New Resource on Ancient Maya Writing Released

A new volume published under the Institute’s Research Press imprint is *A Thematic Bibliography of Ancient Maya Writing*, by Stephen D. Houston and Zachary Nelson. “Many people don’t know about the quantity of research on ancient Maya writing,” says Houston, a BYU professor of anthropology who is an authority on Maya writing. “In fact, the literature is overwhelmingly large. This bibliography provides a roadmap through that literature.”

The bibliography arranges hundreds of publications into nine sections. The section titled “Discovery” lists publications that report on the first eyewitnesses who saw Maya writing in use and discussed the script with native scribes. Because of pressure from Spanish authorities, these scribes soon went out of business, in some cases possibly transferring their literacy to roman script. “Nature of Maya Writing” lists works dealing with the pivotal question of how scholars have understood the writing system and what its components or spelling rules might have been. “History” relates to the first glimmerings and eventual triumphant discovery that Maya inscriptions contained historical records structured according to Maya needs and dynastic glorification.

Publications grouped under “Time” discuss the Maya practice of placing events in a temporal and astronomical context. For a long period the only understood portion of the Maya texts was time, and the associated numbers proved more amenable to analysis than the other portions of the glyphic texts (whose content has been revealed only in the last two decades). The section on “Supernaturals” relates to the presence of god names in the Maya “screenfold” books. Works in the “Objects” section treat a principal preoccupation of Maya texts: the dedication and possession of sacred objects and valuables, which the Maya “name-tagged” (denoted ownership) by means of hieroglyphic texts. These objects include chocolate vessels with text reporting ownership and even the...
Very often in my work on the critical text of the Book of Mormon, I have discovered cases where the text reads inappropriately. Book of Mormon researchers have typically attempted to find some circumstance or interpretation to explain a difficult reading, but in many cases I have found that difficult readings are actually the result of simple scribal errors.

One example of this is in Mosiah 17:13–14:

and it came to pass that they took him and bound him and scourged his skin with faggots yea even unto death and now when the flames began to scorch him he cried unto them saying . . .

The word scourged is found in the printer’s manuscript (in Oliver Cowdery’s hand). This reading is followed by the 1830 and all subsequent editions. Unfortunately, the original manuscript is not extant for this passage.

There are considerable problems with the use of the word scourged in Mosiah 17:13. First of all, the verb scourge means ‘to whip’, which does not make sense here, especially since faggots (bundles of sticks for burning) are seemingly being used to whip (or perhaps beat) Abinadi to death. One can, I suppose, construct various scenarios in which one can be beaten to death with faggots.

More serious, however, is the fact that elsewhere the Book of Mormon text always refers to Abinadi as having been burned to death, not beaten or whipped:

Mosiah 17:18
and in that day ye shall be hunted and ye shall be taken by the hand of your enemies and then ye shall suffer as I suffer the pains of death by fire

Mosiah 17:20
and now when Abinadi had said these words he fell having suffered death by fire

Alma 25:9
thus the words of Abinadi were brought to pass which he said concerning the seed of the priests who caused that he should suffer death by fire

Alma 25:11
and now Abinadi was the first that suffered death by fire because of his belief in God now this is what he meant that many should suffer death by fire according as he had suffered

Thus the current reading in Mosiah 17:13 (“scourged his skin with faggots”) contradicts all other places in the text which refer to Abinadi’s death by fire.

The solution to these problems is to emend the word scourged in Mosiah 17:13 to scorched. In the very next verse (Mosiah 17:14), the text specifically refers to the flames scorching Abinadi (“the flames began to scorch him”). In fact, the word scorch is precisely in accord with Book of Mormon usage. This verb is always used to refer to burning the surface of something. Consider, for instance, the two other uses of scorch in the Book of Mormon text:

Alma 15:3
and this great sin and his many other sins did harrow up his mind until it did become exceedingly sore having no deliverance therefore he began to be scorched with a burning heat

Alma 32:38
and when the heat of the sun cometh and scorcth it because it hath no root it withers away and ye pluck it up and cast it out

Interestingly, the same use of scorch for burning people is found in a comment by the Elizabethan John Hooker about the Spanish in the Americas:

they subdued a naked and yielding people . . . and against the course of all human nature did scorched and roast them to death (cited in Paul Johnson,
Now the question is, How did scorched and scourged get mixed up in Mosiah 17:13? I would suggest that the original manuscript (which is not extant here) correctly read “and scorched his skin with faggots.” One possibility is that when Oliver Cowdery came to copy this passage into the printer’s manuscript, he mistakenly read scorched as scourged. This misreading would have been facilitated by Oliver’s frequent misspelling of scourge(d) as scorge(d). Although he wrote scourged in the printer’s manuscript at Mosiah 17:13, Oliver probably misread scorched as scorged, but then spelled it correctly when he wrote it. About 40 percent of Oliver’s extant spellings of scourge(d) are missing the letter u:

