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Symposium Reports Research on Abraham Traditions

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Insights

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Symposium Reports Research on Abraham Traditions

A FARMS symposium at BYU on Saturday, 26 January, highlighted findings from a years-long effort to collect, translate, and publish ancient accounts of the early life of the patriarch Abraham. Titled “Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham,” the free public event featured presentations by John Tvedtnes, Brian Hauglid, and John Gee, compilers and editors of a new book of the same title published by the Institute under the FARMS imprint.

Participants filled the Harold B. Lee Library auditorium and three overflow rooms to capacity, and hundreds more viewed the proceedings live via the Internet. Sponsored by the Institute and BYU’s Religious Studies Center, the three-hour symposium began with opening remarks by Institute executive director Daniel Oswald and associate director M. Gerald Bradford.

In the first presentation, “The Abraham Traditions Project,” Hauglid, an assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU, pointed out Abraham’s pivotal place in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as in LDS theology. He and his colleagues found many important parallels between ancient Abraham narratives from diverse traditions and the Book of Abraham. Hauglid outlined three main purposes of the project: (1) to seek traces of divine revelation in the Abraham traditions, (2) to further Hugh Nibley’s research in this field, and (3) to make the largely inaccessible corpus of Abraham material available in English translation.

Hauglid noted that of the more than 45 nonbiblical motifs identified in the Book of Abraham, all are attested to one degree or another among the 119 traditions collected in *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*. He sees the book as providing overwhelming support for the claim that the Book of Abraham is an ancient text. *Traditions* also opens up many

[continued on page 4](#)

LDS Scholars Embrace Historicity of Scripture

In defense of the historicity—the historical actuality—of scriptures embraced by Latter-day Saints, several BYU and Institute scholars have contributed to a collection of essays published recently by BYU’s Religious Studies Center. Edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* contains 11 essays that explore this topic.

From Elder Alexander B. Morrison’s discussion of the open canon of LDS scripture and the checks and balances on it, to Elder Dallin H. Oaks’s defense of faith and revelation as important elements of scriptural scholarship, the essays are helpful contributions

to the understanding of historicity in scripture. Essays by BYU religion professors Paul Y. Hoskisson, Kent P. Jackson, Robert J. Matthews, and Robert L. Millet deal with scholastic developments that have led some to question the historicity of scripture, offer cogent reasons why the scriptures must be historically authentic if they are to be believed at all, and explain the necessity of historicity in both the justice of the gospel plan and the spiritual development of individual believers.

Two essays augment the idea of historicity. John S. Tanner advocates reading the scriptures as texts with meanings that may be literal, literary, or both, while James E. Faulconer’s complex but rewarding exploration of a premodern view of religious history directs attention away from the usual understanding of


[continued on page 3](#)

more areas of future research on the patriarch Abraham, he said. Some of this research will appear in subsequent volumes of the Studies in the Book of Abraham Series, edited by Hauglid and John Gee.

Addressing the topic “Abraham and Revelation,” Tvedtnes, a senior resident scholar at the Institute, illustrated how some ancient traditions support the Book of Abraham. He noted that chapters 3 and 4 of Abraham’s account describe the patriarch’s vision of the stars and other heavenly bodies, the creation of the earth, and the premortal spirits assembled in council. All these elements, while not found in the Bible, are included in other early Abrahamic lore, Tvedtnes said. Abraham wrote that it was by means of the Urim and Thummim that he received these revelations (Abraham 3:1, 4). A handful of ancient texts support the idea that Abraham possessed one or more stones of supernatural powers, and one text specifically states that the stone was an astronomical instrument.

Michael Lyon, illustrations editor at the Institute, discussed depictions of Abraham in ancient and medieval iconography. He showed many slides and explicated artistic details in various scenes, focusing on the casting of Abraham into the fiery furnace of the Chaldees (a story not found in the Bible but popular in Jewish and Islamic traditions).

John Gee, the Institute’s assistant research professor of Egyptology, spoke on the topic “The Transmission of Abraham Traditions.” He focused on how these traditions spread in time and space. The traditions relating to Abraham’s early life range from the third century B.C. to the late Middle Ages and come from widely separated locations in the Mediterranean basin and the Near East. Gee emphasized that much work still needs to be done on the large body of traditions collected thus far. He noted that approaches that take a simplistic view of the disparate data cannot adequately explain the material and that a true intellectual history of Abrahamic traditions must deal with all relevant material. Gee mentioned the existence of traditions dealing with the later years of Abraham’s life and invited persons interested in gathering them to contact him.

The symposium concluded with a question-and-answer session moderated by Gee in which the four presenters, joined by BYU associate professor of history William Hamblin, responded to questions from the audience. 

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and Mormon Studies (FARMS)**

**Institute for the Study and
Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts**
Brigham Young University

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University’s Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

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.

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