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INSIGHTS

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

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An Early Islamic Challenge to Christian History

One of the great lessons to be drawn from the Islamic world of the Middle Ages is that in order for people of varying faiths and persuasions to coexist peacefully, it is not necessary that significant differences between them be settled or even downplayed. Islamic society was vibrant with debate and ideological rivalry. But there was a framework of tolerance that allowed for these differences while preserving basic modes for coexistence. For example, the Islamic caliphates (beginning in the seventh century and continuing into the early modern period) treated the Jews and Christians living within their domains as *ahl al-kitab* (“People of the Book”), a Qur’anic designation that recognized that these communities, too, worshipped the God of Abraham and had at least part of his truth revealed to them and recorded in their scriptures—the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, respectively. Therefore, these non-Muslims, though not accorded the same legal or social status as Muslims, were nevertheless allowed to practice their religions freely and openly and to participate in the pursuit of knowledge.

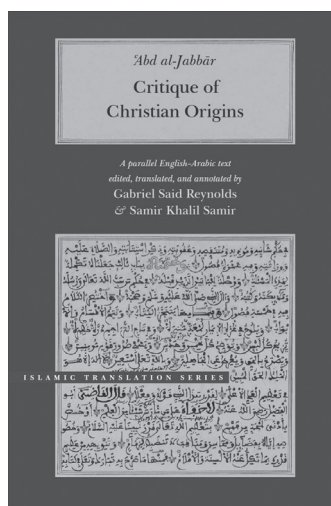
The various religious factions vigorously debated one another, each tradition seeking to establish its own merits and validity while demonstrating the invalidity and sometimes even the moral turpitude of the others. Such disagreements were seldom if ever the basis for armed conflict—that was reserved for the more mundane questions of territorial and political control. Nevertheless, nodes of sectarian rivalry jostling within a general climate of mutual tolerance during the Islamic caliph period is a feature difficult to miss in its literature.

The most recent title published by the Maxwell Institute’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative is the

Critique of Christian Origins, by Abd al-Jabbar, an early Muslim rationalist theologian who did his best to make the case that Christianity lacked merit both doctrinally and historically. His use (and misuse) of the Bible and other historical data is a fascinating glimpse into the sectarian world of his day.

In the *Critique*, Abd al-Jabbar develops what might be considered the first Islamic history of Christianity. Unlike Muslim scholars before him, Abd al-Jabbar criticizes Christianity not only theologically (a major focus being the doctrine of the Trinity—a notion that Islam vehemently rejects), but also on historical grounds. His main argument responds to a notion that is familiar to Latter-day Saints, who believe that there have been a number of dispensations of the true gospel on the earth, each dispensation followed, however, by an eventual decline and ultimately a loss of essential truths and priesthood authority.

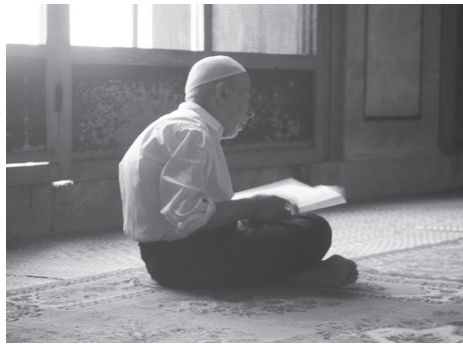
Similarly, Muhammad taught his followers that Islam (submission of one’s individual life and will to the one true God) did not begin with Muhammad, but with Adam, and had been renewed through chosen prophets from time to time throughout the ages of the world. Abraham was another prophet who brought true Islam; Moses, another; and, most significantly for Abd al-Jabbar’s argument, Jesus was another. The Qur’an refers to Jesus’s revelation of true Islam as the Injil—a word clearly derived from the Greek word for “good news,” *evangelion*. Many readers of the Qur’an suppose that this Injil, or gospel, refers to the New Testament (a collection of books and letters written *about* Jesus and his teachings, but not *by* him), but Abd al-Jabbar read the Qur’an to mean that Jesus had brought his own book, called the Injil, and that when he delivered it to the world, it was pure and correct, but that it was subsequently lost or corrupted through neglect or



FOR MORE INFORMATION
Neal A. Maxwell
Institute for
Religious Scholarship
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602
(801) 422-9229
(800) 327-6715
maxwellinstitute.byu.edu

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deliberate misrepresentation by Jesus's followers. According to Abd al-Jabbar, these followers (Peter



