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Maxwell Institute Summer Seminar: “The Gold Plates as Cultural Artifact”

by Richard Lyman Bushman



The 2012 summer seminar was hosted by the Maxwell Institute, which is committed to supporting young scholars who are pursuing advanced studies in fields related to the work of the Institute. The seminar provides the next generation of scholars the opportunity of being mentored by leading Mormon scholars who publish in the field of Mormon studies. The papers were presented at a BYU symposium on June 23, 25, and 26, 2012.

For six weeks this past summer, eight scholars from all over the United States and from Europe met daily in the Maxwell Institute library to discuss and research the topic “The Cultural History of the Gold Plates.” They were the latest rendition of a seminar that has met every summer since 1997 under the direction of Richard Bushman, with the aid of Terryl Givens and Claudia Bushman, to explore aspects of Mormon culture.

This year’s seminar continued a tradition of taking up a subject that the seminar’s leader is working on. The first seminar in 1997 explored the cultural context of the Restoration while I was writing *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*. Claudia Bushman’s seminar investigated women and Mormon history, and the seminars under Terryl Givens have contributed to his study of the history of Mormon

theology. The 2012 seminar was the second on the gold plates.

On first sight, it does not seem that there is much to say about the gold plates. They disappeared a long time ago and now can only be imagined. But if gone, the gold plates are not forgotten. There are a few ingenious Latter-day Saints who still are uncovering plates, and many more who put them on tie tacks and shape birthday cakes in the form of plates. In the Spokane Exposition of 1974, the Church built its pavilion on piers in the Spokane River to look like gold plates. The plates still turn up in popular culture, including in Broadway shows such as the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Angels in America* and in popular novels such as James Rollins’s *The Devil Colony*, in which gold plates inscribed by ancient Jews are found in a cave in Utah. (Gold and caves often go together, we discovered.) The story of the plates has become a cultural resource that writers and artists of all sorts call upon to talk about human experience.

As a cultural icon, the plates lead off in many directions. In the Book of Mormon they were part of an assemblage of holy objects that accompanied them down through time: the Liahona, the sword of Laban, the 24 gold plates of Ether, and the interpreters. This collection prompted the seminar to look into the subject of holy relics. How have sacred material objects been understood in other traditions? They also fall into the category of lost and recovered histories, of which there are many extant in the world today. How do the plates fit into that tradition? They have provoked a Latter-day Saint interest in writing on metal plates everywhere in the world.

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What's in a Name? Mormon—Part 2

by Paul Y. Hoskisson

In part 1 of my discussion of the name *Mormon*,¹ I presented the evidence that Joseph Smith did not originally write the letter published over his signature in the 1843 *Times and Seasons*, but that he made some corrections to the letter William W. Phelps had composed and then gave his approval to have it published. I also mentioned the fact that B. H. Roberts left most of the letter out of his *History of the Church* because he believed the full letter was “based on inaccurate premises and was offensively pedantic.”

This second installment of my examination of the name *Mormon* begins with an analysis of Roberts’s objections, finds support from a modern Church leader, and concludes with a discussion of what *Mormon* might mean in an ancient Near Eastern context.

Roberts’s dismissal of the body of the letter leads to an examination of the “premises” that he mentions. When the letter states that “the Bible in its widest sense, means *good*,” the writer (Joseph Smith or W. W. Phelps?) was not suggesting that the word *Bible* etymologically means “good.” Rather, the writer was suggesting that the Bible is good, that reading it promotes good, and that the Bible metaphorically means “good.” This certainly is an acceptable figurative meaning of the word *Bible* that no Christian in the 19th century would have denied.

That the word *Bible* figuratively means “good” leads to an examination of the statement “The word *Mormon*, means literally, more good.” Just as it does today, the word *literally* had various connotations in Joseph Smith’s day. It was used to mean “word by word” and “real, not figurative or metaphorical.”² But *literally* could also be used in a figurative sense, that is, as an intensive.³ The use of *literally* as an inten-

sive can be traced back at least 150 years before the *Times and Seasons* letter.⁴ Closer in time and in a Latter-day Saint context, a sentence from the *Evening and Morning Star* in 1834 uses *literally* as an intensive: “We admit, that our country is literally filled with stated publications, and many are conducted under the title of *religious periodicals*.”⁵

Therefore, just as “good” is not a translation of the word *Bible*, the conclusion can be drawn

“I am not ashamed of the nickname *Mormon*. Look,” he went on to say, “if there is any name that is totally honorable in its derivation, it is the name *Mormon*. And so, when someone asks me about it and what it means, I quietly say — ‘*Mormon* means *more good*.’”

that “more good” is not a translation of the word *Mormon* but a figurative etymology that highlights the value of the Book of *Mormon*, even if it might have been used tongue in cheek. Thus, if the Bible, which is true as far as it was transmitted correctly, means “good” in a figurative sense, then the Book of *Mormon*, which was transmitted correctly, “means, literally, *more good*,”⁶ with *literally* acting as an intensive.

