



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

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## Institute Addresses BYU President's Leadership Council

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# Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

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<http://farms.byu.edu>

## Institute Addresses BYU President's Leadership Council

On 19 March 2004, at the invitation of Brigham Young University president Cecil O. Samuelson, Institute executive director Noel B. Reynolds led some 200 members of the President's Leadership Council and university deans and directors through an overview of the work of FARMS and the Institute. The purpose of the two-hour presentation was to reprise the Institute's activities that are having a positive impact on the international academic scene and on other fronts in ways that add luster to the university.

In introductory remarks, Reynolds noted that more than 300 scholars (over half of them BYU faculty and staff) have contributed to Institute publications, most of which have been FARMS publications. He went on to explain the Institute's structure and three principal aims: academic research on Restoration scripture, scholarly efforts focused on other religious traditions, and leadership in the interpretation of Latter-day Saint scriptures.

Later in the presentation, Reynolds focused on the work of FARMS. He noted recent discoveries that have shed light on Lehi's probable route from Jerusalem to the embarkation point at Bountiful. Aided by photographs and maps, he traced that route with reference to the scripture account, pointing out notable landmarks along the way such as a "continually running" river and a "firm and . . . immovable valley" consistent with Nephi's descriptions in 1 Nephi 2:6–10. The altars at Nihm (Nehem) confirm the existence of an ancient locale corresponding to Book of Mormon Nahom (see 1 Nephi 16:34). Reynolds ended his narrative at Wadi Sayq, an oasis along the southern coast of Oman that fits Nephi's description of Bountiful. He showed photographs of the site and described the

remains of an ancient building (a small temple?) the likes of which Omani archaeologists had never seen before. (For full treatments of this research, see *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 [1998]: 4–21; 8/1 [1999]: 54–63; 10/2 [2001]: 56–61.)

Turning to the New World, Reynolds affirmed that although researchers are not finding definitively Nephite cities in Mesoamerica, they are finding Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon. The illustrations he used depicted elements of ancient Mesoamerican kingship, imagery, demographics, and construction that correspond to descriptions in the Book of Mormon.

Daniel C. Peterson, director of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, noted that METI's nine dual-language texts have been making significant friends for BYU

and the church in the Islamic world. Celebrated by prominent Middle Eastern diplomats, these volumes have involved scholars from institutions all over the world and are broaden-

ing BYU's academic reputation. One translation series, *The Medical Works of Moses Maimonides*, is acclaimed by both Jews and Muslims, bridging, as Maimonides did, both worlds. And the Eastern Christian Texts series focuses on Eastern Christianity, expanding the reach of these BYU Press publications to Christians, Muslims, and Jews.

Pursuing a similar theme, Kristian Heal, director of the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, reviewed the center's use of cutting-edge

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technology to image ancient manuscripts in order to preserve their contents, improve their legibility, and make them available for study. The Institute's Dead Sea Scrolls CD-ROM database, featuring BYU's WordCruncher software, is now the gateway to scrolls research. Other imaging projects include the Maya murals in Bonampak, Mexico; carbonized manuscripts from ancient Petra (near Amman, Jordan) and Herculaneum (near Naples, Italy), the latter the subject of the *Out of the Ashes* PBS television program; and ancient Syriac texts from the Vatican Apostolic Library's vast archives.

Back in the Americas, the Institute has been asked to digitally image the ancient Maya religious text known as the Popol Vuh. It is also working with the Smithsonian Institution's Freer Gallery on digitally imaging the most important New Testament text in America—the Codex Washingtonianus, or the Freer Manuscript of the Gospels, dating to the fourth or fifth century AD.

Peterson discussed the recent achievements of FARMS research. He noted that recent issues

of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* and the *FARMS Review* feature articles (some are posted on lds.org) by experts who refute charges that DNA science disproves the Book of Mormon. He highlighted other groundbreaking research, such as Royal Skousen's work on the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon that, among other important findings, has uncovered direct translations of Hebraic structures that were edited because they do not work in English; and John Gee's work on the Joseph Smith papyri that details the origin and extent of the papyri, showing that what is now extant is a small percentage of what Joseph had to work with.

President Samuelson wrapped up the presentation with a strong endorsement of the work of the Institute and its role in bringing friends to BYU.

This report is a sampling of the extensive research that FARMS is conducting, much of which can be read about on the newly revamped FARMS Web site. Also, in the next newsletter, read highlights of FARMS's achievements in scripture research during its first 25 years. 📖

## Nibley Fellowship Program

Each year at about this time we remind graduate students about the Nibley Fellowship Program and its application deadline. Named in honor of Hugh Nibley, this program provides financial aid to students enrolled in accredited PhD programs in areas of study directly related to the work and mission of the Institute, particularly work done under the name of FARMS—studies of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Old and New Testaments, early Christianity, ancient temples, and related subjects. Applicants cannot be employed at the Institute or be related to an Institute employee.

The Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to 16 graduate students for the 2003/2004 academic year: **Sharon Mar Adams**, Religious Thought, University of Denver; **Stephen M. Bay**, New Tes-

tament, Early Christianity, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; **Daniel Belnap**, Northwest Semitics, University of Chicago; **Lincoln H. Blumell**, New Testament, Early Christianity,

Those interested in applying for the first time or who wish to renew their fellowships for the 2004/2005 academic year must do so by **30 June 2004**. To obtain guidelines and an application form, contact:

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