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Maxwell Institute Scholars Speak at FAIR Conference

Scholars from the Maxwell Institute, as well as a number of authors who contribute to the institute's publications, delivered papers at the recent FAIR conference held in Sandy, Utah, in August. 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.

Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at BYU and editor-in-chief of the Maxwell Institute's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative (METI), responded to criticisms of the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. "Today's attack on the witnesses focuses on the alleged non-literality of their experiences," he said, with some critics "portraying them as alienated from empirical reality and as having merely imagined the plates, or seen them in a subjective hallucination."

As Peterson pointed out, however, both the Three and Eight Witnesses testified throughout their lives that they saw real plates, with some of them, such as David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery, specifically dealing with the issue of whether they could have been deceived and insisting that they were not. Moreover, the experience of the Three Witnesses—which included seeing an angel and hearing the voice of God—is "characterized by a marked religious or spiritual tone," while the experience that the Eight Witnesses had of examining and handling the plates "might be labeled an ordinary or natural testimony." A single explanation thus "seems unable to account for the two very different kinds of experience."

Matthew Roper, a resident research scholar at the Maxwell Institute, spoke on "Adam in Ancient Texts and the Restoration." He noted, for example, that the premortal existence of the first man, the necessity of a Savior, and opposition and agency are all "key themes found in both revealed Latter-day Saint teachings and other ancient texts and beliefs about Adam in ancient Judaism, Christianity, and the subsequent religious and cultural

heirs to those traditions." Further, latter-day scripture and a number of ancient texts not available to Joseph Smith both tell how Adam and Eve were visited by heavenly messengers sent by God, something not found in the biblical account. "I submit to you," said Roper, "that the revelations of ancient texts through Joseph Smith are a treasure that we Latter-day Saints have yet to fully value and cherish."


Brian M. Hauglid, an associate professor of ancient scripture at BYU and coeditor of the Maxwell Institute series *Studies in the Book of Abraham*, spoke on the Kirtland Egyptian Papers, a collection of documents written by various individuals that relate to the Joseph Smith Papyri. Hauglid challenged the assertion by critics that the Kirtland Egyptian Papers constituted "translation working papers" for the Book of Abraham. "It's not unreasonable to suggest that the papers were study papers—not translation papers," he said. Such an endeavor would have been quite consistent with the goal of Joseph Smith and his associates to "study and learn, and become acquainted with all good books, and with languages, tongues, and people" (Doctrine and Covenants 90:15). Furthermore, the Kirtland Egyptian Papers display characteristics of having been copied from other documents as opposed to being transcribed from Joseph Smith's dictation as he translated the Book of Abraham.

David G. Stewart Jr., a medical doctor and BYU graduate in molecular biology, spoke on DNA and the Book of Mormon. His well-documented presentation argued that "the claims of critics that DNA evidence disproves traditional Latter-day Saint teachings about Native American ancestry are based in a misunderstanding or misrepresentation of science and an ignorance of history and scripture." Stewart undermined the assumptions that modern Jewish mtDNA accurately represents the mtDNA of ancient Israel and that Native Americans and modern Jews do not share genetic affinities.

As an example of how critics ignore relevant genetic research when it does not serve their purpose, Stewart noted a study in the *American Journal of Human Genetics* in 1996 that concludes that

the founding inhabitants of the New World likely originated in Mongolia *or* in a “geographic location common to both contemporary Mongolians and American aboriginals” (the latter possibility, which Stewart sees as congenial to a theory of common origin in ancient Israel, is ignored by critics). Stewart goes on to show that attempts to use DNA evidence to discredit the Book of Mormon fail to meet rudimentary scientific standards and that “a careful examination of existing DNA data demonstrates that the teachings of Latter-day Saint prophets are fully consistent” with that

data. His paper is scheduled for publication in the forthcoming issue of the *FARMS Review*.


Among the other speakers were Michael R. Ash (“Book of Abraham 201: Papyri, Revelation, and Modern Egyptology”), Matthew B. Brown (“Revised or Unaltered? Joseph Smith’s Foundational Stories”), and Brant A. Gardner (“Defenders of the Book: Surveying the New World Evidence for Book of Mormon Historicity”), all of whom have written for the *FARMS Review*. Many of the presentations will soon be available at the FAIR Web site: <http://fairlds.org/>. 

Lehi’s Epic Journey cont. from page 1

create page after page of stunning color layouts. And the contributing scholars’ insightful observations, not only those included in the film but many more now available for the first time, bring rewarding perspectives on the great faith and sacrifice of Lehi’s party as they journeyed in the desert in obedience to God’s command. With all this information now in book form, the reader can better contemplate and absorb the ideas and images presented.

“It helps us to visualize the story of Lehi and Sariah,” says Brown. “Whether we are talking about the challenges inside the family or about the territory through which they passed, it places these experiences in a vivid, real setting.”

The documentary was filmed in the Middle East at locations that scholars believe mark or approximate the route that took

Lehi’s party across Arabia to reach the seaside location where they eventually embarked by ship to the New World. *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land* will enrich your study of the opening chapters of the Book of Mormon. To order a copy, go to the FARMS Web site and, at the bottom of the notice for this book, click on the “more” link to the BYU Bookstore. 



Steve DeVore, producer of the *Journey of Faith* documentary, and film director Peter Johnson meet new friends in the old city of Sana'a, Yemen.