



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

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# INSIGHTS

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

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## Behind the Messiah Documentary

The following is part 1 of a two-part series of articles written by S. Kent Brown, executive producer of *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*. During production he was director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and FARMS at the Maxwell Institute. *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*, a documentary produced by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, the College of Religious Education, and BYU Broadcasting, received a sneak preview at BYU's

Education Week in August. For the first time ever, teachings of the restoration, sound academic views from faithful Latter-day Saint scholars, and state-of-the-art documentary production have been combined to produce this seven-part series on Jesus Christ, the *Messiah*. BYUTV will air the documentary beginning on January 10, 2010, and copies will be available for purchase in the spring. A short preview can be viewed at [www.byub.org/messiah](http://www.byub.org/messiah). This documentary is the result of over 200 hours of interviews with LDS experts in various fields. Filming was done on-site in Israel, Egypt, and Denmark and on a specially built stage at the LDS motion picture studio.

On a warm June day in 2001, Noel Reynolds, then a BYU vice president, sat pondering a moment and then looked straight at me on the other side of the desk and said, "This film, if done right, will become the 'Jesus the Christ' for the 21st century. This is the perfect project for a visual era."

Here is the beginning of the story.

The April 1998 showing of the acclaimed PBS documentary film *From Jesus to Christ* struck me as skillfully filmed but as a subtle and willful challenge to deeply held Christian beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth. The PBS film draws upon the skills of some of the best-known New Testament scholars. It created a sensation. However, I saw the four-hour film not only as too brief a story, with an axe to grind, but also as a stunning disclosure about how film can tell Jesus's full story. "What if Latter-day

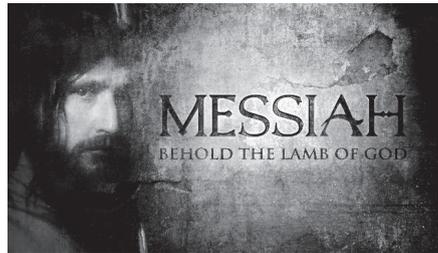
Saints could produce a documentary film on the Christ as well crafted as *From Jesus to Christ* and as well thought out?" I asked myself. "One reason to explore another film," I thought, "is that a documentary crafted from an LDS point of view could and should include the dimension of faith."

Thus began an effort that would go through concept building, research papers, BYU classes, script drafts, review committees, preproduction planning, and film tests.

But why did the showing of *From Jesus to Christ* become a catalyst?

In reality, without *From Jesus to Christ* there is no story. As early as my grad school days, I sensed the inadequacy, often the aggressive confrontation, of other, non-faith approaches to Jesus's life. Seeing the PBS film cemented that judgment even more deeply into my head, but in a wonderfully visual way. I sat glued to the television not only listening to the "party line" that many scholars have adopted about Jesus's humanity and his corresponding lack of divinity, but also mesmerized at how impressive the film medium is in presenting that message. Now, without taking on respected colleagues at conferences and in publications, and creating heaps of ill will in professional settings, I saw a way for Latter-day Saint scholars to tell our version of Jesus's story and, if those colleagues choose to listen in, to tell it to them in an inviting, inoffensive format.

"Who is Jesus?" becomes the major question that the film addresses. Let me specify a few important points. Jesus as Savior and Redeemer stands at the heart of our faith. But when I repeat the titles *Savior* and *Redeemer*, I mean something fundamentally different from what most of my Christian friends mean. Speaking generally, their Jesus saves those trapped in sin who receive the sacraments or ordinances of the Christian church. Again speaking generally, in their view, those saved must receive these ordinances while living in mortality, before death. Jesus's saving power does not extend to those who die without such ordinances. In stark contrast, my



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Jesus possesses power to save those who have died without the gospel and to open the door for the dead to receive salvation. My Jesus holds infinite power to save. My Jesus is not limited.

The question “Who is Jesus?” leads us to another important issue, that of Jesus’s original roles—a God who volunteered to become the Savior, created the world, and then dealt with mortals through his Old Testament prophets. From this brief list, other believers share only the doctrine that the Son was Creator. But they come to this view partly through the language of the Christian creeds. These documents describe the Son not only as the one “by whom all things were made,” a statement that rests on scripture (see John 1:3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:2), but also as “being of one substance with the Father.” This latter expression complicates the issue of how exactly the Son served as Creator with the Father. For Latter-day Saints, the doctrine is refreshingly plainer: the Son stands independent of the Father as Creator and acts under his direction.

In order to be clear on this matter, our first episode, titled “‘Before Abraham Was’: Premortal Savior,” paints a vivid portrait of the Savior as both Creator and God of the Old Testament. We grasp one of the hefty keys for understanding who Jesus really is in the events of the premortal grand council wherein our Father in Heaven selected him to become our Redeemer and Savior. All of this is old news to Latter-day Saints, but is almost unknown to our believing friends. To aid understanding of all viewers, we stitch the first episode together in a compelling, forthright manner. Our interviewed scholars draw on scripture resources as diverse as the book of Genesis, the Gospel of John, the Book of Abraham, and section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Without compromise, we pair modern scripture with ancient sources, adding what we can learn about Jesus as premortal Deity from other early Christian authors.

By contrast, most other film treatments of Jesus begin with his birth and focus on him as a mortal infant and child, sadly dismissing the miraculous and heaven-driven events that the New Testament Gospels record about his birth. From my perspective, all of Jesus’s story recorded in the Gospels and in Third Nephi makes much more sense if a person accepts the view that a loving Father was involved in Jesus’s birth and was guiding both events and persons toward a planned outcome.

In fact, in the second episode we drive home the points that Jesus’s birth fulfills prophecy and that his coming was overlaid by a rich series of divine manifestations, resting our case on a careful review of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Many of our colleagues in the academic world focus on the differences between the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke and conclude that, perhaps, Matthew offers a reliable sketch of events and that Luke is not to be trusted. Our approach is to say that such differences between the two writers potentially bring forward a richer tapestry of occurrences that interwove the lives of Mary and Joseph and others. I have written a fair amount about Mary and Elisabeth, and I have come to respect deeply Luke’s presentation of these women and their situations. His account is doctrinally rich and culturally true to the times. I find nothing to suggest that he is making up parts of his report. It is from Luke, for example, that we learn God entrusts his secret of the ages—who the Messiah’s mother is to be—to two women, Mary and Elisabeth.

As a further example, Luke clearly places Mary on a pedestal. Why? Some scholars conclude that God’s choice of Mary was purely an act of grace, almost a random event. But it becomes plain that Mary was known long before her mortal life began. Not only do we possess the impressive prophecy from Isaiah about the virgin who brings forth a son and calls his name Immanuel, a prophecy that we share with other believers (see Isaiah 7:14), but we also look to a series of prophecies from the Book of Mormon about her, one even naming her more than a century before her birth (see Mosiah 3:8).

Within a week of the screening of the PBS documentary, I handed a proposal for a film to Robert Millet, then the BYU dean of Religious Education. That proposal emphasized the film as a scholarly treatment that would be reared on an LDS doctrinal base while remaining true to the cultural character and historical veracity of the New Testament age. To my eventual surprise, I woefully underestimated the time required to make the film and its cost. I guessed that we could finish a film in no more than three years, one-quarter of the eleven-plus years that have passed, and of the money needed, my calculation was a mere one-twelfth of the final budget. So it began. *(To be continued in the next issue.)* ♦

**By S. Kent Brown**

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