



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

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## Maxwell Institute Well Represented at FAIR Conference

Four scholars from the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship spoke at the FAIR conference held in Sandy, Utah, in August. FAIR, the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research, is a private, nonprofit organization dedicated to providing well-documented answers to criticisms of Latter-day Saint doctrine, belief, and practice.

John L. Sorenson, professor emeritus of anthropology at Brigham Young University and author of *An Ancient Setting for the Book of Mormon*, spoke on the “area of academic endeavor that might be called ‘Book of Mormon Studies,’” providing “an initial survey of its history, present status, and prospects for the future.” Noting that the Book of Mormon was originally made sense of as an ancient record only in terms of biblical parallels, Sorenson added that there have recently been many efforts to understand the scripture more deeply using other tools. The Book of Mormon can also be seen from the perspective of poetic forms, warfare, textual analysis, geography, ancient law, linguistics, or historical and anthropological parallels, to name a few examples. The area of Book of Mormon studies has not yet fully matured, but its future as a topic for expanded scholarly analysis looks promising.

John Gee, the William (Bill) Gay Associate Research Professor of Egyptology at the Maxwell Institute and author of *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, discussed two puzzles associated with the Joseph Smith Papyri: their original length and who owned them anciently. Gee calculated the amount of the interior portions of the Joseph Smith Papyri based on their circumference and showed that the results helped make sense of otherwise conflicting eyewitness testimony. (The circumference of a scroll at any given point will limit the amount of papyrus that can be contained inside it, as the scroll will keep getting smaller. The amount of remaining text can be calculated from the circumference and tightness of the windings.) He also examined what is known about the ancient owner of Joseph Smith Papyrus I (Hor) based on his titles (such as prophet of Amonrasonter, prophet of Min-who-massacres-his-enemies, and prophet of Chespisichis in Thebes) and the historical implications of those titles.

Larry E. Morris, a writer and editor with the Maxwell Institute, spoke of several controversies associated with Oliver Cowdery, pointing out, for example, that two documents questioning the authenticity of key restoration events (both of which are attributed to Cowdery) are now known to be forgeries. Furthermore, attempts to link Joseph Smith Sr. with William Cowdery (Oliver’s father) in a purported conspiracy to found a new religion fail for lack of evidence. The same is true of theories that Oliver somehow used Ethan Smith’s book *View of the Hebrews* to help create the Book of Mormon or that he arrived in New York in the early 1820s and conspired with the Smith family, Sidney Rigdon, and others to start a religious movement.

Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic at BYU and director of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI), offered the concluding address of the conference: “God and Mr. Hitchens.” Peterson offered several criticisms of Christopher Hitchens’s bestselling book *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens, for example, claims that all religions have resisted efforts to translate their sacred books. The Bible, however, was the most widely translated book in the ancient world. Buddhist scriptures were also widely translated from early times. Again, Hitchens argues that the synoptic gospels are based on oral accounts when both religious and secular scholars agree that those gospels are clearly based on written sources. In an effort to refute Hitchens’s popular but poorly researched work, Peterson and William J. Hamblin, professor of history at BYU (who also spoke at the FAIR conference), are now working on a book-length response.

Other speakers included Richard E. Turley Jr. and Steven L. Olsen, managing director and associate managing director, respectively, of the Family and Church History Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; and Terryl Givens, professor of literature and religion at the University of Richmond and the author of *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion*. For more information on FAIR, see the organization’s Web site at <http://www.fairlds.org/>. 