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## Researchers Share, Test Ideas with Peers

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# Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

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<http://farms.byu.edu>

## Latest Review Rolls off Press

The *FARMS Review of Books* has a long tradition of providing its readers with insightful and substantive reviews of books on the Book of Mormon, Mormon studies, and Christian studies, as well as those books that attack the beliefs of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The latest issue does not disappoint. It contains reviews and responses to 18 books or articles on diverse topics, such as ancient Nephite culture, the conversion of Alma, hidden ancient records, the temple, the LDS concept of the nature of God, and the ark of the covenant.

In one review Brant A. Gardner observes that John L. Sorenson's 1997 book *Nephite Culture and Society: Selected Papers*, though lacking the kind of detailed analysis of historical setting found in his 1985 "watershed book," *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, "provides some in-depth views of themes that were not as extensively treated

in [the earlier book]." He notes further that Sorenson's substantive approach and overall vision of how the pieces of Nephite culture fit together inform the essays, allowing readers to better understand the Book of Mormon.

Gardner provides a synopsis and critical discussion of each essay and concludes by focusing on the book's final essay, "The Political Economy of the Nephites," which he considers sufficient reason to purchase the book. Gardner explains that "this topic clearly underscores the radically different conceptual structures that govern Book of Mormon events." He praises Sorenson for opening up "new vistas of understanding," though he believes the author should have relaxed "his self-imposed restriction of examining only the text without seeking links to the outside world."

In another review Alonzo Gaskill responds to an unpublished document of limited circulation that defends the Catholic Church's recent pronouncement that baptisms performed by the Church of Jesus Christ

[continued on page 5](#)

## Researchers Share, Test Ideas with Peers

Each semester the Institute sponsors an average of six brown bag presentations (so named because they are informal lectures delivered during the noon hour). Held on the BYU campus, these events are conducted largely for the benefit of scholars and other specialists who are invited to report on research projects they are pursuing and papers they are writing. At the conclusion of their presentations, the speakers respond to questions and constructive comments from the audience. These events enable researchers to test and explore the ideas and insights they are developing on a host of topics related to the work of the Institute. In order to ensure a maximum amount of give-and-take between the presenters and the audience, attendance

is limited to invited BYU faculty and staff as well as Institute personnel.

*INSIGHTS*

later reports on most of these presentations. Three such reports follow.

### in this issue

- Book of Mormon Word Usage
- Update: The Theban Legion

### Strength of LDS Theology

On 7 November 2001 Barry Bickmore, assistant professor of geology at BYU, addressed the topic "Doctrinal Trends in Early Christianity and the Strength of the Mormon Position." He began by noting three versions of Christian history since New Testament times: (1) direct continuity with the New Testament Church, the Catholic and Orthodox view; (2) some

[continued on page 4](#)

## Book of Mormon Word Usage: “Seal You His”


The verb *to seal* occurs some 34 times in the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> In most of these instances the verb takes (is followed by) a direct object referring to such things as the law, a book, records, words, an account, an epistle, an interpretation, revelation, the truth, and the stone interpreters.<sup>2</sup> Twice, however, the verb *to seal* takes a person as a direct object that is qualified by a possessive pronoun:

Therefore, I would that ye should be steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works, that Christ, the Lord God Omnipotent, *may seal you his*, that you may be brought to heaven, that ye may have everlasting salvation and eternal life, through the wisdom, and power, and justice, and mercy of him who created all things, in heaven and in earth, who is God above all. (Mosiah 5:15; emphasis added)

For behold, if ye have procrastinated the day of your repentance even until death, behold, ye have become subjected to the spirit of the devil, and *he doth seal you his*; therefore, the Spirit of the Lord hath withdrawn from you, and hath no place in you, and the devil hath all power over you; and this is the final state of the wicked. (Alma 34:35; emphasis added)

While use of the term *to seal* to mean “to mark as one’s property, and secure from danger”<sup>3</sup> was known in Joseph Smith’s day, it was not usually used of persons. What, then, are we to make of the expression “seal you his” in the Book of Mormon? Hebrew seals from before the Babylonian exile (and

thus in use during Lehi’s time) provide helpful insight. Many of those seals contain a formulaic inscription reading “belonging to,” followed by the owner’s name.<sup>4</sup> To seal a document or an object, a person would wrap string or twine around it, place a daub of mud on the knot, and press the seal into the mud. Affixing this sort of seal marked the object as the possession of the person in whose name it was sealed.

It is this cultural milieu that underlies the seemingly peculiar usage in the Book of Mormon and clarifies its meaning: our actions allow either Christ or the devil to place his seal on us to indicate to whom we belong. 