Elder Gordon B. Hinckley spoke to this issue in the October 1990 general conference.⁷ While on his mission in England many years earlier, he had a discussion with his companion about the appropriateness of using the name *Mormon*.⁸ His companion had stated, “I am not ashamed of the nickname *Mormon*. Look,” he went on to say, “if there is any name that is totally honorable in its derivation, it is the name *Mormon*. And so, when someone asks me about it and what it means, I quietly say—‘*Mormon* means *more good*.’” Then Elder Hinckley made his own observation: “His statement intrigued me—*Mormon* means ‘more good.’ I knew, of course, that ‘more good’ was not a derivative of the word *Mormon*. I had studied both Latin and Greek, and I knew that English is derived in some measure from those two languages and that the words *more good* are not a cognate of

the word *Mormon*. But his was a positive attitude based on an interesting perception. And, as we all know, our lives are guided in large measure by our perceptions. Ever since, when I have seen the word *Mormon* used in the media to describe us—in a newspaper or a magazine or book or whatever—there flashes into my mind his statement, which has become my motto: *Mormon* means ‘more good.’ We may not be able to change the nickname [of the Church], but we can make it shine with added luster.”⁹

If the definition of *Mormon* as “more good” was merely a figurative etymology, I can now consider nonfigurative explanations of the name.

Notwithstanding the warning “that the word Mormon stands independent of the learning and wisdom of this generation,”¹⁰ many attempts have been made to provide a sound etymology for *Mormon* based on secular knowledge of ancient Near Eastern languages. The following discussion reviews some of the promising suggestions that have been made. Unfortunately, the most likely suggestion (the first) has no etymology, and the other suggestions that do have an etymology are less likely.

- On a limestone stela of the Egyptian Nineteenth to Twenty-first Dynasty in the Museum of Gizeh, the name *mrmnu* appears, accompanied by the title “doorkeeper.” In an article that has yet to be superseded, Wilhelm Spiegelberg treats the name as Semitic in Egyptian transcription, although he is not certain that it is Semitic and does not provide a meaning. He transcribes it into Hebrew characters with *mr/lmn(w)*. Spiegelberg’s description of the stela unfortunately does not permit its current identification.¹¹ Despite various difficulties, such as dating to at least 600 years before Lehi and not having an etymology, this name *mrmn*¹² on an Egyptian inscription seems like a direct hit, as Hugh Nibley pointed out years ago.¹³

- Nibley has also pointed out that *mrm*, be-

sides appearing as an Egyptian personal name, is attested in Hebrew and Arabic and means “desirable” or “good.”¹⁴ In this case, *Mormon* would consist of the root *mrm* plus the common Semitic ending *-ōn*, often used for geographic and personal names such as *Kidron* and *Gideon*. For possible Hebrew examples of the lexeme, see the biblical personal name *Mirmāh* in 1 Chronicles 8:10¹⁵ and the personal name *Merēmoth* (also of questionable etymology), the name of a priest in Ezra 10:36 (= Nehemiah 10:5).¹⁶ The latter name also appears as *mrmwt* on an eighth-century-BC ostrakon from Arad.¹⁷ Note also the personal name *ma-ri-ma-na* at Ugarit,¹⁸ though the language origin of this Ugaritic name is uncertain.¹⁹

- Ben Urrutia has called attention to Egyptian *mr-mn*, “love established forever,”²⁰ while Robert Smith has suggested “strong/firm love” or “love remains steadfast/firm.”²¹ The translation “love is established forever” brings to memory the words of Paul: “Charity never faileth” (1 Corinthians 13:8).²² Interestingly, Mormon used similar words when writing, “But charity is the pure love of Christ, and it endureth forever” (Moroni 7:47).²³

- Finally, and less likely, is Egyptian *mr* (Nubian and Coptic *mur, mor*), “bind, girth.”²⁴

What conclusion can be drawn? While the name *Mormon* can designate figuratively that which is “more good,” the etymology remains uncertain. The most likely suggestion, from the pen of Hugh Nibley, is that the name *Mormon* appears to have a direct analog in the name *mrmn* on an Egyptian stela. Other Egyptian and Hebrew possibilities exist. In fact, we are blessed with several possibilities, which is a very comfortable position to be in.

