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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

Number 1

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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]."³¹ 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In another review Alonzo Gaskill responds to an unpublished document of limited circulation that defends the Catholic Church's recent pronouncement that baptisms performed by the Church of Jesus Christ

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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.

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

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

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in this issue

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

“Let Us Stain Our Swords No More”

In Alma 24 we read of the courage of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, Lamanites who had converted to the Lord. Their king pleaded with them, “Let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren” (Alma 24:12). So great was their faith that they covenanted never to take up arms again and buried their weapons of war. When the unconverted Lamanites came against them, the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, rather than resist their attackers, prostrated themselves

on the ground to pray and allowed their brethren to slay them.

An interesting parallel to their courage is found in a story from ca. A.D. 287, preserved by Saint Eucher, bishop of Lyon (died A.D. 494).¹ He wrote of the Theban Legion, Christians from the region of Thebes in Upper Egypt who had been recruited for the Roman army in the third century A.D. When the Bagandae of Gaul (today’s France) rebelled, the emperor

Maximian assembled an army to which he added the Theban Legion, composed of 6,600 men. After the rebellion was quelled, Maximian ordered that the army join in offering sacrifices to the Roman gods for the success of their mission. This included the killing of Christians.

The Theban Legion refused to comply and was moved by their commander, Maurice, to Aguanum, present-day St. Maurice-en-Valais in Switzerland. When news of their disobedience reached Maximian’s camp at nearby Octudurum, he sent several messages repeating his order, each of which was refused. He then ordered that the legion be “decimated,” that is, that every 10th man (Latin *decimalis*) be put to death. He threatened a second decimation unless the men obeyed. The Christians from Thebes shouted that they would never commit the sacrilege the emperor demanded. The second decimation was ordered, yet the Thebans remained adamant. In this, they were like the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, of whom we read, “Now there was not one soul among all the people who had been converted unto the Lord that would take up arms against their brethren; nay, they would not even make any preparations for war; yea, and also their king commanded them that they should not” (Alma 24:6). The stirring speech of king Anti-Nephi-Lehi strengthened their resolve (Alma 24:7–16).



The Martyrdom of Saint Maurice and the Theban Legion, by El Greco. The Theban Legion, a third-century group of Egyptian Christians in the Roman army, was massacred by the order of the emperor Maximian after they refused to offer sacrifices—which included the killing of Christians—to pagan gods.

Courtesy National Museum of Art of Romania

Like the Lamanite king, the Theban commander, Maurice, addressed his legion, calling attention to the example of their slain comrades and persuading them all to be ready to die to keep their baptismal vows, which included the renunciation of Satan and the worship of God only. The Anti-Nephi-Lehies, too, had made a covenant, in which they vowed never to take up arms against their brethren (Alma 24:18).

Maurice sent a message to Maximian in which he declared, “We readily oppose your enemies whoever they are, but we cannot stain our hands with the blood of innocent people. We have taken an oath to God before we took one to you; you cannot place any confidence in our second oath if we violate the other. . . . We have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin.” His words remind us of those of the Lamanite king, who said, “Since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren. Behold, I say unto you, Nay, let us retain our swords that they be not stained with the blood of our brethren; for perhaps, if we should stain our swords again they can no more be washed bright through the blood of the Son of our great God, which shall be shed for the atonement of our sins” (Alma 24:12–13).

Upon hearing the message from the Theban commander, the emperor sent troops to mas-

sacre the remaining Thebans. Declining to resist, they put aside their weapons and offered their necks to the executioners. St. Eucher wrote that, in doing this, they bore witness to Christ, who similarly died without protest. Here, too, we are reminded of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who upon seeing the enemy coming against them “went out to meet them, and prostrated themselves before them to the earth, and began to call on the name of the Lord; and thus they were in this attitude when the Lamanites


“We have arms in our hands, but we do not resist, because we would rather die innocent than live by any sin.”

began to fall upon them, and began to slay them with the sword. And thus without meeting any resistance, they did slay a thousand and five of them; and we know that they are blessed, for they have gone to dwell with their God” (Alma 24:21–22).

