



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

Volume 27 | Number 6

Article 8

January 2007

Full Issue

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Recommended Citation

(2007) "Full Issue," *Insights: The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship*: Vol. 27: No. 6, Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/insights/vol27/iss6/8>

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INSIGHTS

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

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Number 6
2007

Occasional Papers Spotlights the Book of Mormon

The latest issue of the Maxwell Institute's *Occasional Papers* (number 5 in the series) focuses exclusively on what Joseph Smith called "the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion"—the Book of Mormon. As M. Gerald Bradford, editor of the series and associate executive director of the Maxwell Institute notes, "the papers in this volume show that the Book of Mormon can be studied and understood from a wide variety of scholarly disciplines."


The lead-off article is a Book of Mormon chronology offering a detailed view of the book's remarkable history, from the early visits of Moroni to the critical text project now in progress, from the Danish translation in 1851 to the Twi (a language spoken in Ghana) translation in 2005.

In "That Most Important of All Books': A Printing History of the Book of Mormon," David J. Whittaker surveys the printing history of the Book of Mormon in the English language, focusing on the first edition of 1830, as well as on other editions published before Joseph Smith's death in 1844. Throughout this printing history, Church leaders have sought to make the volume available in both an accurate and useful format but with the key

concern being its role in bettering the lives of those who read it.

The next article, "The Golden Bible in the Bible's Golden Age," offers a perspective on the Book of Mormon from a prominent scholar who is not a Latter-day Saint—Paul Gutjahr, professor at Indiana University. As Gutjahr points out, many early converts to Mormonism frequently spoke of how they came to faith in Joseph Smith's teachings by reading the Book of Mormon and the Bible side-by-side. "It is obvious by the virtue of the place Mormonism holds as the world's fastest growing religion that the book which gave the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints its popular name is one of the most important written texts ever to emerge in the United States."

In "His Secret is with the Righteous': Instructional Wisdom in the Book of Mormon," Alyson Skabelund Von Feldt shows that many writers in the Book of Mormon were familiar with the literary forms, themes, and vocabulary of Hebrew wisdom literature. What's more, Book of Mormon authors clearly understood the search for wisdom to be a quest for eternal life and the mysteries of God.

Occasional Papers number 5 is now available through the BYU Bookstore. For more information, call 1-800-253-2578 or visit the Web site at byubookstore.com. 

Documentary Exploring the Life of Jesus Christ Planned

With the full backing of the BYU administration, the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship—in partnership with Religious Education, BYU Broadcasting and the department of Theatre and Media Arts—is laying plans to begin filming a seven-part documentary series on the ministry and life of Jesus Christ, beginning with his role as premortal Deity, continuing through his mortality, and ending with his role as judge of all. The series is provisionally titled *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*. The project envisions a high definition series that presents the views of Brigham Young

University scholars. Each of the twenty-six minute episodes will explore a segment of the Savior's mission and will feature contemporary scholarly discussions regarding the Savior's ministry.

The series was conceived by S. Kent Brown, current director of FARMS and the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, largely in response to the impressively produced 1998 PBS documentary series *From Jesus to Christ*. Although that series offered a lot of good information about Jesus and his times, its editors began from a viewpoint of non-faith. Brown judged that a documentary series that rests on the broader range of LDS scripture, paired with insights from modern

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FOR MORE INFORMATION
The Neal A. Maxwell
Institute for
Religious Scholarship
200 WAIH, BYU
Provo, Utah 84602
(801) 422-9229
(800) 327-6715
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Scripture update: El Niño and Lehi's Voyage Revisited

In recent years several scholars have drawn the attention of Latter-day Saints to the phenomenon popularly known as “El Niño.”¹ In 1990 David L. Clark highlighted the fact that a mechanism was now known to science that would permit, periodically, easterly sea travel across the Pacific, the direction Lehi's party is understood to have traveled.² ENSO, the more formal acronym for this phenomenon, comes from El Niño (the Christ child) and Southern Oscillation, referring to the fact that the changes commence in the southern Pacific Ocean. The intermittent ENSO effect creates an easterly equatorial current running counter to the prevailing westerly direction of Pacific currents and winds. The winds can even blow in reverse, thus not only allowing but encouraging sea travel to the western coast of the Americas.

