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INSIGHTS

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

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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.” ♦

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Zarahemla: Revisiting the “Seed of Compassion”

More than ten years ago, Stephen Ricks and John Tvedtnes presented a case for interpreting the Book of Mormon proper noun *Zarahemla* as a Hebraic construct meaning “seed of compassion” or “child of grace, pity, or compassion.” The authors theorized:

It may be that the Mulekite leader was given that name because his ancestor had been rescued when the other sons of King Zedekiah were slain during the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem. [See Mosiah 25:2.] To subsequent Nephite generations, it may have even suggested the deliverance of their own ancestors from Jerusalem prior to its destruction or the anticipation of Christ’s coming.¹

A literary analysis of this proposal provides further evidence supporting the legitimacy of this etymological claim. This confirmation derives from what could reflect original Hebrew wordplays in the Book of Mormon consistent with Tvedtnes and Ricks’s proposal concerning the prefix *zara-* and the terminal form *-hemla*. Reading the Book of Mormon through a Hebraic lens, the name *Zarahemla* appears linked with attestations of these Hebraic roots.

In their consideration of the name *Zarahemla*, Tvedtnes and Ricks divided the word into the Hebrew nouns *zeraʿ* meaning “seed,” and *hemlāh* denoting “compassion/mercy.”² As a verbal form, the root *hml* signifies “to have compassion,” or “to spare.”³ This nuance appears reflected in texts such as 1 Samuel 15:9 in the King James Version of the Bible: “But Saul and the people spared (*hml*) Agag, and the best of the sheep.” Significantly, the Book of Mormon features two occasions in which the place name *Zarahemla* appears in close proximity with individuals being “spared”:

And we returned, those of us that were spared, to the land of *Zarahemla*, to relate that tale to their wives and their children. (Mosiah 9:2)

And in one place they were heard to cry, saying: O that we had repented before this great and terrible day, and then would our brethren have been spared, and they would not have been burned in that great city *Zarahemla*. (3 Nephi 8:24)

In terms of analyzing the name *Zarahemla*, this biblical-like pun provides supporting evidence for the accuracy of interpreting the terminal ending *-hemla* as the Hebraic nominal form *hemlāh*.

If translated into biblical Hebrew, the Book of Mormon would feature a similar wordplay between

the Hebrew word *zeraʿ* and the proper noun *Zarahemla*. In addition to its specific nuance “seed” reflecting a vegetative connotation, the Hebrew noun *zeraʿ* denotes human “offspring, or descendants.”⁴ The term *descendant* occasionally appears in the Book of Mormon in close literary proximity to the proper noun *Zarahemla*:

Ammon, he being a strong and mighty man, and a descendant of *Zarahemla*. (Mosiah 7:3)

For I am Ammon, and am a descendant of *Zarahemla*, and have come up out of the land of *Zarahemla*. (Mosiah 7:13)

Though these literary proposals create an intriguing reading of the text, the legitimacy of these observations as intentional wordplays reflects the assumption that the reformed Egyptian in the Book of Mormon was a modified Egyptian script used to record an attestation of Hebrew. If correct, these Hebraic puns would provide evidence that Book of Mormon authors incorporated similar writing techniques to those witnessed throughout the Old Testament.

In their own literary efforts, ancient Hebrew authors made frequent use of wordplays on proper names of people and places in a way that parallels the Book of Mormon’s presumed Hebraic use of the nouns “spared,” “descendants,” and “*Zarahemla*.”⁵ For example, in Hosea 12:3–4, the biblical author creates a play upon the proper name Jacob *yaʿqob* and the verb *ʿaqob* meaning “to supplant”:

The Lord . . . punished Jacob for his conduct. . . . In the womb he tried to supplant his brother.⁶

Biblical scholars have identified a variety of these wordplays throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Studies have shown that in the process of producing the Book of Mormon, Nephite writers imitated and were influenced by biblical techniques. Assuming that the underlying text from which the Nephite record was translated derived from some form of Hebrew, the literary relationship between “spared,” “descendants,” and “*Zarahemla*” witnessed throughout the Book of Mormon supports the etymology offered by Ricks and Tvedtnes for the meaning of this important Nephite name. In addition, interpreting *Zarahemla* as the place name “seed of compassion” provides evidence that Book of Mormon authors possessed an impressive

familiarity with the literary styles and techniques witnessed throughout the Old Testament. ♦

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Notes

1. Stephen D. Ricks and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Hebrew Origin of Some Book of Mormon Place Names," *JBMS* 6/2 (1997): 259.

2. See Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, eds., *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1906), Accordance Bible Software, DVD, 3.0.

3. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament; Study Edition* (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1:328.

4. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 282.

5. See Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 244.

6. As translated in *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Text* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1000.

