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Herculaneum Papyri Project Catalyzes New Oxford Society

Brigham Young University’s Herculaneum papyri project continues to gain support among American and European scholars. The project’s director, Roger T. Macfarlane, an associate professor of classics at BYU, was invited to serve on the organizing board of the nascent Herculaneum Society, which was inaugurated in Oxford, England, on 3 July 2004. The society promotes international attention on scholarship and fund-raising related to the ancient town of Herculaneum and its Villa of the Papyri. Together with David Armstrong, a classics professor at the University of Texas at Austin, Macfarlane will direct the North American division of the Herculaneum Society. “There is no secret,” he says, “that the society is eager to capitalize on our project’s success.”

During the society’s first year, a DVD copy of the KBYU-TV documentary Out of the Ashes is being offered as a perk for all new members. The board feels sure that the documentary’s high quality will attract donors to the society’s cause. The documentary, which has won two international awards and a prestigious Bronze Telly Award during 2004, tells the history of the Herculaneum papyri as well as the story of how BYU’s Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts (CPART, a sister organization of FARMS) has applied multispectral imaging technology to the scrolls. Information about the documentary is available online at www.byubroadcasting.org/ashes. The Herculaneum Society can be visited at www.herculaneum.ox.ac.uk, and the site contains a link to the inaugural edition of the newsletter Herculaneum Archaeology. To stay abreast of BYU’s ongoing work on the Herculaneum papyri, visit the CPART Web site at http://cpart.byu.edu and select the “Herculaneum” link.

Ancient Exegesis and the Study of Scripture

Attention to exegesis in and of the Hebrew Bible has much to offer Latter-day Saint students of scripture in their efforts to understand the biblical text. Exegesis is the explanation or interpretation of a text. The word is derived from Greek, meaning literally “to lead out (of).” The general study of biblical exegesis has come to incorporate at least three subdivisions, each having direct relevance for Latter-day Saints: inner-biblical allusion, biblical and postbiblical exegesis, and scribal comments and corrections.

Inner-biblical allusion refers, simply, to the Bible’s self-reference. As Michael Fishbane has shown in his standard Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel (1985), there is much evidence indicating that biblical authors used traditions found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to “preserve, render contemporary, or otherwise reinterpret these teachings or traditions for new times and circumstances” (p. 8). An example of this is Jeremiah 2:3, in which Jeremiah adapts a law known from Leviticus 22:14–16 in order to reinforce his teaching of the importance of Israel’s relationship with God. Another example is Malachi 1:6–2:9, in which the prophet turns the priestly blessing of Numbers 6:23–27 into a condemnation of priestly practice.