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Scholars Focus Conference on Third Nephi

The Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies hosted a two-day conference on 3 Nephi at the end of September 2008. Entitled “Third Nephi: New Perspectives on an Incomparable Scripture,” the conference consisted of a plenary session with an introductory address by John W. Welch, subsequent presentations by 21 distinguished scholars covering six themes, and a concluding session featuring a panel discussion.

Opening the conference, John W. Welch, the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at BYU’s J. Reuben Clark Law School, spoke on the topic, “New Insights into the Temple Setting of the Sermon on the Mount in Reference to the Sermon at the Temple.” According to Welch, 3 Nephi is the pinnacle of the Book of Mormon—its Holy of Holies. It “documents one of the most gloriously crowning moments in all of history.” In January 1988, Welch was struck by the significance of the temple setting for the Sermon on the Mount recorded in 3 Nephi. Twenty years of research has continued to enrich this insight for him. Welch coined the name “Sermon at the Temple,” and pointed out that the Sermon on “the mount” recalls that the temple in Israel was equated with “the mountain of the Lord.” He said we need to look for temple themes in our scripture reading whenever we come across heavy concentrations of words such as light, salt, rain, rock, washing, anointing, the name of God, throne, sonship, garments, bread, forgiveness, commandments, covenants, oaths,

treasures, wisdom, judgment, seeing God, eternity, and peacemaking.

Welch noted that the Sermon at the Temple is presented as a covenant-making text, explicitly connected with baptism, commandments, and covenantal promises of rewards or consequences. He catalogued the significant number of Greek words and phrases in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount that come from the ancient Greek version of the Psalms because the temple is the dominant factor in the Psalms, which were used as hymns in the temple. Each allusion to the Psalms in the Sermon on the Mount adds to its temple genre and supports its temple setting in 3 Nephi. Welch said that of the 383 words in the total vocabulary of the Sermon on the Mount, one-third of them “cast a long temple shadow.”

Critics have long thought of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi as the Book of Mormon’s Achilles’ heel, but we now know otherwise. Welch said when he told Elder Maxwell about the Sermon at the Temple, Elder Maxwell replied in so many words, with Ether 12:27 clearly in mind, “Isn’t it interesting how the Lord can turn what people have seen as the Book of Mormon’s greatest weakness into one of its greatest strengths.”

Preparing the Way of the Lord’s Coming

The concurrent sessions of the remainder of the conference featured clusters of themed presentations. Addressing “Preparing the Way of the Lord’s Coming,” Daniel Belnap, assistant professor of ancient scripture at BYU, entitled his remarks, “‘There Arose a Mist of Darkness’: The Narrative of Lehi’s Dream in Christ’s Theophany.” He noted

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that cultural narratives like the Exodus in the Hebrew Bible are not merely historical milestones but a main event, an archetype that can help form and preserve cultural identity. The Nephites, unlike Israel, never had the promise of returning to their homeland. Their narrative became Lehi's dream. Belnap divided the dream into three scenes—journey through darkness, obtaining the tree, and partaking of the fruit—and related them to major components of 3 Nephi.

Dana M. Pike, professor of ancient scripture, BYU, explained that the requirement in 3 Nephi 9:19–20 for Jesus's disciples to offer a broken heart and contrite spirit—given in conjunction with the instruction to cease animal sacrifices—is often misinterpreted as something new at that time. Pike's address, entitled “Third Nephi 9:19–20: The Offering of a Broken Heart,” discussed Psalm 51:16–17 and 2 Nephi 4:32—passages that chronologically precede 3 Nephi 9 by hundreds of years—indicating that the need for disciples to offer a broken heart existed from the beginning. He emphasized that 3 Nephi 9:19–20 refers not to a new sacrifice of a broken heart, but to a renewed emphasis on the need for disciples to break or smash their sin-hardened hearts. This allows the Lord to replace our now broken, irretrievable heart with a new, soft heart so the Holy Ghost can transform and sanctify us.

