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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

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Review Responds to Distortions of DNA Evidence, Mormon Origins

The latest issue of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 15, no. 2, 2003) responds in full measure to two works challenging the historicity of the Book of Mormon and the foundational events of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. The contributing scholars not only expose fatal flaws in the critics' arguments and methods but also provide background information and perspectives that readers will find instructive. In addition, this issue of the *Review* evaluates several other recent publications in Mormon studies and includes a Book of Mormon bibliography for 2002.

In his introduction, *Review* editor Daniel C. Peterson focuses his remarks on Thomas W. Murphy, heralded by his partisans as a "Mormon Galileo" for his supposedly devastating claim that DNA science discredits the Book of Mormon. "Is Thomas Murphy really the Galileo of Mormonism?" Peterson asks. In answer he quotes BYU biology professor Michael Whiting, who told the *Los Angeles Times*, "It's an inappropriate comparison. The difference is Galileo got the science right. I don't think Murphy has." Peterson's extensive comments on the Murphy affair, and on Grant H. Palmer's book that challenges fundamental LDS beliefs from a so-called insider's view, establish an enlightening context for the scholarly refutations that follow.

DNA and the Book of Mormon

The first five papers examine the question of whether DNA science can be said to disprove the Book of Mormon. David A. McClellan, a BYU biology professor, provides a helpful conceptual framework for appreciating the complexity of DNA science and the crucial necessity of formulating testable hypotheses

and exercising caution in interpreting ambiguous data and drawing conclusions. The basic concepts that he outlines in his paper, "Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?" are intended to "empower nonbiologists to judge for themselves the accuracy of [my] conclusions . . . [which] I am confident . . . will illustrate the complete harmony between scientific thought and the fundamentals of Latter-day Saint belief." He observes that "detractors have no basis for their claims that current human genetic data calls into question the story line of the Book of Mormon. Current genetic data cannot, nor will any future data ever, falsify the Book of Mormon story line." McClellan explains at length in nontechnical terms why, according to the philosophy of the scientific method, that is so—namely, because the record's story line "does not present a rejectable hypothesis. Genetic data can never be used to invalidate these claims; its only possible use would be to support them."

In "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," Institute scholar Matthew Roper argues that "there is no good reason to assume [as critics do] that Native American lineages and ancestors must be *exclusively* Israelite" in order for scientific fact to agree with Book of Mormon claims. Roper reviews Joseph Smith's statements regarding the Lamanite heritage of the American Indians and draws on the published opinions of B. H. Roberts, Orson Pratt, and other notable

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- Lecture Report
- Divine Providence in History

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Was Aminadab a Zoramite?

In one of the more moving narratives found in the Book of Mormon, a group of Lamanites are miraculously prevented from killing the prophets Nephi and Lehi in a prison. The Lamanites and Nephite dissenters are then redeemed from their own spiritual bondage when they are converted to Christ.

In what is a key element of their conversion, the Nephite dissenter Aminadab reminds his fellow Lamanites that Alma, Amulek, and Zeezrom had taught them faith in Christ nearly 45 years earlier (Helaman 5:41), presumably during the mission to the Zoramites.¹ Shortly after this mission, the Zoramites who remained unconverted “became Lamanites” (Alma 43:4). Assuming that some of the dissenters in the prison had heard these prophets preach to the Zoramites, several elements of the prison narrative in Helaman 5 would have both recalled and graphically reinforced for them those earlier prophetic teachings. Indeed, this possible connection between the two events is strengthened by the parallel language in both narratives.

In his words to the dissenting Zoramites years before, Amulek warned that if they procrastinated the day of their repentance, there would come a

“night of *darkness* wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33). Regarding the prison account, the record states that the would-be attackers were “overshadowed with a cloud of *darkness*, and an awful solemn fear came upon them” (Helaman 5:28). So profound was the fear generated by this darkness that they were unable to harm Nephi and Lehi and unable to even move (Helaman 5:34). Might these descriptions of the Lamanites recall the language previously used by Amulek?

Alma taught Zeezrom, who accompanied Alma on his mission to the Zoramites, that it is the devil who seeks to “*encircle you about* with his chains, that he might chain you down to everlasting destruction, according to the power of his captivity” (Alma 12:6). And Amulek taught the Zoramites that when the wicked repent, the Lord “*encircles them* in the arms of safety, while he that exercises no faith unto repentance is exposed to the whole law of the demands of justice” (Alma 34:16). Employing similar imagery, the account in Helaman states that while in the prison, Nephi and Lehi were “*encircled about*” by a protective fire that literally separated them from their persecutors, who in contrast were surrounded by darkness (Helaman 5:23–25,

28). It is only after the Lamanites began to pray and to repent that they were “*encircled*” by the same protective fire (Helaman 5:42–44). Much as Amulek had taught, the now-repentant Lamanites were included in the circle of safety.

