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INSIGHTS

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

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Center for Book of Mormon Studies Created



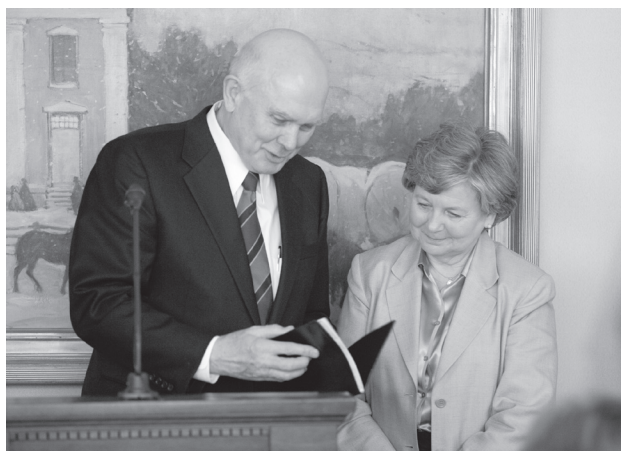
Laura F. Willes. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

Accompanied by Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, President Cecil O. Samuelson recently announced the formation of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, a research center that promises to bring national and international distinction to the study of the Book of Mormon.

President Samuelson made the announcement at a luncheon attended by Mark and Laura Willes and their family.

“The Willes Center,” President Samuelson remarked, “will form an integral part of BYU’s Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.”

In commenting on the establishment of the Willes Center, Elder Oaks said, “It’s a remarkable combination to have the resources, the inspiration of what to do with them, and the faith to do it, and that’s the story of Mark and Laura Willes in bringing this Willes Center to Brigham Young University.



Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles presents Laura Willes with an inscribed copy of the Book of Mormon. Photo by Mark Philbrick.


... That trio ... comes to fruition in a place that stands for the same thing.”

Mark Willes, the former CEO of Times-Mirror, noted the counsel from President Hinckley when Brother Willes received his call to serve as a mission president: “Just read the Book of Mormon.” That counsel, and a lifetime of devoted reading in the book, helped to spark Willes’s interest in founding a center whose purpose would be to encourage and support the pursuit of research on this volume of scripture. He chose to name it for his wife, Laura F. Willes, who, Brother Willes remarked, “has taught [their] children and [their] grandchildren and [their] missionaries to love the scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon.”



Mark and Laura Willes hold a copy of the Book of Mormon inscribed by the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve. Photo by Mark Philbrick.

In her response, Sister Willes said that the idea came as a complete surprise to her, especially because she prefers to remain out of the spotlight. But, she said, she hopes that she represents “all of the brothers and sisters in the Church and all of the men and women in the world who desperately need the Book of Mormon and its teachings.”

The Willes Center will begin functioning immediately according to Andrew C. Skinner, the executive director of the Maxwell Institute. “We want to open opportunities for capable researchers to begin and continue research efforts on the Book of Mormon.” Skinner added that the Center will “promote the study of the Book of Mormon both as an ancient text and as a publication in the modern world.” The Willes Center “will award scholarships, sponsor lectures and symposia, and assist in publications and media productions.” S. Kent Brown has been named as director of the Willes Center. 

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Skinner Concludes Museum of Art Lecture Series

On March 21 Andrew C. Skinner, executive director of the Maxwell Institute and professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, addressed the topic of “Crucifixion and Resurrection” in the Museum of Art lecture series on the life of Christ. Skinner began by saying that “the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth are the lynchpin of everything we believe and everything we do in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.”

First, Skinner carefully detailed and expounded upon the events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection. For example, Skinner noted that Pilate’s act of washing his hands at the trial of Christ was actually an ancient custom, “a symbolic demonstration of absolving oneself of guilt or responsibility for the shedding of another person’s blood,” but it was also a prescription of the Mosaic law “performed over the carcass of a sacrificed heifer as a sign that their city was not responsible for the death of a slain man” (see Deuteronomy 21:6–8). Thus, Skinner instructed, even in the trial before his death, Christ’s life fulfilled all statutes of the law of Moses.