“The Savior's Coronation in Third Nephi,” by LeGrand L. Baker, who is retired from his career in library science at BYU, presented highlights from *Who Shall Ascend into the Hill of the Lord?* a book he co-authored with Stephen D. Ricks, professor of Hebrew and cognate learning, BYU, that will be published in spring 2009. Baker said that the biblical psalms were the liturgy of the ancient Israelite New Year festival temple drama and that the prophets in the Book of Mormon frequently used the drama's sequence and principles in their sermons and teachings. He focused on the coronation rites of the drama and showed that the sequence of the events of the Savior's coming to America, as reported in 3 Nephi, matches perfectly the sequence of the rites of the coronation ceremony in the Old Testament temple drama, demonstrating that the Nephite religion and the preexilic Israelite religion were the same.

Addressing the topic, “How Oft Would I Have Gathered You as a Hen Gathereth Her Chickens’: The Power of the Hen Metaphor in Third Nephi

10:4–7,” Jane Allis-Pike, part-time faculty in ancient scripture, BYU, analyzed the elements of the hen metaphor found in 3 Nephi 10:4–7 and suggested that it represented Christ's (hen) covenant relationship to the people of the house of Israel (chicks). A close literary reading of the metaphor revealed the connection between agency and the atonement, meaning that the chicks or people of the house of Israel were free to choose to run to Christ (hen) and the protective power or away from him, thus rejecting his protection—he would not subvert their agency. Embedded in the metaphor is a covenant lawsuit wherein the Savior acting as prosecutor, and the survivors of the destruction as witnesses condemn the acts of the “unnatural chicks” or house of Israel who have been destroyed. Allis-Pike noted that this highlights the relationship between the agency, atonement, and judgment of those who are under covenant with the Lord.

Experiencing the Lord

Patrick Steffen, associate professor of clinical psychology, BYU, opened the next series of presentations exploring the theme, “Experiencing the Lord.” Explaining the title of his address, “Confirmation Bias and Contention,” he noted that confirmation bias, a modern psychological principle that involves people only accepting new information if it fits with preexisting beliefs (and rejecting information if it does not), appears to have also existed among the ancient Nephites. In 3 Nephi 11:29 the Lord warns the Nephite disciples not to argue or contend over points of doctrine as they had been doing. Steffen said that the fulfilling of the law of Moses and the coming of Christ to the Americas ushered in significant changes that may have challenged the existing worldviews of the Nephites. Contention among the disciples indicates that the Nephites were having difficulties adjusting their worldviews to the new reality.

Matthew L. Bowen continued the session theme with his presentation, “‘They Came Forth and Fell Down and Partook of the Fruit of the Tree’: Proskynesis in Third Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10 and Its Significance.” In antiquity, proskynesis (ritual prostration in front of one's superior, often accompanied by a kissing of the feet, the ground, etc.) was the most universal and important gesture observed when approaching Deity. This can be inferred from its prominence among the temple

practices of Egypt, Mesopotamia, and ancient Israel's other neighbors. Bowen, a graduate student at Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, noted that this ritual is also well-attested in the Book of Mormon, beginning with Lehi's vision of the tree of life and in a climactic way at the appearance of Jesus Christ at the temple in Bountiful. There are no better or more appropriate examples of this rite anywhere than those recorded in 3 Nephi 11:12–19 and 17:9–10. The great love manifested at the Savior's appearance to the people at the temple in Bountiful (17:9–10) distinguishes it from other scenes of proskynesis in the ancient world. Bowen said that proskynesis of this quality had never been observed before, and perhaps not since, but it will be observed again in a coming day.

"The Effects of the Manifestations of the Power of Godliness through the Ordinances Performed by the Savior and His Apostles," was the topic explored by Ronald E. Bartholomew, CES faculty in ancient scripture, BYU. According to Bartholomew, a parallel pattern emerges for the establishment of Zion coinciding with and subsequent to the Savior's ministry in both the Old and New Worlds. This includes his formal introduction by the Father, the calling of twelve leaders to administer the first principles and ordinances of the gospel, the teaching of the principles required for the establishment of Zion, the introduction of temple ordinances that institutionalized those principles, and the subsequent establishment and flourishing of Zion communities on both continents that began with but was sustained after the personal ministration of the Savior. Bartholomew indicated that at least one explanation for the success of these two separate communities was the powers of godliness manifest in the ministration of the priesthood ordinances necessary for salvation, a hypothesis which is sustained by the fact that as the ministration of these ordinances ceased or became perverted, the loss of the manifestations of the powers of godliness can be given as at least one explanation for their decline.

