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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 25 | 2005

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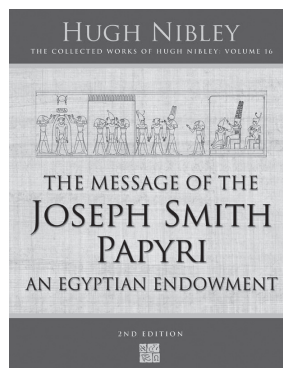
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Nibley Classic on Papyri Given New Life in Second Edition

After years of intense effort, the long-overdue second edition of Hugh Nibley's 1975 book *The Message of the Joseph Smith Papyri: An Egyptian Endowment* is at press. This new edition has been meticulously prepared by BYU Egyptologists John Gee and Michael D. Rhodes, who upgraded this Nibley classic on many points (some unseen, others impossible to miss, such as the superior illustrations by Michael Lyon) while preserving the original content. Published by FARMS and Deseret Book, this edition is a fitting tribute to Nibley's pioneering work and will enable a new generation of students and scholars to profit from Nibley's enduring insights into an area of perennial interest for Latter-day Saints.

Message was a book ahead of its time. With the rediscovery of the Joseph Smith Papyri in 1967, critics who supposed a papyrus fragment to be the source of the Book of Abraham claimed that a lack

of correspondence between the two texts proved the latter a fraud. In introductory remarks to the 1975 edition, Nibley noted this "great fuss . . . over a scrap of papyrus" and how "no one could care less about what the papyrus in question had to offer in its own right—and it is in fact a most singular document."



Thus Nibley's focus in *Message* is on what the papyri are rather than on what they are not. The papyri are the earliest example of ancient Egyptian religious writings known as the Book of Breathings Made by Isis. *Message* contains full reproductions and translations of Joseph Smith Papyri XI and X and of Louvre Papyrus No. 3284, the best-known complete manuscript of the Book of Breathings Made by Isis.

By far the largest portion of the book is Nibley's commentary on the Book of Breathings Made by Isis, a text that "is neither the Book of Abraham nor the source for the Book of Abraham, as Nibley himself clearly demonstrated," writes John Gee in his introduction to the new edition. "Some

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FARMS Review Takes Up Nibley, DNA, Book of Mormon Origins

The latest issue of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 17, no. 1) is now available, offering its usual in-depth, incisive commentary on an array of recent publications and topics of interest to Latter-day Saint readers.

This is the first issue published since Hugh Nibley's death earlier this year, and Louis Midgley's tribute to this illustrious Latter-day Saint scholar has already proved to be one of the more popular contributions. The essay is essentially an intellectual

autobiography in which Midgley (BYU professor emeritus of political science and associate editor of the *Review*) tells of his first encounter with Nibley, in 1949; his subsequent studies under Sterling McMurrin, a prominent philosophy professor at the University of Utah who dismissed the Book of Mormon out of hand; his dissertation on the work of theologian Paul Tillich, who viewed God not as a personality but as the ultimate ground of being; and of Nibley's profound influence.

"My encounters with Nibley, then McMurrin, and eventually Tillich," writes Midgley, "taught me

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“O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?”

The Book of Mormon has come under frequent fire from its critics for allegedly quoting portions of the New Testament before the New Testament was written. A classic example of this is the famous phrase from 1 Corinthians 15:55, “O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” Clear allusions to this passage are made by three Book of Mormon prophets: Abinadi (Mosiah 16:8), Aaron (Alma 22:14), and Mormon (Mormon 7:5).

Book of Mormon apologists have theorized the existence of a common source for this quotation that predates both Paul and the Book of Mormon prophets. Support for this theory is found in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, an apocryphal work that “scholars agree in assigning . . . to the middle of the fourth century,”¹ though it was “considered supplementary rather than false” by early Christians.² The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (originally known as the *Acts of Pilate*) deals primarily with the events of the Savior’s passion, as well as with his descent to hell to set free the captive spirits.

According to this account, as Christ makes his glorious descent, imprisoned prophets cry out in joy and cite their prophecies made in mortality as evidence of Christ’s triumph over death and hell. These prophets include Adam, Isaiah,

and David from the Old Testament and John the Baptist and Simeon from the New Testament.³ Of especial interest is a statement attributed to Isaiah (who is quoted more than once in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*):

After this another prophet, namely, holy Isaiah, spake in like manner to all the saints, did not I rightly prophesy to you when I was alive on earth? The dead men shall live, and they shall rise again who are in their graves, and they shall rejoice who are in earth; for the dew which is from the Lord shall bring deliverance to them [compare Isaiah 26:19]. **And I said in another place, O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?** When all the saints heard these things spoken by **Isaiah . . .**⁴

From this, it appears that the author of the *Gospel of Nicodemus* may have had access to a version of Isaiah that contained the quotation “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” This passage is not found in the King James Version of Isaiah, though the passage quoted in *Nicodemus* immediately before that is found in Isaiah 26:19.

