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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.

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Behind the Messiah Documentary

The following is part 2 of a three-part series of articles written by S. Kent Brown, executive producer of Messiah: Behold the Lamb of God, a Neal A. Maxwell Institute, BYU Broadcasting, and Religious Education production. BYU Television will air part of the series on December 6, 2009. The entire seven-part documentary will air beginning on January 10, 2010. Copies will be available for purchase in the spring. This second article explores the path by which the film climbed from a simple concept to a completed project.



At the summit of eight years of work stood the prototype film, the 13-minute preview that would go to BYU's administration for approval. For me, it was as though all of time had compressed itself into those 13 minutes. The quality of the exhibition on three select topics—modern scholarly approaches to the study of Jesus, his Sermon on the Mount, and his resurrection—had to convey to a group of knowing viewers both the tone of the planned film and the range of visual and audio technologies that can be summoned to tell the story of the Christ.

Because of my research and publishing background, I knew that, before all else, the film needed a conceptual, written framework. It needed a basic document to guide the treatment of Jesus' entire story. And, I was convinced, proper perspective comes from many minds. So after I divided the whole of Jesus' ministry into manageable chapters, I recruited eight outstanding faculty members to join in writing segments of the broad story. We began to write in the summer of 1999. By early 2000, all was in my hands.

With the expert help of Patricia Ward, the administrative assistant in BYU's Ancient Studies office, I plunged into the effort to create the project's guide, its basic document. Ninety pages later, and with the generous help of colleagues, the project possessed its historical, cultural, and doctrinal frame.

Though I had shared the result with my eight colleagues, the need for a tier of reviewers pressed

itself upon me. With hat in hand, so to speak, I went to Robert Millet, then dean of BYU's Religious Education, and asked for monies to pay stipends to a blue-ribbon group of faculty reviewers to examine and critique the basic document. After receiving a promise of funds, I approached a half-dozen distinguished faculty members from different academic disciplines, asking for critique and promising the standard payment for their time and energies. This panel did not disappoint. Their insightful feedback helped me to adjust the framing of the document in important ways.

Two necessities had gradually come into focus for me: the audience and a script. What groups of people were we trying to reach? The most obvious answer was college-age students and young adults. After all, the project's home resided in a university. Besides, this age group would often be the first to run into varying views about Jesus, whether written or portrayed in other media.

To back up a little, with the help of Thomas Lefler, the associate chair of BYU's department of theater and media arts, I had gathered a committee to explore the questions that would face a PBS-quality film, including those of audience and technical support. The committee consisted of some widely experienced people, including Lee Groberg and Heidi Swinton, who had produced jointly such acclaimed films as *Trail of Hope* and *American Prophet*.

After the unstinting assistance of committee members, I came to a decision about the audience for this telling of the Christ story—a film by Latter-day Saints for Latter-day Saints that features the honed skills of Latter-day Saint scholars.

During this committee-driven process, Tom Lefler began to press for a script. He made it clear to me that a script controls all else—the pacing and shape of the film, its content and tone, its visual and, to a large extent, its audio character. Fortunately for me and the project, he knew Matt Whitaker, a distinguished filmmaker and scriptwriter. Between the three of us, we hatched the idea of conducting a university class on the media's treatment of Jesus

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Christ. Fall semester of 2001 had already begun, but Daniel Judd, the chair of BYU's Department of Ancient Scripture, was willing to entertain my proposal for a class to begin in October, during the second block. Twelve students signed up.

Whitaker was the main teacher for the course, leading the students inside the world of film production. He introduced them to the triumphs and vagaries of media portrayals of Jesus of Nazareth. The films all fell short of a full grasp of who Jesus is. Class members came to perceive clearly that a fresh, more complete approach to the story of the Christ was needed.

For my part, I introduced the students to the historical and cultural backdrop of the New Testament Gospels and, of course, to the basic document. The class setting, while leading students to grasp how Jesus had been portrayed in a variety of media, also allowed them to discuss and refine the idea of a wide-ranging film that would go beyond what any visual medium had produced before.