Reading the Qur'an in a mosque in Syria.

and Paul, among others) were responsible for the corruption of the pure Islamic message of Jesus, as well as for characterizing him as the Son of God who had died for the sins of the world and been resurrected. These were claims, argues Abd al-Jabbar, that Jesus himself as a true prophet of Islam never would have made and deeds that he did not perform. He was a great prophet, but not divine, not an atoning savior of the world. So says Abd al-Jabbar, and so he endeavors to convince his reader, marshaling evidence—or what he claims to be evidence—from a variety of sources, including the Bible, religious rituals, and Christian miracle accounts. By any fair account, Abd al-Jabbar's historical attack on Christianity is far from compelling, undermined as it is by his own misuse of source material and outright misrepresentation of New Testament teachings. The degree to which his argument and his use of his sources is (un)per-

suasive may perhaps best be measured by the fact that it is being introduced to a modern audience by devout Christians who obviously do not feel threatened by its content. Gabriel Said Reynolds, at the University of Notre Dame, has expertly rendered this work into English with many helpful scholarly aids, while the Arabic text itself has been carefully edited and prepared for publication by Father Samir Khalil Samir at the University of Saint Joseph, in Lebanon.

If Abd al-Jabbar's attempt to use Christianity's own sources against itself seems to fall short, however, his work is nevertheless fascinating for the wealth of information it contains about the ideological contours of tenth-century Baghdad, including perspectives on Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, and several sects within Islam itself, in addition to Christianity. It is evidence of a time when people who had fundamental disagreements over basic spiritual truths nevertheless lived together in an atmosphere of not just tolerance but cooperation and mutual help as they forged what remains one of the greatest civilizations on record. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis
Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

Nibley Lecture Series Presentations Available Online

The lecture series "The Work of Hugh W. Nibley: On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth" concluded in April. The videos of each lecture are currently being prepared for availability on our Web site. Presently, video of four of the lectures can be accessed through the Upcoming Events section of the Maxwell Institute home page (maxwellinstitute.byu.edu).

Videos of Richard Bushman's lecture, "Nibley and Joseph Smith," Robert Millet's lecture, "Nibley and the Church," Daniel C. Peterson's lecture, "Nibley as Apologist," and Zina N. Petersen's lecture, "Nibley's Early Education," are now available.

An introduction to the series and an overview of Nibley's work by Paul Y. Hoskisson are available at the beginning of Bushman's video.

In addition, transcripts of the lecture by Marilyn Arnold, "'Words, Words, Words': Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon," and the lecture by C. Wilfred Griggs, "Hugh Nibley, Mentor to the Saints," are also available on the Web page.

The lectures were sponsored by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the College of Religious Education, and the Harold B. Lee Library. Presenters explored the scholarship and scope of Hugh Nibley's work. ♦

Nibley Fellowship Program Assists Rising Scholars

For a number of years the Maxwell Institute has sponsored a graduate fellowship program that gives financial aid to students pursuing advanced degrees in fields of special interest to the Institute. Named in honor of the late eminent Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh W. Nibley, this program fosters the next generation of faithful scholars by providing financial aid to students enrolled in accredited PhD programs in areas of study directly related to the work and mission of the Maxwell Institute. Of particular interest is work done under the auspices of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, such as studies of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Old and New Testaments, early Christianity, and ancient temples.

Each year at this time we remind graduate students about the Nibley Fellowship Program and its application deadline. Applicants cannot be employed at the Maxwell Institute or be related to an Institute employee. Those interested in applying for the first time or who wish to renew their fellowships for the 2010–2011 academic year should know that the deadline for submitting a completed application form and all supporting documentation is **August 31, 2010**. The Nibley Fellowship guidelines and an application form are available at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/nibleyfellowships or by e-mailing nibleyfellowships@byu.edu.

The Maxwell Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to the following graduate students for the 2009–2010 academic year:

Continuing Nibley Fellows are **Jared William Anderson**, history of the Bible, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina,

Chapel Hill; **Matthew Bowen**, biblical studies, School of Theology and Religious Studies, Catholic University of America; **Trevan G. Hatch**, Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, Baltimore Hebrew Institute, Towson University; **David Joseph Larsen**, Bible, School of Divinity, University of St. Andrews; **Ariel Bybee Laughton**, early Christianity, Graduate Program in Religion, Duke University; **Paul Derek Miller**, theological ethics and history of Christianity, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Jacob Rennaker**, Hebrew Bible, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Avram Richard Shannon**, Near Eastern languages and cultures, The Ohio State University; **Daniel B. Sharp**, New Testament, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Justin Soderquist**, Bible, Department of Biblical Studies, Trinity Western University; **Thomas K. Sowards**, Bible and ancient Near East, Department of Bible, Hebrew University; **Shirley (Shirl) Irene Wood**, biblical interpretation, Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver.

