INSIGHTS

The Newsletter of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship

Books to Build Faith

I am sometimes contacted by people who are experiencing doubts about the claims of Mormonism or whose spouse or father or daughter has lost faith. I always ask what the specific issues might be, and I then try to address those or to locate colleagues or printed resources that might help resolve their concerns.

I think that such efforts are extraordinarily important. Elder Neal A. Maxwell, for whom the Maxwell Institute is named, was fond of Austin Farrer's praise of the great C. S. Lewis: "Though argument does not create conviction," Farrer wrote, "lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."[1]

Farrer's words have long served as a kind of unofficial motto for several of those associated with what is now called the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship. I think that motto is entirely appropriate.

I do not, however, like to play only defense. I do not want to spend all my time putting out brushfires, playing catch-up, responding to crises. To use a very popular modern buzzword, I much prefer to be proactive. I want to build faith to such a strength that such crises will be less common, to create conditions under which such brushfires will be much more difficult to kindle. Back to the sports metaphor: If the defense is always out on the field, it may be able to keep the opposing team from scoring. But if the offense does not eventually come out to play, the prospects of victory will be very low. A single error by the defense, one moment of inattention or poor execution, will be enough to lose the game.

One way that I choose to be proactive is to suggest a basic packet of books that I would like as many Latter-day Saints to read as possible, a set that I especially wish faltering members to be familiar with. I offer a few nominations here:

Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981). I was once, I confess, sitting at the back of a rather unexciting church class, rereading *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, when an academic colleague of mine from BYU sat down beside me. "Next to the scriptures," he said, "that is the most faith-promoting book I've ever read."

I am inclined to agree with him. Richard Anderson, who earned a law degree from Harvard before receiving a doctorate in ancient history from the University of California at Berkeley, is one of the finest scholars the church has ever produced. In this book, he subjects the Book of Mormon witnesses to meticulous examination. They emerge from the process as sane, lucid, honest, reliable men—a fact of perfectly enormous importance because of the way their testimony directly corroborates central claims of Joseph Smith and Mormonism.

Brother Anderson has written many other very important articles on the witnesses—and on other relevant topics—since his book was published. These are available online at the Maxwell Institute website, including but not limited to "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 18-31; "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 39-60; and "The Credibility of the Book of the Mormon Translators," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 213-37. But *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* remains, I think, the place to start on this vital subject.

John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 2005). In this book, the prolific polymath John W. Welch has assembled an impressive collection of original documents relating to six foundational topics in Mormon history: (1) the first vision,

(2) the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, (3) the restoration of the priesthood, (4) Joseph Smith's visionary experiences generally, (5) the restoration of temple keys, and (6) succession in the presidency (specifically the "transfiguration" of Brigham Young in Nauvoo).

Mark McConkie, ed., *Remembering Joseph: Personal Recollections of Those Who Knew the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003). Mark McConkie, a professor in the School of Public Affairs at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs, has created a vast treasury in this book and in the accompanying bonus CD of intimate views of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The sheer volume of material is deeply impressive. (The CD includes 2,000 pages of primary-source testimonials. The book alone includes statements from many scores of Joseph Smith's contemporaries.) Most of the accounts included—from Joseph's family, friends, and acquaintances, and even from his enemies—have never been published before or are, practically speaking, inaccessible to ordinary people. But they are very much worth the time. Joseph Smith, as described by those who knew him, comes across as an honest, good, and sincere man. And once again, because of the nature of his claims, that is something very important to know and understand.

Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). This is a somewhat more difficult book than the others I have recommended above, but, in my opinion, it is a book that will abundantly reward the effort invested in it.

Grant Hardy, who holds an undergraduate degree from Brigham Young University in classical Greek and a PhD from Yale University in Chinese history, has published impressively on the history of historical writing from his perch at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, where he has served as the chairman of the history department.

In *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, he turns his highly trained eye on the historical writings of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni, treating them as distinct personalities with very different approaches to their material. Although he himself is an active and committed member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

for the purposes of this study he "brackets" the question of whether or not they were real individuals. Nevertheless, the extraordinarily fruitful results of his study demonstrate that the writings of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni are indeed quite distinct—and by far the most reasonable explanation for this, in my opinion, is that they represent three real, historically different men.

I believe that serious and fair-minded engagement with the four books I have recommended is virtually certain to strengthen faith in readers who are even slightly open to the possibility that Mormonism is true. Mark McConkie's compilation will build confidence in the character of Joseph Smith. Richard Anderson's book and John Welch's anthology provide powerful corroboration of Joseph's claims to revelation. Grant Hardy's book demonstrates, at least in one area, how very complex, rich, and internally consistent the Book of Mormon is.

When people contact me with doubts and problems, I do not want merely to try to allay their concerns. I want to build their faith so that their areas of uncertainty will shrink relative to their areas of confidence. These books—and, of course, there are others—are well suited to do just that. ◆

By Daniel C. Peterson
Director of Advancement

1. Austin Farrer, "Grete Clerk," in *Light on C. S. Lewis*, comp. Jocelyn Gibb (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1965), 26.

