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“Symbolism in Scripture” Focus of Willes Center Conference

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INSIGHTS

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“Symbolism in Scripture” Focus of Willes Center Conference

“Symbolism in Scripture” was the theme of the second biennial Laura F. Willes Center Book of Mormon Conference held recently. The conference included presentations by 13 scholars addressing such topics as “The Symbolic Use of Hand Gestures in the Book of Mormon and Other Latter-day Saint Scripture” and “Light: The Master Symbol.”

A concluding plenary session featured two distinguished scholars, Noel B. Reynolds and John W. Welch. Reynolds is a professor of political science at BYU. Welch is the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU’s J. Reuben Clark Law School.

Reynolds addressed the topic “Witnessing the Covenant: The Symbolism of Baptism and Sacrament in the Book of Mormon.” The objective of his presentation was to document and reconcile two competing symbols that are associated with water baptism in Latter-day Saint scripture and discourse.

A widely used symbol portrays baptism as washing away sins. A less familiar symbol portrays baptism as a form of witnessing to the covenant of taking the name of Christ upon oneself and promising to remember him and keep his commandments. Reynolds said that a possibly surprising implication to this covenant is that it precedes baptism “and is the central element of repentance.” The covenant is witnessed at baptism and renewed periodically through taking the sacrament.

Reynolds discussed repentance as understood in the Book of Mormon, concluding that repentance and baptism may have been a new concept for Lehi and Nephi, but Nephi made it standard for his people. Reynolds also explored the Book of Mormon teachings that partaking of the sacrament is a reenacting of the baptismal witnessing and of being spiritually reborn through the remission of sins.

The reconciling of the two baptismal symbols comes “with the Book of Mormon understanding of baptism as a witnessing by the convert to the Father and to the people and with the understanding that the remission of sins comes by fire and the Holy

Ghost, then a number of scriptures which are often read in support of the idea that baptism washes our sins away cease to be problematic.”

Welch concluded the plenary session with a presentation entitled “Symbolism of the Two Sons.” He focused on symbolism embedded in two parables taught by Jesus that begin with “A certain man had two sons.”

After giving a general overview of parables, Welch discussed at length the parables of two sons found in Matthew 21 and Luke 15. With both parables, Welch explored four levels of reading that guide a reader through multiple readings: (1) the literal, factual, historical, or cultural, (2) the moral or ethical, (3) the allegorical, and (4) the anagogical.

Welch suggested that the “scriptures are fairly full of stories and sayings that are based on the pairing and dichotomizing of two sons.” He listed several scriptural sets of sons, such as Cain and Abel, Ishmael and Isaac, and Manasseh and Ephraim. Welch mentioned the sons of Lehi, saying that even though Lehi had several sons, the “family dynamics all boiled down to a standoff between two sons: Laman . . . and Nephi.”

The parables of both the willing and unwilling sons and the prodigal son suggest “symbolic placeholders for Jesus and Lucifer.” Welch said that at a minimum, the two sons in the parable of the prodigal son would strongly suggest “the fundamental doctrine of the Two Ways: Satan’s way of sin, bondage, shame, impurity, sickness, death, and eternal homesickness, on the one hand, and Jesus’ way of honor, life, freedom, belonging, healing, and eternal reward, on the other hand.”

Welch concluded by saying that “literal readings of these two parables may be plainly and factually informative; moral readings can be personally and ideally motivational; and allegorical readings might be ethnically and socially provocative. But for those who have eyes to see, in Jesus’ intended, elevated stratum of godly meaning reside the most sublime of symbols, in both of these two parables, about a certain Father and his two perennially diverging sons.” ♦

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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