In the last two decades a plethora of studies shed considerable light on the effects of El Niño and its opposite phase, La Niña.³ Some of these findings have relevance to Nephi's account of the ocean voyage. While some aspects are still only partly understood, scientists have determined that each El Niño event has a unique signature determined by its intensity, ocean temperatures, and duration. This fact has enabled them to search early weather and ocean records and trace events back over recent centuries. With that baseline, researchers are now finding other, noninstrumental, methods of tracking past ENSO events.

These include dendrochronology (measuring tree growth) in the Amazon jungle⁴ and, in separate studies, in Australian trees.⁵ Major flooding damage at a pre-Columbian temple in Peru has been linked to the destructive effects that an ENSO event can cause in Central and South America particularly.⁶ El Niño correlations have resulted from measuring carbon isotopes in stalagmites,⁷ pollen analysis in peat bogs in Florida,⁸ and lake sediments in Ecuador and Peru. The last of these promises a continual record over possibly seven millennia.⁹ In another study scientists are identifying isotopic variations in ancient coral from Papua New Guinea as far back as 130,000 years ago.¹⁰

The size of the Pacific Ocean ensures that the ENSO effect is reflected globally, even as far away

as Europe, India, and Africa. One of the leading El Niño researchers, Dr. César Caviedes of the University of Florida, has found El Niño links to accounts of major famines, hurricanes, locust plagues, and other “natural” disasters over recent centuries. Not unexpectedly, he has found it has an impact on historical events as diverse as the sinking of the Titanic, the catastrophic winter invasion of Russia by Napoleon's army, and the difficult crossing by Lewis and Clark of the Bitterroot Range of the Rocky Mountains.¹¹ Some evidence of increased intensity of ENSO events since the mid-1970s means that El Niño has also become an integral part of the ongoing global-warming debate.

What this all means to scriptural studies is that El Niño is confirmed as a permanent, long-term component of world weather that certainly operated in Book of Mormon times. In addition to providing an efficient and economical means that the Lord could have used to convey Lehi and Sariah's group east across the largest ocean on earth, the Jaredite migration may also have benefited from El Niño conditions in their journey from Asia to the New World. And, in a further boost for diffusionists, scholars are beginning to see its potential for facilitating premodern transoceanic voyaging, something the Book of Mormon has always posited.¹²

by Warren P. Aston

Independent Researcher

Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, “Transoceanic Crossings,” in *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 263–64; David L. Clark, “Lehi and El Niño: A Method of Migration,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 57–65.
2. Alma 22:28 states that the Nephite's land of “first inheritance” in the New World was “west of the land of Zarahemla, in the borders by the seashore.”
3. www.elnino.noaa.gov (accessed November 29, 2007) is an excellent comprehensive site with interactive links explaining the El Niño phenomenon.
4. Jochen Schöngart et al., “Teleconnection between Tree Growth in the Amazonian Floodplains and the El Niño-Southern Oscillation Effect,” *Global Change Biology* 10/5 (2004): 683–92. Abstract available at www.blackwell-synergy.com/links/doi/10.1111/j.1529-8817.2003.00754.x (accessed November 29, 2007).
5. J. C. G. Banks, “El Niño and the Australian Climate: The Dendrochronological Potential of Australian Trees for Dating Climate Extremes of Drought, Fire and Flood,” in *El Niño—History and Crisis: Studies from the Asia-Pacific Region*, ed. Richard H. Grove and John Chappell (Cambridge: White Horse, 2000), 224–30.

6. See the comments made in a 1998 NOVA documentary concerning the impact of ENSO in Peru anciently and in the present: www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/transcripts/2512elnino.html (accessed November 29, 2007).

