



# BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

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Type: Newsletter

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## Insights, Vol. 21, No. 8 (August 2001)

Editor(s): FARMS Staff

Published by: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

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# Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 21 | 2001

Number 8

<http://farms.byu.edu>

## Abrahamic Lore Collected in New Book

The first book in the FARMS Studies in the Book of Abraham series, *Traditions about the Early Life of Abraham*, will be available in late September 2001.

Compiled and edited by John A. Tvedtnes, Brian M. Hauglid, and John Gee, the volume brings together a wide array of ancient accounts touching on the early life of the great patriarch Abraham.

The Book of Abraham, like the Book of Mormon, has often come under fire by skeptics and critics who discount its claims to be an ancient text. Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley has shown that the Book of Abraham, which goes far beyond the Abraham story in Genesis, finds support in various ancient writings. *Traditions* assembles under one cover for the first time more than 100 ancient and medieval Abraham stories that are translated into English from Hebrew, Greek, Arabic, Latin, Persian, Coptic, and Egyptian texts. The accounts are grouped into sections according to the religious tradition in which they are found—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—and are ordered chronologically.

The book also contains sections on the earliest-known traditions about Abraham and on Abraham accounts that do not belong to any of the three major religious traditions mentioned above. As a whole, the accounts range in time from the third century B.C. to the Middle Ages and in place of origin from Uzbekistan to Spain and from England to Ethiopia.

Although the number of accounts in *Traditions* is impressive, the volume does not include all of the Abraham material from the sources cited nor all of

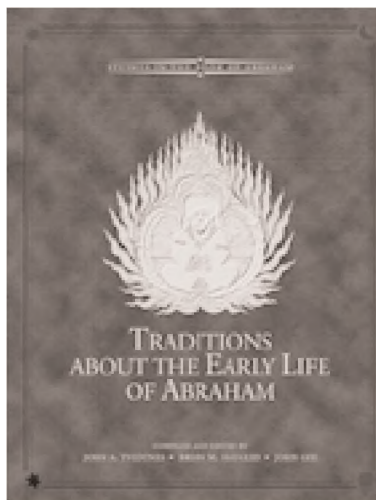
the available stories about Abraham. Rather, the compilers chose to include only those portions of stories that relate to the early life of Abraham and up through events in his life covered by the Book of Abraham, focusing especially but not exclusively on aspects of his life that are found in the Book of Abraham but not in the Bible. Thus *Traditions* features stories beginning with Abraham's birth and ending with his visit to Egypt but omits events in his later life (as recorded in Genesis 14–25) and material paralleling the creation account found in Abraham 4–5 (also known from Genesis 1–2).

*Traditions* is a useful tool for scholars and others who are interested, for example, in assessing the extent to which Abrahamic lore supports and possibly augments the account of Abraham set forth in scripture. The introduction in *Traditions* offers a case in point, revealing significant differences between the similar accounts found

in Genesis 11–12 and Abraham 2. The unique elements in Abraham 2—the famine in Ur, Terah's return to idolatry, Abraham's holding the priesthood, his rescue by an angel, and instruction originating with the Lord (not Abraham) that Sarai should tell the Egyptians that she was Abraham's sister—are attested so much in the extrabiblical texts that it seems strange that these elements are not in the Bible.

The extrabiblical texts also support elements found in Abraham 1 and 3, the contents of which are not attested at all in the Bible. Three of those elements—the destruction of idols, the near sacrifice of Abraham by false priests, and his knowledge of astronomy—are ubiquitous in the extrabiblical accounts; and a fourth element, Abraham's possession of written records or writing of them, is fairly common.

[continued on page 6](#)



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## Abraham and the Urim and Thummim

The Book of Abraham informs us that Abraham “had the Urim and Thummim,” by means of which he “saw the stars.” “And the Lord said unto me, by the Urim and Thummim, that Kolob was after the manner of the Lord, according to its times and seasons in the revolutions thereof” (Abraham 3:1–4).

The Bible associates the Urim and Thummim with the Israelite high priest, but it never suggests that Abraham possessed this instrument of divine revelation. It is significant, however, that some early nonbiblical Jewish writings concur with the Book of Abraham on this issue.

The latter part of Esther 1:6 speaks of several types of stone, two of which are called *dar* and *socheret*. These are rendered “white” and “black” in the King James Bible, but the real meaning is unknown because Esther is the only place where the two Hebrew words are used in the Bible. Jewish tradition holds that they were precious stones (TB *Megillah* 12a). The *Bahir*, an early Jewish kabbalistic work, explains:

“This is the measure of all merchandise (*Sechorah*) in the world. It is also the power of the precious stones that are called *Socheret* and *Dar*.

