



# Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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## Latest Review Takes Up Church Media, Promised Land, Teen Religiosity, and More

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Syriac manuscripts.”<sup>3</sup> While the exact number is not known, more than 1,500 manuscripts have survived to our day from the Monastery of the Syrians.

Western travelers and institutions acquired the majority of the monastery’s Syriac manuscripts during the 17th to 19th centuries, at times by way of honest purchase and at times, sadly, by some measure of bribery and fraud. They are preserved today in Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, and elsewhere. By far the greatest number are in the British Library. Between 1835 and 1851, almost 550 complete and fragmentary manuscripts were acquired by the British from the Monastery of the Syrians.

But more than a century earlier, in 1707, the Vatican Library sent a young Lebanese Syrian (Maronite) priest named Elias Assemani to the Middle East in search of Syriac manuscripts. He first went to Egypt and succeeded in obtaining a number of manuscripts from the Monastery of the Syrians. The precise number is uncertain, for while transporting them by boat to Cairo, a storm arose that capsized the vessel, sending all the manuscripts to the bottom of the Nile and drowning one monk. Elias hired divers to retrieve his treasures from the muddy river bottom and dried them out as best he might, but our only account of the catastrophe reports that “many folios [pages] of them were lost.”<sup>4</sup> One Arabic and 33 Syriac manuscripts later arrived at Rome. Whether just portions of those manuscripts were lost, or some volumes in their entirety, is unknown.

While parts are rendered unreadable by water damage, those 33 manuscripts are some of the most ancient and valuable Syriac manuscripts surviving today. Clearly Elias was permitted to handpick gems from the monastery library. In 1715 his uncle Joseph Simon Assemani returned to the monastery and selected another 100 for purchase. However, negotiations with the monks failed, and he was able to purchase only “a few.” Again, precisely how

many is unknown, but of the estimated 50 Syriac manuscripts Joseph Simon acquired for the Vatican Library, nine certainly came from the Syrian Monastery. These include the only surviving copy of the earliest Syriac chronicle (ca. 540), among other rarities. Scholars have determined that yet others of the Syrian Monastery’s manuscripts were acquired by the Vatican Library, previous to the Assemanis, but precisely how is not always known.

In 2005 the Maxwell Institute’s Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts published *Syriac Manuscripts from the Vatican Library, Volume 1*, reproducing 33 Syriac manuscripts from the Vatican collection. These include 16 manuscripts known to be from the Monastery of the Syrians, and at least two others that may be. This DVD is still available for purchase at the BYU Bookstore. Further work on the Vatican Library Syriac collection is now in the initial stages of planning. ♦

By Carl Griffin

Associate Director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts

#### Notes

1. Its historicity was advocated by Evelyn-White, but no corroborating evidence survives, and recent research by Van Rompay and Schmidt have called it seriously into question. See Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *The Monasteries of the Wadi ‘n Natrûn*, ed. Walter Hauser (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Egyptian Expedition, 1926–33), 2:312–18; and Lucas Van Rompay and Andrea B. Schmidt, “Takritans in the Egyptian Desert: The Monastery of the Syrians in the Ninth Century,” *Journal of the Canadian Society for Syriac Studies* 1 (2001): 41–60.

2. As cited in Evelyn-White, *Monasteries*, 2:320.

3. As cited in William Wright, *Catalogue of Syriac Manuscripts in the British Museum Acquired since the Year 1838* (London: British Museum, Dept. of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, 1870–72), 3:ix.

4. This account does not come from Elias himself, but from his uncle Joseph Simon. J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliotheca orientalis Clementino-Vaticana, I* (Rome: Typis Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide, 1719), preface, section VII; S. E. Assemanus and J. S. Assemanus, *Bibliothecae Apostolicae Vaticanae codicum manuscriptorum catalogus, I, 3* (Rome: Typographia linguarum orientalium, 1759), 77.

## Latest Review Takes Up Church Media, Promised Land, Teen Religiosity, and More

The latest issue of the *FARMS Review* (volume 22, number 2), which appeared at the end of 2010, features a transcript of last year’s Neal A.

Maxwell Lecture given by Mark H. Willes, president and CEO of Deseret Management Corporation. Willes illustrates the kind of creative thinking required for the LDS Church’s media outlets to eventually reach hundreds of millions of people worldwide. For a full report of this lecture, see *Insights* 30/2 (2010).

Five essays deal with the Book of Mormon. Two are reviews of Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum's book *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States*. This book holds that Book of Mormon events took place in the central and eastern United States and that the Book of Mormon prophecies about the land of promise refer exclusively to the United States. In two separate reviews, Matthew Roper shows why the "heartland theory" is untenable. The first takes up several key issues such as what Joseph Smith knew about Book of Mormon geography through revelation and whether his use of certain terms like "this land" supports only a limited North American setting. The second review addresses the authors' narrow interpretation of the terms "land of promise" and "remnant of Lehi."

An essay by Robert F. Smith demonstrates that several letters in the Book of Mormon adhere to a subtle yet significant feature of ancient Near Eastern epistolary form that was unknown in Joseph Smith's day. He also refers to research suggesting that professional bilingual Israelite scribes since the 10th century BC had been using hieratic (short-hand) Egyptian, which developed separately from the Egyptian tradition. In his discussion of territorial symbolism in the Book of Mormon and how it informs the book's covenantal theology, Steven L. Olsen asserts that the concept of a promised land is best understood not so much as a specific location but as "places where sacred covenants govern human relations and where the blessings of the gospel are realized by covenant-based communities" (p. 153).

Readers desiring perspective on the ongoing Book of Mormon historicity debate will find it in Kevin Christensen's assessment of one writer's series of criticisms nearly three decades ago. Christensen shows how subsequent developments have vindicated the Book of Mormon and teach a cautionary lesson about keeping a broader perspective that can accommodate revised assumptions and conclusions.

John Gee mines the data from two books by evangelical sociologists on the influence of religion in the lives of "emerging adults" (college-aged youth). The findings are from a 2005 study of U.S. youth and religion (in which LDS teenagers were ranked highest "in a variety of sociological measures of religious vitality and salience," p. 195) and

also from follow-up studies of the same group. Gee cites the statistics on religious devotion, alcohol consumption, and promiscuity and offers insightful commentary. He concludes with a list of behaviors typical among Latter-day Saints that "seem to correlate most closely to faith playing an important role in an emerging adult's life" (p. 228).

In the editor's introduction, Daniel C. Peterson opines on the Christian (and therefore LDS) obligation to "apologize"—that is, believers' individual responsibility to defend the faith's truth-claims through evidence and reason. He distinguishes between positive and negative apologetics (i.e., affirmatively advocating vs. rebutting and defending), argues that the former requires no special training or expertise to demonstrate that the gospel is desirable, and points to the Internet as a convenient and effective means of doing that.

Peterson also notes that this issue marks the end of the *FARMS Review* title. The next issue of this publication will bear the title *Mormon Studies Review*, which, according to Peterson, reflects "the periodical's expanded vision and scope" as well as "readjustments over the past several years in . . . the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship." This issue is available for purchase at [www.byubookstore.com](http://www.byubookstore.com). ♦

# INSIGHTS

The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

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