book of Mormon). In some cases, the suggested emendations will be discussed even if it turns out that the evidence doesn't support making a change.

You may have noticed in the recent FARMS publication *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* that I gave credit in my last article (“The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon”) for six different emendations. I have always felt that credit should be given for all suggestions that will be discussed in the critical text.

Thus far these suggestions have come from (1) ordinary readers of the Book of Mormon, (2) students in my textual criticism class at Brigham Young University, or (3) student researchers who have worked for me on this project. The main purpose of this letter is to explicitly extend an invitation to all interested readers of the Book of Mormon to send me any examples they might have of possible textual emendations or difficulties in the text that need to be considered.


Volume 4 of the critical text will be approximately 2,000 pages long and will appear in four separately bound parts. The first part, now in preparation, will cover the small plates of Nephi (from 1 Nephi through Omni), plus the Words of Mormon, and will appear sometime next year. My plan is to publish one part per year. So this means that suggestions for the text need to come in soon, especially those that deal with the first part of the text.

Please feel free to contact me directly.

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exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction, and much skill in the art of engraving. (*History of the Church*, 4:537)

While the size and number of plates comprising the two documents differ, it is interesting that both sets of plates were of gold³ and were held together by rings. (For a news report of the book, see <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/2939362.stml>.)  —contributed by John A. Tvedtnes

Notes

1. For a discussion of Orphic gold plates buried with the dead, see C. Wilfred Griggs, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” *BYU Studies* 22/3 (1982): 259–78; republished in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon*

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that Nephi made a clear distinction between the “curse” of the Lamanites (being cut off from the presence of the Lord by Nephi’s departure) and the “mark” of a “skin of blackness,” the latter being intended to keep the Nephites from mingling with the Lamanites and partaking of their wickedness (see 2 Nephi 5:1–7, 19–24; Alma 3: 14–16). Further, Jacob chastised his people for hating the Lamanites because of their skin color and warned that the Nephites could also be cursed because of unrighteousness (see Jacob 3).

The Nephites’ frequent attempts to convert the Lamanites shows that the Book of Mormon does not promote notions of racial inferiority. Tvedtnes also noted that, as an anthropologist, he does not use the term *race*, having concluded several years ago that it is an artificial construction.

Tvedtnes discussed Joseph Smith’s emendation of 2 Nephi 30:6. In this verse, the Nephites are promised that they will receive a knowledge of the Savior. They are also promised that “the scales of darkness shall fall from their eyes; and not many generations shall pass away among them, save they shall be a pure and delightful people.” Although this passage read “white and delightful” in the original manuscript, Joseph Smith changed the word *white* to *pure*, prob-

Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982; reprinted by FARMS).

2. The Etruscan find makes it likely that the brass plates of Laban were also held together by rings, though the Book of Mormon is silent on that subject. These brass plates may have been what influenced Nephi and later Mormon to keep their records on metal plates.
3. It is likely that the plates used by Mormon for his abridgment of the Nephite records were gold alloyed with another metal, perhaps copper. As we have noted, Joseph Smith wrote to Wentworth that the plates had “the appearance of gold.” Similarly, the Eight Witnesses declared that the plates had “the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship” (Book of Mormon, Testimony of the Eight Witnesses).

ably to avoid the misinterpretation that skin color would literally change. In the Bible and other ancient texts, the term *white* is sometimes used in the sense of “pure” rather than of color.

Daniel C. Peterson, codirector of research for the Institute, noted that theism in general and Mormonism in particular have become popular targets in recent months. “There are people out there who see religion as the cause of violence, and this gives rise to a book like Jon Krakauer’s *Under the Banner of Heaven*,” he said. But while some see Krakauer’s book as an attack on the church, it actually attacks the very concept of religious faith itself, questioning whether rational individuals are justified in believing in a moral authority greater than themselves. Peterson went on to explain that given Krakauer’s hostility toward religion in general, religious people cannot fairly use the book to criticize the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (just as evangelical critics cannot fairly use DNA evidence to discount the Book of Mormon when the same DNA evidence shows that migrations to America took place more than 10,000 years ago, long before many evangelicals believe the earth was created).


Peterson noted that while millions of people were murdered in the 20th century at the hands of atheists, it would be simplistic to blame these atrocities on atheism. By the same token, evil acts committed by “religious” people must be viewed in their

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complexity, with proper recognition of the value of religious belief. Faith in God offers meaning and purpose to people around the world, especially to those who suffer from poverty or illness. Any fair-minded discussion of religion ought to acknowledge this, he said.

Other speakers and topics at the conference included the following: Roger R. Keller, professor of church history and doctrine, BYU, on “The Grace of Apologetics”; Armand L. Mauss, emeritus professor of sociology, Washington State University, on “The

Church, the Race Issue, and Misplaced Apologetics”; D. Jeffrey Meldrum, associate professor of anatomy and anthropology, Idaho State University, on “The Children of Lehi: DNA and the Book of Mormon”; and Michael D. Rhodes, associate research professor of ancient scripture, BYU, on “The Book of Abraham: Dealing with the Critics.”