New Documentary to Premier at Education Week


Journey of Faith: The New World, a new Maxwell Institute documentary, is set to premier at BYU Campus Education Week in August.

The Maxwell Institute has again teamed with award-winning Latter-day Saint filmmaker Peter Johnson to produce a documentary that will explore the Book of Mormon in the New World.

Johnson directed the Maxwell Institute’s DVD documentary *Journey of Faith* on the travels of Lehi and Sariah. He previously worked as an executive producer with the Audiovisual Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and before that as director of the BYU Motion Picture Studio, which under his direction became one of the top-rated university film studios in the world. He has directed such films as *A More Perfect Union* (winner of a regional Emmy award and nominated for a national Emmy) and the highly acclaimed *Mountain of the Lord*.


Skinner also explored several possible meanings of the tearing of the temple veil after the crucifixion of Christ, as recorded in the Gospels. For example, this event signified and symbolized the end of the Mosaic dispensation of animal sacrifices. Instead, with the opening of the new dispensation, Christ’s atonement would provide a way for all to enter into the presence of God and “not just the high priests on the Day of Atonement” in the Holy of Holies in the temple.

Describing it as “the most dramatic and remarkable moment in the history of Creation,” Skinner also expounded upon the extreme significance of Christ’s resurrection. “It is true that He inherited *the power* to take up His body again from His Father (Elohim) at the time of His mortal birth. But He received *the keys* of resurrection only after His own resurrection.” The angels rolled away the stones to reveal the miracle of Christ’s empty tomb; likewise, Skinner concluded, through his resurrection Christ could open the spirit world so “all the righteous [could] enter the presence of God.”

The Museum of Art’s display of *Beholding Salvation: Images of Christ* concluded on June 16. 

“The success of the film *Journey of Faith* has almost required that we create a film that follows the story of Lehi and Sariah into the New World,” said S. Kent Brown, director of FARMS and the Willes Center and one of the lead historical consultants on the documentary. The new documentary will follow the same format, with commentary from Latter-day Saint scholars and others, and stunning artwork by Joseph Brickey.

Brown also noted that “scholarship on ancient America has gone far enough to begin to match the Book of Mormon’s description of life and societies. Only now can we say enough to create a statement in a film. In a real sense, a film freezes research where it is. On the other hand, such a film will serve as a stimulus for further careful work.”

Journey of Faith: The New World can be viewed in the Joseph Smith Building Auditorium, August 21–24, Tuesday through Friday, from 4:30 to 6:45 p.m. Registration at Education Week will be required to attend. 

Reflections: Cosmic Optimism

In a world filled with violence, poverty, suffering, illness, accidental death, disappointment, frustration, and hatred, pessimism is an ever-beckoning possibility. And, for some, pessimism shades eventually into utter despair, hopelessness, and cynicism.

In the long term, the secular or naturalistic worldview actually has little else to offer. As one American philosopher put it, the things that matter most will ultimately be at the mercy of the things that matter least. The British philosopher-mathematician Bertrand Russell, an outspoken atheist, expressed the situation even more strikingly in an essay rather archly entitled “A Free Man’s Worship”:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accident collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins—all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built.

But is such a view really safe? Is it even remotely satisfying, when honestly confronted? Russell’s own autobiography suggests that the rather defiant public face of humanistic optimism that he consistently wore masked frequent bouts of inner misery.

Strikingly, Russell’s own daughter Katharine, while a graduate student with her husband at Harvard, rejected the fierce atheism in which she had been raised. It had, she said, brought her only unhappiness and dissatisfaction. Ironically, when her husband subsequently entered divinity school, some of the money from Russell’s Nobel Prize for Literature went to paying his tuition. Katharine impishly commented to her father that God probably found that fact rather funny; Russell responded that, while he didn’t know about God, officials at the Bank of England had been highly amused.