REFERENCE  ORIGINAL MS  PRINTER’S MS
1 Nephi 2:24 Scourge scorge
1 Nephi 19:9 scourge scourge
1 Nephi 19:13 scourged scourged
2 Nephi 5:25 scorge scorge
2 Nephi 5:25 scor[ ] scorge
2 Nephi 6:9 [ ]rge scourge
2 Nephi 20:26 — scourge
2 Nephi 25:16 [ ]corged scourged
Jacob 3:3 — scorge
Mosiah 3:9 — scourge
Mosiah 15:5 — scorged
Mosiah 17:13 — scourged
Alma 23:2 scourge scourge
Alma 52:10 scourge scourge
3 Nephi 20:28 — scourge

Another possibility is that this transmission error occurred during the dictation of the text. In this instance the scribe for the original manuscript might have misheard Joseph Smith’s dictated scorched as scourged. Note, in particular, the similarity in sound between the final ch and j sounds in scorched and scourge.

We should also note one additional factor that may have led scorched to be replaced by scourged—namely, the parallel sentence construction between John 19:1 and the current text for Mosiah 17:13:

Pilate … took Jesus and scourged him
they took him and bound him and scourged his skin

In other words, the familiarity of the language of the Gospels describing Christ’s scourging may have led Oliver Cowdery to substitute the familiar scourged for the unfamiliar scorched in Mosiah 17:13. This same parallelism may also explain why the 1837 printer accidentally dropped the clause “and bound him” from Mosiah 17:13:

Pilate … took Jesus and scourged him
they took him and scourged his skin

This missing clause (“and bound him”) was finally restored to the LDS text in the 1906 Salt Lake large-print edition, undoubtedly by reference to a copy of the 1830 edition. (The RLDS Church restored this clause in its 1908 edition, probably by reference to the printer’s manuscript.)

In other words, both semantic and visual (or auditory) similarity may have conspired to create in Mosiah 17:13 the incorrect reading “they took him and bound him and scourged his skin with faggots.” The reasonable emendation (“scorched his skin with faggots”) thus permits the text to read consistently and plausibly—and without hunting for evidence that people can be scourged to death with faggots. 

By Royal Skousen

New Audiotape Collections Released


The second collection, titled The Temple and the Atonement, contains four essays: “Garden of Eden: Prototype Sanctuary,” by Donald W. Parry; “The Temple and the Atonement,” by Truman G. Madsen; and “Hebrews: To Ascend the Holy Mount” and “The Brother of Jared at the Veil,” both by M. Catherine Thomas. For purchasing information, see the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of the FARMS Web site.
recipes of particular decoctions. Other sections in the bibliography are “Principles of Decipherment,” “Mayan Languages and People,” and “Sites.”

According to Houston, the bibliography is a companion piece to The Decipherment of Ancient Maya Writing, which he recently published with Oswaldo Chinchilla and David Stuart. “Together,” says Houston, “these works should provide scholars with a key resource for understanding the great intellectual adventure of glyphic decoding.”

To obtain a copy of A Thematic Bibliography of Ancient Maya Writing, see the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of the FARMS Web site.

Occasional Papers continued from page 1

concerning divine visions, the prominent role of temples, and characteristics of the Messiah.

Throughout the paper, Christensen compares Barker’s works with the writings of LDS scholars. He devotes an entire chapter to showing how the Savior’s visit to the Nephites in 3 Nephi 8–28 fits perfectly with the ancient Israelite beliefs about the roles of the high priest, as well as with the Israelites’ Messianic expectations.

Christensen ends his paper with a challenge to researchers to examine Barker’s works. He suggests topics that could be rich sources of insight into the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. To fully appreciate the scriptures, Christensen argues, a reader must challenge his or her own assumptions and be willing to accept new ideas, such as those found in the works of Margaret Barker.

To obtain a copy of FARMS Occasional Papers 2, see the enclosed order form or visit the catalog section of the FARMS Web site.

UPCOMING EVENT

Saturday, 23 March 2002 “The World of Abraham,” a FARMS conference on the Book of Abraham, BYU Tanner Building, room 151, 9:00 A.M.–1:00 P.M. Admission is free.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

Susanna: Texts, Translations, and Technical Notes, edited by Mark A. Sedgwick, includes the Greek, Latin, and English texts of the apocryphal book of Susanna. This third monograph in the Ancient Texts and Mormon Studies series is available in April 2002.