By the time that winter semester 2002 rolled around, the 12 students were ready to try their hands at creating scripts for 12 distinct episodes. Some student scripts showed a significant depth of research; others showed a refined skill in organizing the topics. All their creative efforts helped to clarify the issues that a scriptwriter would face in shaping and filling out all the pieces in the broad story of the Messiah.

Now the table was set for an attempt by a skilled writer to produce a script. Tom Lefler and I concluded that 12 episodes were too many. So we reduced the number to seven. In consultation with John Reim, then the director of BYU Broadcasting, and Beth Hedengren of the Honors Program, we chose Emily Inouye and Stacey Snider Birk to create the script. Inouye's task was to boil down the major issues for each of the seven episodes. Behind her came Birk, who was a film major and, by good fortune, had been a student in the BYU Jerusalem Center program and could envision the geographical backdrop for Jesus' mortal life. She took Inouye's research and wrote an engaging script highlighting the key elements in LDS theology that center on the Messiah.

Though we were very pleased with the work of the two women, Lefler and I knew that the script might have omitted key elements and contain mis-

takes. Once again, with the generosity of Religious Education in offering compensation to reviewers, we invited experts to examine and critique the script. It was the resulting revised script, paired with the prototype of the film, that eventually won approval from university officials.

At this point, with the production of the prototype as the next move, Sterling Van Wagenen entered the picture in an important way. I had talked with Van Wagenen in 1998 about directing the film. With his guidance about places around Utah County that would carry the feel of the Holy Land, Joseph Draschil, a film student at BYU, began to assemble the master plan for producing the prototype. One of the challenges was to work with a budget of less than \$20,000, monies that had been donated for this purpose by BYU's Religious Education and the Maxwell Institute. The filming took place at locations in Utah County and in the LDS Motion Picture Studio in Provo.

I served as the "on-camera host" and recruited four colleagues whom I knew to be well acquainted with New Testament scholarship and to be strong advocates of Jesus as Messiah. In February 2006, Van Wagenen and a filming crew shot my host's pieces around and near Utah Lake. With the creative help of John Uibel of BYU's Center for Instructional Design, a crew prepared a set at the Motion Picture Studio. I invited the four scholars to answer questions about selected New Testament topics: Jesus in modern scholarship, the Sermon on the Mount, and the literalness of the resurrection. Van Wagenen skillfully led the scholars through these key issues and then oversaw the editing process. A number of people at the Motion Picture Studio generously lent their skills to the final product.

In June 2006, with a honed description and the prototype film in hand, Draschil and I prepared the final package to be presented to university officials through Andrew Skinner, then the executive director of the Maxwell Institute. I knew that the sensitive nature of the topic would require a lengthy review. Exactly 11 months later, in May 2007, I learned that the project had been approved. To that point, the project had been nine years in its upward course. *(To be concluded in the next issue.)* ♦

By S. Kent Brown

Associate Director, BYU Jerusalem Center

Givens Featured Speaker at First Biennial Willes Center Lecture

The Book of Mormon and its status as an American Bible was the subject of the First Biennial Laura F. Willes Center Book of Mormon Lecture held October 8, 2009, at Brigham Young University. Terryl L. Givens, professor of literature and religion and occupant of the James Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond, focused his remarks on two points: the provenance of the Book of Mormon and major motifs within it.

Unlike the opening of Genesis or the four Gospels, the Book of Mormon begins with a personal introduction by Nephi, who “urgently presses upon his audience the very human, very local, and very historical nature of his narrative.” In the Book of Mormon, Givens said, there is an “authorial preoccupation . . . with authenticating the record’s provenance.” We can nearly always identify who wrote or abridged the text before us, because throughout the record an effort can be traced to “never lose sight of the links in the chain of transmission.” This chain takes the reader from “a historical personage of flesh and blood, who fashioned with his own hands the very materials on which the record was engraven,” to Moroni, who delivered those plates—as well as others—to Joseph Smith and to the eleven witnesses who attested the reality of the plates.

Givens next explored four motifs in the Book of Mormon: revelation, Christology, Zion, and scripture. He said each is introduced in the visionary experiences of Lehi and continued throughout the text.

With respect to revelation, Nephi’s desire to see what his father saw in the vision of the tree of life marks a “paradigm shift of dramatic proportions,” Givens said. The promise of personal, dialogic revelation found in Moroni 10 and illustrated early in

the book through Nephi’s vision, is a “nonnegotiable point of theological difference.”

