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Anderson Speaks at Third Annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture

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INSIGHTS

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

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Anderson Speaks at Third Annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture

With the intent of probing the lives of Christ and Joseph Smith, Richard Lloyd Anderson, emeritus professor of Ancient Scripture at Brigham Young University, gave the third annual Neal A. Maxwell Lecture, held March 20, 2009. Anderson discussed the reliability of the documentary process by which we know of events in the New Testament and in the early years of the Restoration.

Sister Colleen Maxwell, widow of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, members of their family, and BYU Academic Vice President John Tanner and his wife, Susan, were part of the large audience who assembled at BYU for the lecture.

Anderson noted that he was in attendance, as many in the audience were, at the first annual lecture given by President Samuelson. He said “many here feel close to Elder Maxwell personally from his effective communication skills in public and private.” Anderson noted that the lecture series is an “occasion of honoring Elder Maxwell and what he stood for,” and that Elder Maxwell “stood not only for great teachings but living those teachings.”

Anderson said that the word *probing* was used in the title of his address, “Probing the Lives of Christ and Joseph Smith,” because there’s so much material to examine on both. Anderson’s decades of academic study were always split between Christ and those who witnessed his ministry and the Three and the Eight Witnesses as well as other witnesses of Joseph Smith’s ministry. Anderson said that he had “never been able to get on either path,” and had taken both. He said that Brigham Young might say “any argument you make for the divinity of Christ and the truth of the original church, an argument for revelation, an argument for the integrity of that foundation, the same arguments can be made and are made for the restoration of the gospel.” He said it has been “such a wonderful thing to try to relate the early church to the restored church.”

Anderson said one of the main questions involved in historical documentation is what do you do to try to recreate the past if the past is so long

ago? Where are your archives? Anderson defended the letters of Paul as an archive of the early church, as well as the letters of Peter and John. He said many letters from the New Testament period exist. Anderson noted, “if you accept the letters of Pliny at the end of the first century, the letters of Cicero before the beginning of the first century, about the time of Christ, why wouldn’t you accept Christian letters of the equivalent period that are absolutely documented?” Anderson explained that Latter-day Saints are believers in the Bible text, “and we have the text that goes back to people that knew Jesus, kept records, and wrote their memories down. And if there are weaknesses in memories, use the main idea of the memory, because the main point has been kept and told for a reason, and that reason is the religious conviction of the people who were early Christians.” He then quoted 1 John 1:1–2, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness,” and remarked, “Isn’t that wonderful, that you actually just heard the words of one who felt the hands of Jesus at the resurrection.”

The Gospels, however, present difficulties because of the lack of eyewitness sources. But Anderson said that scripturally the connection is back to the men who walked with Jesus, then preached about him and his gospel. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15:11, taught, “Whether it were I or they, so we preach, and so ye believed.”

Anderson said critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints think the problem with the first vision is equal to that of the four Gospels. Some of the accounts conflict, as do the Gospels. But he does not see that the accounts conflict.

“The problem is that Joseph Smith didn’t spell out all the details. I’m a married man, and when I come home tired and my wife asks me a question sometimes I don’t spell out all the details. Then I get a second and a third question, because my wife is analytical enough that she would really like the story and not a piece of it. But in every

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account, whether it's my son giving me graduation reminiscences, today, or whether you think back to something significant that happened on your wedding day, when have you sat down and written the whole story? It's going to be a part of the story no matter what. And that's the intrinsic problem with the testimonies of Joseph and the first vision."

But Anderson said we should ask What's the point? "The point is that the Father introduced the Son, the Son gave the message, and that meshes with the other accounts. The First Vision is a beautiful and marvelous experience."

Missing the Mark

In teaching Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University over the past quarter century, I have rarely found a student, whether true freshman or returned missionary, who knows what the word *mark* means in Jacob 4:14.¹ Most of them know that the mark symbolizes Christ in this verse, but they do not know what a *mark* is. That is, if a *mark* symbolizes Christ, then *mark* must be something in real life other than Christ. In fact, most Book of Mormon readers justifiably feel satisfied and uplifted by relying on what they think *mark* means in this verse. While it is true that great lessons can be learned from this verse by relying simply on the symbolic meaning of *mark*, when the meaning of *mark* as it fell from the Prophet's lips while translating becomes clear, whole new, additional dimensions of understandings of Jacob's warning begin to unfold.

The reason most people today do not know what *mark* meant in Joseph Smith's day is that with time the meanings of many words shift. This is particularly true when reading older books, such as the Book of Mormon or the even much older King James Version of the Bible. In the 19th century the word *mark* was beginning to be replaced in the English language by a newer word. As the newer word rose to dominance, the older word, *mark*, gradually began to lose its original meaning. Such was the case with the meaning of *mark* vis-a-vis *target* at the time the Book of Mormon was first published in 1830.

When the King James Version of the Bible was translated, the word *mark* meant something to aim

The same touchstone could be applied to the many interviews of those who knew the Prophet. "See what are the core thoughts and the main issues that [Joseph is] talking about, you get the message."

Anderson concluded his remarks by saying that "the systems that I know of thinking in history and reconstruction of the past, they work as I apply them to Joseph Smith and the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. . . . I could say to you that I have given my life to constant study of ancient and modern religions and by every rule of evidence that I know, Christ and Joseph Smith are who and what they claim to be." ♦

at, what we today would call a target. On the other hand, the word *target* in King James English did not mean a target, but rather it meant a round shield.² Thus, the King James Bible states in 1 Samuel 17:6 that Goliath had "a target of brass between his shoulders." That is, Goliath was wearing a round piece of brass armor covering part of his upper body.³ He was not wearing a bull's-eye on his chest, as a casual reading today might suggest. That *mark* meant *target* in King James English can be seen from several passages in the King James Bible. For example, in 1 Samuel 20:20 Jonathan agreed to give David a secret signal by shooting arrows "as though [he] shot at a mark."⁴

With time, however, *target* came to mean something to aim at, possibly from using a round shield hung on a wall for "target practice."⁵ As *target* began to take on the meaning of something to shoot at, the older word for something to shoot at in practice, namely, *mark*, began to lose this meaning, but retained something of its previous life in frozen phrases such as "he is a marked man," "marksman," and "mark your target."

At the time the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, *mark* still meant something to aim at and would have been easily understood by 19th-century readers, though *target* was beginning to be used. Thus, throughout 19th-century Latter-day Saint writings *mark* is still used for target.⁶ For example, W. W. Phelps wrote the following, as published in the early Latter-day Saint periodical *Evening and Morning Star*, "Or like as when an arrow is shot at a mark, it parteth the air, which immediately cometh together again, so that a man cannot know