Thus it seems possible that Paul’s exclamation “O death,

where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?” is not his original composition but rather a quotation from a lost passage from Isaiah. This conclusion is strengthened by the fact that Paul’s passage in 1 Corinthians 15:55 immediately follows a quotation from Isaiah 25:8, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” Here is the relevant portion from 1 Corinthians 15:54–56:

So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory [compare Isaiah 25:8]. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law.

Taken in context, then, it appears that Paul’s quotation from Isaiah 25:8 (“Death is swallowed up in victory”) may not end there, but may continue with the missing passage from Isaiah that is preserved in 1 Corinthians 15:55 (“O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?”). Paul’s commentary on the quoted Isaiah passage may not begin until verse 56 (“The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law”).

If this is the case, and there are questions that can be raised,

it may pinpoint the location of the missing passage from Isaiah as having been in Isaiah 25:8 after the words “He will swallow up death in victory,” or perhaps at the very end of the verse, inasmuch as that would appear to be more contextually appropriate.

Regardless of the exact location of the suspected missing text from Isaiah, the *Gospel of Nicodemus* provides some evidence that both Paul and certain Book of Mormon prophets were, in fact, referring to an earlier, common source in Isa-

iah when they made reference to the “sting of death.”

Given that the Book of Mormon quotes copiously from Isaiah and puts such high stock in all of Isaiah’s writings (see 3 Nephi 23:1), which the Nephites had with them on the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 5:13), the fact that three Book of Mormon prophets allude to this same quotation possibly from Isaiah is not surprising. What is pleasantly surprising is that one more subtle indication of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity sheds light not only on

an apparently missing passage from Isaiah, but also on the content of the brass plates. 📖

By Corbin T. Volluz

Senior deputy prosecuting attorney for Skagit County, Washington.

Notes

1. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Acta Pilati,” online edition, 2003.
2. *The Lost Books of the Bible* (New York: Bell, 1979), 9.
3. *Gospel of Nicodemus* 13:4,5; 16:7; 13:11,7, respectively (in *Lost Books*, 80–81, 83).
4. *Ibid.*, 16:9–12 (in *Lost Books*, 83–84).

FEATURE CONTINUED

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that it is a grand mistake to turn the Christian story into theology bounded by ontological categories. My own efforts to defend the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon and hence also Joseph Smith’s prophetic truth claims flow directly from these early insights.”

Nibley’s scholarship is also a key topic in the reviews of Martha Beck’s *Leaving the Saints: How I Lost the Mormons and Found My Faith*, by Kent Jackson (professor of ancient scripture, BYU) and Gregory Taggart (lecturer in the Honors University Writing program, BYU). Beck uses her book as a platform for attacking her father, Hugh Nibley, and his scholarship, although she does not mention him by name. Jackson notes there are “serious and insurmountable problems” with Beck’s story of “a man in a tweed jacket” who supposedly approached her in a grocery store and claimed that as a source checker for her father’s publisher he had discovered that at least 90 percent of Nibley’s footnotes were complete fabrications. As Jackson (himself critical of Nibley’s scholarship) points out, however, Beck’s claims can easily be checked because Nibley’s books are still in print and because the source checkers are listed by name in the publications

and can be contacted. “Nowhere in my examination of [Nibley’s] research and writing,” writes Jackson, “did I find any hint of his making up sources for fictional references.”

An anti-Mormon book that has shared the recent spotlight with Beck’s *Leaving the Saints* is Simon G. Southerton’s *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church*, which critics have employed to supposedly demonstrate that DNA research shows the Book of Mormon to be false. Southerton states that “the question of whether or not Jews or members of the Ten Lost Tribes anciently found their way to the New World is susceptible to examination using DNA technology” (*Lost Tribe*, 118).

In his review of Southerton’s book, Ryan Parr, who holds a PhD in biological anthropology and is currently vice president of Research and Development at a Canadian biotechnical company, argues that such a proposition “indicates an ignorance of the complexities of population dynamics.” He goes on to explain that “the ideal of obtaining samples from a continuous biological breeding population is rarely, if ever, met.” Parr concludes that “nothing within the Book of Mormon precludes an Asian ancestry for Native Americans” and that “the insistence that the presence of small groups from the

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FARMS Review cont. from page 3

ancient Near East must absolutely be present in the current genetic record of Native Americans, as a means of testing the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, is an unrealistic expectation.”