Next, the most striking claim within the Book of Mormon, said Givens, is its “insistence that Jesus Christ was worshipped in the Western hemisphere” centuries before his advent. In fact, “Christology in the Book of Mormon is not an occasional intrusion, but the narrative backbone of the story. . . . All of Book of Mormon history . . . pivots on the moment of Christ’s coming.”

Givens next discussed the exodus of Lehi away from Jerusalem. He attributed to this recurrent motif of *exodus*, which is reenacted many times throughout the text, “the dominant emotional tone” of the Book of Mormon. “The original dislocation signified by Lehi’s exodus becomes a prelude not to a new geographical gathering, but to a shadow of the permanent reconstitution of Zion into spiritual refuge.”

A fourth major motif is scripture itself. Givens taught that a 19th-century Christian audience “would have considered scriptural history to move inevitably toward completion and closure.” In the Book of Mormon, however, “scripture always moves toward proliferation and dissemination.” It is “fluid, diffuse, and infinitely generable.”

Givens concluded his remarks by saying that the “Book of Mormon’s place as canonical scripture cannot be separated from the particular ways it has portrayed itself as a literal historical creation, and from the unexpected ways it has both engaged and rewritten important stands of Christian historical understanding.”

Givens’s talk was based in part on his recent book *The Book of Mormon, A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009). The entire text of this address, “Joseph Smith’s American Bible: Radicalizing the Familiar,” will be available in the next issue of the *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture*. ♦



From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

In the topsy-turvy last days, it is important to realize that as “the eternal purposes of the Lord shall roll on,” His disciples will surely know what it is to be tumbled.

(Mormon 8:22.) It will be no time to be proud, especially when the tumblings may not at the moment seem purposeful. Yet the Lord’s work will roll on; His meek disciples will understand. (*Meek and Lowly* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987], 56, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997], 191)

Valuable Research Tool Available Soon

By the end of this year, “Nineteenth-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844)” will be made available as one of the Harold B. Lee Library’s digital collections.

Building on the work of previous generations of researchers, Matthew Roper, research scholar with the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, has collected digital facsimiles and electronic transcriptions of as many of these early publications as could be found.

Roper and editorial staff members of the Maxwell Institute, especially Sandra Thorne and Larry Morris, with the assistance of the librarians at the Harold B. Lee Library, have combined these digital files into a searchable online collection and are making this important collection of early publications relating to the Book of Mormon accessible to researchers and others interested in Mormon history.

One of the best historical windows for understanding how the Book of Mormon was interpreted and understood by early readers is through the literature relating to that book published during Joseph Smith’s lifetime. Publications from this period enrich our perspective on early Latter-day Saint history, as the Book of Mormon was cast in a variety of roles by both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint readers. This collection represents an effort to gather together that body of literature and make it available to those interested in the origins of the Book of Mormon. Researchers will be able to view the original documents, typed transcriptions, or both. The electronic database will also be periodically updated.

“Nineteenth-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844)” will be included in the collections found online at www.lib.byu.edu/online.html. The Maxwell Institute will announce the full posting at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu, as well as in a later issue of this newsletter. ♦

Peterson Participates in World Parliament

Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Islamic studies and Arabic and editor in chief of the Middle Eastern Texts Initiative, will chair a plenary session at the Parliament of the World’s Religions held December 3–9, 2009, in Melbourne, Australia.

Entitled “Islam and the West: Creating an Accord of Civilisations,” the panel discussion will center on understanding Islam. Peterson’s involvement illustrates METI’s engagement with scholars worldwide.

The Parliament of the World’s Religions, first held in 1893, brings together the world’s religious and spiritual communities to discuss and explore interreligious understanding and cooperation.

Others who will participate in this session include Tariq Ramadan, professor of contemporary Islamic studies at Oxford University and senior research fellow at Doshisha University in Kyoto, Japan; Chandra Muzaffar, political scientist and founding president of the International Movement for a Just World (JUST), Malaysia; and Feisal Abdul Rauf, chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, a multinational, multireligious project that works to improve relations between the Muslim world and the West. ♦

INSIGHTS

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

