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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

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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

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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

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Love vs. Hate: An Analysis of Helaman 15:1–4

Few literary genres from the ancient world stand out so prominently as the Near Eastern vassal treaty. Scholars have shown that these political contracts formed between vassal kings and suzerain provided the conceptual background for the book of Deuteronomy.¹ “The assumption is that Israel conceived of its relation to Yahweh as that of subject peoples to a world king and that they expressed this relationship in the concepts and formulas of the suzerainty treaty.”²

In the Near Eastern treaty, vassals were required to love their superiors: “If you do not love the crown prince designate Ashurbanipal,” warns the Assyrian treaty of Esarhaddon, “[then] may Ashur, king of the gods, who determines the fates, decree for you an evil, unpropitious fate.”³ In this ancient context, “loving the king with one’s entire heart signified the severance of all contact with other political powers.”⁴ Hence, Israel’s command to “love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might,” presented in the book of Deuteronomy, seems to refer to a political commitment rather than an emotional attachment (Deuteronomy 6:5).⁵

Scholars in recent decades have shown that in the biblical world the word *love* often represented a covenantal devotion to one’s superior, while its opposite,

namely *hate*, at times signified the status of an individual outside of this affiliation.⁶ While the connotation of these words for Westerners usually signifies an intense emotional charge, in the ancient Near East, *love* and *hate* often carried the aforementioned unique covenantal connotation.⁷

“All their [the Ephraimites’] wickedness is in Gilgal: for there I hated them: for the wickedness of their doings I will drive them out of mine house” (Hosea 9:15). As demonstrated in this biblical passage, the Ephraimites’ wickedness resulted in their loss of the blessing associated with having the God of Israel serve as their sovereign. The Lord hated the Ephraimites “for the wickedness of their doings” because in the context of ancient Near Eastern treaties these acts were tantamount to a political insurrection. As a result, the Ephraimites were removed from God’s covenantal house or family. “I will love them no more,” declared the Lord: “all their princes are revolvers” (Hosea 9:15). Thus, the words *love* and *hate* in the biblical world often carried a deliberate connotation of political alliance (or lack thereof).

With this observation in mind, the problematic passage in Helaman 15 where Samuel the Lamanite describes God’s love and hatred seems to convey a specific nuance derived from the world of antiquity. When Samuel

presents his inspired message to the people of Nephi, he declares, “They [the Nephites] have been a chosen people of the Lord; yea, the people of Nephi hath he loved” (v. 3). With these words, Samuel attempts to remind the Nephites that they have traditionally served as God’s covenant people. In this relationship, the Lord has acted as the Nephite suzerain from whom the people of Nephi have received reciprocal “love.” In contrast, Samuel presents his own people, the Lamanites, as those whom God “hath hated because their deeds have been evil continually” (v. 4). Significantly, Samuel uses the verb *hate* in the same context in which it appears in the book of Hosea. God hated the Lamanites in a parallel manner to the way he hated the Ephraimites: their evil acts had placed them outside the boundary of his covenantal relationship.

While some modern readers have expressed concern regarding this apparently harsh statement preserved in the Book of Mormon, Samuel’s message relates perfectly to the context of “love” and “hate” in the ancient sense of alliance. ■

Notes

1. See A. D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy: New Century Bible Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1979), 33; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Eisenbrauns, 1992), 60–61.
2. Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Fortress Press, 1985), 205.

3. As cited in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton University Press, 1969), 537, 538.
4. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, 81.
5. William L. Moran, “The Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 77–87.
6. N. Lohfink, “Hate and Love in Osee 9, 15,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25 (1963): 417.
7. This would explain why the Lord says that he loves Jacob (Israel) but hates his brother Esau (Malachi 1:2–3; Romans 9:13).

By David E. Bokovoy

THE LOOK OF AMERINDIANS

Lure of the West, the Smithsonian American Art Museum exhibit now showing at BYU’s Museum of Art, includes a painting that may be of special interest to FARMS patrons. *Young Omaha, War Eagle, Little Missouri and Pawnees*, by Charles Bird King in 1821, depicts five American Indian chiefs. James D. Horan, writing in *The McKenney-Hall Portrait Gallery of American Indians* (New York: Bramhall House, 1982), observed that the King painting was one of a large



Charles Bird King, *Young Omaha, War Eagle, Little Missouri and Pawnees* (1821), Smithsonian American Art Museum

series of paintings commissioned by the U.S. government in the 1820s. Horan’s album reproduces most of them and

sets their context. These portraits of Amerindian leaders of the eastern, southern, and plains states were painted while they visited Washington, D.C.

Horan notes that this art depicts faces far different from the “Mongoloid” norm assumed or pictured in most textbooks as representing “American Indians.” For example, Horan refers to “McIntosh, the handsome Creek who looked like a swarthy-skinned Scots Highland Chief” (p. 122). Other notable examples of European-looking Amerindians (many of them Creeks or Shawnee) can be seen on pages 140, 160, 272, and 318. Today’s experts on the Native Americans still have no answer to how such close resemblances to Europeans are to be accounted for. Whether the answer lies in the Book or Mormon or elsewhere, at least the problem suggests that conventional arguments that no voyagers crossed the ocean from the Old to the New World need rethinking. The free exhibit will continue at the Museum of Art until 18 May.


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historicity and toward the underlying order embodied in scriptural accounts.

John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks focus on historical plausibility as a method for determining historicity, disclosing both the strengths and weaknesses of this methodology. They show that the Book of Abraham is plausible in terms of what we know about its genre, specificity of concrete detail, particulars of government, social organization, and religious custom.

As Louis Midgley explains in his essay, critics of the Book of Mormon have tried to find a middle ground between deliberate fraud and divine authen-

ticity to justify its coming into being. But those who approach the study of the Book of Mormon from a naturalistic viewpoint have already imposed upon it the conclusion they hope to reach. Daniel C. Peterson presents a straightforward and entertaining discussion of the difference between historicity and inerrancy.


Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures is a thoughtful examination of an important issue for Latter-day Saints and people of faith everywhere. The collective force of this volume comes from its variety of engaging academic perspectives, showing that the historicity of the LDS scriptural canon is vital to the spiritual purposes behind them. To obtain a copy, see the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of our Web site. 

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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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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