METI Volume Highlights Education

Consider this picture: A sandy courtyard somewhere on the outskirts of a desert village. A group of boys—ages perhaps 8 to 16—are gathered outside



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the entrance to a simple, well-worn little building. They are seated or kneeling in the sand, huddled in the last vestiges of the late morning shade. Each holds a text or a tablet. Some are reading, some are looking out to where the pale sky meets a broken line of rooftops and trees, reciting, in a quiet murmur to themselves, the words of the book they are holding. Some gently rock back and forth as they read, letting the cadence of their movement compliment the rhythm of the words on the page. Others are writing on tablets of slate or wood. These writers are likewise engaged in the exercise of recitation, but with the pen, setting down line after line from memory. One boy uncrosses his legs, stands up, and steps toward a man who is seated on a little chair in front of the group. As the boy steps forward, his teacher rises and the boy presents his tablet to him. It is written front and back in neat lines of Arabic. Both the teacher and the boy are careful not to smudge the words on the slate. They are sacred words, revealed to a prophet named Muhammad long ago in Mecca, a town on the western edge of Arabia, toward which they have both been praying every day since they were very young.

This is an almost timeless scene, one that has been played out in countless places from Morocco to Syria virtually every day for nearly 14 centuries. It is an enduring picture of Islamic education at its most basic level—the beginning of literacy by learning Qur'an.

Education has always been an important pursuit in Islam. It was fostered for many reasons and at many levels. There were itinerant teachers who taught the fundamental tenets of the faith in exchange for lodging and other services, there were Qur'anic schools, often associated with the mosques, where masters of the Qur'an gathered a circle of pupils and tutored them, and there were centers of higher learning at Baghdad, Damascus, Alexandria, and elsewhere, where Islamic theology and jurisprudence were developed and taught.

Given the scope and intensity of Islamic educational efforts, it is not surprising that much was written on the subject from both theoretical and practical points of view. In a soon-to-be released volume from the Maxwell Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, Bradley J. Cook, with assistance from Fathi H. Malkawi, has drawn together and introduced selections from the writings of eminent Islamic thinkers, presenting them in a dual-language format for the first time. Each piece in *Classical Foundations of Islamic Educational Thought* has been translated and annotated by a respected scholar of classical Arabic literature. Together, these texts are a trove of information about the way education has been approached in the classical Islamic tradition. There is much here of relevance to modern educators who are interested in carrying forward that tradition even as new technologies and social realities impact the learning environment. And there is much for all to appreciate about a faith tradition that enjoined its followers to "seek learning, even unto China."

For more information about this and other titles in the Islamic Translation Series, visit meti.byu.edu. ♦

By D. Morgan Davis

Director, Middle Eastern Texts Initiative

Summer Seminar Mentors Rising Scholars

Ten graduate and advanced undergraduate students selected from more than half a dozen institutions participated in the Mormon Scholars Foundation summer seminar held this past May and June under the auspices of the Maxwell Institute.

The theme for the seminar was “Foundations of Mormon Theology: The Nature of God and the Human.” Terryl Givens, professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond, and author of a forthcoming two-volume history of the subject to be published by Oxford University Press, led the students. Richard Bushman, Howard W. Hunter Chair of Mormon Studies in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University, oversaw the seminar.

The Maxwell Institute mentors young scholars who are advancing in fields related to the work and mission of the Institute. The summer seminar gives the next generation of scholars the benefit of mentoring by leading Mormon scholars who publish in the field of Mormon studies.

Each of the participants presented a paper at a culminating symposium held at Brigham Young University, which showcased a number of important insights gleaned by the students from weeks of immersion in archives. Paper topics were as diverse as “Interracial Marriage in Early Mormon Thought,” “A Savior Unto Israel: Bloodlines and Assurance in Early Mormon Salvation Theory,” and “Wallowing in the Mud and Snorting Like Beasts: The Problem of the Body in Early Mormon Spiritual Experience.”

One example of discoveries made by participants concerned an important document published for the first time in the recent Joseph Smith Papers volume—a transcription of a song sung in tongues. The Papers editors had not been able to identify the speaker, the transcriber, or the interpreter of this text appearing in the Book of Commandments and Revelations, the earliest existing master record of Joseph Smith’s revelations. David Golding, one of the seminar students, found a broadside in BYU special collections that indicated that David Patton spoke the text in tongues, and Sidney Rigdon interpreted.

One participant summarized his experience with the seminar: “When I first applied to the . . . summer seminar, I wasn’t sure what to expect. As a non-Mormon who had grown up in the shadow of the church, I had been taught to view anything that BYU did with suspicion and as likely proselytizing. I had heard, however, that the seminar had produced some good scholarship and respected what I knew of the work of the professor who was leading it.

“What I discovered . . . was a community of scholars who was committed to understanding Mormon theology and history within an academic framework while at the same time recognizing its spiritual value for members of the faith. The knowledge and forthrightness of my fellow participants impressed me. . . . Participating in the seminar increased my respect for Mormon theology and scholarship.”

The Mormon Scholars Foundation, established in 2007 and directed by Bushman, Givens, and Andrew Skinner (Professor of Ancient Scripture at BYU and former executive director of the Maxwell Institute), organizes and funds conferences and seminars in collaboration with other organizations such as the Maxwell Institute. Information about future summer seminars will be made available through the Maxwell Institute. ♦

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