First-time Nibley Fellows are **Jason Combs**, New Testament, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Ian Fowles**, religions of North America, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Daniel O. McClellan**, Jewish studies, Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, University of Oxford; **Dave Nielsen**, New Testament, Graduate Program in Religion, Duke University; and **Joseph Stair**, ancient Mesoamerica, Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.

With the increased cost of graduate programs nowadays, we would like to be able to increase the amounts we can give to our Nibley Fellows. If you would like to contribute, please contact Ed Snow at 801-422-9047 or ed_snow@byu.edu. ♦



From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Those who stand indecisively at the foot of the gospel's gangplank, not wishing to come aboard, are, of course, not in the same circumstances as those who accept the gospel as soon as they hear it, though they hear it late in the day. Those later

workers, as the Lord Himself tells us, get the same wages as those who signed on early. But those who simply mill about the dockside grumbling about the fare or questioning the seaworthiness of the vessel, instead of helping out, are those most to be pitied. (*Wherefore, Ye Must Press Forward* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1977], 5, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 72)

Work of Maxwell Institute to Be Presented at Education Week

Brigham Young University Campus Education Week, slated for August 16–20, 2010, will feature a series of presentations that represent a range of the work done by the Maxwell Institute.

Of significant importance to the Maxwell Institute and BYU is a special presentation entitled “Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God—A Viewing of Episodes 4–7 with Insights from Some of the Contributing Scholars,” which will be held in the auditorium of the Joseph Smith Building at 4:30 PM Tuesday through Friday, August 17–20. This important documentary series premiered on BYU Television earlier this year. Hosts are Paul Y. Hoskisson, John W. Welch, and others to be announced later.

Also from Tuesday through Friday, August 17–20, at 12:30 PM in the Clyde Building, Paul Y. Hoskisson, D. Morgan Davis Jr., Kristian S. Heal, and John L. Gee will present on the topic “The Work of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute at BYU.”

Hoskisson’s presentation, “What People’s Names in Sacred Scripture Can Tell Us: Meanings, Lessons, Cultures, Scripture Sources,” will focus on the meaning of names in antiquity. He suggests that names could be manipulated to illustrate a point or drive home a lesson, names can tell us about the people who carry the name and about the culture that produced the names, and names can even be useful in authenticating the source of sacred scripture. Hoskisson is the director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and FARMS at the Maxwell Institute.

The topic “The Path of Light and Knowledge from East to West” will be discussed by Davis. He will explore the history of premodern philosophy and science as developed by Arabic-speaking scholars and then later assimilated into the Latin scholastic tradition in Europe, paving the way for the Renaissance. The volumes produced by the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative at the Maxwell Institute are primary sources for telling this story. Davis is the managing editor of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative at the Maxwell Institute.

Heal’s lecture, “Ancient Traditions about Joseph in Egypt,” describes the efforts of the Maxwell Institute to explore ancient traditions about impor-

tant biblical characters. This presentation focuses on several traditions about the life of Joseph that have been preserved by early Christians. In particular, Heal will discuss what these traditions have to say about Joseph’s father and brothers, about the merchants who took him to be sold in Egypt, about Potiphar and his wife, and about the reunion of Joseph with his family after so many years apart. Heal is the director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at the Maxwell Institute.

Gee’s lecture is entitled “Recent Research on the Book of Abraham.” He coordinates Book of Abraham research at the Maxwell Institute and has been involved for several years researching the Book of Abraham. The lecture will discuss several aspects of this recent research. Gee is the William “Bill” Gay Research Professor of Egyptology at the Maxwell Institute.

Daniel C. Peterson will lecture Tuesday through Friday in the Wilkinson Student Center at 4:30 PM. His topic is “Evidences of the Purposes of the Church in Ancient Christianity.” Peterson is the editor in chief of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative.

All of these presentations are open to Education Week attendees. For more information about BYU Education Week, see ce.byu.edu/ed/edweek. ♦

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Paul Y. Hoskisson, D. Morgan Davis, *General Editors*
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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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