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Ancient Literary Forms Enhance Meaning and Promote Faith, New Book Says

One of the most important and interesting areas of recent Book of Mormon studies focuses on ancient Hebrew literary forms that can be detected in the English text. Having spent many years in intensive personal study of these forms, Elder Hugh W. Pinnock offers his perspective on their beauty, function, and background in a gorgeous new book, Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon.

Elder Pinnock has labored to understand what scholars (including many non-LDS scholars) have discovered about these ancient literary forms and has applied this hard-won knowledge to his study of the Book of Mormon. In his book he gives a simple guide to these forms and offers his own discoveries in the hope that they will stimulate others to search for these forms in the scriptures and increase their own understanding and testimonies.

In the introductory chapter he provides background on the history of Hebrew literary forms: "As the classical Greeks studied language, they defined various arrangements of

Journal Looks at Enigmatic Tree of Life Stone

In the early 1950s archaeologist M. Wells Jakeman claimed that a carved stone monument unearthed in Izapa, Mexico, in 1941 depicted Lehi’s vision of the tree of life as reported in the Book of Mormon. As is true for any archaeological find, the accuracy of that initial assessment of the stone dubbed Izapa Stela 5 will either stand or begin to fall in light of further evidence and study, though a definitive determination regarding the stela may simply not be possible.

The latest issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies (vol. 8, no. 1) features two articles that offer the latest thinking on the enigmatic Stela 5. Stewart W. Brewer carefully lays out the history of this stela and catalogs the evidence for and against Jakeman’s claim. Brewer’s survey also reports on other interpretations, both LDS and non-LDS, concluding with an introduction to the newest drawing of Stela 5 commissioned by the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF).

John E. Clark, director of the NWAF, takes up the story of the first publication of the new drawing of Stela 5 by NWAF illustrator Ayáx Moreno. Clark describes the importance of Izapa in Mesoamerican culture and history and explains how the drawing was made. In a fascinating study of Stela 5, Clark draws parallels with known Mesoamerican artistic symbols determined by recent scholarship and examines the possibility of Old World connections, looking at specific claims made by Jakeman. He concludes that there is
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words scientifically, naming more than two hundred structural patterns. Today literary critics still use many titles the Greeks gave to various writing forms. The Romans developed this discipline further, but after language changes in the Middle Ages, the use of these forms and their classical definitions was almost forgotten. Knowledge of these Hebrew writing forms and Jewish poetry has been partially resurrected today, but these elements of biblical style are still not broadly understood or even known by many of today’s scripture experts. As far as I can determine, it was well after the publication of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith in 1830 that other books including or explaining these forms arrived in America. This book offers a basic working knowledge of some of the ancient writing forms that can be identified in the scriptures.

Elder Pinnock shows how parallelistic forms of repetition give emphasis and clarity to ancient writing and how an understanding of these parallelistic forms lays the foundation for an understanding of almost every other writing form in ancient scripture. After discussing the purposes of the Hebrew forms and some “enemies” to understanding them, he defines many of the most common literary forms and gives many examples from both the Bible and Book of Mormon, formatted to clearly show the reader where the parallelism is and how it is formed.

Throughout the book Elder Pinnock emphasizes Joseph Smith’s divine role as translator and how the Prophet could not have known about or deliberately crafted the many subtle Hebrew structural devices in the Book of Mormon. He observes, “The beauty and surprising presence of these Hebrew writing forms in the Book of Mormon appear to be an almost untapped reservoir of testimony-strengthening material.” Elder Pinnock’s book is an invitation to fellow students of the scriptures to deepen their knowledge and appreciation of an intriguing aspect of the Book of Mormon’s ancient literary heritage. It can be ordered using the enclosed order form.

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probably no direct connection between the stela and Lehi’s dream.

The informative articles by Brewer and Clark are by no means the end of the story on Stela 5, but they demonstrate that by incorporating recent scholarship on Mesoamerican art and symbolism, the new drawing brings us nearer to understanding the intended message of that stela.

This issue of the journal introduces a new series dealing with cultural interpretations of the Book of Mormon. Louis C. Midgley, in “A Singular Reading: The Māori and the Book of Mormon,” draws on his experiences as a missionary in New Zealand to explain the Māori reaction to the Book of Mormon. Matthew Roper continues the theme of Mesoamerican parallels with his thorough and entertaining treatise on swords and cimeters in the Book of Mormon. With the help of a magnificent mural by famed artist Diego Rivera, Bruce H. Yerman explains the link between Ammon and the Mesoamerican custom of smiting off arms. Marilyn Arnold, in “Unlocking the Sacred Text,” shows how to go beyond a superficial reading of the Book of Mormon to find a text that “almost magically expands to meet [one’s] increased ability to comprehend it.” The last feature article is a photo essay by George C. Potter titled “A New Candidate in Arabia for the ‘Valley of Lemuel.”

The New Light department illuminates issues concerning the so-called Lehi’s Cave near Jerusalem, the location of Book of Mormon Nahom, the Anthon

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