Reflections, a new section beginning in this *Insights*, will feature short essays on world religions and other topics.

While they differ in much, the great religions of the world are united in declaring that there are great and good things in store for the faithful, and even, in some versions, for all or virtually all of humankind. The contemporary British philosopher John Hick terms this view, shared by Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and all of the major traditions, “cosmic optimism.” “Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him.” These words come from the King James Version of 1 Corinthians 2:9, a Christian text from the New Testament. But they are unmistakably based upon Isaiah 64:4, a passage from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. And, in Islam, they eventually turn up as a “hadith” or tradition ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Hebrew Bible opens with the book of Genesis, in which we are told, leaving aside debatable details, that the physical world in which we live is not the product of random chance but of the deliberate action of a supremely powerful and intelligent being who benevolently looked upon his creation and pronounced it “good.” And the Christian Bible closes with the Revelation of John which, again leaving aside arguments over the details of interpretation, testifies that, however bad things may become, however great the uncertainties and the sufferings, all remains under the control of a vastly powerful and infinitely good Father. In the end, all will conclude in a vision of blessed happiness, symbolized by a celestial city that needs no illumination because God himself is its light. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are done away” (Revelation 21:4).

The principal message of religion, said the American philosopher William James, is that “the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word.” Or, in the memorable words of the fourteenth-century English mystic and anchorite Julian of Norwich, that “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

It is a message, and a confidence, that is much needed in our time. 

by Daniel C. Peterson

Maxwell Institute Thanks Senator Bennett

On May 8 Andrew Skinner, executive director of the Maxwell Institute, Daniel C. Peterson, editor in chief and director of its Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, and Ed Snow, Development Director, met with U.S. Senator Bob Bennett and leaders of the Library of Congress in Washington DC to thank the senator for helping to secure federal funding for METI and to present him with several volumes of METI publications. Beginning in 2005, Senator Bennett worked to obtain \$750,000 from the Library of Congress's budget to go toward METI publications, in addition to requesting \$250,000 more for 2008.

METI, founded in 1992 and now part of the Maxwell Institute, is dedicated to finding, translating, and publishing important works from the

ancient Middle East, including manuscripts from Islamic, Jewish, and early Christian authors on both intellectual and spiritual subjects. Peterson says that the project helps to express respect for these great, and often undervalued, traditions. To date, 13 volumes have been published.

Senator Bennett likewise noted the benefit of these publications, especially to U.S. relationships with the Arab world. "Officials from Egypt, Jordan, and Kuwait have publicly praised and recognized BYU's effort to bring these great scientific, philosophical, and religious treasures of the Islamic world forward," Bennett remarked, "and I am happy to lend my support."¹

Note

1. As quoted in Suzanne Struglinski, "Arabic texts translated—thanks to Bennett," *Deseret Morning News*, 9 May 2007.

In Memoriam: Frank William (Bill) Gay

Frank William (Bill) Gay, in whose name two Maxwell Institute research funds were endowed, passed away May 21, 2007, in Kingwood, Texas. His wife Mary Elizabeth, five children, 17 grandchildren, and 12 great-grandchildren survive him.

The William (Bill) Gay Research chair at the Maxwell Institute was created and endowed in his honor. John Gee is the William (Bill) Gay Associate Research Professor. This endowment supports all of the projects and publications done by Gee and others on the Book of Abraham and related studies.

As mentioned in the last issue of *Insights*, the Russel B. Swensen Endowed Mentorship Fund was created as a result of a generous gift from Robert (Bob) Gay in honor of his father William (Bill) Gay.

Gay had a 59-year affiliation with the Howard Hughes organization. He also devoted his time and concern to many not-for-profit entities, which included the Polynesian Cultural Center, Harvard Graduate School of Business, the University of Utah and Brigham Young University, and the Boy Scouts of America. He also served as a member of the general board of the Sunday School of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He received numerous recognitions and awards.

The Maxwell Institute administration and staff express condolences to the family.

INSIGHTS

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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.