“And upon what is the attri-

bute of *Dar*?

“This teaches us that God took a thousandth of its radiance, and from it He constructed a beautiful precious stone. In it He included all the commandments.

“Abraham came, and He sought a power to give him. He gave him this precious stone, but

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### Ancient Jewish sources concur that Abraham possessed an instrument of divine revelation.

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he did not want it” (*Bahir* 190).<sup>1</sup>

From Abraham 1:2, 4 we learn that the power that Abraham sought was the priesthood. It seems that the two stones he received were associated with that power. *Bahir* 192 continues:

“[It is written that Abraham kept] ‘My commandments, My decrees, and My Torahs.’ He said, ‘Since I do not want [the precious stone], I will keep all the commandments that are included in it.’

“What is the meaning of ‘My Torahs’? This teaches us that he knew and kept even the decisions (*Horah*) and discussions that are taught on high.”<sup>2</sup>

Abraham did indeed learn of discussions from “on high.” Abraham 3 records his vision of

the heavens and of pre-earth life, revealed via the Urim and Thummim. Abraham 4–5 records his vision of the creation of the earth, including the discussions and decisions of “the Gods.”

The Talmud supports the idea that Abraham possessed a miraculous stone.


“R. Eliezer the Modiite said that Abraham possessed a power of reading the stars for which he was much sought after by the potentates of East and West. R. Simeon b. Yohai said: Abraham had a precious stone hung round his neck which brought immediate healing to any sick person who looked on it, and when Abraham

our father departed from this world, the Holy One, blessed be He, suspended it from the orb of the sun” (TB *Baba Bathra* 16b).<sup>3</sup>

Although the stone in question is said to have been used for healing purposes, it is interesting that it immediately follows a statement about Abraham’s astronomical capabilities, which, according to Abraham 3:1, he acquired in part through the stones known as the Urim and Thummim. In this connection we note that the translator of the Talmud passage indicated “a variant rendering: ‘He possessed an astrological instrument.’”<sup>4</sup>

Jewish tradition holds that Abraham possessed glowing gems and pearls,<sup>5</sup> reminding us

that ancient texts also describe the Urim and Thummim as glowing stones.<sup>6</sup>

The early Jewish texts that discuss Abraham's possession of miraculous stones had not yet been translated into English in Joseph Smith's day and thus are valuable evidences for the authenticity of the Book of Abraham. 

#### Notes

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *The Bahir* (York Beach, Maine: Samuel Weiser, 1989), 75.
2. *Ibid.*, 77.
3. Rabbi Dr. I. Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1961), 4:83–84.
4. *Ibid.*, note.
5. Louis Ginzberg, ed., *Legends of the*

*Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1937), 1:298, 5:265 n. 312.

6. See the discussion in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: Out of Darkness unto Light* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 198–208.

**By John A. Tvedtnes**

#### BROWN BAG REPORT

During March and April, BYU's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts sponsored three brown bag lectures addressing topics on the Middle East, the FARMS Dead Sea Scrolls Database, and the Book of Mormon.

#### LDS Branches in the Islamic Middle East

On 28 March 2001 James A. Toronto, associate professor of Arabic and Islamic studies at BYU, gave a slide presentation during which he reported on branches of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the Islamic Middle East. He noted areas of historical interest, such as Turkey, the first Muslim area where LDS missionaries proselytized (beginning in 1884), and Aleppo, in northern Syria, where he has been engaged in restoring the grave sites of two missionaries, Emil Huber (d. 1908) and Turkish Mission president Joseph Wilford Booth (d. 1928). Toronto noted that although the church does not proselytize in the Middle East today, it has organized branches in several Gulf countries and in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey. He concluded by discussing the status of the

church's legal recognition in various Middle Eastern countries.


#### Improving the FARMS Dead Sea Scrolls Database

On 4 April 2001 Elisha Qimron, professor of Hebrew literature at Israel's Ben-Gurion University, discussed his work of improving the accuracy of the FARMS Dead Sea Scrolls database. Though the database is a great achievement, he said, the transcriptions of the scroll texts it contains are being updated as new information comes to light. Some of the transcriptions were prepared as early as the 1950s by scholars who did not have (1) access to all of the scroll fragments relevant to their particular study or (2) the image-enhancing capabilities of modern computer technology.