Wrapping up this session, Daniel B. McKinlay, senior resident scholar at the Maxwell Institute, spoke to the theme, "Joy in Third Nephi." He said that the word *joy* shows up frequently in the Book of Mormon. In most cases it is portrayed as blessed euphoria, though occasionally it is depicted in people with a sinister attitude. In 3 Nephi Jesus experiences a "fulness of joy," in contrast to his

being the man "acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3) who interacted with a largely unreceptive group in Palestine. The Lehtes to whom he ministers also feel a high level of joy. The elation they experience contrasts with the grief they felt during the cataclysm. McKinlay noted that intense joy tends to be more pronounced in the face of adversity.

The Lord's Prayers

Robert L. Millet began the second day's presentations on the topic "The Lord's Prayers" with his paper entitled, "The Praying Savior: Insights from the Gospels of Luke and Third Nephi." Millet, a professor of ancient scripture, BYU, noted that Jesus teaches us to pray by modeling the Lord's Prayer. The prayer in 3 Nephi 17 wasn't recorded because it was inexpressible and no words could suffice. Millet said that while Jesus had taught the Nephites to pray to the Father in the name of the Son, the disciples knelt and prayed to Christ because Jesus was now a resurrected, glorified, and immortal Savior, standing in their midst more than ever, as the Word, the expression and representative of the Father. In praying to Christ it was as though they were praying to the Father. Jesus prayed to be an example for us because he loved the Father, he and the Father enjoyed communion, and he revered his Father. Jesus Christ set aside his power and glory to understand mortality in its fullness; so when he needed reassurance, answers, perspective, or the sacred sustaining influence of the Father in his darkest hours, he prayed.

Matthew J. Grey's presentation, "'Jesus Blessed Them . . . and His Countenance Did Shine Upon Them': Understanding Third Nephi 19 in Light of the Priestly Blessing," briefly summarized the ritual actions and theological significance of the priestly blessing performed by Aaronic priests in the Jerusalem temple during the Mosaic dispensation. This ritual included a communal prayer, a priestly prayer of intercession, and the priest raising his hands above his head to bless the congregation. Following this summary, Grey suggested that Jesus's actions in 3 Nephi 19 are best understood in light of this priestly ritual. There the resurrected Jesus appears to a Nephite congregation assembled at the temple, has them kneel in communal prayer, offers his own intercessory prayer to the Father on their behalf, and returns to "bless them," thus allowing the congregation to experience the full spiritual

reality in ritual-communion with God through the intercession of Jesus, the Great High Priest. Grey is a graduate student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Richard Dilworth Rust, emeritus professor of English, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, concluded this cluster of lectures by discussing the symbolism of whiteness and how the whole of 3 Nephi could be considered a treatise on discipleship. His address, “‘Nothing Upon Earth So White’: Third Nephi 19:25 and Becoming Like Christ,” further explained that when the twelve disciples became “white, even as Jesus” (19:30), there was an example of the celestialization process set forth in the Book of Mormon. The color white is not the essential element in determining righteousness or wickedness; being “white, even as Jesus” is referring primarily to the Holy Ghost shining with and through them. Rust said that the scene in which the twelve disciples were glorified in the presence of the Savior could “well represent a return to the Garden of Eden.”

The Lord’s Prophecies

Focusing on the reasons why the Savior included Malachi 3–4 in his sermon to the Nephites during his ministry, Aaron P. Schade and David R. Seely entitled their joint presentation “The Writings of Malachi in Third Nephi: A Foundation for Zion in the Past and Present.” Schade, assistant professor of religion, BYU–Hawaii, and Seely, professor of ancient scripture, BYU, taught that four significant passages from Malachi teach doctrines that are essential for the building of Zion in the days of the Nephites as well as in the latter days. These doctrines include the importance of the Lord sending messengers such as Elijah and the coming of Jesus Christ to restore Melchizedek priesthood keys, which includes the power to seal families together in the temple. The writings of Malachi helped the ancient Nephites to build Zion and can help us as Latter-day Saints to build Zion in our own day.

