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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 25 | 2005

Number 2

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Latest Addition to the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley Series

FARMS is pleased to announce the release of a new volume of previously unpublished class lectures by celebrated Latter-day Saint scholar Hugh Nibley, who recently passed away at age 94. *Apostles and Bishops in Early Christianity*, volume 15 in the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley series, comprises Nibley's finely detailed lecture notes for a course he taught at Brigham Young University in 1954 on the office of bishop in the early Christian church.

When the course ended, Nibley moved on to other projects and did not see this research through to publication. Although these lectures are now dated in certain (mostly stylistic) respects, readers will be impressed by his control of primary sources and the sustained depth of his skillful analysis. Nibley fans in particular will welcome this latest addition to the massive library of his collected works and will relish the insights it adds to his related studies on Mormonism and early Christianity. Besides laying out Nibley's case for the early church's loss of prophetic gifts and

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FARMS Review Probes Geography, Papyri, Isaiah, Creation, and More

The latest *FARMS Review* (vol. 16, no. 2, 2004) is another weighty issue flush with articles covering a wide array of interesting topics. In the lineup are reviews of works on Book of Mormon geography, de-Christianization of the Old Testament, the Joseph Smith Papyri, Isaiah's central message, Jerusalem in Lehi's day, creation theology, gospel symbolism, and the Christian countercult movement. Also included are two freestanding essays, one older article of lasting appeal (initiating a new feature in the *Review*), book notes, a 2003 Book of Mormon bibliography, and the editor's top picks of recent publications. A foretaste of the many engaging articles follows.

In the introduction, editor Daniel C. Peterson demonstrates how detractors since 1830 have abandoned one theory after another in seeking to explain away Joseph Smith's role in bringing forth the Book of Mormon. Peterson covers a lot of ground as he sketches a kind of intellectual history of the anti-Mormon campaign. He ably turns each successive theory on its head. Responding to the charge that if the Book of Mormon were truly an

ancient record, that fact should have been proved by now, Peterson writes, "One wonders when, exactly, the deadline for verification passed" and asks, in turn, why critics have not been able to prove the record false, much less agree on how it came to be.

Three reviews deal with Book of Mormon geography. In the first, John E. Clark, professor of anthropology at BYU and director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, weighs the claims of two books. He finds them to be unconvincing, the first "privileg[ing] impression over substance" and the second (a proposal for lower Central America as the range of Nephite and Lamanite lands) "worth contemplating" but faulty on many counts. Clark offers insights into the narrow neck of land, population sizes, Izapa Stela 5 (the so-called Lehi Tree of Life Stone), weights and measures, and Jaredite colonization. In other reviews, Allen J. Christenson and Brant A. Gardner reach similar conclusions regarding attempts to identify Book of Mormon lands through superficial linguistic analysis and to challenge the limited geography model (see below), respectively.

In a freestanding study entitled "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," FARMS resident

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“What Meaneth the Rod of Iron”?

Latter-day Saint scholars Hugh W. Nibley and John A. Tvedtnes have discussed at length how a staff, rod, and sword came to be commonly identified with the word of God in the ancient Near East.¹ The evidence they cite from the Bible, the earliest Hebrew commentators, modern biblical scholarship, and elsewhere affirms Nephi’s unambiguous assertion that the “word of God” is a “rod.”

Further support for the antiquity of Nephi’s imagery is detectable in his own comparison of the word to a rod, a comparison that may involve wordplay with the Egyptian term for “word” and “rod.” Although we have the Book of Mormon text only in translation and do not know the original wording of the text, we can use our knowledge of the languages that the Nephite writers said they used—Hebrew and Egyptian (1 Nephi 1:2; Mormon 9:32–33)—to propose reasonable reconstructions.

We note that the Egyptian word *mdw* means not only “a staff [or] rod”² but also “to speak” a “word.”³ The derived word *md.t*, or *mt.t*, probably pronounced **mateh* in Lehi’s day, was common in the Egyptian dialect of that time and would have sounded very much like a common Hebrew word for rod or staff, *matteh*.⁴ It is

also very interesting that the expression *mdw-ntr* was a technical term for a divine revelation, literally the “the word of God [or] divine decree.”⁵ The phrase *mdw-ntr* also denoted “sacred writings,”⁶ what we would call scriptures, as well as the “written characters [or] script”⁷ in which these sacred writings were written.

