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Behind the Messiah Documentary

S. Kent Brown

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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 3 of a three-part series of articles written by S. Kent Brown, executive producer of Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God, a Neal A. Maxwell Institute, BYU Broadcasting, and Religious Education production. BYU Television will air the seven-part documentary beginning on January 10, 2010. Copies will be available for purchase in the spring. This third article reviews unusual occurrences tied to the early filming in Egypt and Israel.



For the first time in my career, I felt vividly, in the moment, that people had been put in our way to assist.

Occasionally this phenomenon had been a part of my teaching and research experience, but I had sensed it mainly in retrospect. The series of assists began in Egypt, but only after a bumpy beginning.

I have flown into the Cairo International Airport 20 or more times. Against my better judgment, I agreed to a limo ride to the hotel. It turned out that the limo was a seven-passenger van that stopped at several other hotels before we reached my destination.

The big surprise came when I reached my hotel, the Cairo Marriott Hotel on Zamalek Island. The desk clerk could not find a reservation for me. So I retreated from the registration desk and tried to use my cell phone. It did not work. I went to the hotel office where I could rent an international telephone line. I tried to call Russ Kendall, our producer, who was in Israel, to learn how our reservation might be named. No luck. I called Lorie Anderson at BYU Travel, who had made the hotel reservation. I tried her cell phone, and no one answered. I dialed her university number. She answered. Relief. She told me the reservation number and assured me that the reservation was for the Cairo Marriott Hotel. Armed with the reservation number and depleted by about \$40 for the calls, I went back to the reservation desk and pushed the written reservation number across the counter. The fellow who stepped forward to help me said, "Just a minute," and disappeared into the back room. I thought, "Not again." He soon returned and told me that the reservation number matched the J. W. Marriott Hotel that lay across town. I was not even aware of a J. W. Marriott Hotel in Cairo. I paid for a ride to the other Marriott Hotel.

When I reached the other hotel, I was shocked to learn that I was booked into a normal room only for the following two nights. For the first night, I had a reservation for a \$600-per-night suite. I told the fellow that I only needed a room to sleep in, not a suite. So, against policy, he moved me into a normal room for about \$100 for the night.

Following this rather jarring beginning in Egypt, I was not prepared for the sweet experience that would happen the next afternoon after the filming crew arrived from Israel via Amman, Jordan.

Sterling Van Wagenen, our director, was anxious not to lose any of the 48 hours that we were to spend in Egypt, and so we drove off to the Church of the Holy Virgin, which sits perched on the east bank of the Nile River some five miles south of downtown Cairo. Thirty years before I had photographed the exterior of this small church that celebrates the traditional spot where Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus embarked on a boat for Upper Egypt and then, more than three years later, sailed back to that spot to begin their overland journey to Nazareth.

Thanks to a small local group that Kendall had hired to make arrangements for our filming team, Father Antonios, the pastor, was expecting us. With warm generosity, Father Antonios opened the entire chapel complex to us, promising that when we returned the next day we could film in any part of the grounds and church building. This warm reception was only the beginning.

The next day saw us traveling to the Wadi Natrun, a valley that lies below sea level in the western desert and runs roughly parallel to the Cairo-Alexandria road. When I had last driven that road some 20 years previously, I saw only desert sands on either side. Now towns and growing businesses line the roadway, so it was challenging to see the turn-off to the Monastery of the Syrian (Deir es-Syrian), which Coptic Christian tradition connects to the Holy Family's flight from Herod's deadly grasp.

Roads and buildings have sprouted everywhere in what used to be a sea of sand. The Christian monks clearly had to fence in their property so that no one would build on their land. And mosques stood near the Christian enclaves.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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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Our host at the monastery was a very pleasant man named Father Jacob (Anba Yaqub). He graciously walked with me and described the monastic complex while our cameras rolled. I found his willingness to give of his time to be extraordinary—and unexpected.

Knowing that our time was limited, we departed the monastery early in the afternoon and raced back to Cairo and the Church of the Holy Virgin on the banks of the Nile.

As promised, Father Antonios opened the church to us for whatever purpose we wanted. Van Wagenen positioned me on the edge of a pew and asked a few questions about Egyptian Christianity while the cameras churned. A soft light was streaming in the western doors. It was a nice setting for such questions. Then Father Antonios, who had come into the building, accompanied me on a brief walk through the church. He acted demurely at first, saying that I was the scholar and that he was not an expert on the flight of the Holy Family. So I asked him to tell me about the church, which he did, describing its history and architectural features as the cameras rolled.

Then the camera operators went all around the grounds, capturing images of the church. After sunset, the big camera photographed the three characteristic domes from the east side against the dying light. It occurred to me that we had already captured better images than any of those that I had seen in documentary films about the Savior.

Two days later, Friday, October 24, we were in Jerusalem. After unloading our gear at Lion's Gate

following a filming shoot at the Garden Tomb, we found ourselves inside St. Anne's Convent within the Old City. For a third time, I sensed that a generous person had been placed in a position to assist us. The grounds of St. Anne's convent include the pool of Bethesda, the scene of Jesus' miracle narrated in John 5. Our visit had been arranged so that even though the site was not open to the public during the early afternoon, we were allowed inside the grounds. In a charitable act, Father Michel LaVoi gave us carte blanche to visit and film anywhere we liked.

Before any tourists came into the convent grounds, the filming crew shot the area around the pool where Jesus healed the man who had been ill for 38 years. When we visited, the pool was completely dry. This was the first time in 30 years that I had seen it without water. Father LaVoi allowed a small group of us to go to the bottom of the dry pool on ladders to look at the underpinnings of the Byzantine and Crusader structures that once sat atop the pool's edges.

These three experiences, two in Egypt and one in the Old City of Jerusalem, caught me by pleasant surprise. My general experience living and working in the Middle East has taught me not to expect to accomplish a goal as planned, or on time. But there we stood, beneficiaries of the charitable acts of people of other faiths who freeheartedly offered their services and goodness to us. ♦

By S. Kent Brown

Associate Director, BYU Jerusalem Center

Nibley Lecture Series to Be Held

A lecture series entitled "The Work of Hugh W. Nibley: On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth" will be held during winter semester 2010 at BYU.

March 2010 marks the 100th anniversary of Nibley's birth. In addition, *One Eternal Round*, volume 19 of the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, the final volume of the series, will have been published.

The lectures will be held Thursday evenings at 7 p.m. in the Harold B. Lee Library auditorium and are sponsored by the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the College of Religious Education, and the Harold B. Lee Library.

During the series, a wide array of presenters will explore the scholarship and scope of Hugh Nibley's work. Richard Bushman will deliver the first lecture, "Hugh Nibley and Joseph Smith," on Thursday, January 14. A few of the other scheduled presenters include Robert L. Millet, "Nibley and the Church"; John W. Welch, "The Lasting Legacies of Hugh W. Nibley"; C. Wilfred Griggs, "Nibley as Mentor"; Eric D. Huntsman, "Nibley and Classical Scholarship"; Daniel C. Peterson, "Nibley as Apologist"; and Terry B. Ball, "Nibley and the Environment."

The complete schedule of lectures will be available on the Maxwell Institute Web site (maxwellinstitute.byu.edu). ♦