Alma taught the Zoramites about the bronze serpent that Moses raised up as a “type” in the wilderness, “that whosoever would *look* upon it might live. And many did *look* and live” (Alma 33:19). He also urged the Zoramites to “cast about [their] *eyes*” in order that they might begin to have faith in Christ (Alma 33:21–22). The prison narrative in Helaman echoes this concept of “look and live.” The dissenter Aminadab “turned him about” and saw the faces of Nephi and Lehi within the pillar of fire (Helaman 5:36). “And it came to pass that this man did cry unto the multitude, that they might turn and *look*. And behold, there was power given unto them that they did turn and *look*; and they did behold the faces of Nephi and Lehi” (Helaman 5:37).

Furthermore, in urging the Zoramites to cry unto God for all of their needs, Amulek said, “Therefore may God grant unto you, my brethren, that ye may begin to exercise your *faith* unto *repentance*. . . . Yea, *cry* unto him for mercy; for he is mighty to save” (Alma 34:17–18). Similarly, when the Lamanites asked

what they must do in order to remove the awful cloud of darkness, Aminadab reminded them, “You must *repent*, and *cry* unto the voice, even until ye shall have *faith* in Christ, who was taught unto you by *Alma*, and *Amulek*, and *Zeezrom*; and when ye shall do this, the cloud of darkness shall be removed from overshadowing you” (Helaman 5:41). Aminadab’s counsel repeats what the Nephite dissenters likely heard years before but apparently had only now learned.

These considerations may suggest that Aminadab and some of his fellows were Zoramites

who as young men had heard those Nephites preach. More significantly, the account of their conversion shows how God can confirm the words of his servants the prophets in mercy as well as in judgment. ³⁰

By Matthew Roper

Note

1. The only time when these three prophets are specifically said to have served together was during the mission to the Zoramites (Alma 31:6), though it is possible that they served together at other times as well.

LECTURE REPORT

Early Christian Monastic Prayer

On 10 October 2003, Father Columba Stewart presented an Institute-sponsored lecture at BYU titled “The Practices of Egyptian Monastic Prayer: Desert, Cell, and Community.” Fr. Stewart is a Benedictine monk of St. John’s Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota, where he is professor of theology at St. John’s School of Theology and teaches monastic studies. He is also the interim director of the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, which is working closely with the Institute on its manuscript preservation projects in the Middle East and Ethiopia.

Fr. Stewart has published extensively on early Christian spirituality. His lecture provided an opportunity for students and faculty to hear the fruits of some of his latest research on prayer in early Christianity, particularly monastic prayer. He described the role of the scriptures, particularly the Psalms, in the spiritual life of Egyptian monks of the fourth through sixth centuries. Through a process of prayerful and thoughtful reading, as well as memorization (the book of Psalms and the entire New Testament would be memorized in the first years in the desert), the monks of this period used the scriptures throughout the day to praise God, challenge and transform themselves, and battle the demons.

Ancient Mesoamerican Initiative

At an Institute-sponsored brown bag lecture on 29 October, BYU anthropology professor

John E. Clark, a member of the FARMS board and director of the New World Archaeology Foundation (NWAf), reported on the progress of the Institute’s Ancient Mesoamerican Initiative, which he directs. Clark highlighted the cities included in the Mesoamerican Early Cities Project that are the most pressing and promising of the Institute’s research priorities. Of the 20 cities included in this project, funding is needed to proceed with 14 of them. Donations from Leon and Randie Reinhart and Alan and Karen Ashton have allowed work to begin in several cities.

Clark says the task of conducting this kind of research is so enormous that it exceeds the reach of any researcher or team of researchers and must be managed. For example, in Mesoamerican research, the Institute could accomplish more if it functioned less as a research organization and more as a grant-giving organization. This would enable the Institute to select and fund external researchers who would report their findings to the Institute.

Maya Creation Mythology in the First Century AD

At a campus-wide lecture at BYU on 17 November, Professor William A. Saturno, an archaeologist from the University of New Hampshire specializing in Mesoamerican civilization, spoke on Maya creation mythology in the first century AD. His slide presentation and discussion focused on his discovery (in March 2001) of San

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Bartolo, an archaeological site in northeastern Guatemala. The site, which contains a number of structures and is still being excavated, has yielded the oldest intact Maya murals ever found and is providing new insights into Maya prehistory. The beautiful, well-preserved murals predate those at Bonampak, a Maya site in Chiapas, Mexico, by several hundred years.

