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INSIGHTS

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Behind the Messiah Documentary

The following is part 1 of a two-part series of articles written by S. Kent Brown, executive producer of *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*. During production he was director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and FARMS at the Maxwell Institute. *Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God*, a documentary produced by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, the College of Religious Education, and BYU Broadcasting, received a sneak preview at BYU's

Education Week in August. For the first time ever, teachings of the restoration, sound academic views from faithful Latter-day Saint scholars, and state-of-the-art documentary production have been combined to produce this seven-part series on Jesus Christ, the *Messiah*. BYUTV will air the documentary beginning on January 10, 2010, and copies will be available for purchase in the spring. A short preview can be viewed at www.byub.org/messiah. This documentary is the result of over 200 hours of interviews with LDS experts in various fields. Filming was done on-site in Israel, Egypt, and Denmark and on a specially built stage at the LDS motion picture studio.

On a warm June day in 2001, Noel Reynolds, then a BYU vice president, sat pondering a moment and then looked straight at me on the other side of the desk and said, "This film, if done right, will become the 'Jesus the Christ' for the 21st century. This is the perfect project for a visual era."

Here is the beginning of the story.

The April 1998 showing of the acclaimed PBS documentary film *From Jesus to Christ* struck me as skillfully filmed but as a subtle and willful challenge to deeply held Christian beliefs about Jesus of Nazareth. The PBS film draws upon the skills of some of the best-known New Testament scholars. It created a sensation. However, I saw the four-hour film not only as too brief a story, with an axe to grind, but also as a stunning disclosure about how film can tell Jesus's full story. "What if Latter-day

Saints could produce a documentary film on the Christ as well crafted as *From Jesus to Christ* and as well thought out?" I asked myself. "One reason to explore another film," I thought, "is that a documentary crafted from an LDS point of view could and should include the dimension of faith."

Thus began an effort that would go through concept building, research papers, BYU classes, script drafts, review committees, preproduction planning, and film tests.

But why did the showing of *From Jesus to Christ* become a catalyst?

In reality, without *From Jesus to Christ* there is no story. As early as my grad school days, I sensed the inadequacy, often the aggressive confrontation, of other, non-faith approaches to Jesus's life. Seeing the PBS film cemented that judgment even more deeply into my head, but in a wonderfully visual way. I sat glued to the television not only listening to the "party line" that many scholars have adopted about Jesus's humanity and his corresponding lack of divinity, but also mesmerized at how impressive the film medium is in presenting that message. Now, without taking on respected colleagues at conferences and in publications, and creating heaps of ill will in professional settings, I saw a way for Latter-day Saint scholars to tell our version of Jesus's story and, if those colleagues choose to listen in, to tell it to them in an inviting, inoffensive format.

"Who is Jesus?" becomes the major question that the film addresses. Let me specify a few important points. Jesus as Savior and Redeemer stands at the heart of our faith. But when I repeat the titles *Savior* and *Redeemer*, I mean something fundamentally different from what most of my Christian friends mean. Speaking generally, their Jesus saves those trapped in sin who receive the sacraments or ordinances of the Christian church. Again speaking generally, in their view, those saved must receive these ordinances while living in mortality, before death. Jesus's saving power does not extend to those who die without such ordinances. In stark contrast, my



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Jesus possesses power to save those who have died without the gospel and to open the door for the dead to receive salvation. My Jesus holds infinite power to save. My Jesus is not limited.

The question “Who is Jesus?” leads us to another important issue, that of Jesus’s original roles—a God who volunteered to become the Savior, created the world, and then dealt with mortals through his Old Testament prophets. From this brief list, other believers share only the doctrine that the Son was Creator. But they come to this view partly through the language of the Christian creeds. These documents describe the Son not only as the one “by whom all things were made,” a statement that rests on scripture (see John 1:3; Colossians 1:16–17; Hebrews 1:2), but also as “being of one substance with the Father.” This latter expression complicates the issue of how exactly the Son served as Creator with the Father. For Latter-day Saints, the doctrine is refreshingly plainer: the Son stands independent of the Father as Creator and acts under his direction.