Paul Y. Hoskisson is director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies.

(Mormon to page 7)

Moses Maimonides' *On Hemorrhoids* and the History of Textual Reception

by D. Morgan Davis

There are unpleasant topics, and then there are Unpleasant Topics. The latest volume to appear in the Medical Works of Moses Maimonides, *On Hemorrhoids*, seems the perfect occasion to modestly avert our attention from the actual subject of the book and consider instead the question of its reception. When referring to the reception history of an antique text, scholars have in mind the journey the text has taken. During its long life, what paths have a given text traveled, so to speak? By this we mean not just where has a given physical document turned up, but also where and by whom were the words and ideas it contained copied, translated, paraphrased, summarized, or argued with? Information was precious in the premodern age. The painstaking work required to hand copy or translate texts of any significant length ensured that only those writings that were in real demand received such attention.

So it is perhaps with some surprise that we open the pages of a work like *On Hemorrhoids* to discover that “this treatise was popular in Jewish circles and also aroused interest in non-Jewish circles” (p. xv). How do we know this? Because it exists in so many copies and translations. The Arabic version alone has survived in no fewer than 10 manuscripts (some of these are Judeo-Arabic versions, meaning in the Arabic language, but written with Hebrew characters). Furthermore, the text was translated into Hebrew and Latin in the years just after its composition. There are three different Hebrew translations and two Latin translations. The first Hebrew translation is attributed to Samuel

ibn Tibbon (c. 1150–c. 1230)—a contemporary of Maimonides who practiced medicine and wrote philosophy in southern France. The other two translations—one by an unidentified author, the other by Zerahyah Ben Isaac Ben Shealtiel Hen—apparently survive in only one extant manuscript each.

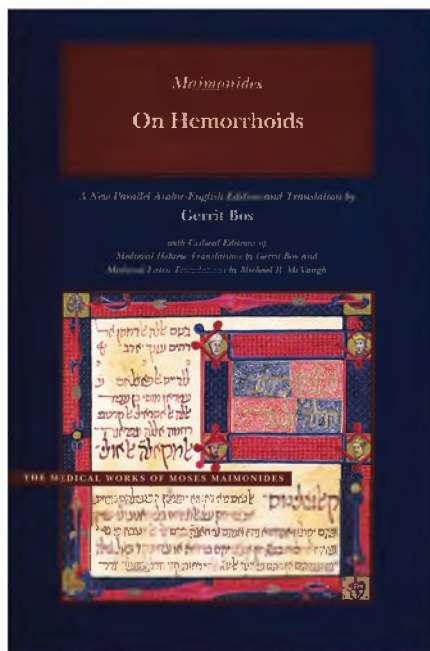
As for the Latin versions, one—apparently prepared by Giovanni da Capua around 1300 in Rome—was based on Zerahyah’s Hebrew translation. The second—independently executed by Armengaud Blaise in southern France at nearly the same time—was based on the Arabic.

This latest volume from the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative compiles for the first time under one cover *all* of these various recensions and translations (Arabic, Hebrew, and Latin) of the text Maimonides wrote and adds to them an authoritative English translation of the Ara-

bic, deftly rendered by series editor Gerrit Bos.

Why all of this attention to collecting and publishing so many versions of this document? In part the answer is that each version represents another chapter in a story that weaves together the patterns of thought and the communities of practice that animated the human landscape of the Middle Ages. By careful attention to who copied whom, how technical terms were translated or even transferred from one language to another, and even how such texts were physically preserved, scholars can gain a richer understanding of the intellectual milieu of southern Europe and North Africa in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

D. Morgan Davis is director of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative.



A New Beginning for the *Mormon Studies Review*

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship is continually striving to align its work with the academy's highest objectives and standards, as befits an organized research unit at Brigham Young University. Our areas of endeavor include the study of LDS scripture and other religious texts and related fields of religious scholarship, including the burgeoning field of Mormon studies.