7. Amy Frappier et al., “El Niño Events Recorded by Stalagmite Carbon Isotopes,” *Science* 298 (18 October 2002): 565. Other researchers have since added to these data at other locations. See, for example, Matthew S. Lachniet et al., “A 1500-Year El Niño/Southern Oscillation and Rainfall History for the Isthmus of Panama from Speleothem Calcite,” *Journal of Geophysical Research* 109/D20 (October 27, 2004): 117, suggesting a correlation between rainfall and the collapse of the Maya culture.

8. Timme H. Donders et al., “Mid- to Late-Holocene El Niño-Southern Oscillation Dynamics Reflected in the Subtropical Terrestrial Realm,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science of the USA (PNAS)* 102/31 (2005): 10904–8. Abstract available at www.pnas.org/cgi/content/full/102/31/10904 (accessed November 29, 2007).

9. Melanie A. Riedinger et al., “A ~6100 ¹⁴C yr Record of El Niño Activity from the Galápagos Islands,” *Journal of Paleolimnology* 27/1 (2002): 1–7. An abstract of another study involving sediment dating over longer periods is G. Skilbeck et al.,

“Century-to-decade scale modulation of ENSO recorded by postglacial laminated sediments from the Peru continental margin,” available at www.science.uts.edu.au/des/StaffPages/GregSkilbeck/monaco-abstract-2004.pdf (accessed November 29, 2007).

10. Alexander W. Tudhope et al., “Variability in the El Niño Southern Oscillation through a Glacial-Interglacial Cycle,” *Science* 291 (February 23, 2001): 1511–17; an illustrated summary is available at www.ncdc.noaa.gov/paleo/pubs/tudhope2001/tudhope.html (accessed November 29, 2007).


11. César Caviendes, *El Niño in History: Storming through the Ages* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

12. David L. Clark’s original primary citation: Ben R. Finney, “Anomalous Westerlies, El Niño and the Colonization of Polynesia,” *American Anthropologist* 87/1 (1985): 9–26, focused on easterly Polynesian migrations. See also Finney’s “Voyaging and Isolation in Rapa Nui Prehistory,” available at <http://pvs.kcc.hawaii.edu/rapanui/finney.html> (accessed November 29, 2007). Other researchers have also proposed ENSO-assisted migration scenarios; see, for example, Atholl Anderson et al., “Prehistoric maritime migration in the Pacific Islands: An hypothesis of ENSO forcing,” *The Holocene* 16/1 (2006): 1–6.

DSS Library Wins ALA Choice Award

Each year in January, *Choice* magazine recognizes a short list of the best academic titles from among the 7,000 or so reviewed in the previous year. Among the winners of the January 2008 awards is BYU’s *Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library*, which was produced by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and published by Brill Academic Press. This electronic database contains searchable texts of all of the published non-biblical scrolls. High resolution images of the scrolls and a complete English translation accompany the texts. The latest version of the database, published at the end of 2006, is the culmination of 10 years of work by the Maxwell Institute and represents the fruits of more than 50 years of research in publish-

ing and translating the Dead Sea scrolls. The database was edited by Professor Emanuel Tov of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and produced by Professor Noel B. Reynolds and Kristian S. Heal of the Maxwell Institute. Students and faculty at BYU may enjoy the learning and research opportunities provided by the database thanks to a special arrangement that the Maxwell Institute worked out with Brill that allows for the Institute to distribute copies of the database on campus at little or no cost.

Choice magazine is published by the American Library Association and is distributed to more than 35,000 libraries, academics, and administrators each year. The Outstanding Academic Title awards are conferred based on ratings in six criteria, including academic excellence and value to undergraduate students. 

Submissions Welcome

Scripture Updates are brief (no more than 600 words), well-written summary reports of work dealing with LDS scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, that has been completed or is ongoing. They are intended to keep our readers current on new insights, developments, and discoveries relating to the scriptures. Touching on issues such as the language of scripture, literary composition, the history of the texts, translation matters, and comparisons with other scriptures or writings, as well as issues that emerge from various expositions of particular passages or teachings in the texts, they represent work that is being pursued by scholars in a number of relevant fields of study—textual and literary studies, linguistics, history, cultural studies, and so forth. The goal of these Scripture Updates is to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the scriptures of the restoration.


