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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 23 | 2003

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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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Brown Bag Report

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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Nephi, Wisdom, and the Deuteronomist Reform

Biblical scholar Margaret Barker has argued that Judaism was reformed initially in response to the discovery of the “book of the law” (2 Kings 22: 8; 2 Chronicles 34:14) in King Josiah’s time (reigned 640–609 B.C.) and later in response to the destruction of the Israelite monarchy and the experience of the exile. Those reforms were carried out by a priestly group known to scholars as the Deuteronomists, credited with editing the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings (to celebrate Josiah and to address aspects of later Jewish history) and leaving a distinct imprint on the Hebrew Bible.

Barker summarizes their efforts:

The reform of Josiah/the Deuteronomists, then, reconstructed as best we can from both biblical and non-biblical sources, seems to have been a time when more than pagan accretions were removed from the Jerusalem cult. Wisdom was eliminated, even though her presence was never forgotten, the heavenly ascent and the vision of God were abandoned, the hosts of heaven, the angels, were declared to be unfit for the chosen people, the ark (and the presence of Yahweh which it represented) was removed, and the role

of the high priest was altered in that he was no longer the anointed. All of these features of the older cult were to appear in Christianity.¹

As might be expected, the Book of Mormon prophets show

The Book of Mormon reflects the wisdom tradition that was prevalent in preexilic Israel but lost through later Deuteronomist reforms.

many affinities with the traditions of the First Temple period (1006–586 B.C.) that Barker reconstructs. Moreover, the Book of Mormon appropriately diverges from the later reform efforts that took place during the Babylonian exile of the Jews, when Lehi’s group was already in the New World. This report will highlight how the teachings and activities of Nephi preserve aspects of the preexilic Hebrew wisdom tradition. (A subsequent study will extend this idea to include temple themes in the teachings of Nephi’s successor, Jacob).

The Book of Mormon account, which begins about

10 years after Josiah’s death and thus understandably reflects positive aspects of the initial reforms in the attention given to Moses and to exodus themes,² also reflects the wisdom tradition that was prevalent in preexilic Israel but lost through later Deuteronomist reforms.³ Barker writes:

First, they [the Deuteronomists] were to have the Law instead of Wisdom (Deut. 4.6). . . . What was the Wisdom which the Law replaced? Second, they were to think only of the formless voice of God sounding from the fire and giving the Law (Deut. 4.12). Israel had long had a belief in the vision of God, when the glory had been visible on the throne in human form, surrounded by the heavenly hosts. What happened to the visions of God?⁴

Her primary guide for reconstructing the lost wisdom tradition is the pseudepigraphic Book of Enoch, which originated in Jewish tradition and was later used by the earliest Christians. Wisdom themes also preserved in the Book of Mormon have been discussed by LDS scholars Hugh Nibley and Daniel C. Peterson.⁵

Barker’s work illuminates the ancient wisdom themes further. Referring to the book of Daniel, Barker notes that “the text itself claims to be about a *wise man* who predicts the future, inter-

prets dreams and functions at court.”⁶ She adds that

Joseph, our only other canonical model [of a wise man], is very similar; he functions at court, interprets dreams and predicts the future. . . . How are we to explain his dealings with heavenly beings, and his use of an inexplicable mythology? . . . This suggests that the wisdom elements in the non-canonical apocalypses which have no obvious roots in the Old Testament may not be foreign accretions, but elements of an older wisdom which the reformers have purged.⁷

Nephi resembles the prototypical wise men Joseph and Daniel in several respects. He accepts a kingly role (2 Nephi 5:18) and interprets dreams as well as predicts the future (1 Nephi 11–15). Like Daniel, he shows commitment to the law of Moses (1 Nephi 4:14–17; 2 Nephi 5:10), communes with angels (1 Nephi 3:29–30; 11:21, 30; 12:1; 2 Nephi 4:24), seeks divine interpretation of symbols (1 Nephi 11:9–11), and values the cultural context behind prophetic writing (2 Nephi 25:1–5).

Searching the brass plates, Lehi discovers his descent from Joseph (1 Nephi 5:14–16). Not surprisingly, the Book of Mormon preserves Joseph traditions that did not survive in the transmission of the Bible (2 Nephi 3; Alma 46:23–27). Barker identifies many other details of Israel’s lost or suppressed wisdom tradition that illuminate Nephi’s activities. For example, “The wise man has *knowledge* of God, is a child/servant of the Lord . . .

and, as God’s son, will receive help.”⁸ Further:


Another of the angelic arts was metal-working, and we find wisdom attributed to a variety of craftsmen in the Old Testament. . . . 1 En[och] 8 links this skill to the arts of war, and in Isaiah 10.13 we do find that the king of Assyria’s military prowess is called wisdom. Job 28 implies that wisdom extended to the techniques of mining, damming

Resembling the prototypical wise men Joseph and Daniel, Nephi qualifies remarkably well as a representative of Israel’s lost wisdom tradition.

and irrigation. Ezekiel 27.8–9 says that the navigators and shipwrights were also wise.⁹

Consistent with the wisdom tradition of ancient Israel, Nephi is a king, a dreamer, an interpreter of apocalyptic visions, and a “forth-teller” who prophecies of great judgment to come (1 Nephi 11:36; 22:12–19), claims knowledge of God’s mysteries (1 Nephi 1:1; 2 Nephi 4:23–25), and knows of both the heavenly hosts of angels and the fallen ones (1 Nephi 1:8–10; 11:30–31; 2 Nephi 2:17).