To better serve these goals, last year we renamed our venerable *FARMS Review* as the *Mormon Studies Review*. For many years the *FARMS Review* has filled an important niche in the intellectual life of its many readers under the vigorous editorship of Professor Daniel C. Peterson and his associates, Louis C. Midgley, George L. Mitton, and, more recently, Gregory L. Smith and Robert White. We thank these colleagues and the many contributing writers to

the *Review* for their industry and scholarship over the past 23 years.

We are proud of the accomplishments of the *FARMS Review* and are pleased to make its past issues freely available on our website. But to better position the new *Mormon Studies Review* within its academic discipline, we are assembling a board of scholars in this field to advise us and will appoint a new editorial team. We regret that we must suspend publication during this period of reorganization and reorientation, but we are certain that our current—and many new—readers will find the new *Mormon Studies Review* a valuable scholarly resource for the discipline.

We have not yet set a launch date for the new *Review*, but we will be posting further developments on our website.

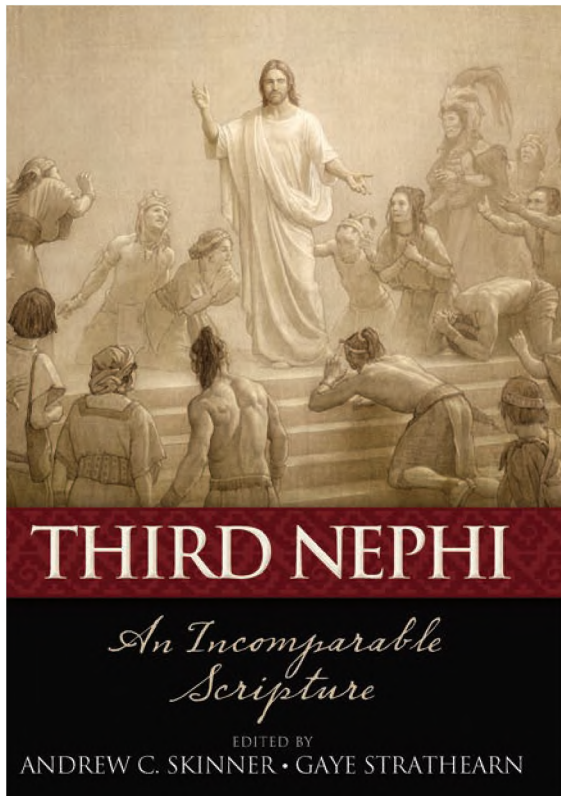
Joseph Bonyata Hired as Director of Production

We are pleased to announce that we have recently hired Joseph Bonyata as our director of publication production. Joe started his career in book publishing at Fortress Press in Minneapolis, a leading publisher in biblical studies and theology. As managing editor at Fortress, Joe was responsible for over 60 new titles a year and oversaw the digital publication of the 55 volumes of *Martin Luther's Works*, as well as a new translation of the foundational book of Lutheranism, *The Book of Concord*. Joe also headed the team that initially developed fortresspress.com. After Fortress, he published books on “planes, trains, and automobiles” at MBI Publishing in Minneapolis. Joe then served as director of editorial production for the New York trade publisher Perseus Books Group, overseeing the publication of over 200 new book titles a year.

Joe has a BA in journalism from the University of Minnesota and a Certificate in the Business of Publishing from the University of Chicago. He currently serves as a Church Service Missionary at the Provo MTC and lives in Orem with his wife, Barbara, who teaches Spanish literature at BYU, and their daughter, Isabella, and son, Elijah. Joe's oldest daughter, Alexandra, just graduated from his alma mater, the University of Minnesota.

Joe says, “I am thrilled to be a part of helping to further the mission of the Maxwell Institute. And I am so impressed by the depth, breadth, and quality of the Institute's publications. I look forward to working with my new colleagues in continuing the Institute's legacy of promoting top-notch scholarship and encouraging religious understanding and respect among humankind's many different cultures.”

Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture— Proceedings of a Willes Center Symposium



The personal appearance of Jesus Christ as recorded in the book of 3 Nephi constitutes the narrative and spiritual climax of the Book of Mormon. Although the sacred account repeats and reinforces many of the Savior’s Old World teachings, many aspects of his New World ministry have no parallel elsewhere in scripture. In this light, *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture* is a fitting title for a new book published by the Maxwell Institute and Deseret Book.

