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Memorial: Max Wells Jakeman (1910–1998)

Observations from Jakeman’s students honor this LDS scholar, who could be called the father of Book of Mormon archaeology.
MEMORIAL

Max Wells Jakeman
1910–1998

This pioneer LDS scholar died in Provo July 22, 1998. Little public notice of his passing was taken, but many people who have been influenced by his teaching gratefully contemplate his life and labors. Many considered him "the father of Book of Mormon archaeology." Thousands of church members obtained important ideas and information about that topic from him. Most Mormons who have received professional training in New World archaeology gained inspiration and challenge either under his mentorship or that of his students. Several substantial studies on the ancient peoples of Mexico and Central America have stemmed from seeds of knowledge that he planted.

His academic training was chiefly in the field of ancient history, especially that of the Near East and the Mediterranean. His Ph.D dissertation at Berkeley applied that framework to native and Spanish documents from Yucatan, and that project crystallized his view of what archaeology should be. For Dr. Jakeman, "the archaeology of the Book of Mormon" should draw upon external documentary and archaeological materials to clarify and establish the authenticity of the historical book left by Mormon and Moroni. Archaeology not connected to written history was of less interest to him, and he saw little value in the link that had developed in most American universities between archaeology and anthropology.

Jakeman came to Brigham Young University in 1946 where the Department of Archaeology was formed around him. For the next twenty years his concept of historical archaeology dominated the instruction there. He retired in 1976 but privately continued scholarly work along the lines he had been pursuing over previous decades.

He was confident from the outset where his research would lead—ultimately to what he called "the archaeological test of the Book of Mormon." But he did not develop collaborators to whom he could entrust pursuing the task which he himself was unable to complete. He reworked his own writings repeatedly in order that they might reach the public with complete clarity. Unfortunately he rarely satisfied his own high standard; consequently little of his research has been published.

Arguably his greatest contribution was the educational experience he provided for thousands of BYU students. He introduced them to ideas that were uncommon in his time, among them: (1) that the Book of Mormon deserves, and its readers need to make, careful analysis of the text of that volume, beyond doctrine; (2) that the historical, archaeological, and geographical aspects of the record can be related successfully to results from secular scholarship by critical comparison of the two bodies of data; and (3) that such efforts are exciting and meaningful. His students carried his ideas throughout LDS church circles, where they opened up many minds that never encountered Jakeman personally. It is safe to say that without his work, much of what we know today about New World lands and peoples in relation to the Book of Mormon would not have come to light.

Prepared from observations by a number of Jakeman's former students.

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