Addressing the topic, “Jesus’s Use of Isaiah to Teach the Doctrine of the Gathering in Third Nephi 20:11–23:3,” Gaye Strathearn, assistant professor of ancient scripture, BYU, dealt with the question of who “my servant” is in 3 Nephi 20:43–45. She noted that Jesus is here quoting Isaiah 52:13–15. In its Isaianic context these verses are the introduction

to Isaiah 53 and so the servant refers to the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. In 3 Nephi, however, Jesus replaces Isaiah 53 with a discussion of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints have routinely interpreted the “my servant” in 3 Nephi 20 to refer to Joseph Smith, but Strathearn argues that Jesus interprets it more specifically to refer to the Book of Mormon.

Concluding this session, Heather Hardy, an independent scholar from Asheville, North Carolina, spoke to the topic “‘And They Understood Me Not’: Third Nephi as Fulfillment of Jesus’s Eschatological Prophecies.” She noted that following Albert Schweitzer’s 1906 book, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, New Testament scholars of the last hundred years have concurred that Jesus’s mortal ministry focused on his call to prepare for the imminent and cataclysmic coming of the kingdom of God. While establishing the centrality of Jesus’s kingdom teachings, Schweitzer also made evident a serious problem at the heart of the Gospels’ account, namely, that this kingdom seems never to have actually arrived. The testimony of 3 Nephi is that Jesus’s Palestinian prophecies about a great day of judgment, the coming of the Lord, and the inauguration of the kingdom of God within the lifetime of his hearers were in fact fulfilled in precise detail within the time frame he had foretold.

Theological Implications

Addressing the theme “Theological Implications,” David Paulsen, professor of philosophy at BYU, entitled his remarks “The Social Model of the Trinity in Third Nephi.” He explained that Joseph Smith always declared the plurality of Deity as three distinct Gods (“social trinitarianism”), but many critics mistakenly say that early Mormonism was monotheistic, believing in one God in three modes (“modalism”). Paulsen’s extensive study of all references to God in the Book of Mormon revealed that the text as a whole is clearly anti-modalist. He listed six categories in 3 Nephi that witness that Christ is a separate person from the Father: ascension to the Father, Jesus praying to the Father and interceding on behalf of the people, Jesus receiving and obeying commandments from the Father, Jesus commanding the people to pray to the Father in his (Christ’s) name, the resurrected Jesus referring to the Father as “my Father,” and a catchall category that encompasses verses that otherwise differentiate between

the Father and the Son (for example, “Behold, my Son in whom I am well pleased”).

Robert A. Rees, emeritus professor, University of California, Santa Cruz, explored the topic, “Children of Light: How the Nephites Created Two Centuries of Peace.” Rees indicated that the Book of Mormon’s use of the elements of drama to show the historical conflict between the forces of darkness and light provides convincing rationale for the sustained period of peace (200 years) after Christ’s visit. Because of the dramatic transformation from darkness and hatred to light and love, the children held a vivid memory of being in Christ’s presence and therefore determined and covenanted to have peace the rest of their lives and to pass that on to their children and grandchildren. The dramatic narrative in 3 Nephi places a special burden on us to work to end war and actively use the energy of our hearts and souls, our time, and our economic means to work toward peace.

Victor L. Ludlow, professor of ancient scripture, BYU, concluded the session theme with his presentation, “The ‘Father’s Covenant People’ Sermon in Third Nephi 20:10–23:5.” He taught that the scriptural writings of ancient prophets, especially by Nephi in 1 and 2 Nephi, lay the foundation for the Father’s covenant teachings delivered by Jesus in 3 Nephi. This sermon is the capstone of Jesus’s three sermons in 3 Nephi. Ludlow noted three key words that describe this sermon: “Father” (appears 39 times in the 88 verses of the sermon), “covenant” (16 of the 154 “covenant” citations in the Book of Mormon appear in this sermon), and “people” (appears 35 times throughout the sermon). It is a chiasmic poem, instructing Israelites about covenant promises, some fulfilled and some for latter days, witnessing to the world of God’s power, and teaching and testifying. The pivotal point is the “promised sign” (3 Nephi 21:1–7), which is the Book of Mormon coming from the Gentiles to the Lamanites, who begin to accept it and its gospel message.