Qimron is providing better reconstructions of lacunae (missing text) and more accurate renderings of existing passages by comparing them, for example, with parallel passages in scroll fragments from different copies of the same scrolls. He is also preparing additional information about the scroll texts that will appear in footnotes in his transcriptions, which will supplement the

official transcriptions contained in the database. Although reconstructing the scroll texts still entails some guesswork, Qimron and his colleagues hope to keep it to a minimum through intensive study of all related scroll texts.

#### Teaching Logic with the Book of Mormon

On 11 April 2001 BYU philosophy professor Dennis Packard discussed how he teaches students in his introductory logic class to apply syllogistic reasoning to passages in the Book of Mormon. Using the tools of logical analysis, his students mine the scriptures for deeper understanding. They ask "how" and "why" questions and test assumptions about the meaning of certain passages. They glean insights, improve their exegetical skills, learn the value of close reading, and come to appreciate the doctrinal depth and integrity of the Book of Mormon. Packard noted that his students grasp the principles of logic better and find the class more stimulating when they apply their newfound skills to the scriptures. 

## Institute Researchers Share Findings at Apologetics Conference


Four members of the Institute staff delivered papers at a conference on Book of Mormon evidences held in Provo on 17 and 18 August. The event was sponsored by the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), an organization dedicated to defending LDS beliefs and practices with sound scholarship.

Speaking on Egyptian influences in ancient Israel, assistant research professor John Gee noted that an archaeological study showed an increase in Egyptian and Egyptianizing material in Israel between 750 and 600 B.C. He showed slides of Israelite seals from that same period that feature Egyptian iconography, including a number of seals belonging to members of the royal family of Judah.

Daniel C. Peterson, associate executive director of the Institute, surveyed the various theories put forth for the origin of the Book of Mormon, including the traditional explanation offered by Joseph Smith. Organizing these theories into eight general categories, he argued that every alternative to Joseph Smith's explanation runs into serious, and sometimes insurmountable, difficulties.

Research associate Matthew P. Roper reviewed elements in the Book of Mormon that were once the subject of ridicule by skeptics and unbelievers but now can be shown to correctly describe aspects of the ancient world that Joseph Smith could not have known about. He also discussed the tentative nature of empirical evidence for scriptural claims and the need for Latter-day Saints to exercise caution and patience in regards to it.

Senior research associate John A. Tvedtnes reported briefly on his recent trip to Israel to speak on Hebrew names in the Book of Mormon at the 13th World Congress of Jewish Studies. He then discussed changing attitudes in the non-LDS scholarly community about the validity of scholarly studies of scriptures and doctrines peculiar to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, even when done from the perspective of faithful LDS scholars.

Other speakers from BYU were S. Kent Brown (who spoke on "Lehi and Sariah in the Desert"), Louis C. Midgley ("Reflections on Naturalistic Explanations of the Book of Mormon"), and Scott Woodward ("DNA and the Book of Mormon"). Additional speakers were Ross Baron, Brant Gardner, John Lynch, Ben McGuire, and L. Ara Norwood. FAIR plans to publish the proceedings of this conference. Those interested in obtaining a copy of the book can watch for further details by visiting FAIR's Web site at [www.fair-lds.org](http://www.fair-lds.org). 

## PROJECT REPORT

## Digitization of Ancient Manuscripts Under Way

The Institute has begun to digitize numerous manuscripts from medieval Egypt as well as two large microfilm collections of manuscripts from repositories in Jerusalem, Armenia, Egypt, Greece, and elsewhere. The digitized images will become part of an electronic archive that will facilitate scholarly study of these rare texts.

The medieval Egyptian manuscripts were donated to the Institute by the late Aziz Atiya, distinguished professor of history at the University of Utah. They consist of important religious and legal texts written in Coptic and Arabic.

The microfilm collections include (1) S. Kent Brown's extensive film archive of ancient manuscripts from Cairo's Coptic Museum and from several religious and educational organizations in Jerusalem and Egypt; and (2) images of ancient manuscripts from several monasteries, including St. Catherine's in Sinai and Mt. Athos in Greece. BYU purchased the latter collection from the Library of Congress.

The microfilming began in March 1979, shortly after a fire destroyed the Church of the All-Holy Virgin in Old Cairo, resulting in the loss of nearly 200 manuscripts. "That loss galvanized the resolve of the authorities of the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt to seek assistance in preserving the church's manuscript heritage," said Brown, the director of


Ancient Studies at BYU who worked with Dr. Atiya on the Coptic Encyclopedia project. “I happened to be in the right place at the right time, because I was then working at the Coptic Museum, which lies only 100 yards from the church building that burned. With the assistance of many, including BYU, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Mormon Archaeology and Research Foundation, the microfilming project grew from that point.”