In order to be clear on this matter, our first episode, titled “‘Before Abraham Was’: Premortal Savior,” paints a vivid portrait of the Savior as both Creator and God of the Old Testament. We grasp one of the hefty keys for understanding who Jesus really is in the events of the premortal grand council wherein our Father in Heaven selected him to become our Redeemer and Savior. All of this is old news to Latter-days Saints, but is almost unknown to our believing friends. To aid understanding of all viewers, we stitch the first episode together in a compelling, forthright manner. Our interviewed scholars draw on scripture resources as diverse as the book of Genesis, the Gospel of John, the Book of Abraham, and section 93 of the Doctrine and Covenants. Without compromise, we pair modern scripture with ancient sources, adding what we can learn about Jesus as premortal Deity from other early Christian authors.

By contrast, most other film treatments of Jesus begin with his birth and focus on him as a mortal infant and child, sadly dismissing the miraculous and heaven-driven events that the New Testament Gospels record about his birth. From my perspective, all of Jesus’s story recorded in the Gospels and in Third Nephi makes much more sense if a person accepts the view that a loving Father was involved in Jesus’s birth and was guiding both events and persons toward a planned outcome.

In fact, in the second episode we drive home the points that Jesus’s birth fulfills prophecy and that his coming was overlaid by a rich series of divine manifestations, resting our case on a careful review of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Many of our colleagues in the academic world focus on the differences between the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke and conclude that, perhaps, Matthew offers a reliable sketch of events and that Luke is not to be trusted. Our approach is to say that such differences between the two writers potentially bring forward a richer tapestry of occurrences that interwove the lives of Mary and Joseph and others. I have written a fair amount about Mary and Elisabeth, and I have come to respect deeply Luke’s presentation of these women and their situations. His account is doctrinally rich and culturally true to the times. I find nothing to suggest that he is making up parts of his report. It is from Luke, for example, that we learn God entrusts his secret of the ages—who the Messiah’s mother is to be—to two women, Mary and Elisabeth.

As a further example, Luke clearly places Mary on a pedestal. Why? Some scholars conclude that God’s choice of Mary was purely an act of grace, almost a random event. But it becomes plain that Mary was known long before her mortal life began. Not only do we possess the impressive prophecy from Isaiah about the virgin who brings forth a son and calls his name Immanuel, a prophecy that we share with other believers (see Isaiah 7:14), but we also look to a series of prophecies from the Book of Mormon about her, one even naming her more than a century before her birth (see Mosiah 3:8).

Within a week of the screening of the PBS documentary, I handed a proposal for a film to Robert Millet, then the BYU dean of Religious Education. That proposal emphasized the film as a scholarly treatment that would be reared on an LDS doctrinal base while remaining true to the cultural character and historical veracity of the New Testament age. To my eventual surprise, I woefully underestimated the time required to make the film and its cost. I guessed that we could finish a film in no more than three years, one-quarter of the eleven-plus years that have passed, and of the money needed, my calculation was a mere one-twelfth of the final budget. So it began. *(To be continued in the next issue.)* ♦

By S. Kent Brown

Associate Director, BYU Jerusalem Center

Nibley Magnum Opus to Be Released Soon

Hugh Nibley's long-anticipated *One Eternal Round* is in the final stages of production. This volume represents the culmination of Nibley's thoughts and research on the Book of Abraham, especially Facsimile 2.

Representing more than fifteen years of research and writing, the volume is impressive in its penetrating insights into and coverage of the subject. Within its scope Nibley dealt with mathematics, Alexander the Great, the Egyptian pharaohs Sheshonq and Sesostris, medieval Jewish Kabbala, medieval Jewish and Islamic traditions about Abraham, ancient Hermeticism, Greek myths and their relationship to Egyptian and Mesopotamian myths, early Jewish and Christian apocrypha, ancient Chinese jade disks, Indian mandalas, the Aztec calendar stone, shaman drums, ancient

Egyptian mirrors, axial times, the great year-rites of ancient civilizations, Paleolithic cave drawings in France, the *Tabula Smaragdina*, Hopi Indian ceremonies, alchemy, and the relationship of myth, ritual, and history. The final groundbreaking chapter delves into geometry and mathematical relationships depicted on Facsimile 2. All these are woven together into a magnificent tapestry of evidence, demonstrating that the Book of Abraham and its facsimiles represent actual ancient materials and traditions that have all come to light long after Joseph Smith published them.