The Written Record

Under the heading “The Written Record,” Grant Hardy, professor of history at University of North Carolina, Asheville, presented his research entitled “Christ’s Use of Scripture in Third Nephi 19–26.” On the second day of Christ’s New World ministry (3 Nephi 19–26), almost half of his sermon consists of quotations from Micah, Isaiah, and

Malachi. Hardy asked, why would the risen Lord, coming as God from heaven, need to cite scripture when his own words would have been accepted as scripture by the Nephites? At 3 Nephi 26:1–6, Jesus himself offers three keys to interpreting prophecies: overlapping applicability, multiple fulfillments, and recurrent attestation. Hardy said that although Latter-day Saints usually read the quoted scriptures of 3 Nephi 19–26 as applying particularly to the last days, many of those prophecies would also have been fulfilled among the Nephites at the time of Jesus’s appearance at the temple in Bountiful.

Borrowing from insights drawn from the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges, who allegorizes the phenomenon of repetition in his famous short story, “Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote,” George B. Handley argued that the repetition of the Sermon on the Mount in 3 Nephi is a textual and allegorical clue about how to read revelation. Handley, professor of humanities, BYU, said that revelation requires the imagination and the language of the reader as much as it does an openness to the new language of God. It combines, in other words, our own historical context and cultural moment—all factors that shape how we read, what questions we ask, and how we judge—with the transformative power of divine will. He insisted that it is the necessity of this interface between the human and the divine—a kind of two-way and ongoing translation—that perpetuates and explains a theology of continual revelation, a balance that more closed models of revelation do not tolerate.

Concluding this session, Charles Swift, assistant professor of ancient scripture, BYU, explored the theme, “‘So Great and Marvelous Things’: The Literary Message of Third Nephi.” He discussed how 3 Nephi is written in such a way as to portray the Savior as God. While the New Testament Gospels paint a portrait of Jesus as both man and Son of God, 3 Nephi clearly emphasizes his divine nature. Swift specifically looked at how the book depicts prayer, miracles, and dialogue to show that the narrator purposely omitted some details and stressed others to convey the message that the resurrected Savior is God.

A panel discussion featuring Daniel C. Peterson, S. Kent Brown, Grant Hardy, Robert L. Millet, Richard Dilworth Rust, and John W. Welch concluded the conference, where they examined some of the topics presented during the conference. ♦

Latest *FARMS Review* Offers Well-Rounded Fare

The latest incarnation of the *FARMS Review* (vol. 20, no. 2, 2008) sizes up recent books dealing with evolutionary science, plural marriage, Book of Mormon geography, and even the lost ark of the covenant. It also reviews the latest volume in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* and introduces a new feature called the Neal A. Maxwell Institute Lecture, which this time features two talks by General Authorities who were guest speakers at the Maxwell Institute's annual lectures in 2007 and 2008.

In his editor's introduction, "Debating Evangelicals," Louis Midgley draws on his long experience in discussing countercultists' reliance on creedal formulae and theology (issues often debated among themselves) and contemplating the questions of if and how Latter-day Saints should respond to critics of their faith.

In "On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar," BYU president Cecil O. Samuelson, a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, honors Elder Maxwell's intellectual curiosity and life of Christian discipleship by recounting lessons learned firsthand as one of this remarkable leader's "people projects." Elder Bruce C. Hafen, also of the Seventy, takes up the related theme of resolving the seemingly tense relationship between reason and faith.

Theories surrounding the possible location of the ark of the covenant, as well as tidbits of scriptural history, are discussed in John A. Tvedtnes's review of Tudor Parfitt's *The Lost Ark of the Covenant: The Remarkable Quest for the Legendary Ark*, a work that begins with reliance on the Bible but develops a theory ironically at odds with it on many counts.

George D. Smith's recent treatment of plural marriage during the Nauvoo era is reviewed by Gregory L. Smith (no relation to author), who shows it to fall short of minimal scholarly standards with its blatant reliance on selective citation and misinterpretation of sources. Robert B. White quickly reaches the same conclusion in a humorous review almost as short as what he needed to read of *Nauvoo Polygamy* (dust jacket and first two pages) in order to form an accurate opinion of its demerits.