The papers by Roper and Tvedtnes will appear in the forthcoming issue of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 15, no. 2).  —reported by Larry Morris and Mike Parker

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great worth of souls in mind (D&C 18:10), he said. Joseph learned the true extent of the Savior’s personal suffering upon receiving the revelation in D&C 19—the “final, indispensable lesson before he organized the church and the most significant lesson of the gospel,” Griffith said. He went on to note that lawyers, whose ideal role is to build communities based on the rule of law, are often “at the forefront of the push for riches,” which runs counter to the admonition in Jacob 2:18–19 and to the spirit of Moses 7:18 if that pursuit is not undertaken with the intent to bless others. Such purity of motive should be the mainspring of discipleship, he said.

Herculaneum Papyri Project: Preliminary Findings

Dr. Gianluca Del Mastro, a professor of philosophy at the University of Naples and a visiting professor in BYU’s classics department, reviewed

progress on interpreting and electronically preserving the Herculaneum papyri using multispectral imaging techniques developed at BYU. Calling the MSI images a revolution in reading the carbonized papyri, he showed examples of how he has been able to discern scroll text that was previously unreadable. For example, the images have made it possible to read text in depressions of wrinkled fragments and to distinguish congealed layers of papyrus from one another and ink strokes from fibers. The images have also enabled scholars to identify individual scribes. One intriguing find was a reference to a previously unknown tragedy by Euripides. In March, Del Mastro matched two fragments from Philodemus’s “On Poems.” He said that the fragile papyri, which date from 1000 B.C., have deteriorated 10 percent in the past seven years but now are electronically preserved. Del Mastro concluded by noting the discovery in 2000 of seven papyri (15 fragments) from two houses in Herculaneum, one of which (Casa de Bicentenario) appears to have housed the first Christian community in the city. 

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priests, record keepers, architects, merchants, artists, and judges, who all seemed idle compared with the hardworking farmers who were the ideal (exemplified by King Benjamin, who “labored with [his] own hands,” Mosiah 2:14). Then there were the elite at the pinnacle of social, political, and economic power who demanded support. For example, King Noah taxed his Zeniffite subjects to provide sustenance

for the elite (see Mosiah 11:3–8; also Mosiah 7:22; Alma 60:21–22; 3 Nephi 6:10–12). But the economic system also supported a variety of respected craft workers, such as “curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it” (Helaman 6:11).

An economic surplus stimulated trade, and it made at least some people rich (see Mosiah 24:7; Helaman 3:10; 6:7–8). Furthermore, certain regions were more productive than others: central Zarahemla had to supply the Nephite army in the southwest quarter

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of the land, for instance (see Alma 57:6; 58:4, 7), and the land of Melek was a food exporter (see Alma 62:29).

While hunting may have been an idealized traditional activity among the Lamanites, at least according to their biased Nephite neighbors (as in Enos 1:20), the high population level that the Lamanites reached, reflected in the size of their armies, cannot be accounted for except on the basis of settled agrarian living. Most Lamanite commoners must have been farmers too.

With all of this daily labor, ancient life did not provide “jobs,” designated economic roles that let men predictably go to work to earn a living. We can be sure that 95 percent of the Nephites and Lamanites, like people in the rest of the ancient world, simply toiled daily at the hard work in front of them without the complex structure of specialized “jobs” or “careers” that organizes the lives of many of us today. ■ —*adapted from John L. Sorenson, Mormon’s Map (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 88–89*

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant, edited by John Gee and Brian Hauglid, is volume 3 in the Book of Abraham Series. It includes FARMS conference papers on the Book of Abraham and its commonalities with ancient texts, Abraham’s vision of the heavens, and the significance of the Abrahamic covenant. Available autumn 2003.

Occasional Papers, Volume 4, edited by Jared Ludlow, contains articles by three BYU professors and focuses on the polemical use of water and storm language in the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Kings), justice and mercy in the book of Deuteronomy, and the garment of Joseph. Available autumn 2003.

The FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 2), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, features reviews and articles on DNA issues, the Mountain Meadows massacre, and secret combinations, as well as responses to a so-called insider’s view of Mormon origins. Available December 2003.

Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely, will help readers to imagine what Jerusalem was like around 600 B.C. Subjects include culture, family life, agriculture, politics, religious practices, inscriptions, law, and international relations. Available early in 2004.

Evidences and Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, by Daniel C. Peterson, provides an intriguing look at the evidences that support the Book of Mormon as an ancient text. It also looks at the lives and testimonies of those who were witnesses to the coming forth of the “keystone of our religion.” Copublished with Covenant Communications on two cassettes or CDs.

Insights

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Primary research interests at FARMS include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

FARMS makes interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

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