### Notes

1. Title Page (twice); 1 Nephi 14:26; 2 Nephi 18:16; 26:17; 27:7, 8 (twice), 10 (thrice), 11, 15, 17, 21, 22; 30:3, 17; 33:15; Mosiah 5:15; 17:20; Alma 34:35; Helaman 10:7 (twice); 3 Nephi 3:5; Ether 3:22, 23, 27, 28; 4:5 (thrice); 5:1; Moroni 10:2.
2. See 2 Nephi 18:16 (law); 2 Nephi 27:7, 10, 17, 22 (book); Moroni 10:2 (records); 2 Nephi 27:10, 11, 15 (words); 2 Nephi 26:17; Ether 3:22, 27; 4:5; 5:1 (account); 2 Nephi 3:5 (epistle); Ether 4:5 (interpretation); 2 Nephi 27:10 (revelation); Mosiah 17:20 (truth); Ether 3:23, 28 (stone interpreters).
3. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: S. Converse, 1828), s.v. “seal,” definition 8, citing Song of Solomon 4:12: “A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.”
4. See Nahman Avigad and Benjamin Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Israel Exploration Society, and The Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997), 470.

By John Gee

## Brown Bag continued from page 1

measure of apostasy and corrective reformation, the Protestant view; and (3) total apostasy and a complete restoration of primitive Christianity, the LDS view. Arguing the strength of the LDS position, Bickmore examined three doctrines that evolved in the first few centuries of Christianity: the nature of


God, God’s relationship with nature, and the nature of divine unity. He asserted that in each case the doctrine changed from something closely resembling LDS theology and toward the doctrines of later Christianity. Bickmore closed by addressing the Catholic and Protestant responses to the evolution of theology in the ancient Christian church. He is the author of *Restoring the Ancient Church*, published by the Foundation for Apologetic Information

and Research. The full text of his brown bag presentation can be found online at [www.fair-lds.org](http://www.fair-lds.org).

### Herculaneum Papyri Project

On 28 November 2001 Roger T. Macfarlane, chair of the Department of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature at BYU, reported on the Herculaneum papyri project, for which he is the principal investigator. He began by showing a video clip in which noted scholars praise BYU's recent work of digitally imaging the ancient carbonized texts to improve legibility and to create an electronic archive that will preserve the images and facilitate scholarly access to them. The Villa of the Papyri, destroyed in A.D. 79 following the eruption of Vesuvius, was first excavated in 1752–53. Many of the scrolls and scroll fragments found in the villa's library contain the writings of Philodemus, a Greek Epicurean philosopher of the third century B.C. One level of the library is yet unexcavated, and scholars expect to find more works by important Greek and Latin authors, Macfarlane said. After discussing plans to publish the images and to publicize the extraordinary find through museum exhibitions and television, he concluded by showing specifically how the digital images—in his words “a revolutionary step forward in the reading and publication of the Herculaneum papyri”—are aiding scholars.

### The Origin of the Book of Mormon

On 12 December, Louis C. Midgley, emeritus professor of political science at Brigham Young University, and Matthew P. Roper, resident scholar at the Institute, reviewed their progress on a book project titled *Recovery of the Book of Mormon: A FARMS Sourcebook of Historical Documents*. Midgley and Roper's goal for the project is to update and replace Francis W. Kirkham's groundbreaking collection, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, which has been the main resource for researchers of the early history of the Book of Mormon since it was published in 1937. *Recovery of the Book of Mormon* will include 575 printed sources (newspaper articles, books, pamphlets, and tracts, ranging in length from one sentence to over 300 pages) from the lifetime of Joseph Smith that deal with the origin of the Book of Mormon. Although most of the sources were written by anti-Mormons, this collection will be valuable for many reasons, including (1) some of the sources record information about the missionaries, members, and teachings of the early church that is not available in other sources; (2) the sources show the earliest forms of various arguments against the Book of Mormon; (3) many of the sources that will be printed in their entirety through this project are currently available only in archives. Midgley and Roper are hoping to begin publishing the results of this project in 2003. 

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## Review of Books continued from page 1

of Latter-day Saints are not valid. The author, Father Luis Ladaria, cites doctrinal differences between the two faiths as key to the ruling. Gaskill challenges Ladaria's arguments involving such issues as the Trinity, the purpose of baptism, and authority and finds them scripturally unsustainable, contradictory, and self-defeating.

Gaskill notes that the Catholic Church, which rejects LDS baptism partly because LDS beliefs contradict the Catholic conception of the Trinity (“one God existing within three persons of one substance”), does not apply that standard to baptism in other Christian faiths. For example, the Eastern

Orthodox notion of the Godhead, like the LDS view, is essentially “subordinationist” and therefore in harmony with the views of early Christian fathers whom the Catholic Church accepts as orthodox. Yet LDS baptism is rejected while Eastern Orthodox baptism is not. Gaskill identifies other “false dichotomies” in Ladaria's reasoning but acknowledges that the ruling itself is inoffensive and fair, since the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints baptizes its Catholic converts.

Kurt Widmer's book *Mormonism and the Nature of God: A Theological Evolution, 1830–1915* prompted a review and response by David L. Paulsen. In his book Widmer claims that the Latter-day Saint concept of the nature of God evolved during the lifetime of Joseph Smith from modalism

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