Now consider Nephi’s comparison of the word and the rod in the context of the Egyptian word *mdw*:

I beheld that the **rod** [*mdw/mt.t*, Heb. *matteh*] of iron, which my father had seen, was the **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] of God.⁸ (1 Nephi 11:25)

And they said unto me: What meaneth the **rod** [*mdw/mt.t*, Heb. *matteh*] of iron which our father saw, that led to the tree? And I said unto them that it was the **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] of God; and whoso would hearken unto the **word of God**, and would **hold fast unto it**, they would never perish. (1 Nephi 15:23–24)

An indication of Nephi’s awareness of the play on words is his use of the expression “hold fast unto” the “word of God,” since one can physically hold fast to a rod but not to a word (compare Helaman 3:29).

Nephi’s comparison of the rod of iron to the word of God also makes very good sense in light of other scriptural passages that employ the image of the iron rod.⁹ But the comparison takes on even richer connotations when viewed as a play on multiple senses of the Egyptian word *mdw*. Since Lehi’s language consisted of the “learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2), we would reasonably expect that Lehi and his sons (Nephi in particular) were aware of, and probably even used, the common word *mdw/mt.t* in at least some of those senses. It seems unlikely that the word’s phonetic similarity to Hebrew *matteh* would have escaped their attention. On the contrary, it would plausibly explain Nephi’s apparent substitution of “word” for “rod” in later remarks to his brothers in 1 Nephi 17:26, 29: “And ye know that by his **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] the waters of the Red Sea were divided. . . . And ye also know that Moses, by his **word** [*mdw/mt.t*] according to the power of God which was in him, smote the rock, and there came forth water.”¹⁰

Nephi’s imagery itself, along with its possible Egyptian language wordplay, further attests the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Certainly Joseph Smith in 1829 could not have known that *mdw* meant both “rod” and “word.” However, Nephi, in the early sixth century BC,

likely had a good understanding of such nuances, and he may have employed them as part of a powerful object lesson for his brothers. 

By Matthew L. Bowen

BYU graduate (2000) in English, minor in Classics; pursuing studies in Hebrew Bible and Egyptology

Notes

1. Hugh Nibley, “Ezekiel 37:15–23 as Evidence for the Book of Mormon,” in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed., ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988): 311–28; John A. Tvedtnes, “Rod and Sword as the Word of God,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 148–55.
2. Raymond O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999), 122.
3. Ibid. Significantly, all *mdw*-derived words were originally written with the “walking stick”/“staff” (i.e., “rod”) hieroglyph (see Sir Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* [Oxford: Griffith Institute/Ashmolean Museum, 1999], 510). Thus “word” in its earliest Egyptian conception was literally identified with a “rod.”
4. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951?), 641. מַטֵּה (*matteh*) = “staff, rod, shaft.” It is derived from the trilateral root *NTH*, which as a verb means “stretch out, spread out, **extend**, incline, bend.” Thus I suspect that Lehi’s first mention of the “rod of iron” might well constitute a polyptoton (words derived from the same root and used in the same sentence) on *NTH*: “And I beheld a **rod** [*matteh*] of iron, and it **extended** [*nth*] along the bank of the river, and led to the tree by which I stood” (1 Nephi 8:19). An Egyptian transliteration of the Hebrew *matteh* (“rod”) and Egyptian *mdw/mt.t* (“rod, word”) would have been graphically similar or even identical if written in demotic characters.
5. Faulkner, *Concise Dictionary*, 122.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Compare the phrase “word of God” to *mdw-ntr* “words of God” = “hieroglyphs.”
9. For biblical examples of the rod of iron, see Psalm 2:9; Revelation 2:26–27; 12:5; 19:15; compare Isaiah 11:4. In all of these passages, the rod is emblematic of the deified king’s authority to enforce his own divine decrees—the word of God.
10. Exodus 14:16, Exodus 17:5–6, and Numbers 20:8–11 are the biblical passages to which Nephi alludes. Remarkably, each passage cites the *matteh* (“rod”) as the instrumentality through which Moses performed the miracles recorded in Exodus. Thus Nephi’s additional wordplay in 1 Nephi 17:26, 29 is likewise sublime.