We invite readers to contribute to Scripture Updates by sending an e-mail to the attention of Matt Roper: matt_ropers@byu.edu.

BYU and Oxford Brookes University Collaborate on Transcription of Syriac Texts

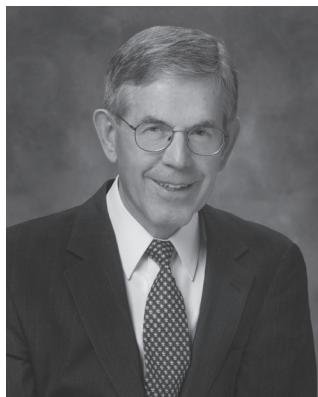
Following the success of the *BYU Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Library* (2nd ed., Brill, 2006), the Maxwell Institute's Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (CPART) has initiated a project to produce an electronic library of ancient Syriac literature. Syriac is a dialect of Aramaic, the language of Jesus and his disciples. Syriac was the language spoken by ancient Christians throughout the Middle East, from Syria to India, and a large and important body of early Christian literature is preserved in it. Electronic libraries have been produced for Greek, Latin and other ancient literatures, but this will be the first project to do the same for Syriac.

Because the corpus of Syriac literature is many times larger than that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, new approaches and technologies to automate the transcription and grammatical tagging of the texts are being developed. In the past, transcription and tagging of texts has been done manually, requiring enormous investments of capital and time. The advent of optical character recognition (OCR) software has largely automated the transcription process for printed texts in many languages, but unfortunately, the technical challenges of doing OCR on connected script languages such as Arabic and Syriac are considerable. Until now, no OCR software for Syriac has been developed.

That challenge has been met by Professor William Clocksin of Oxford Brookes University in Oxford, England. He has been working for a number of years on the unique problems posed to OCR by connected script languages, and CPART has been following his research since an initial meeting with him in 2003. After meeting with Clocksin again this past June, CPART officials and Clocksin jointly decided that his Syriac and Arabic OCR software, called *Qoruyo* (Syriac for "reader"), was sufficiently developed to permit limited deployment and usage. Clocksin generously agreed to train CPART staff on its usage and permit BYU to use this software in the production of its Syriac electronic library.

In October, Carl Griffin and Kristian Heal of CPART traveled to Oxford for training on *Qoruyo*. The technical challenges of Syriac OCR are such that *Qoruyo* requires manual character mapping and modeling for each distinct typeface. While this requires an initial time investment, the accuracy achieved with a fully-trained typeface model can be even higher for Syriac than typical commercial OCR software is for English. While manuscripts and some irregular or complex printed texts will still need to be transcribed by hand, *Qoruyo* will greatly facilitate and economize the production of CPART's Syriac electronic library. As CPART begins electronic text production with this software, its staff will continue to collaborate with Professor Clocksin on the development of *Qoruyo*. 

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Journey of Faith: The New World Screened in Hawaii

On November 9, 2007, the new Willes Center-sponsored DVD, *Journey of Faith: The New World*, was shown to a large audience in the IMAX Theater of the Polynesian Cultural Center in Laie, Hawaii, adjacent to the campus of BYU–Hawaii. The screening was offered in connection with a three-day international business conference cosponsored by the University. The founder of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies, Mark H. Willes, opened the screening by explaining how the film came about, its significance as a study aid to help all better understand the cultural and geographical setting of events leading up to the Savior’s visit in the New World, and also the anticipated impact of similar projects on students of “The Lord’s Book.”

Documentary on Life of Christ


continued from page 1

prophets and apostles, will offer to Latter-day Saints, particularly college-age individuals, a more complete picture of the Savior, his times, and his notable achievements.

In 1999, Brown gathered together a blue-ribbon panel of BYU scholars whose combined efforts produced a ninety-page basic document that, since then, has guided students, faculty members, and filmmakers who have worked on the project. As is customary, the basic document and the film script that rests on it have undergone several rigorous reviews that have refined and improved the information that will appear in the final film.