Two other books that have stirred their share of controversy are Clyde R. Forsberg Jr.’s *Equal Rites: The Book of Mormon, Masonry, Gender, and American Culture* (which views the Book of Mormon as a pro-Masonic tract) and Dan Vogel’s *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (which views it as Joseph Smith’s commentary on his troubled youth). Both are reviewed in this issue. Other reviews cover such topics as early accounts of Moroni’s visits to Joseph Smith, the relationship between science and religious belief, and the fate of those who never learned of Christ during mortality.

Nibley Classic cont. from page 1


individuals were under the delusion that it was, and so Nibley had to show that it is not. . . . For Nibley, the Book of Breathings itself is interesting and deserves to be investigated for what it is rather than what it is not, a trap that some Egyptologists still fall into.”

Nibley goes into immense detail, drawing on ancient and modern sources to explicate the text. He sees the Book of Breathings not merely as a funerary text but as a manual for an initiate to the ancient temple. On Egyptian temple initiation, Nibley was ahead of his time, and the topic has since become mainstream in the discipline. In his penetrating analysis, Nibley is at his best, sharing provocative insights and displaying his legendary erudition in history and ancient languages.

According to Gee, “Nibley was asking the right questions and answering both to the best of his ability and to the best of anyone’s ability at the time. . . . Nibley’s period piece remains a treasure trove of useful information and insights.”

Nibley invites readers to discover for themselves certain parallels to modern temple ritual. “If the Egyptian endowment was but an imitation, it was still a good one,” he writes, “and we may be


Like Midgley’s tribute to Nibley, Dilworth B. Parkinson’s “We Have Received, and We Need No More,” is a stand-alone article rather than a book review. Originally presented as a BYU devotional address, this engaging essay identifies several “important lessons by comparing the process of trying to learn a language to the process of trying to learn the gospel.” Parkinson, a BYU professor of Arabic, concludes that “no matter how much progress we have made, . . . we need more. We need a firmer witness, a clearer and deeper understanding, and a more practical, heart-changing incorporation of almost any gospel principle we could contemplate.”

For information on viewing this issue of the *FARMS Review* online (a benefit of subscription) or on purchasing a copy, visit the FARMS Web site (farms.byu.edu). 

able to learn much from it, just as we may learn much about the early church from the vagaries of the Gnostics. But it is not for a moment to be equated with the true and celestial order of things.”

This new edition has been reformatted for optimal clarity and effectiveness of presentation. The extensive references have been carefully rechecked and found to be exceptionally accurate. Under the supervision of artist and art historian Michael Lyon, nearly all of the illustrations have been redrawn or replaced with new photographs. The Egyptian transliterations have been standardized, and many deletions found in Nibley’s original drafts have been restored, including several pages relating to the atonement of Jesus Christ.

“What we as editors have not done, except in rare cases in footnotes, is to update Nibley,” Gee explains. “To do so would have been to make the work the editors’ rather than Nibley’s.”

While much has changed in the field of Egyptology since 1975, Nibley’s study remains a landmark for its depth of analysis and stunning insights into unique religious writings from the ancient world that merit our appreciation and scrutiny. To obtain this book, use the enclosed order form or order online by visiting the FARMS Web site (farms.byu.edu) and clicking on the link for the book. 


Atonement and the Temple

In 1988 Hugh W. Nibley noted that the use of terms based on the word *atone* (*atonement, atoning, atoned, etc.*), while used in the Old Testament mostly in association with rites performed in the tabernacle of Moses, clearly tied the Nephites to preexilic Israel, that is, prior to the Babylonian captivity of the Jews in 587 BC. He found that most of the occurrences were “in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, where they explicitly describe the original rites of the tabernacle or temple on the Day of Atonement.”¹


This English word is found only once in the King James version of the New Testament (at Romans 5:11) but 81 times in the Old Testament. All of these Old Testament passages are cultic in nature, and all but four of them are associated with rites performed in the tabernacle of Moses. The Book of Mormon includes 39 occurrences of atonement words,² suggesting to Nibley a closer tie to preexilic

Israel than to postexilic Israel and the New Testament, where the word occurs much less frequently. Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem preceded the exile of Judah into Babylon, so it is the preexilic milieu that is reflected in the Book of Mormon.

