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Moving Syriac Literature into the Digital Age

The mother tongue of Jesus and his disciples was not Greek or Latin or even Hebrew, but Aramaic, the language of Israel's Babylonian captors. Aramaic, and in particular the dialect of Syriac, has continued to be spoken by many Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere down to the present time. This Semitic language became the vehicle for a vast body of early Christian literature that expressed Christian theology in singularly Semitic forms. For example, just as the Hebrew prophets expressed themselves primarily in poetry or rhythmic prose, rich with symbolism and analogy, so also early Syriac teachers composed didactic hymns and even their sermons in poetic meter. In contrast to the philosophical theology of western churches, Syriac Christians articulated a symbolic theology that drew on images from nature and scripture to express the Christian mysteries.

The unique literature of the early Syriac churches is now the focus of much historical, linguistic and religious research. Great manuscript discoveries during the 19th century resulted in large amounts of Syriac publications, but these important books are now very often rare and difficult to access. One of the richest collections of such works is the Semitics/ICOR Library at the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, DC, which is based on the personal collection of the distinguished orientalist, Fr. Henri Hyvernat. The Maxwell Institute and the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU collaborated with CUA to image over 60,000 pages of rare Syriac printed books and related studies. The *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* became available online in 2007 as part of the Lee Library's Digital Collections (<http://www.lib.byu.edu/dlib/cua/>). These valuable works are now freely available and easily accessible to both scholars and members of the Syriac churches. (See *Insights* 27/5.)

This digital collection has received a substantial amount of usage, with as many as 6,000 visits

per month. Not only is this resource being used by scholars in such places as Russia, Syria, Lebanon, and India, where Syriac scholarship is active and resources are rare, but even scholars working in or near major research libraries are finding the collection invaluable. Dr. Ute Possekel, a Syriac scholar working in Boston, wrote us to say, “Just wanted to add my thanks for the online Syriac books. I'm delighted to hear about having Baumstark's *Geschichte* available. It's been always such a hassle to hunt down a copy to check something or other—and I live in the Boston area that is generally well supplied with libraries! Great work, we are all very grateful.” Dr. Sebastian Brock of the University of Oxford observed, “How frustrating it is that important literature on Syriac studies is scattered over so many periodicals and books, with the result that even a good library like Oxford University's

Bodleian Library does not cover anything like the whole range—and if this is so, how much more for any other university and academic libraries.”

In its brief lifetime, *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* has become an important part of a growing collection of Internet resources for scholars of early Christianity and Syriac. These resources include relevant titles available on omnibus archives such as Gallica, Google Books, and the Internet Archive. Most important is a sister project to that of BYU, the *eBeth Arké Syriac Studies Collection* (www.hmmml.org/vivarium/BethArke.htm). When complete, this collection will contain approximately 650 items, also scanned from the collections of CUA. Whereas the BYU-CUA collection primarily serves the needs of scholars, eBeth Arké is oriented to the Syriac Christian churches.

The success of *BYU-CUA Syriac Studies Reference Library* has been gratifying to all involved and is catalyzing further action. Plans are now being made to extend the collection to include more of the treasures conserved at CUA, for the further benefit of scholars and Christians of Syriac heritage worldwide. ♦



This woodcut of Ephrem, the most important Syriac author, is taken from the title page of the 1603 Roman edition.

FOR MORE INFORMATION
The 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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by Carl Griffin
Associate Director of CPART

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.

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. 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, ancient temples, and related subjects are of particular interest.

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 2009–2010 academic year should know that the deadline for submitting a completed application form and all supporting documentation is **August 31, 2009**. The Nibley Fellowship guidelines and an application form are available at mi.byu.edu/nibleyfellowships or by e-mailing nibleyfellowships@byu.edu.