PUBLICLY SPEAKING

BYU Anthropologist Addresses Maya Origins Puzzle

In 2001 the chance discovery of a 2,000-year-old Maya mural in a chamber buried beneath a pyramid in the Guatemalan jungle stirred the archaeological community. It was a sensational find, one of the most important for Mayanists in half a century. Rendered in brilliant colors with exquisite skill, the remarkably well-preserved mural reveals a highly sophisticated artistic tradition and hieroglyphic script predating the Maya’s golden age by 800 years.

Since then, a team of archaeologists working at the remote site, at San Bartolo in Guatemala’s Petén lowlands, have uncovered another mural in the chamber. They expect to piece together additional murals that once graced the other two

walls, destroyed long ago by Maya workmen making way for newer construction.

Last October, at the Beckman Center of the National Academies of Science and Engineering in Irvine, California, all six members of the San Bartolo field research team presented their latest findings. Among them was BYU professor of anthropology John E. Clark, director of the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, who addressed the longstanding puzzle of Maya origins.

He noted that for all the attention given to excavating Maya sites in Mesamerica, scholars remain unclear about the origins of Maya civilization, “and for most of them, it is not a research question.” One result of this neglect is that “the Maya have consistently been given credit for things they did not do,” Clark said. “Many Maya

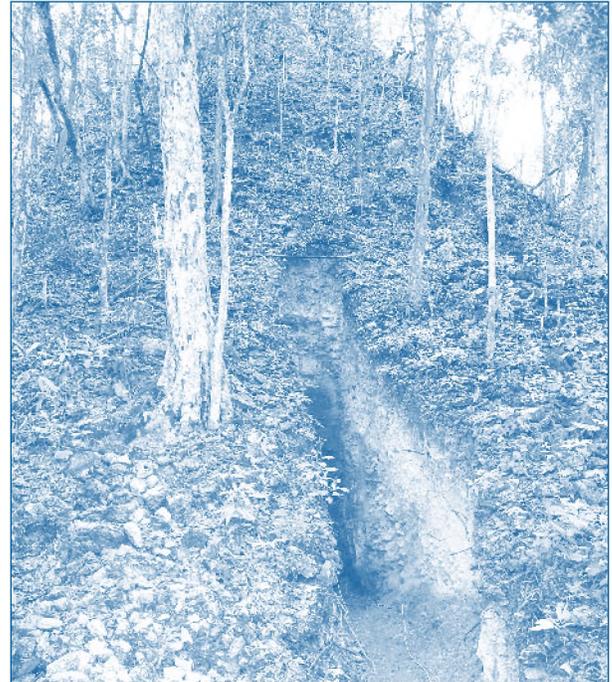
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Maya Origins cont. from page 3

practices were a revered heritage received from their Olmec forebears.” (The Olmecs are thought to have occupied southern Veracruz, western Tabasco, and nearly all of Chiapas in what is present-day southern Mexico.)

Clark explained that there are two main hypotheses regarding Maya origins. The “mother culture” hypothesis posits that Maya civilization derived from the earlier Olmec civilization, while the “sister culture” hypothesis asserts that different cultures arose independently yet contributed equally to the development of Mesoamerican civilization (discounting the primacy of Olmec settlement and influence). Clark sees merit in the former view, but with a crucial distinction: he proposes the label “mother civilization” or “first civilization” hypothesis since the focus is not on cultural dimensions such as biology and linguistics but on “the advent of civilization among established peoples and linguistic communities”—that is, on institutions and belief systems.

Clark then reviewed considerable archaeological evidence indicating that the Olmecs were the first major civilization of Mesoamerica and that they exerted a lasting civilizing influence on the



A looters' trench exposed part of the pyramid's mural.