Equally interesting, but missing in Nibley’s study, is the use of the term in the early parts of the Nephite record, where Lehi uses the term once (2 Nephi 2:10), his son Nephi once (2 Nephi 25:16), and Lehi’s son Jacob—the priest in charge of the temple in the city of Nephi—eight times (2 Nephi 9:7 [twice], 25–26; 10:25; Jacob 4:11–12; 7:12). The first five occurrences of Jacob’s use of the term appear in his covenant speech, presumably given at the temple (see 2 Nephi 6:2; 9:1). Two others (Jacob 4:11–12) clearly appear in a temple discourse (see Jacob 1:17; 2:2, 11). Significantly, King Benjamin used the term seven times in his sermon at the temple in the city of Zarahemla (Mosiah 3:11, 15–16, 18–19; 4:6–7), and the people used it once in their response to him (Mosiah 4:2). Another main user of atonement terminology was Alma, who was the high priest at the time he invoked this term seven times in Alma 13, 33, 36, and 42, while his companion Amulek spoke the word six times in Alma 34.

Thus the use of atonement terminology by the first generations of Lehi’s family, together with its continued connection to the temple, places the concept in its proper ceremonial context and provides further weight to Nibley’s suggestion that the use of these terms is evidence that the Book of Mormon correctly reflects its origins in the religious world of preexilic Israel. 

Another Gold Book Found

In October 2005, police in Tehran, capital of Iran, recovered a number of artifacts that a farmer had found while plowing a field and then had sold to smugglers. Among the objects was a book consisting of eight gold sheets inscribed in cuneiform script, which was used in much of the ancient Near East. The sheets were bound by four small rings passing through holes in the sheets, in the same fashion as an ancient Etruscan gold book found in Bulgaria in 2003 (see “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 BC Discovered,” *Insights* 23/5, 2003) and the plates of the Book of Mormon (described in *History of the Church*, 4:537). The book is from the Achaemenid period, which began in the mid-sixth century BC. One of its most prominent rulers was Cyrus the Great, who conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC and allowed the Jews taken captive by the Babylonians to return home two years later. A fuller report of this interesting discovery will appear in a forthcoming issue of FARMS’s *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 

By John A. Tvedtnes

Senior resident scholar, FARMS

Notes

1. See Hugh Nibley, “The Meaning of the Atonement,” in his *Approaching Zion*, ed. Don E. Norton (1989), 566–67. Nibley’s paper was originally presented on 10 November 1988 as part of a lecture series sponsored by Deseret Book and FARMS.
2. The figures presented here were obtained by means of a computer search of the scriptures. Nibley did not have access to the electronic version of the scriptures and consequently erred in his count. He wrote that the atonement words appeared 127 times in the Old Testament (5 of them outside the Pentateuch) and only once in the New Testament, in the epistle to the Hebrews. In reality, the word’s sole appearance in the KJV New Testament is in Paul’s epistle to the Romans (5:11).

From METI

Theodore Abū Qurrah, translated and introduced by John C. Lamoreaux of Southern Methodist University, includes first-ever English translations of a substantial portion of Theodore Abū Qurrah's writings, which treat such issues as the characteristics of true religion and the nature of free will. Abū Qurrah (fl. AD 810), the bishop of Haran (in modern-day southern Turkey), was one of the first Christians to write in Arabic and to mount a sustained theological defense of Christianity against Islam. This book is now at press and will be distributed by the University of Chicago Press and made available through the BYU Bookstore.

By ISPART Scholars with Other Publishers

Joseph: Exploring the Life and Ministry of the Prophet, edited by Susan Easton Black and Andrew C. Skinner (Deseret Book, 2005), features studies by 33 Latter-day Saint scholars on an array of topics, including Joseph Smith's mission foretold by ancient prophets, Moroni's visits, the book of Lehi, the Three Witnesses, the mission to the Lamanites, Zion's Camp, the Kirtland Temple, the gatherings, the Nauvoo Legion, and the martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum.

The Pearl of Great Price: A Verse-by-Verse Commentary, by Richard D. Draper, S. Kent Brown, and Michael D. Rhodes (Deseret Book, 2005), offers detailed analyses of the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham (including the facsimiles) in light of ancient and modern sources. It likewise provides insights into the background and doctrinal content of Joseph Smith—History, Joseph Smith—Matthew, and the Articles of Faith.

Prophets, Priests, and Kings: Old Testament Figures Who Symbolize Christ, by Andrew C. Skinner (Deseret Book, 2005), recounts the lives and contributions of 30 Old Testament figures who were types and shadows of their Messiah, an approach to the Old Testament that illuminates its overlooked role of witnessing of Christ and pointing souls to him.

Insights

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Andrew C. Skinner *Executive Director, ISPART*
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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (ISPART). As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS 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.

FARMS makes interim and final 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. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

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