According to Brown, transferring 1,503 early Christian manuscripts from microfilm to electronic images will ease tremendously the work of scholars around the world who regularly request copies of those texts for their research. The digitized images will offer greater legibility and ease of manipulation. “The service of transferring the manuscript images is a gift beyond words to all who work on these ancient texts,” he said.

Four BYU service representatives—Don and Ruthell Haycock of Rangley, Colorado, and Chuck and Dorothy James of Lyman, Wyoming—are providing valuable assistance in this long-term project. Under the direction of Institute technology manager Steven W. Booras and archiving manager Lynne Shumway, they use a scanning device to capture the microfilm images (400,000 of them in Brown’s collection alone) in electronic format. Then they enter each image and relevant metadata (information that

will be used to compile a descriptive index for each manuscript) into a database.

“The service representatives have proved invaluable in helping the digitizing project to move forward,” said Shumway. “They have quickly become familiar with terminology and the technology related to the digitizing process and are excited about being able to recognize basic Syriac letters and numbers.”

Once completed, the electronic archive will be a boon to scholars researching the ancient and medieval history and literature of the Near East. 



Lynne Shumway (standing) supervises BYU service representatives working on electronic archive of ancient texts.


## Request for Research Proposals

The Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts invites scholars and other researchers to submit proposals for support of research projects that are in line with the work of the Institute. Relevant areas of research include the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Old and New Testaments, early Christianity, ancient temples, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and subjects related to the Institute’s Middle Eastern Texts Initiative and its three publication series: the Eastern Christian Texts Series, the Islamic Translation Series, and the Graeco-Arabic Sciences and Philosophy Series.

Proposals can be submitted anytime, although the Institute’s board will consider them only three times a year: at the beginning of fall and winter


semesters (early September and early January) and in early May. All proposals are evaluated and peer reviewed (a process requiring at least three months) before they are submitted to the board for consideration.

Due to financial limitations and other constraints, the Institute can fund and provide other assistance for only a limited number of projects each year. Consequently, only those research projects that show the most promise and that are fully in line with the Institute’s interests will receive Institute support.

Those who wish to submit research proposals should write to or contact M. Gerald Bradford, Associate Executive Director, c/o the Institute, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602. He will be happy to answer any questions and provide application forms and further instructions on how to apply for Institute support. 

## Abraham continued from page 1

The compilers hope the book will shed light on the life of Abraham and encourage in-depth study of the Book of Abraham. "This project has been five or six years in the making, and as far as I know, no one, including FARMS, has published anything quite like it before," says Hauglid. "The project has involved many people, and it represents a great contribution to the body of scholarship on Abraham."

*Traditions* also contains a thematic index, extensive footnotes, appendixes, and subject and citation indexes. See the enclosed order form. 

### BOARD NOTES

Donald W. Parry, an associate professor of Hebrew language and literature at BYU and a member of the Institute's board, was honored with a Young Scholar Award on 27 August 2001 during BYU's annual university conference. The award encourages and acknowledges outstanding promise and contributions by faculty in the early stages of their careers.

### UPCOMING EVENT

A FARMS symposium titled "The Original Text of the Book of Mormon: Findings from the Critical Text Project" will be held at BYU on Saturday, 20 October 2001, from 9:00 A.M. until noon in the auditorium in room 1080 of Harold B. Lee Library. Professor Royal Skousen will be among the participants. Watch for further details.

### NEW PUBLICATIONS

*On the Sacred and Symbolic*, by Hugh W. Nibley, volume 5 in the Preparing for the Millennium audiotope series. In an essay read by Lloyd D. Newell, Nibley examines symbolic elements from the temple in ancient and modern times and explores the "terrible questions" (e.g., Is there life after death?) that are answered through the temple experience. See the order form.

*Elijah and the Priests of Baal*, a video lecture by John A. Tvedtnes. Using the account of Elijah's contest with the false prophets of Baal, Tvedtnes illustrates how biblical events can be more fully understood and appreciated if one knows enough of the culture, history, geography, and other background information to place them in their own time and place. See the order form.

The Newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies (FARMS) at Brigham Young University



# Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOL. 21, No. 8 | 2001

Published by the  
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and Mormon Studies**  
at Brigham Young University  
P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602

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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.

FARMS is part of the Brigham Young University Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. 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.

FARMS 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 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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