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Givens Featured Speaker at First Biennial Willes Center Lecture

The Book of Mormon and its status as an American Bible was the subject of the First Biennial Laura F. Willes Center Book of Mormon Lecture held October 8, 2009, at Brigham Young University. Terryl L. Givens, professor of literature and religion and occupant of the James Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond, focused his remarks on two points: the provenance of the Book of Mormon and major motifs within it.

Unlike the opening of Genesis or the four Gospels, the Book of Mormon begins with a personal introduction by Nephi, who “urgently presses upon his audience the very human, very local, and very historical nature of his narrative.” In the Book of Mormon, Givens said, there is an “authorial preoccupation . . . with authenticating the record’s provenance.” We can nearly always identify who wrote or abridged the text before us, because throughout the record an effort can be traced to “never lose sight of the links in the chain of transmission.” This chain takes the reader from “a historical personage of flesh and blood, who fashioned with his own hands the very materials on which the record was engraven,” to Moroni, who delivered those plates—as well as others—to Joseph Smith and to the eleven witnesses who attested the reality of the plates.

Givens next explored four motifs in the Book of Mormon: revelation, Christology, Zion, and scripture. He said each is introduced in the visionary experiences of Lehi and continued throughout the text.

With respect to revelation, Nephi’s desire to see what his father saw in the vision of the tree of life marks a “paradigm shift of dramatic proportions,” Givens said. The promise of personal, dialogic revelation found in Moroni 10 and illustrated early in

the book through Nephi’s vision, is a “nonnegotiable point of theological difference.”

Next, the most striking claim within the Book of Mormon, said Givens, is its “insistence that Jesus Christ was worshipped in the Western hemisphere” centuries before his advent. In fact, “Christology in the Book of Mormon is not an occasional intrusion, but the narrative backbone of the story. . . . All of Book of Mormon history . . . pivots on the moment of Christ’s coming.”

Givens next discussed the exodus of Lehi away from Jerusalem. He attributed to this recurrent motif of *exodus*, which is reenacted many times throughout the text, “the dominant emotional tone” of the Book of Mormon. “The original dislocation signified by Lehi’s exodus becomes a prelude not to a new geographical gathering, but to a shadow of the permanent reconstitution of Zion into spiritual refuge.”

A fourth major motif is scripture itself. Givens taught that a 19th-century Christian audience “would have considered scriptural history to move inevitably toward completion and closure.” In the Book of Mormon, however, “scripture always moves toward proliferation and dissemination.” It is “fluid, diffuse, and infinitely generable.”

Givens concluded his remarks by saying that the “Book of Mormon’s place as canonical scripture cannot be separated from the particular ways it has portrayed itself as a literal historical creation, and from the unexpected ways it has both engaged and rewritten important stands of Christian historical understanding.”

Givens’s talk was based in part on his recent book *The Book of Mormon, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The entire text of this address, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible: Radicalizing the Familiar,” will be available in the next issue of the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*. ♦



From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

In the topsy-turvy last days, it is important to realize that as “the eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on,” His disciples will surely know what it is to be tumbled.

(Mormon 8:22.) It will be no time to be proud, especially when the tumbings may not at the moment seem purposeful. Yet the Lord’s work will roll on; His meek disciples will understand. (*Meek and Lowly* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 56, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997], 191)