Saturno began by narrating the hazards of the first expedition and his accidental discovery of the murals. He then discussed physical aspects of the site (a temple complex built upon earlier structures, tunnels dug by looters in search of prized artifacts, and the earliest-known painted Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions) and interpreted mural scenes as depicting the birth and the emergence of the maize god from the underworld. He went on to explain the symbolic nature of caves in Maya belief and speculated that the finely stylized, flowing Maya inscriptions (largely indecipherable) suggest a writing tradition going back earlier than suspected.

Though relatively small, San Bartolo unexpectedly has three hallmarks of Classic Maya civilization—reference to a ruling lord, hieroglyphics, and art, Saturno said. Yet because it predates the Classic period and lies outside the El Mirador Basin as a seemingly sovereign state, its presence there raises vexing questions and introduces complexity into views on the development of Maya civilization.


The lecture, held in the auditorium of the Harold B. Lee Library, was sponsored by the New World Archaeological Foundation, the Reinhart Family Foundation, and the Institute.

Lehi and Sariah: New Light from Arabia

On 18 November, S. Kent Brown, a BYU professor of ancient scripture speaking at BYU's Harold B. Lee Library's "House of Learning" lecture, shared some of his research on Lehi and Sariah's journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful, conjectured to lie on the southern coast of modern Oman. Brown is a member of the FARMS board, editor of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, and director of Ancient Studies at BYU.



Wilderness area near Nihm, Yemen. Photo by Brent C. Hall.

Brown showed film clips from his visit to Yemen in September 2001, where he and a filming team photographed sections of the famed incense trail, an ancient trade route that Lehi's company likely followed as they traveled through Arabia. Three altars found in the ruins of a temple near Marib, Yemen, bear inscriptions containing the name *Nhm* (apparently a variant of the place-name *Nahom*, 1 Nephi 16:34) and date to the time of Lehi and Sariah. After making additional geographical connections with Nephi's account of his family's wilderness journey, Brown concluded that the Book of Mormon is a "real account about real people who went through real places." The Institute plans further research and filming of areas associated with Lehi's trail as permission and funding become available. 



FARMS CELEBRATES

25 Years of Faithful Research and Publication on the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture

Stay Tuned for More on This Milestone Later This Year

Exploring the Role of Divine Providence in History

Most modern historians view social, economic, and political factors as the sole shaping influences of history. For other scholars, the role of divine providence in history cannot be denied and is a topic worthy of serious consideration. Last year, Latter-day Saint scholars who embrace the notion of “providential history” shared their perspectives at a symposium titled “A Latter-day Saint View of History,” held at Brigham Young University on 6–7 February 2003. Among the 21 presenters at this unique event was John W. Welch, publications director for the Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, editor in chief of *BYU Studies*, and founder and board member of FARMS. His paper, “Early Mormonism and Early Christianity: Some Providential Similarities,” contemplates a number of intriguing parallels that will be of interest to FARMS readers. A sampling follows (all quotations are from Welch’s Presentation).

Similarities between the rise of early Christianity and early Mormonism invite “the belief that the world was prepared in many of the same ways for Jesus as it was for Joseph. . . . With relatively few followers and plenty of defectors, schismatics, and opponents, both movements needed to come forth at times when certain conditions were present that would allow for the possibility of success.” Such conditions included improved travel methods, new religious freedom, widespread literacy, and legal protections for newly created religious associations—conditions that have not always existed.


In 31 BC the Pax Romana, a new era of peace, was established when Augustus Caesar defeated Mark Anthony; likewise, 30 years before the birth of Joseph Smith Jr., the American colonies suc-

ceeded in defeating the British and established their own nation dedicated to liberty and peace. “The feelings of instability that result from overturning traditional orders were in both cases assuaged by elevating new figures or families to demi-divine status”—the Caesar line in the Roman Empire and the leading families of Virginia and Massachusetts through whom came the first several presidents of the new American

republic. This social order reflected a desire for a single, unifying leader and led many people of faith to embrace unifying leadership under God or his prophets and apostles on earth. “Thus one is not surprised to see, both in the letters of Paul and in the Doctrine and Covenants,

the virtue of unity accentuated and demanded.”

Other factors conducive to the establishment of the churches were prepared long before either Christ’s or Joseph Smith’s time. About 200 BC the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, creating a standardized Old Testament. Similarly, 200 years before Joseph Smith’s birth in 1805, the King James Version established a standardized English translation of the Bible. “Without such a text, the gospel could not have been spread abroad as it was in either dispensation.”