Maya and other peoples. For example, to illustrate the Olmec legacy among later Mesoamerican peoples, Clark took a detailed look at the great Maya king Pakal of Palenque, who lived 1,000 years

after the Olmecs and whose tomb, found in 1952,

was replete with artifacts.

Clark found “an 80 percent correspondence between the practices and artifact inventory apparent in Pakal’s mortuary monument and Olmec practices from the previous millennium. This is a phenomenal correlation.” Noting that the Maya at San Bartolo wore masks exhibiting clear Olmec influences, Clark concluded that “the San Bartolo mural communicates plainly after 2,000 years of entombment that the Maya derived civilization from their Olmec ancestors.”

The other distinguished speakers at the symposium were William A. Saturno, the



Dressing of the maize god, ca. AD 100. San Bartolo Mural North Wall, center. Artwork by Heather Hurst. Published with permission of the Proyecto San Bartolo.

University of New Hampshire archaeologist who discovered the mural; Michael D. Coe, an anthropologist at Yale University who is a major figure in the decipherment of Maya writing; David S. Stuart, an archaeologist at the University of Texas at Austin who, like Coe, is known for his expertise in Maya writing; Karl A. Taube, an anthropologist at the University of California, Riverside, who serves as the iconographer of the San Bartolo Mural Project; and Heather Hurst, an archaeological illustrator at Yale University who is producing reproductions of the San Bartolo murals.

Among those attending the symposium was Allen J. Christenson, a humanities professor at BYU who specializes in the art and literature of the Maya people of Mexico and Central America. As translator of *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Maya*, 2 vols. (London: O Books, 2003–4), he

appreciates the cultural significance of the San Bartolo murals.

“If someone sat down to imagine what the find of the century would look like, he could not have done any better than this,” Christenson said, noting that the murals are remarkable for their antiquity, beauty, and intact state as well as for the rich iconographic and epigraphic information they contain. The frescoes include phonetic Maya language (only a few of the glyphs have been translated so far) of purely theological content, and the scenes of creation mythology ending with the accession of a king relate directly to Popol Vuh creation stories. “What we have of the Popol Vuh is a 16th-century copy, but the stories and creation imagery go way back, before the time of Christ,” Christenson said. 📖

Hugh Nibley cont. from page 1

apostolic authority, the book opens a new window on the character of Nibley’s scholarly interests and teaching style during his seventh year of teaching at BYU.

The lectures are divided into two sections. The first section considers the duties and ecclesiastical authority of apostles and bishops throughout the early church, and the second section covers topics related to the legitimacy of the Roman church’s controversial claim to ecclesiastical supremacy. Nibley began his course by summarizing the conflicting views of Protestant and Catholic scholars on whether the early church was formally organized or not (lack of consensus on this issue warranted reexamination of the two main ecclesiastical offices in question: that of apostle and bishop). He then reviewed key differences in those offices and traced the gradual secularization of the bishop’s role into one resembling that of an elected political magistrate, with the trappings of civic prominence and magisterial dignity. Nibley emphasized that no single bishop had primacy over any other and that episcopal councils and synods eventually became the norm for governing the church in the absence of the higher ecclesiastical authority possessed by the apostles.

Nibley also emphasized that early Christian leaders consistently differentiated between episcopal and apostolic authority. This is clearly evident in epistles written to outlying churches in which local bishops such as Ignatius, Clement, and Polycarp, recognizing the limits of their stewardship, urged repentance not as emissaries acting under an apostolic or even episcopal mandate, but merely as concerned friends and observers. Even centuries later, when bishops assumed higher authority, they still did not command repentance. “Plainly the apostles had a kind of authority that none of their successors had,” Nibley wrote. “They were conceived of as the twelve judges of Israel and so were limited to that number” (10).