Mesoamericanist Brant A. Gardner evaluates Wayne N. May's *This Land* series, which champi-

ons a U.S. setting (mostly in Ohio) for the Book of Mormon narrative, and shows that it fails to meet very specific geographic requirements. May also embraces the "Michigan Relics" as real, though, as Gardner explains, they have long been shown to be an archaeological hoax. (It turns out that May's coauthor, Edwin G. Goble, author of the faulty geography, has since retracted his claims regarding both the faulty geography and the disputed artifacts.)

In regard to Trent D. Stephens and D. Jeffrey Meldrum's recent book *Evolution and Mormonism*, Duane Boyce discusses the untidy nature of scientific practice, specifically how scientific investigation can, contrary to its ideal aim, "exert a suppressive influence on the generation and acceptance of new hypotheses."

Two contributors take up the Mountain Meadows Massacre, a troubling event in Utah history that has seen renewed public discussion in recent years. Robert H. Briggs reviews the long-anticipated *Massacre at Mountain Meadows: An American Tragedy*, by Ronald W. Walker, Richard E. Turley Jr., and Glen M. Leonard. This book avoids the polarizing, demonizing approaches of the past, Briggs notes, and deals head-on with the question of how basically good people can commit violent atrocities. The author's use of "a growing scholarly literature on mass killings and violence" enabled them to develop "an analytical framework that makes the massacre explicable" and thus make a significant contribution. Providing historical perspective on the Utah War and the massacre at Mountain Meadows is an insightful and entertaining piece by William B. MacKinnon.

In his review of *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, Louis Midgley shares instructive personal anecdotes and perceptive discussion of Nibley's faith and intellectual interests that provide a helpful lens for approaching this latest volume. Of related interest is a response by longtime Nibley editor Shirley S. Ricks to recurring allegations that Nibley misused sources to buttress his arguments. Ricks marshals statistics and testimonials by those who worked on Nibley's books to show that, to a remarkably high degree, his footnotes and translations are reliable and that, more often than not, supposed inaccuracies reflect the reader's ignorance of the incredibly wide range of sources under Nibley's command. ♦

Update: The “Familiar Spirit” in 2 Nephi 26:16

There are two ways to read a text, through exegesis and through eisegesis. The first means, approximately, “reading out of the text,” while the second means, approximately, “reading into the text.” Both are legitimate ways of approaching a text. Anyone who reads the scriptures will at times engage in both exegesis and eisegesis, whether knowingly or unwittingly. Therefore, the more conscientiously and consciously we engage in rigorous and careful exegesis and eisegesis, the better the chance that our reading of the scriptures will truly enlighten the mind and provide substance for the soul. I will illustrate both approaches using the term *familiar spirit* found in 2 Nephi 26:16, Isaiah 29:4, and 1 Samuel 28.

First, an example of the eisegetical approach.

The word *familiar* has various meanings in English and only the context can help decide which meaning is the intended one. Thus, one way to understand 2 Nephi 26:16 might come when the common understanding of *familiar* is applied. That is, *familiar* can suggest “to be acquainted with,” or as the Oxford English Dictionary reads, “known from constant association.” This is the meaning that some Church members have given to *familiar* in this verse. It is certainly true that the Book of Mormon will have a spirit about it that will be familiar to those who know the Bible; they will recognize the same spirit in both books. This connotation of *familiar* is certainly appropriate to describe the effect the Book of Mormon has on all those who are honest in heart.

Now, an example of an exegetical approach.

Familiar also has another meaning that is at play in Isaiah 29:4 and 2 Nephi 26:16, and because of this other sense a different understanding of these verses becomes possible. The Hebrew behind the “familiar spirit” in Isaiah 29:4 (King James Version) is *ʾob*.¹ This Hebrew word denotes, approximately, “the spirit of a deceased person.” This sense is most apparent in 1 Samuel 28 when Saul first asks about and then visits a medium, the infamous “Witch of En-Dor.” But she is never called a witch in the King James Bible; rather, she is simply called “a woman

that hath a familiar spirit” (1 Samuel 28:7), or more literally from the Hebrew, “a female master of familiar spirit.”² Because the biblical context of those who deal with “familiar spirits” is usually that of a séance, which is uniformly condemned in the Old Testament, people have assumed that the “familiar spirit” is evil or demonic, when actually, it is the medium who brings up the “familiar spirit” who is condemned, and not the “familiar spirit” per se.