This book in its final form would not have come to fruition without the years of synthesis and polishing capably performed by coauthor Michael D. Rhodes and the illustrations prepared by Michael P. Lyon.

The book will be available for purchase through Deseret Book and the BYU Bookstore in January 2010. ♦

Changes Coming to Periodical Subscriptions

With the addition of a new annual periodical at year's end, Maxwell Institute subscribers will be offered new options effective January 1, 2010.

All current subscribers will receive a complimentary copy of the first issue of *Studies in the Bible and Antiquity* at the end of 2009. This periodical focuses on the Bible and the ancient biblical world. Beginning in January 2010, this periodical, as well as the other Maxwell Institute periodicals, will be available as part of the new basic subscription structure.

The basic model is a cafeteria plan—mix and match—with the *Insights* newsletter as a free feature of each subscription:

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- Discount for taking 1 or 2 and 3—\$3.00 (\$42)
- Discount for taking all three—\$10.00 (\$65)

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From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

Some murmurers seem to hope to reshape the Church to their liking by virtue of their murmuring. But why would one want to

belong to a church that he could remake in his own image, when it is the Lord's image that we

should come to have in our countenances? (See Alma 5:19.) The doctrines are His, brothers and sisters, not ours. The power is His to delegate, not ours to manipulate! (*Ensign*, November 1989, 83, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997], 69.)

A Note on Volcanism and the Book of Mormon

The account of the great destruction at the death of Christ in Third Nephi relates that many cities at the time were destroyed by fire (3 Nephi 8:14; 9:3, 9–11). In an article published in 1998, geologist Bart Kowallis argued that the destructive events, including the burning of cities described there, are consistent with the effects of a significant volcanic event.¹ The volcanic interpretation fits particularly well in a Mesoamerican setting where volcanic events are historically common.² Additional support for this interpretation can be found in Mormon's description of the aftermath of these events. In his abridgement of the subsequent history of the people of Lehi, Mormon states that it was many years before these burned cities were rebuilt and inhabited (4 Nephi 1:6–7).

One of the devastating effects of a volcanic eruption is the long-term impact it can have upon the agriculture of a community. A populated community such as a village, town, or city must be able to provide food and water and other resources for itself in order to be viable. In addition to the ash fall, which would destroy crops during the eruption itself, “many gases produced by cooling ash (sulfur dioxide, hydrochloric acid, hydrofluoric acid, carbonic acid and ammonia) are detrimental to plant growth.”³ In significant eruptions this can have a debilitating effect that lasts for decades. In a pre-industrial economy, this would discourage future settlement until a stable agriculture was again sustainable. The year 1902 saw the eruption of the West Indies volcano Soufrière St. Vincent. A geologist who returned to study the site in 1933 found that soil from the volcano, which had been ash at the time of the eruption, had undergone sufficient changes in about 30 years to return to a level comparable to that before the eruption. Based upon this and other examples, another scientist concludes that “in tropical climates a soil can be created from volcanic ash which is sufficient to support agriculture or climax vegetation in 30–40 years.”⁴

In light of these studies, Mormon's account may be significant. He states that after 59 years had passed away from the birth of Christ, “the Lord did prosper them exceedingly in the land; yea, inso-much that they did build cities again where there

had been cities burned. . . . And it came to pass that the seventy and first year passed away” (4 Nephi 1:7, 14). Notably, the events described occurred between the end of the 59th year and the end of the 71st year (that is, between 25 and 37 years after the destruction at the death of Christ). This would make sense in light of a volcanic event, since by that time, as shown above, the soil of the affected area would be able to sustain an agriculture required to feed those who lived there. ♦

By Matt Roper

Research Scholar, Maxwell Institute

Notes

1. Bart J. Kowallis, “In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi,” *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–98): 136–90.
2. John L. Sorenson, “When Day Turned to Night,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 66–67.
3. James E. Chase, “The Sky Is Falling: The San Martín Tuxtla Volcanic Eruption and Its Effects on the Olmec at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz,” *Vínculos* 7/1–2 (1981): 64.
4. Chase, “Sky Is Falling,” 64–65.

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Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute 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.

The Maxwell Institute makes 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.