The Maxwell Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to the following graduate students for the 2008–2009 academic year:

Continuing Nibley Fellows are **Jared William Anderson**, biblical studies: New Testament,

Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Lincoln H. Blumell**, early Christianity, Department and Centre for the Study of Religion, University of Toronto; **Matthew Bowen**, biblical studies, Department of Theological and Religious Studies, Catholic University of America; **Matthew J. Grey**, ancient Mediterranean religions, Department of Religious Studies, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill; **Paul Derek Miller**, theology, ethics and culture/history of Christianity, School of Religion, Claremont Graduate University; **Jacob Rennaker**, comparative religion, Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington; **Daniel B. Sharp**, New Testament, Claremont Graduate University; **Shirley (Shirl) Irene Wood**, biblical interpretation, Iliff School of Theology, University of Denver;

First-time Nibley Fellows are **Trevan G. Hatch**, Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism, Jewish Studies, Baltimore Hebrew University; **David Joseph Larsen**, scripture, early Christianity, Department of Theology, Marquette University; **Ariel Bybee Laughton**, early Christianity, Graduate Program in Religion, Duke University; **Avram Richard Shannon**, Hebrew Bible, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Ohio State University; **Justin Soderquist**, New Testament, Septuagint, Department of Biblical Studies, Trinity Western University; **Thomas K. Sowards**, Bible, Department of Bible, Rothberg International School; and **Matthew P. Yacubic**, Mesoamerica, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Riverside.

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

It has always been the case—that the Lord has raised up men as His prophets who have just the cluster of talents needed for a particular time. It is no different in the culminating days of the dispensation of the fulness

of time. The Lord measured and ordained these men before they came here. Knowing perfectly the conditions that would obtain, He has sent, and will send, men to match the mountains of challenges that are just ahead of us. (*All These Things Shall Give Thee Experience* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979], 122, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 128.)

"Voices in the Human Conversation" Available on Internet

Several video broadcasts exploring areas related to the work of the Maxwell Institute are available to view online through the BYU Web site. In February, the College of Humanities at BYU presented, as part of their "Voices in the Human Conversation" program that was originally broadcast on KBYU, a lecture by Roger Macfarlane, associate professor of humanities, classics, and comparative literature at BYU. Entitled "Illuminating the Papyri from Herculaneum, Oxyrhynchus, and Beyond," Macfarlane discussed Multi-Spectral Imaging and ancient texts. In the past, the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at the Maxwell Institute (then under the auspices of FARMS) assisted scholars like Macfarlane in retrieving images from such places as Herculaneum, Petra, and Bonampak. Although CPART's emphasis now involves digitizing ancient works through other methods, Macfarlane has carried on BYU's work of multi-spectral imaging.

"Voices in the Human Conversation" is a lecture series intended to help the public participate in a dialogue of the study of language, its structures and features, and the recognition that it is through language that we perceive and experience the world. The lecture series features college faculty members, their scholarly research, and their unique insights.

An earlier series of lectures is also available for online viewing as part of the "Voices in the Human Conversation" program. Most of the presenters have published with the Institute, and their subjects are of interest to the Institute. All originally aired in September 2007:

- "The Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon," Royal Skousen, professor of linguistics and English language, BYU. Skousen discusses the monumental study of the Book of Mormon text detailing the translation and transcription processes involved in the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.
- "Seven Striking Features of the Dead Sea Scrolls Bible," Donald W. Parry, professor of Hebrew Bible studies, BYU. Parry, a member of

the international team of translators of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discusses aspects of the scrolls.

- "Popol Vuh: The Creation," Allen J. Christenson, professor of humanities, classics, and comparative literature, BYU. Christensen has studied Maya culture, literature, and art for many decades. He has published an English translation of the Popol Vuh, the single most important ancient Maya book to have survived the impact of the arrival of Europeans in the new world in the 15th and 16th centuries.
- "The Great World of the Spirits of the Dead: Some Contexts for D&C 138," George S. Tate, professor of humanities, classics, and comparative literature, BYU. Tate lectures on this section that was received by President Joseph F. Smith shortly before his death in 1918.

To view the podcasts of each lecture, go to <http://humanities.byu.edu/media> and click on the hyper-linked sentence, "Click here for the *Voices in the Human Conversation* podcast," then select a lecture. ♦

INSIGHTS

Paula W. Hicken, Jacob D. Rawlins, *Editors*

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M. Gerald Bradford, Morgan Davis, John Gee,
Carl Griffin, Kristian Heal, Paul Y. Hoskisson, Daniel C. Peterson

Publications Department

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