As background, groups and individuals within the academic world are looking critically at Jesus as a historical figure. Many question the validity of the gospel accounts based on inconsistencies—between the gospels themselves, between the Bible and other historical documents, and between the apostles’ stories and what is thought to be “known” of the culture. They are constructing a revised history of Christianity based on modern notions of ethnography, social science, etc. Although no consensus view exists among so many scholars, the general leaning is similar, in that it moves away from the divine or

The screening was followed by a question-and-answer session conducted by Peter Johnson, the film’s director, and Andrew Skinner, executive director of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, which is the administrative home of the Willes Center. “Projects of this kind, which illustrate the profundity and truth of the Book of Mormon are the very things the Willes Center was created to support,” said Professor Skinner, “and we anticipate many more in the coming years.”

The Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies awards faculty scholarships to encourage important research on the Book of Mormon. Some awards include support for research on the BYU campus, but an awardee can pursue research from any locale as long as the topic relates to the Book of Mormon. Please go to our Web site at willescenter.byu.edu for more information. 

miraculous. In their broad view, Jesus was a charismatic leader, a traditional mystic, a wise philosopher, or (perhaps most popularly at the moment) a social critic and an instigator. In this perspective, his followers were zealots, biased and inaccurate in their writing, and their collective enthusiasm produced the visions attributed to a resurrection. Significantly, according to this view, the persistence of the Savior’s reputation and following is largely inexplicable.

The project *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God* will also include a Web site where the resources used in the television broadcast (the standard works, statements of modern prophets and apostles, and historical records) can be accessed to allow viewers to explore further beliefs and doctrines about Jesus Christ.

The seven parts will include: Premortal Savior, Birth, Authority, Ministry, Death, Resurrection, Apostasy and Restoration. 

Joseph Smith, Responses to Early Missionaries Topics in *BYU Studies*

Following closely on the heels of a recent double-sized issue on Mormons and film, the latest issue of *BYU Studies* contains a landmark study by historian Max H Parkin entitled “Joseph Smith and the United Firm: The Growth and Decline of the Church’s First Master Plan of Business and Finance, Ohio and Missouri, 1832–1834.” Never before have the historical documents been so thoroughly and masterfully marshaled to give readers a heightened appreciation for the importance of the “United Firm” in the early Church. Along with all else that Joseph Smith was revealing and directing during these years, the consecrated legacy of how he organized, operated, and motivated this multifaceted operation deserves to be recognized in its own right.

Another lengthy article in this issue presents a first-ever translation into English of a pamphlet written in 1855 by Peter Kierkegaard (Søren Kierkegaard’s brother) entitled “About and Against Mormonism.” Introduced and analyzed by Professors David Paulsen and Julie K. Allen, this historical document gives readers an inside look at the preaching of early Mormon missionaries in Denmark and at the somewhat sophisticated rebuttals that were tossed back at them. This Protestant response to Mormonism, together with the very different 1860 Catholic response by Cardinal Reisach (translated from the Italian and published in *BYU Studies* last year with an introduction by Mark Noll), are key documents in the intellectual history of the Church in Europe in its first decade on the continent.

On the lighter side, this issue also contains a survey on dating and marriage at BYU, two award-winning personal essays, and eight book reviews addressing a variety of contemporary academic issues.

To obtain a copy of this issue, visit the *BYU Studies* Web site (byustudies.byu.edu).

From Other Publishers

Temple Worship: 20 Truths That Will Bless Your Life by Andrew C. Skinner (Deseret Book, 2007) eloquently describes the joys and blessings of temple worship and how we can get the most out of our temple experience. In this inspiring, practical book, Andrew Skinner shows how the temple represents the “ultimate” in our worship, how temple ordinances are tied to the atonement, how temple blessings apply to all—especially to those who walk life’s road alone—and how the temple prepares us for exaltation. Skinner weaves in personal experiences and statements from modern prophets as he bears witness that the sealing ordinances are a source of great comfort and security, that temples are places of personal revelation, and that unseen beings attend us there. This book will permanently change your feelings about the temple.

INSIGHTS

Paula W. Hicken, *Managing Editor*
Jacob D. Rawlins, *Production Coordinator*
Brette Jones, *Editorial Intern*

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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.