Welch goes on to highlight many other similarities between the two churches, such as those pertaining to the work of early apostles and patterns of growth. These rare similarities, though admittedly circumstantial, suggest to Welch that the superintending hand of providence is discernible in human affairs as “God purposefully orchestrates or capitalizes on the confluence of certain conditions that make the achievement of divine purposes possible.” A complete collection of the symposium proceedings will be published by the Religious Studies Center later this year. Watch for a publication notice in *Insights*. 

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Latter-day Saint leaders and scholars, as well as the Book of Mormon itself, to debunk that notion.

In his second paper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy,” Roper explains that kinship terms such as *Israelite*, *Lamanite*, and *Nephite* are not necessarily indicative of genetic distinctions, because over time they take on sociocultural and political meanings and include outsiders who

intermixed with those groups. Roper observes that although there is no scriptural warrant behind the idea that *all* Native Americans are Lehi’s literal descendants, that scenario is in fact possible: an entire population’s common ancestry can emerge

within hundreds (rather than thousands) of years, as contemporary models of population genetics demonstrate. Even so, he concludes, “scientific studies in genetics at present permit only a very finite peek at the panoramic mosaic of an individual’s ancestry.”

In “Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing,” linguist Brian Stubbs uses mathematical probabilities to demonstrate how quickly (within eight generations) one population can diffuse into another and become genetically indistinguishable from it. This biological phenomenon makes “easily feasible” the view that “most Amerindians are descended from Book of Mormon peoples.” Stubbs identifies several serious flaws in the *DNA vs. the Book of Mormon* video put out by Living Hope Ministries and concludes that DNA science is still in its infancy and may yet yield “evidence for multitudes of Lehite posterity in the Americas.”

Senior Institute scholar John A. Tvedtnes responds to Murphy on another matter in “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon.” Tvedtnes easily refutes the idea that the Nephites’ use of pejorative terms to describe their Lamanite brethren makes the Book of Mormon a racist and thus fraudulent book because it reflects typical

19th-century attitudes introduced by Joseph Smith. He notes, “If Joseph Smith’s racism is reflected in the Book of Mormon, why does that volume have large numbers of Lamanites becoming righteous—indeed, more righteous than the Nephites—in the decades before Christ’s appearance?” He discusses the difference between the Lamanites’ curse (separation from God) and the later mark of the curse (a change in skin color), noting that many of the epithets applied to the Lamanites were based on geographic and

cultural differences, not on skin color. Tvedtnes finds the critics’ arguments fatally flawed and argues that the Book of Mormon “advocates and idealizes the exact opposite [of racist attitudes]: . . . peace, happiness, and unity through the gospel of Jesus Christ.”

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Historicity of Mormon Origins

Four reviews respond to Grant H. Palmer’s *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins*. Palmer is a retired CES employee whose outsider, revisionist polemic against Joseph Smith and the origins of Mormonism has been publicized as (in the words of reviewer Steven C. Harper) “the benevolent act of a knowledgeable, official church teacher, self-commissioned to save the Saints from ignorance.”

In “The Charge of a Man with a Broken Lance (But Look What He Doesn’t Tell Us),” Davis Bitton, a professor emeritus of history at the University of Utah who served as assistant historian for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, focuses on Palmer’s duplicity in masquerading as a church insider and reliable “spokesman for a virtual unanimity of scholarly opinion.” Bitton demonstrates the emptiness of that position and takes Palmer to task on many points: his trivialization of personal inspiration, selective disbelief of Joseph Smith’s teachings and history, misrepresentation of opposing scholarly views, dismissal of relevant facts and scholarship, and overall disingenuousness and incongruity of method.

In “A One-Sided View of Mormon Origins” Mark Ashurst-McGee, a scholar at BYU’s Joseph Fielding Smith Institute for Latter-day Saint History, presents faithful alternative interpretations of the founding events that Palmer challenges and misinterprets in pursuing his agenda of “demythologizing” Mormon origins. For example, Palmer portrays the angel Moroni as a capricious guardian spirit of hidden treasure and argues that Joseph Smith borrowed his account from Romantic writer E. T. A. Hoffmann’s short story “The Golden Pot.” Ashurst-McGee finds the alleged parallels between the two accounts to be weak, forced, or nonexistent and Palmer’s analysis to be “studded with factual errors” and “key manipulations” and devoid of convincing evidence. Ashurst-McGee goes on to counter Palmer’s claim that Smith dropped superstitious dimensions of the encounter with Moroni in order to give it a Judeo-Christian legitimacy at the time the church was founded; he shows that the historical record does not support Palmer’s view but does affirm the accuracy and integrity of Joseph Smith’s account.