In the second half of his course, Nibley gave special attention to how the office of bishop changed drastically as Rome emerged as the controversial seat of episcopal and, later, papal authority. He probed the shifts in power, the origin of episcopal hierarchy, issues of apostolic succession, and modern-day confusion surrounding the development of papal power. “A thousand years after Nicaea the church discovered that a one-man organization could not provide a dependable succession and hit upon the idea of a council of men,” taught Nibley. “This is exactly what

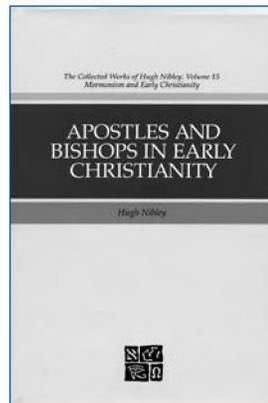
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Hugh Nibley *cont. from page 5*

the primitive church had in the Twelve Apostles, but at that late date the sacred college could not and did not pretend to be apostolic in origin. What better indication that the primitive church had been taken away?” (175).

The typescripts that Nibley wrote before giving these lectures contained some partial references to his sources. With painstaking efforts the editors and Joseph Ponczoch supplied 770 footnotes, which are typeset at the bottom of each page. Greek, Latin, French, and German texts are supplied so that students can compare Nibley’s translations with the originals he consulted. In less than 10 percent of the cases, the source that Nibley had in mind was not found at the time this book went to press. Many of the missing sources, however, have already been located by Douglas Salmon and others.

Because Nibley’s typed lectures also lacked a summation or conclusion, John F. Hall and John W. Welch suggest in their “Editors’ Postscript” that the last words of Nibley’s study “The Passing of the Primitive Church: Forty Variations on an Unpopular Theme” serve as a fitting conclusion for this volume: “We have indicated above some of the



reasons for suggesting that the church, like its founder, his apostles, and the prophets before them, came into the world, did the works of the Father, *and then went out of the world*, albeit with a promise of return. Some aspects of the problem, at least, deserve closer attention than students have hitherto been willing to give them” (reprinted in Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987], 168–208).

The quality of Nibley’s exposition and its reliance on enduring primary sources add value and luster to the lectures despite their age. In typical fashion, *Apostles and Bishops* “pushe[s] the arguments far beyond the positions that have been staked out by others” and “raise[s] significant questions for future explorations concerning the history of early Christianity,” the editors state in the preface. “Readers will find these lecture notes just as informative and

engaging as the popular recordings and published transcripts of Nibley’s later lectures on the Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price.”

To purchase a copy of *Apostles and Bishops*, visit the FARMS section (under “BYU Publications”) of byubookstore.com. 

FARMS Review *cont. from page 1*

scholar Matthew Roper demonstrates that current views favoring a small-scale geography are not of recent devise, as some critics claim, but had antecedents as early as the 1840s. Speculation on the geography question has spawned two principal theories: the hemispheric model (with Book of Mormon lands comprising North, Central, and South America) and the limited geography model (a restricted New World setting on the order of hundreds rather than thousands of miles). Roper notes that although the hemispheric view was popular among early Latter-day Saints, it is not clear whether it was the result of prophetic revelation or the outgrowth of the personal ideas and

assumptions of the Prophet Joseph Smith and others. The striking diversity of 19th-century opinion on Book of Mormon lands attests that the church had no authoritative stance on what was—and continues to be—an open issue. According to Roper, today many serious students of the Book of Mormon favor Mesoamerica (encompassing southern Mexico and Guatemala) as the best match for the complex requirements of the text itself—a view that has remained tenable after years of examination in light of the archaeological and cultural record of ancient Mesoamerica.

“The Book of Abraham: Ask the Right Questions and Keep on Looking” is Larry E. Morris’s review of Robert K. Ritner’s translation of the Hor

Book of Breathings, part of the Joseph Smith Papyri. Ritner, associate professor of Egyptology at the prestigious Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, annotated his translation extensively and included notes on previous scholars' work, providing helpful information for students of the Joseph Smith Papyri. Interestingly, the same papyri fragments were translated by Michael D. Rhodes in a 2002 FARMS publication entitled *The Hor Book of Breathings: Translation and Commentary*. Rhodes is associate research professor in the Department of Ancient Scripture at BYU. Since Ritner and Rhodes worked independently yet refer to the same body of scholarship, their translations invite comparison. To help facilitate that effort, Morris's review includes a side-by-side comparison of the two translations of the hieroglyphic text accompanying the initial vignette in Joseph Smith Papyri I.