That the “familiar spirit” is not always evil is apparent in 1 Samuel 28 where the spirit called up from the dead is the prophet Samuel (real or imagined). If Saul had thought that all “familiar spirits” were evil, he would not have ventured to have Samuel called up.

Therefore, when the Bible says in Isaiah 29:4 that the inhabitants of Jerusalem who will be destroyed will speak “out of the ground . . . as of one that hath a familiar spirit,” the meaning is that destroyed Judah will speak from the dead, that is, from the records they left behind, the Old Testament, and without the aid of a medium. This has nothing to do with necromancy and divination, but everything to do with the dead speaking to the living through the records the dead leave behind. This is made even clearer in 2 Nephi 26:16 where Isaiah is paraphrased and applied to the Nephites who will, like the inhabitants of Jerusalem, be destroyed. They also shall speak “out of the ground . . . as one that hath a familiar spirit; for the Lord God will give unto him [Joseph Smith] power, that he [the translator of the Nephite records] may whisper concerning [the destroyed Nephites], even as it were out of the ground” where they are buried, and where the plates had been buried.

As can be seen, the reader has the choice of interpreting 2 Nephi 26:16 eisegetically, reading into these passages the meaning “a spirit which seems familiar,” or exegetically, reading out of these passages “a message from those who have passed on before us.” Both ways of approaching 2 Nephi 26:16 are correct and legitimate methods that can lead to enlightenment and understanding. ♦

by Paul Y. Hoskisson

Director, Willes Center and FARMS

Notes

1. Hebrew: אוב.
2. Hebrew: אשה בעלת אוב.

Work on BYU's Messiah Documentary Continues

The filming for the Messiah documentary has been completed, and the important work of editing has begun. Team members had traveled to Israel, Egypt, and Denmark to film the visual backdrop for the nine-part film as well as to capture the hosts' comments that will introduce a wide array of topics in the documentary. Those hosts included Gaye Strathearn (assistant professor of ancient scripture), John Tanner (professor of English), Andrew Skinner (professor of ancient scripture), and Kent Brown (professor emeritus of ancient scripture).

The director of the filming effort, Sterling Van Wagenen, cofounder of the Sundance Film Festival, was enthusiastic about the footage that the team gathered, including spectacular shots around the Sea of Galilee. "In places, it was a challenge to find the right angle for the cameras and to place our hosts in a physical context that tied to the topic. But we succeeded marvelously. We found cooperation wherever we went."

Tanner, also BYU's Academic Vice President, said "the opportunity to visit again the places where the Savior taught and then to interact with colleagues on camera was a rare treat."

Strathearn, who went to Copenhagen with the team, felt that the opportunity to be filmed near the original Christus statue was "a privilege that comes only once in one's life."

Brown judged that "our footage for this film is better and more interesting than any I have seen in a documentary film devoted to Jesus. The project has been enhanced by this recent filming trip. And the filming team is simply the best that a person can assemble."

Skinner, the former executive director of the Maxwell Institute, was particularly touched by "the opportunity to bear witness of the Savior in places that He knew and traveled."

During December 2008, fifty scholars were interviewed on camera answering important questions not only about the current state of New Testament scholarship but especially about the Savior's life and on-going ministry.

The documentary is backed by the BYU administration and the Maxwell Institute,

in partnership with Religious Education, BYU Broadcasting, and the Department of Theatre and Media Arts. The series was conceived by S. Kent Brown, former director of the Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies and FARMS, largely in response to the impressively produced 1998 PBS documentary series *From Jesus to Christ*. Although that series offered good information about Jesus and his times, its editors began from a viewpoint of non-faith. Brown judged that a documentary series that rests on the broader range of LDS scripture, paired with insights from modern prophets and apostles, will offer to Latter-day Saints, particularly college-age individuals, a more complete picture of the Savior, his times, and his notable achievements.

The project will also include a Web site where the resources used in the television broadcast (the standard works, statements of modern prophets and apostles, and historical records) can be accessed to allow viewers to explore further beliefs and doctrines about Jesus Christ. ♦

INSIGHTS

Paula W. Hicken, Jacob D. Rawlins, *Editors*

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