At this point, we read that some of the attacking army, seeing the faith of those who were being slain, “repented of the things which they had done” and “threw down their weapons of war, . . . and they came down even as their brethren, relying upon the mercies of those whose arms were lifted to slay them. And it came to pass that the people of God were joined that day by more than the number who had been slain; and those who had been slain were righteous people, therefore we have no reason to doubt but what they were saved” (Alma 24:24–26).

The story of the Theban legion contains similar elements. Some members of the legion had been posted along the military highway used during the campaign, and they were sought out and slain. Eucher reported that miracles occurred during the slaughter, resulting in massive conversions to Christianity among local populations. Several soldiers were tortured by Hirtacus, Roman governor of Solothurn, in what is today Switzerland. The shackles binding them suddenly broke open

and the fire was extinguished.² When Hirtacus ordered their beheading, they offered their necks to the executioners.

We are not suggesting that the Book of Mormon account of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies derives from the story of the Theban Legion. They are too remote in time and place, and it is safe to say that Joseph Smith was unaware of the writings of St. Eucher. Rather, what we have are two accounts of people whose faith in Christ was so strong that they chose death over a betrayal of their sacred vows. It has always been thus with true believers. 

Notes

1. The story is recounted in a number of sources, of which perhaps the most complete is in Aziz S. Atiya, ed., *The Coptic Encyclopedia* (New York: Macmillan, 1991), 7:2231–34.
2. Similar miracles are reported in the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 7:16–18; Alma 14:26; 3 Nephi 28:19–22; 4 Nephi 1:31–33).

By David Linn and Kevin Barney

Book of Mormon Word Usage: “Seal You His”


The verb *to seal* occurs some 34 times in the Book of Mormon.¹ 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.² 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”³ 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.⁴ 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.

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. 📖

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

(the idea that the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost are different modes of the same being) to binitarianism (a belief in the Father and Son as separate beings, but a denial of the divinity of the Holy Ghost) and finally to cosmic henotheism (the idea that many gods exist, but only the one God is worshipped). Widmer also claims that LDS theology remained unclear until the early 1900s, when LDS General Authorities James E. Talmage, John A. Widstoe, and B. H. Roberts clarified and defined the nature of God.

In his review Paulsen responds to Widmer's claims by quoting the scriptures and the writings of Joseph Smith and other early church leaders. While he admits that the early LDS concept of God grew and changed as Joseph Smith received knowledge "line upon line, precept upon precept" (2 Nephi 28:30), Paulsen shows that the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham, and the Doctrine and Covenants consistently point to a Godhead of three beings who are unified in purpose and action.

This issue also includes reviews of *Come unto Christ: The Conversion of Alma the Younger*, by Merrill Jenson and Betsy Jenson; *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, by John A. Tvedtnes; *Charting the Book of Mormon*, by John W. Welch and J. Gregory Welch; *A Guide to the Joseph Smith Papyri*, by John Gee; *The Temple in Time and Eternity*, edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks; and many others, as well as responses to several articles and books written by detractors of the church. Reviewers include Barry R. Bickmore, Brant A. Gardner, William J. Hamblin, Hugh W. Nibley, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch. The *Review* also includes a bibliography of books on the Book of Mormon published in 2000.

To purchase the *Review*, see the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of the FARMS Web site. 

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

The Hôr Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary, by Michael D. Rhodes, treats the fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri associated with Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham. Available in March 2002.

Susanna: Text, Translations, and Commentary, edited by Mark Sedgwick, includes the Greek, Latin, and English texts of the apocryphal book of Susanna. Available in March 2002.

A Thematic Bibliography of Ancient Maya Writing, compiled by Stephen D. Houston and Zachary Nelson, presents over 200 pages of sources about the Ancient Maya.

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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.

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