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Brown Bag Report

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Insights

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The Book of Mormon at the Bar of DNA “Evidence”

On 29 January a capacity crowd gathered in the Harold B. Lee Library auditorium to hear BYU biology professor Michael F. Whiting address the topic “Does DNA Evidence Refute the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon? Responding to the Critics.” The size of the audience suggested the great interest people have in the role and limitations of DNA research in unlocking the past, especially the religious past.

Whiting began by noting that critics have recently rushed to judgment proclaiming that DNA evidence has dealt a deathblow to the Book of Mormon. As they see it, Native Americans have been shown to be of Asiatic ancestry, whereas the lineage history in the Book of Mormon, the critics claim, predicts a Middle Eastern genetic signature among the descendants of the Lamanites.

DNA analysis is a marvelous tool for biological inquiry, Whiting said, but it can answer only certain kinds of scientific questions—and the Book of Mormon, being a religious history, is not open to direct scientific confirmation.



Dr. Michael Whiting emphasizes a point during his presentation on DNA and the Book of Mormon.

A specialist in molecular systematics who sits on review panels for the National Science Foundation to evaluate proposed projects involving NSF-funded DNA research, Whiting also finds the critics’ argument scientifically flawed. For example, the

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On 13 November John F. Hall, professor of classical languages and ancient history at Brigham Young University, spoke about his new book, *New Testament Witnesses of Christ: Peter, John, James, and Paul*. The book draws on early Christian writings to show that the “four pillars” of early Christianity—Peter, John, James (the brother of Jesus), and Paul—consistently testified of the life and mission of Jesus Christ. The book is important,

Hall believes, because many professing Christians, even many ministers, do not accept Christ as the literal Son of God even though the scriptures and the writings of the early church fathers are clear on the matter. In his book Hall also deals with issues of scholarly debate, such as whether the Gospel of John was the last biblical book written and whether tradition has judged Peter too harshly as a man of little faith and learning, that are illuminated by the Greek text and by an understanding of Greek

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culture. Hall’s book is divided into sections that review the backgrounds of the four pillars, apostolic authority, the Jewish world, and the Greek and Roman world.

On 15 January James E. Faulconer, professor of philosophy at Brigham Young University, spoke about his research on the structure of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans. He began by describing the two major outlines of Romans used in the Christian world. The first, used mainly by Protestants, begins with an introduction (Romans 1), followed by a discussion of faith (chaps. 2–4), a description of a life of faith (chaps. 5–8), and examples of people who lived lives of faith (chaps. 9–15). The second outline, used mainly by Catholics, begins with a discussion of justice and mercy (chaps.

1–8), followed by an explanation of the covenant (chaps. 9–15). Faulconer presented his own outline of the book of Romans, entitled “Faith, Life, and Covenant.” His outline begins with a discussion of faith in its relation to justice and mercy (chaps. 1–8). In this first section, Faulconer said Paul teaches that all men are condemned because of sin, but that the gospel has the power to save all those who exercise faith (chaps. 1–4). In chapters 5–8, Paul teaches that through the power of Christ’s atonement, men can be freed from the bonds of sin to live by the Holy Ghost and to become part of God’s covenant people. Faulconer said that the second half of Romans (chaps. 9–15) is an explanation of the covenant and that the covenant is the enactment of God’s justice and mercy. God is faithful to his part of the covenant, he concluded, and the covenant people are obligated to be obedient, through the power of faith, to God. 📖

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DNA evidence they refer to is simply their interpolation of results from other people’s research that was not specifically designed to test hypotheses derived from the Book of Mormon.

The genetic lineage history as described in the Book of Mormon is “in a class of problems that is very difficult to test via DNA evidence,” Whiting said. “DNA analysis can neither easily refute nor corroborate the lineage history as put forth in the Book of Mormon, . . . and it does nothing to speak to the authenticity of the text.” According to Whiting, “there are many assumptions which must be satisfied, many hypotheses which must be properly formulated, and many caveats associated with the data and analyses which must be acknowledged before the results can have any scientific merit.”

While there are no explicit statements in the Book of Mormon whose veracity can be tested through DNA research, certain implicit ideas can be thus tested, Whiting said. The “global colonization hypothesis” is one example. If the Jaredites, Mulekites, and Lehitites came to a land devoid of

resident populations and eventually expanded to fill all of North and South America while retaining a Middle Eastern genetic signature all the while, then their descendants should carry the same tell-tale genetic markers. That Native Americans (the presumed genetic descendants of the Lamanites) carry an Asiatic genetic signature shows that the hypothesis (with its many assumptions) appears incorrect, he said.

That exercise does not disprove the Book of Mormon, Whiting noted, because the global colonization hypothesis is not the only one emerging from the Book of Mormon. In fact, for decades some Book of Mormon scholars have favored the “local colonization hypothesis,” which assumes that the colonizers arrived in a land already inhabited with people of unknown genetic origin, that there was gene flow between those groups, and that the range of Nephite-Lamanite settlement and expansion was of limited geographic scope. In this case, using DNA to map out a genealogy is fraught with difficulty. Results would be nondiscriminatory and unclear, Whiting said.

To illustrate that last point, Whiting, for the remainder of the lecture, assumed his role of NSF