Adding to his stature as a quintessential man of wisdom, Nephi demonstrates knowledge of writing (1 Nephi 1:2) and possesses appropriate wisdom

in relation to mining and metal-working (1 Nephi 17:9–10), shipbuilding (1 Nephi 17:8–9; 18:1–8), navigation (1 Nephi 18:12–13, 22–23), and the arts of war (2 Nephi 5:14, 34). In sum, Nephi qualifies remarkably well as a representative of Israel’s lost wisdom tradition that Barker so ably reconstructs. 

Notes

1. Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 15. See her book *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), 16–17.
2. See my study “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *FARMS Occasional Papers*, no. 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001) 16–21.
3. See Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987), 83.
4. Barker, *Great Angel*, 13. I corrected the second reference to Deuteronomy 4:12.
5. See Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 551; and Daniel C. Peterson, “Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23,” in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), especially pp. 209–18.
6. Barker, *Older Testament*, 91; emphasis in original.
7. *Ibid.*, 91–92.
8. *Ibid.*, 92.
9. *Ibid.*, 95.

By Kevin Christensen

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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. 📖

DNA continued from page 1

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

reviewer and evaluated whether a proposal to test the validity of the global colonization hypothesis via DNA evidence would be based on good science or not. He then discussed 12 complicating factors that would need to be resolved before an investigation could be responsibly undertaken. A few of those points are summarized here.

- *Was there a unique Middle Eastern genetic signature in the source population?* That there was cannot be taken for granted. Many cultural and racial groups today do not have discrete markers that unambiguously identify them as members of those groups, and we know that the Middle East has been at the crossroads of civilization for millennia. Also, it is possible that the colonizers possessed genetic variants that blurred their actual lineage.

- *What were the effects of genetic drift?* In small human populations, random sampling will cause some genetic markers to disappear and others to become widespread. Such skewing in the frequency distribution of genetic markers blurs historical relationships.

- *Did the colonizers merge with an existing population?* Inter-marriage with a native population of unknown genetic origin would make it difficult to identify which genetic signature was passed to the descendants. A large native population might quickly swamp out the colonizers' genetic markers.


- *Who are the living genetic descendants of the Lamanite lineage?* Whom do you sample? The limited geography model means that you cannot sample just anywhere in North and South America. In addition, genetic mixing after Book of Mormon times is problematic, possibly obliterating a "Lamanite" genetic signature.

- *How do you identify with certainty the Middle Eastern population containing the ancestral genetic signature that you will use for comparison?* The genetic markers in the source population may have changed over time through natural selection, mutation, and recombination. Other factors, if unaccounted for, can also yield misleading results.

Whiting emphasized that he does not believe that DNA is an unreliable tool or that the science has so many assumptions that the results are never believable, because good, hypothesis-driven science can yield accurate results if the experiments are properly designed and the data is properly analyzed. He concluded by restating three key points: (1) the local colonization hypothesis is hard to test because the history of the Lamanite lineage is nebulous, (2) it is unlikely that DNA evidence can either refute or corroborate that hypothesis, and (3) it is foolish to base one's testimony of the Book of Mormon on the tentative results of DNA analysis.

"I would be just as critical of someone who rose up and said, 'I now have DNA evidence proving the Book of Mormon is true' as I am of critics who say, 'We have evidence that proves it is not true.' The science is tough, and the answers do not come unambiguously," Whiting said.

The Institute-sponsored event concluded with a question-and-answer session in which questions from the audience were directed to a panel composed of Whiting and other specialists from BYU: Keith A. Crandall, assistant professor of population genetics; David A. McClellan, assistant professor of molecular evolution; Heath Ogden, a doctoral candidate in molecular systematics; and Daniel C. Peterson, editor of *The FARMS Review*. Issues touched on included the idea that because the Book of Mormon does not make its internal geography explicit, attempts to solve certain questions scientifically will not be assumption-free. A few people expressed their confusion over the term *Lamanite*, which, as Peterson noted, has different meanings at different times in Book of Mormon history.

A detailed article by Whiting on this subject is scheduled to appear in a future issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. 

View Dr. Whiting's presentation "Does DNA Evidence Refute the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon?" and many other video lectures on the FARMS Web site at <http://farms.byu.edu/multimedia>.

The Institute appreciates opportunities to facilitate meaningful scholarly discussion of Mormon studies. One recent instance was its cosponsorship of a conference titled “God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History,” held at the Yale University Divinity School on 27–29 March. The event featured more than two dozen scholars and authors, including several Latter-day Saints. A report of the conference will appear in the next issue of *Insights*.

UPCOMING EVENT

12 May 2003: A set of meetings on the Institute’s Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy series (GrASP), a part of the Institute’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, will be held at the Library of Congress, in Washington, D.C. Under the joint sponsorship of the Library and the Institute, the event will include a meeting of GrASP’s international advisory board, a meeting of that board with key Library curators, and a public meeting on the field of Graeco-Arabic sciences and philosophy and on the aims and character of the series. Other possible events remain to be finalized. Watch the Web site for further details.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

The FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 1), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, contains reviews of a FARMS publication titled *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project*, Terryl L. Givens’s study of the Book of Mormon titled *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (published by Oxford University Press), three books on the Book of Abraham, and an evangelical critique titled *The New Mormon Challenge*, initially treated in the last *Review*. *The FARMS Review* (formerly *FARMS Review of Books*) also includes a study of what was known about chiasmus at the time the Book of Mormon was produced. Beginning with this issue is a section called “Book Notes,” in which brief descriptions of recent books will be given. Available in late April.

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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.

It is hoped that this information will help all interested people to “come unto Christ” (Jacob 1:7) and to understand and appreciate more fully the scriptural witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.