The tone of Ritner's commentary reveals hostility toward the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints despite the assertion of impartiality. Ritner also denigrates Joseph Smith and the contributions of Latter-day Saint scholars Hugh Nibley and John Gee. Morris notes that this kind of nonscholarly ax-

grinding detracts from the value of Ritner's translation, as does his refusal to deal with other scholars' claims that certain nonscriptural elements of the Book of Abraham also appear in ancient or medieval texts that were unavailable to Joseph Smith. As for the quality of Ritner's translation, Morris suggests this is a good topic for trained Egyptologists to take up in the future.

In "Exploring the Isaiah Code: Ascending the Seven Steps on the Stairway to Heaven," David Rolph Seely, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, assesses Avraham Gileadi's latest book and his impressive Isaiah corpus in its entirety. Seely adjudges *Isaiah Decoded: Ascending the Ladder to Heaven* distinctive because of its "holistic approach [that] attempts to read and understand passages in Isaiah in light of their relationship to the writings of Isaiah as a whole." Gileadi employs structural, typological, and rhetorical analyses to relate Isaiah's writings to people today—"a message so relevant to the times in which we live and to our divine destiny as children of God," Gileadi writes in his book. According to Gileadi, each of the seven

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FROM OTHER PUBLISHERS

Dead Sea Scrolls Reader Released

A new multivolume work promises to facilitate study of the Dead Sea Scrolls. *The Dead Sea Scrolls Reader*, published by the prestigious academic publisher E. J. Brill, offers transcriptions and English translations of all the nonbiblical Qumran texts.

An advantage of the *Reader* is that it classifies the texts by genre. This practice was not followed in the official *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* series, where the texts were originally published, and the resulting dispersion of related texts therein was an obstacle to comparative analysis. In the *Reader*, some 500 Hebrew and Aramaic texts are grouped into six volumes, each covering a genre such as religious law or exegetical, parabiblical, calendrical/sapiential, and poetic/liturgical works. Twenty-five texts are published therein for the first time.

The editors of the project are Donald W. Parry, a professor of Hebrew Bible at BYU, and Emanuel Tov, the J. L. Magnes Professor of Bible at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and editor in chief of the Dead Sea Scrolls publication project. Parry and Tov have worked on the project since the mid-1990s.

The 2,400-page text of the *Reader* is being used in the BYU Dead Sea Scrolls Database on CD-ROM, with planned publication this fall. This electronic database will include the scrolls in a searchable format, together with many additional research tools.

The Dead Sea Scrolls comprise a collection of approximately 900 texts, written in Hebrew and Aramaic, that form a significant body of secular and religious literature. The scrolls have been called the most important archaeological find of this century because of the way in which they have increased knowledge of the Hebrew Bible, the Second Temple era of Judaism (250 BC–AD 70), the Hebrew language, and various religious texts. 

levels on the ascent to heaven represents a set of spiritual characteristics that people must acquire if they are to gain salvation (as opposed to descending the metaphorical ladder to damnation).

Seely notes that Gileadi's model of ascent derives from the "bifid" (parallel) structure of the book of Isaiah—namely, seven parallel themes arranged chiastically in each half of the book. "The idea is that Isaiah arranged his material in such a way that he teaches about salvation and invites God's children to come to salvation through a series of choices between opposites [e.g., ruin/rebirth, rebellion/compliance]," Seely explains. Each level is related to nations or biblical figures that reflect certain spiritual qualities and afford instructive models. Seely finds "many marvelous insights throughout this book"—such as Isaiah's teaching that creation is not a one-time event but a cyclical process that continues throughout the plan of redemption (and Gileadi shows how that process occurs at each of the seven levels). Of *Isaiah Decoded*, Seely concludes, "There is something here for everyone. . . . Gileadi has succeeded in bringing the teachings of Isaiah to the average reader in an interesting and readable format that can aid us in 'likening' these things to ourselves."

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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.

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