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Mentoring Students at the Maxwell Institute

We have all felt the excitement that comes from seeing a great scholar at work, whether in the classroom or the archives. No less palpable is the thrill of a personal encounter with the past through direct contact with ancient texts or artifacts. Most of us can trace our fascination with the ancient world back to just such a personal encounter. One of our roles at the Maxwell Institute is to help inspire the next generation of young scholars. We do this by providing opportunities for BYU students to work directly with Institute scholars on new research, and thus to help them have their own encounters with the ancient world.

The BYU Office of Research and Creative Activities (ORCA) grants program was designed to provide just these kinds of opportunities. These grants enable students to work with faculty on specific research projects, often resulting in a joint publication by the student and the faculty mentor. Through these grants students are able to experience the whole process of academic research, from formulating a research idea to writing up the finished article.

John R. Manis, a senior pursuing a minor in Near Eastern Languages, recently won an ORCA grant to work with Kristian Heal, a specialist in Syriac studies and director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at the Maxwell Institute, on a research project to assess the influence of the Syriac exegetical tradition in an ancient commentary on Genesis preserved in Armenian.

The Armenian Genesis commentary that they will study is attributed to the Syriac author Ephrem of Nisibis (d. AD 373). Though Ephrem did indeed write a commentary on Genesis, the Armenian commentary is not a translation of that work, but rather of another, later commentary which no longer survives in Syriac. Since the Armenian commentary draws on the works of the great Syriac scholar Jacob of Edessa (d. AD 708), as well as other Syriac commentaries, it is clear that it was composed no earlier than the ninth century. Though some of the sources for the Armenian commentary have been identified, scholars have failed to notice the abundant parallels between this commentary

and ancient Syriac homilies on the Old Testament patriarch Joseph. The inclusion of material from these homilies in the Armenian commentary's treatment of Genesis 37–50 suggests that this work is a unique attempt to absorb the exegetical expansions and comments of homiletic tradition into the commentary tradition proper.

John Manis served a full-time LDS mission in the republic of Armenia, where he was able to experience firsthand the richness of Eastern Christianity and gain a solid understanding of the Armenian language. Upon returning to BYU, Manis wished to continue his study of the Armenian language and of the ancient Christian literature and traditions preserved in Armenian, but has had to work independently for the most part. "It has been hard to find classes that even come close to my interests in Eastern Christianity," Manis notes, "but this grant gives me an opportunity not only to explore my interests now, but also to be prepared for more specialized graduate studies." Heal and Manis intend to publish their research in an academic journal in 2010.

Future student mentoring opportunities will be available to students through the Institute's Russel B. Swensen Endowed Mentorship Fund. This fund was named in honor of a beloved BYU professor and was created in 2002 to provide grants each year to selected undergraduate students who are pursuing degrees in fields of study related to the Maxwell Institute's broad areas of interest and who have secured an agreement to conduct research under the supervision of a BYU faculty member. ♦

Upcoming Event

BYU's L. Tom Perry Special Collections has been gathering Thomas L. Kane family papers into its collections for many years. They now have the largest collection of Thomas L. Kane manuscripts in the world. For this exhibit, they have drawn from this rich archive original manuscripts, rare books, and photographs that document Kane's relationship with the Latter-day Saints, which included friendship with Brigham Young and Kane's position of advocate for the Saints during the process of statehood and the Utah War. The exhibit continues in the Harold B. Lee Library through June 2009. Free admission.