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The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed from 1979 until 2006, when it was formally incorporated into the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. Archived by permission.



INSIGHTS

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

September 2000

"by study and also by faith" (D&C 88:118)

Early Christianity Initiative Launched

Last March the FARMS Board of Trustees approved an effort to consolidate a number of research projects and to launch new ones, all of which deal with various aspects of the early formative period of Christianity. Known as the Early Christianity Initiative (ECI), this effort will enable scholars to coordinate work on texts of the New Testament, related ancient texts, and the history of early Christianity.

Under the auspices of a new committee of the FARMS board and coordinated by the FARMS Research Department, the initiative will involve many scholars, including the following who are principal investigators of a number of ongoing

projects: John F. Hall, BYU professor of classical studies and ancient history; William J. Hamblin, BYU professor of history; Noel B. Reynolds, professor of political science and associate academic vice president at BYU; and John W. Welch, Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU. Volunteer managerial assistance will be given by Ed Lunt of Holladay, Utah.

The initiative will coordinate projects in the following four broad areas:

FARMS New Testament Manuscripts on CD

Utilizing the technology and expertise developed by BYU's Center for the Preservation of

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New Research on Hidden Books in Ancient Times

In *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: Out of Darkness unto Light*, a new book from FARMS, John A. Tvedtnes, associate director of research at FARMS, demonstrates how "various elements of the Book of Mormon story have antecedents in the ancient world that were not known to Joseph Smith or his contemporaries."

One of the interesting aspects of the Book of Mormon history is the angel Moroni's role as guardian and deliverer of the plates. Tvedtnes details similar stories that are found in ancient and medieval documents. "A number of stories can be found in which an angel delivers a heavenly book or a long-lost earthly book to a mortal." Tvedtnes further explains how "some early Jewish and

Christian accounts parallel the Book of Mormon story in that an angel is appointed to guard sacred records."

The book explores other details about the preparation and burial of the Book of Mormon plates—such as the sealed portion, the stone box, the mountainside repository, and the relics kept with the plates—and ties these elements to numerous ancient traditions.

Tvedtnes notes that the coming forth of the Book of Mormon "marked the beginning of an era in which ancient records would be rediscovered in

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The Foundation for
Ancient Research
and Mormon Studies

FARMS UPDATE

A Report on Research in Progress

Number 138

Teraphim and the Urim and Thummim

Biblical scholars have long puzzled over the nature and function of objects referred to as "teraphim" in the biblical record. A recent study of divination practices in the ancient Near East notes that the term "is of disputed derivation and uncertain meaning" and that in the biblical text it "does not consistently designate the same type of object." Yet evidence in Hosea 3:4 (8th century B.C.) suggests that, in the preexilic Israelite religion, the teraphim may once have been considered "a legitimate method" of divination until they were taken away from Israel during a period of discipline.¹

In a recent study, Cornelius Van Dam argues that in ancient Israel the teraphim were a substitute for the Urim and Thummim and may have functioned in a similar way. He suggests that *teraphim* (plural of *terep*) derived from the root *rpp*, which corresponds to the Arabic root *raffa* ("quiver") but can also mean "shine, glisten."² If so, teraphim, like the Urim and Thummim, "may have been made of a precious stone with light-reflecting qualities."³ Van Dam thinks that teraphim had a revelatory function in early Israel and that they may later have been replaced by the Urim and Thummim, or "perfect light."⁴

Similarly, the Book of Mormon prophets associated the

Nephite interpreters (two stones consecrated to God for revelatory purposes) or their function with the concept of light. For example, we read about "Gazelem, a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light" and "bring to light" all the secret abominations of the people who possessed the land (Alma 37:23, 25). Moroni used similar language in describing how the Nephite record would be brought forth in the latter days (Mormon 8:15–16).

Other biblical scholars suggest that *teraphim* is the altered metathesized form of an earlier term, *petarim*, from the verb *ptr*, "to interpret."⁵ This would mean the teraphim were originally called "interpreters." Under this theory, while the use of teraphim may have been a legitimate method of divination in early Israelite times, later biblical writers gave these oracular instruments a name with a more negative connotation, *teraphim*.

In addition to its similarities to Aramaic *psr* and Arabic *fas-sara*, both of which can mean "interpret," *ptr* appears to be related to the Egyptian verb *ptr*, "to see."⁶ Both meanings are consistent with Ammon's explanation in Mosiah 8:13 of the sacred instruments that King Mosiah used to translate ancient records.

In contrast to biblical commentators of the day, who

viewed teraphim only as idolatrous images,⁷ early Mormon writer W. W. Phelps suggested that teraphim may have sometimes fulfilled a positive role and were similar in form and function to the Urim and Thummim possessed by Israel's high priest. In the light of more recent studies of these objects, Phelps's suggested connection between the Old Testament teraphim and the Book of Mormon interpreters utilized by the Prophet Joseph Smith in the translation of the Book of Mormon seems entirely plausible.⁸

NOTES

1. Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* (1996), 222–27.

2. Cornelius Van Dam, *The Urim and Thummim: A Study of an Old Testament Means of Revelation* (1997), 228–29.

3. Ibid., 229. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Glowing Stones in Ancient and Medieval Lore," appendix 2 in *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books* (2000), 195–225.