Steven C. Harper, an assistant professor of church history and doctrine at BYU, continues the discussion of how Palmer ignores the rules of sound historical scholarship in order to secularize Joseph Smith’s religious encounters. In “Trustworthy History?” Harper discredits Palmer’s claim to be writing “New Mormon History,” instead placing him squarely in “an ideological tradition abandoned by the historical profession generally”—characterized by an overconfidence that past events can be accurately and scientifically discerned, combined with a skepticism of revelation and faith. “Palmer does not realize that there is no promised land where the past is unmediated, where the truth about what really happened is only as far away as the last edition of original documents.” Harper offers correctives to Palmer’s take on the witnesses of the gold plates, priesthood restoration, and the first vision and concludes that Palmer’s tendentious book “bespeaks incongruity. It feigns objectivity. It defines incredibility.”

In “Prying into Palmer,” Louis Midgley, a BYU professor emeritus of political science, uncovers

the roots of Palmer’s book in its first incarnation in 1984, a draft entitled “New York Mormonism,” written under the anti-Mormon pseudonym of *Paul Pry Jr.* Midgley demonstrates that the very foundations of *An Insider’s View* are shaky in that “Palmer had swallowed, ‘hook, line, and salamander,’ the revisionist anti-Mormon propaganda popular at that time.” Midgley also fleshes out Palmer’s pertinent career background and explores how Palmer has filled the void created by his disbelief with a vague “sentimentality about Jesus.”

On the brighter side, a book published in 2001, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, edited by BYU professor of ancient scripture Paul Y. Hoskisson, contains essays by believing Latter-day Saint scholars who defend the historical integrity of the Book of Mormon and other works in the Latter-day Saint scriptural canon. In “Holding Fast to the Word,” reviewer Keith H. Lane, a religion professor at BYU–Hawaii, notes a recent trend among some secular scholars to “give an alternative reading to Latter-day scripture, seeing, for example, the Book of Mormon as an elaborate parable or as a book containing meaningful ethics or theology, but whose characters and events have no basis in history and whose origin is not what Joseph Smith claimed it was.” For that reason, Lane observes, *Historicity* is a timely and important book. It presents detailed, well-reasoned arguments about why there can be no middle ground in this matter and why Latter-day Saints can confidently hold fast to their traditional understandings and dismiss misguided naturalistic explanations of their revealed scripture.

This issue of the *Review* looks at other recent publications as well: Will Bagley’s *Blood of the Prophets: Brigham Young and the Massacre at Mountain Meadows*, Robert A. Pate’s *Mapping the Book of Mormon*, Boyd Petersen’s *Hugh Nibley: A Consecrated Life*, Clark Pinnock’s *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, and Robert V. Remini’s *Joseph Smith*.

To purchase a copy of the *FARMS Review*, use the enclosed mail-order form or visit the FARMS section (under “BYU Publications”) of byubookstore.com. 

FARMS Occasional Papers, Volume 4, edited by Jared Ludlow (BYU–Hawaii) and Larry E. Morris, contains articles by three BYU professors and focuses on the polemical use of water and storm language in the Deuteronomic 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.

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 BC, before much of the city was obliterated by the Babylonians, in fulfillment of prophecy, a few years after Lehi's departure. Subjects include culture, family life, agriculture, politics, religious practices, inscriptions, law, and international relations.

The FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 2), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, features articles on DNA issues and responses to a so-called insider's view of Mormon origins. It also reviews books on the Mountain Meadows Massacre, the historicity of Latter-day Saint scripture, and more.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

Astronomy, Papyrus, and Covenant, edited by John Gee and Brian Hauglid, is the third volume in the Book of Abraham Series. It includes papers from a FARMS-sponsored conference on the Book of Abraham and covers such topics as Abraham's vision of the heavens, commonalities between the Book of Abraham and noncanonical ancient texts, and the significance of the Abrahamic covenant. Available spring 2004.

Theodore Abu Qurrah, translated and introduced by John C. Lamoreaux of Southern Methodist University, includes first-ever English translations of a substantial portion of Theodore Abu Qurrah's writings, which treat such issues as the characteristics of true religion and the nature of free will. Abu Qurrah (fl. AD 810), the bishop of Harran (in modern-day southern Turkey), was one of the first Christians to write in Arabic and to mount a sustained theological defense of Christianity against Islam. Available spring 2004.

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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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