Edited by Andrew C. Skinner and Gaye Strathearn (professors of ancient scripture at BYU), the book presents the proceedings of a BYU symposium held in September 2008 and hosted by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies. Fifteen essays offer fresh

perspectives on diverse topics that expand understanding of the sacred narrative that has been called the “fifth Gospel.”

In the opening essay, John W. Welch discusses how the temple setting of Christ’s teaching provides a key to understanding the parallel sermons in 3 Nephi 12–14 and Matthew 5–7. Both texts echo the temple with words such as *light, washing, anointing, garments, oaths, and seeing God*; and additional verbal cues allude to passages in Psalms and Exodus, which are temple-centered texts. Welch pictures 3 Nephi as the Holy of Holies of the Book of Mormon—a kind of inner sanctum where the God of Israel personally appears to invite us to enter into his presence.

Matthew L. Bowen explores the act and symbol of *proskynesis* (prostrating or bowing to the earth in worship) in the Book of Mormon. Beginning with those in Lehi’s vision who “fell down” before the tree of life and tasted its fruit (1 Nephi 8:30), many accounts tell of people falling or bowing to the earth upon tasting the sweet fruit of the atonement. This motif culminates in the Savior’s appearance at the temple in Bountiful. In those climactic moments, Lehi’s symbolic vision is fulfilled as the multitude “did fall down at the feet of Jesus, and did worship him” (3 Nephi 11:17).

Other contributors treat such themes as a broken heart, the hen metaphor, prayer, covenant promises, the Suffering Servant, the Godhead, Jesus as divine Lord, the writings of Malachi, Nephite peace, and the power of godliness. Also included in this volume is a transcript of the panel discussion that concluded the symposium. *Third Nephi: An Incomparable Scripture* is available at byubookstore.com.

Kristian Heal Appointed Director of Advancement

Dr. Kristian Heal has been appointed to serve as the Maxwell Institute's new director of advancement (fundraising). He succeeds in this position Professor Daniel C. Peterson, who has elected to step down and return to full-time teaching as professor of Arabic and Islamic studies in BYU's Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages. Professor Peterson will continue to serve as editor-in-chief of the Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative series.

Dr. Heal is a native of the United Kingdom and received his education at the Universities of London, Oxford, and Birmingham. He is a

specialist in the early literature of the Christian Middle East and coordinates the Institute's work on the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as several projects in Syriac studies, in his capacity as the director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. "Dan has been a wonderful advocate for the Institute," says Dr. Heal, "and it has been a real pleasure serving with him and others in the Institute's development team over the past year. I'm delighted to now have an opportunity to devote more time to working with our donors and staff in my new capacity."

(Mormon from page 3)

Notes

1. See "What's in a Name? Mormon—Part 1," *Insights* 32/2 (2012): 2-3.
2. See Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language*, 1844 ed., s.v. "literal" and "literally."
3. For example, "For more than a hundred years, critics have remarked on the incoherency of using *literally* in a way that suggests the exact opposite of its primary sense of 'in a manner that accords with the literal sense of the words.' . . . The practice does not stem from a change in the meaning of *literally* itself—if it did, the word would long since have come to mean 'virtually' or 'figuratively'—but from a natural tendency to use the word as a general intensive." *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (2004), CD-ROM, s.v. "literally." I thank my friend and colleague Don Brugger for pointing out to me some of these dictionary entries.
4. See *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (2009), CD-ROM (v. 4.0), s.v. "literally," 3b.
5. Editor, "To Our Subscribers," *Evening and Morning Star*, May 1834, 160.
6. *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194.
7. At the time, he was a counselor in the First Presidency.
8. I thank editing intern Dustin Schwanger for bringing this item to my attention.
9. In Conference Report, October 1990, 69; or "Mormon Should Mean 'More Good,'" *Ensign*, November 1990, 51.
10. *Times and Seasons*, May 15, 1843, 194. This statement may refer to the fact that the Restoration, including the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon, was not done by any secular, academic, or scholarly means of our enlightened age.
11. Wilhelm Spiegelberg, "Zu den semitischen Eigenamen in ägyptischer Umschrift aus der Zeit des 'neuen

Reiches' (um 1500-1000)," *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 13 (1898): 51. My friend and colleague John Gee maintains that to date he has not been able to identify the stela, despite some search attempts.

12. According to John Gee, Egyptologists are divided about whether to represent word-final *w/w*. I have chosen to leave it off.

13. Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 500 n. 30. Nibley states that "the common Egyptian *Mr*-[means] . . . 'intention, wish, desire.'"

14. Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 500 n. 30.

15. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* does not offer an etymology.

16. Suggestion by Jo Ann Hackett.

17. Arad ostrakon no. 50. See Shmuel Ahituv, *Echoes from the Past: Hebrew and Cognate Inscriptions from the Biblical Period*, trans. Anson F. Rainey (Jerusalem: Carta, 2008), 149. On page 484 Ahituv explains this personal name as "Blessed by the god Mawt, death."

18. Suggestion by Jo Ann Hackett.

19. The name appears in the appendix "Liste ungedeuteter oder ihrer sprachlichen Herkunft nach unsicherer Namen," in Frauke Gröndahl, *Die Personenamen der Texte aus Ugarit*, Studia Pohl 1 (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1967), 304.

20. Ben Urrutia, "The Name Connection," *New Era*, June 1983, 40.

21. Suggestion by Robert F. Smith.

22. Suggestion by Ben Urrutia.

23. Suggestion by John A. Tvedtnes.

24. Suggestion by Robert F. Smith. On the element *mr* meaning "binding," see Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 109.

(Seminar from page 1)

Paul Cheesman was only the most zealous of the searchers for parallel plates. They are of interest to modern feminists because Emma Smith played a prominent role in recovering and translating the plates, and they are of interest to scholars who study literary hoaxes.

The problematic of the seminar (and of my book) is, why this inextinguishable interest? Considering that the plates are no longer accessible and for many are beyond belief, why do they still arouse the imagination? The idea of a gold book recovered from a stone box buried in a hill, inscribed with ancient characters describing a lost civilization, and cared for by an angel seems to hold endless fascination. The plates' story is often ridiculed or used as evidence of Joseph Smith's imagination and cunning—but ridiculed or not, the plates survive. Mormons have not wavered in their belief, and artists and writers of all stripes deploy the plates for their own purposes. Even our seminar this past summer attests to their enduring interest.

The seminar culminated with a public presentation of the participants' papers: Richard Bushman, "The Gold Plates in Mormon and American Culture"; Ruth Eldredge, "Sacred Materiality and the Holy Past: the Gold Plates and Christian Relics"; Austin Walters, "Hisses from the Dust: The Gold Plates and the Recovery of Sacred Records"; Craig Rossell, "Gold Plates and the Cave Myths"; Jeremy Walker, "Hoaxes, Gold Plates, and the Discourse of Authenticity"; Michelle Mueller, "Women and the Plates: Emma Smith and Gender in Mormonism"; Jeremy Talmage, "The Other Plates: Déjà vu or Something New?"; Bryan Cottle, "The Moroni Principle: The Mormon Quest for Metal Plates in the Paul Cheesman Years"; and Saskia Tielens, "The Gold Plates in the Contemporary Popular Imagination."

For those interested in learning more, papers from the seminar will soon be available on the Maxwell Institute website.

Richard Bushman, Gouverneur Morris Professor of History Emeritus at Columbia University, held the Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University from 2008 to 2011.

Gerrit Bos Lecture Series

The Maxwell Institute is proud to sponsor a lecture series at Brigham Young University by Dr. Gerrit Bos, editor and translator of the *Medical Works of Moses Maimonides* and chair of the Martin-Buber-Institut at Cologne University.

Monday, 1 Oct., 1:00–2:00 p.m., 3716 HBLL (entry through the south doors): Synonym literature in Hebrew manuscripts and the innovation of a Hebrew medical terminology by Shem Tov Ben Isaac of Tortosa (fl. 13th century) in his translation of al-Zahrawi's *K. al-Tasrif*.

Tuesday, 2 Oct., 12:00–1:20 p.m., 3714 HBLL (south doors): Moses Maimonides, *Medical Doctor and Author: Some aspects of his work, medical training, theory and practice*.

Wednesday, 3 Oct., 12:00–1:00 p.m., 3716 HBLL (south doors): Medieval stone lore in a Hebrew garb: Berekhiah Ben Natronai ha-Nakdan and the *Sefer Ko'ach ha-Avanim* (On the Virtues of Stones).

INSIGHTS

The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute
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By furthering religious scholarship through the study of scripture and other texts, Brigham Young University's Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship seeks to deepen understanding and nurture discipleship among Latter-day Saints while promoting mutual respect and goodwill among people of all faiths.



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