4. Van Dam, *Urim and Thummim*, 229.

5. C. J. Lubuschagne, "Teraphim: A New Proposal for Its Etymology," *Vetus Testamentum* 16 (Jan. 1966): 115–17.

6. Adolf Erman and Hermann Grapow, *Wörterbuch der ägyptischen Sprache* (1935–53), 1:564.

7. Thomas C. Upham, *Jahn's Biblical Archaeology* (1823), 528–29.

8. W. W. Phelps, "Hosea Chapter III," *Evening and Morning Star* 1/2 (July 1832): 6; "Despise Not Prophecysings," *Times and Seasons* 2/7 (1 Feb. 1841): 298. See Tvedtnes, "Glowing Stones," 209–10.

By Matthew Roper

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FARMS Welcomes New Director of Publications

The FARMS Board of Trustees has appointed Alison V. P. Coutts as the new Director of Publications. She succeeds Melvin J. Thorne, who has accepted a position as associate professor in the Department of English at BYU.

Alison has been an editor for FARMS since 1994. Originally from the Isle of Wight, in England, she has worked in administration for nearly 25 years. Before coming to BYU to study English and Near Eastern Studies, Alison lived in Germany, where she worked as vice president for an international insurance agency.



Alison V. P. Coutts

It was in Germany that Alison first became acquainted with FARMS as a subscriber. "Once I discovered the 'Collected Works of Hugh Nibley,' I set about reading them from start to finish," she recalls. Alison speaks fluent German and French and enjoys spending time at the Missionary Training Center in Provo, where she interprets for the French and German missionaries. Alison is very happy with this second career and is mindful of the accountability of her new position: "FARMS has a reputation for responsible scholarly editing; it is a reputation that I will do my best to uphold."

Mel's new responsibilities include directing the Humanities Publications Center and teaching classes. During his 11 years at FARMS, Mel contributed significantly to the Foundation's publishing efforts. His friends and colleagues at FARMS are saddened by his leaving but wish him well in his new endeavor.

Early Christianity (continued from page 1)

Ancient Religious Texts (CPART), scholars and other specialists will digitally image and enhance early manuscripts of the New Testament in order to create a readable electronic database. More than 100 papyri of parts of the New Testament are known to exist, all of them likely written before A.D. 325. Like the *Dead Sea Scrolls Electronic Reference Library on CD*, developed by CPART and released last year through E. J. Brill Publishers, the FARMS New Testament Manuscripts Database will facilitate scholarly examination and textual study of these rare and fragile manuscripts.

New Testament Text and Commentary Series

A series of publications, focusing on the words and cultural backgrounds of the New Testament, will include translations, analysis, and commentary on many of the books in the New Testament, relying on, among other sources, the original manuscripts included in FARMS's New Testament Manuscripts Database. Works will feature a side-by-side presentation of the original Greek text and an English translation, as well as commentary on the surviving manuscripts and their variants, technical notes, and a glossary of Greek words and

phrases, all from an LDS perspective.

The series will compare each text with other parts of the New Testament and with other early Christian literature. Readers will be particularly interested in further insights drawn from the Joseph Smith Translation of the New Testament and other significant parallels found in LDS scripture.

Other Early Christian Texts

Research and study are also proceeding on a series of publications dealing with many key documents from the early Christian church. For many years some LDS scholars have made mention of these texts but have stopped short of examining them in regard to where, why, and by whom they were written. These texts include the *Didache* (an early Christian "handbook of instructions"), the *Odes of Solomon* (hymns), the *Gospel of Thomas* (lost sayings attributed to Jesus), the *Hymn of the Pearl* (an early Christian parallel to the plan of salvation), the letters of Ignatius (bishop of Antioch around A.D. 100), and the early Christian creeds (which reveal changes made in the Christian church over time). Works in this series and in the FARMS New Testament Text and Commentary series will be

included among titles published under the auspices of FARMS's Ancient Texts and Mormon Studies project.

Critical Study and Analysis of Changes within Early Christianity

This effort brings together the work of several LDS scholars who are in the process of identifying and documenting many changes that occurred in the early period of the Christian church. In order to understand how these organizational, doctrinal, and ceremonial changes came about, scholars are concentrating on religious, cultural, political, philosophical, and literary forces at work in the Mediterranean world from the time of Jesus to the fall of the Roman Empire.

"As Christians, Latter-day Saints have a vested interest in understanding the New Testament and the world of the apostles and disciples who followed Jesus Christ," John Welch says. "Indeed, the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Prophet Joseph Smith affords Latter-day Saints a uniquely powerful vantage point from which to analyze and appreciate the fortunes of early Christianity. This new initiative brings the experience and perspective of scholarship on the scriptures that FARMS has supported for the past 20 years to bear on ancient studies of the dispensation of the meridian of time."

The ECI is part of FARMS's ongoing effort to research and study the backgrounds of ancient scripture. It is a logical and natural extension of CPART's efforts to electronically preserve ancient religious texts as a means of furthering serious study of this material. It is anticipated that the ECI will shed much needed light on a significant, exciting area of study that promises to yield many valuable insights for LDS students of the scriptures.

Hidden Books (continued from page 1)

such vast quantities that our knowledge about the ancient Near East would greatly multiply in just a few generations." As his book amply demonstrates, this new information has been very congenial to the Book of Mormon's claim to ancient origins.

The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books can be purchased by using the enclosed order form or by ordering directly from the catalog section of the FARMS Web site.

INSIGHTS

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The Purpose of FARMS

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) encourages and supports research about the Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ and other ancient scriptures. It also works to preserve ancient religious documents.

FARMS is a nonprofit educational foundation at Brigham Young University. Its main research interests include ancient history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to the scriptures. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of the scriptures, solid research and academic perspectives alone can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about the scriptures.

The Foundation works to make interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these publications, including most royalties, are used to support further research and publications on the scriptures. 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 take more seriously these ancient witnesses of the atonement of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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