From Elder Neal A. Maxwell

For a disciple of Jesus Christ, academic scholarship is a form of worship. It is actually another dimension of consecration. Hence one who seeks to be a disciple-scholar will take both scholarship and discipleship seriously; and, likewise, gospel covenants. For the disciple-scholar, the first and second great commandments frame and prioritize life. How else could one worship God with all of one's heart, might, *mind,* and strength? (Luke 10:27) —*On Becoming a Disciple-Scholar*, p. 7, as quoted in *The Neal A. Maxwell Quote Book*, ed. Cory H. Maxwell (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1997), 87

What's in a Name? Sebus

When I first began studying Book of Mormon proper names more than 30 years ago, the name *Sebus* appeared to present a Gordian knot. Hebrew words, like other Semitic words in general, are most often built on a structure of three different consonants. This language feature emphasizes the consonants and their sequence and order. The problem with *Sebus* is that its first and third consonants, /s/ and /s/, are the same—something that is extremely rare in any Semitic language.[1] That being the case, for a long time I shelved any attempt to etymologize *Sebus*.[2]

Recently I stumbled onto Amos 5:11 and the hapax legomenon *bšs*, which in context seems to mean "to gather a tax."[3] Some scholars have suggested that the word, albeit by metathesis, derives from the Akkadian[4] *šabāšu*, meaning "to collect (taxes), to gather in."[5] It appears, however, that this Akkadian word in its Neo-Babylonian form, *subbusu*, derives from an Aramaic[6] root, *sbs*.[7] My initial worry about the identical first and third consonants vanished because of this rare example in both Aramaic and Babylonian, even though in the Hebrew word the sibilants are differentiated as *šbs*[8] (supposedly borrowed from Aramaic or Babylonian).[9]

The vowels fit the pattern of a passive participle or stative verbal form, that is, /ū/ or /u/ between the second and third consonants.[10] The meaning would be "to be gathered," a fit name for a watering hole.

It may seem a stretch to use a biblical hapax legomenon meaning "to gather/to be gathered" with an Aramaic/Neo-Babylonian cognate to explain a Lamanite (Nephite?) place-name. But what makes this stretch plausible is that the Book of Mormon passage in which the name occurs seems to be playing off the meaning "assemble, gather," namely, "all the Lamanites drive their flocks" to the "water of Sebus" (= assembly; Alma 17:26). At this place where the Lamanites *gathered* to water their flocks, "a certain number of the Lamanites" *scattered* the flocks of the king (v. 27). Ammon responded by telling his fellow servants that they should *gather* the flocks "and bring them back unto the place of water," to *Sebus* (v. 31).

Thus a possible Aramaic word from around the time of Lehi meaning to "gather," as well as a well-attested word in Babylonian (including the Neo-Babylonian of Lehi's day), could provide the etymology for the Book of Mormon place-name *Sebus*. The consonants line up; the vowels match. Additionally, it is telling that the only name in the Book of Mormon that begins and ends with the same consonant, a sibilant, corresponds well with one of the rare Semitic words that begin and end with a consonant, also a sibilant.

If I may be allowed to speculate further afield, I would suggest that there is a possible secondary wordplay involving *Sebus*. The East Semitic (Babylonian) word *šabāsu*, which means "to be angry,"[11] also begins and ends with a sibilant and contains a medial /b/. Perhaps the choice of the word *angry* in Alma 17:36 was not just serendipitous but a conscious play on a word that sounded similar to *Sebus*.

Nevertheless, as with any suggestion, this etymology of *Sebus* must remain only a possibility whose plausibility depends on the eye of the reader. ◆

By Paul Y. Hoskisson
Director, Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies

Notes

1. The only other examples known to me of original Semitic words with the same first and third consonants, other than the lexemes suggested below, are the Hebrew words for "root," *šōrēš*; "three," *šālōš*; and, from Ugaritic, "sixth," *ṯdṯ*. Note that all of these, like *Sebus*, begin and end with a sibilant or, in the case of *ṯdṯ*, what became a sibilant in Hebrew, *šēš*.

2. The word appears several times in Alma 17–19.

3. While the King James Bible reads "your treading," the New English Bible (Oxford, 1971) reads "levy taxes." The *Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford, 2004) cautiously reads "impose a tax" and notes "meaning of the Heb. uncertain."

4. That is, the East Semitic languages Babylonian and Assyrian.

5. *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, CD-ROM (Brill, 1994–2000), שבס (hereafter *HALOT*). See *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Oriental Institute, 1989), 17:6, s.v. *šabāšu*, "to collect, gather," and in the D stem (= Hebrew *piel*) "to collect taxes, to gather in" (hereafter *CAD*). See also *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (Harrossowitz, 1981), 3:1119, s.v. šabāšu, "einzammeln" (hereafter *AHw*).

6. Aramaic is a West Semitic language closely related to Hebrew that educated Israelites of Lehi's day knew.

7. *Dictionary of North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (Brill, 1995), 2:775. See CAD, 15:341, s.v. *subbusu*; and *AHw* (1972), 2:1053, s.v. *subbusu*. It appears once as a verb, *us-sa-ab-bi-is*, and once as an adjective, *su-ub-bu-su-tu*. See also H. ben Yosef Tawil, *An Akkadian Lexical Companion for Biblical Hebrew* (KTAV, 2009),

61; and Michael Sokoloff, *Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Bar Ilan Univ. Press, 2002), 1107. I thank my friend Robert Smith for the last two references.

8. The transcription in the Book of Mormon of a Hebrew word would mask the difference because in English we have only the letter *s* for Semitic /š/, /ś/, and /s/.

9. There is some question about the quality of the sibilants in this word. It would appear that the Ugaritic cognate is *ṯbš* (see *HALOT*, בשם). The issue is complicated because the Akkadian cuneiform script often does not distinguish between the sibilants /š/, /ś/, and /s/.

10. The theme vowel of the passive participle in Hebrew is /ō/, from an original /ū/, and the theme vowel of the stative verbal form is /u/. A stative verbal form denotes a condition, such as the Hebrew word meaning to be sick, *maruṣ*.

11. *CAD*, 17:4, s.v. *šabāsu*.

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Nibley Fellows, 2011–2012

Each year the Maxwell Institute awards Nibley Fellowships to LDS students pursuing graduate degrees (usually PhDs) in fields of study directly related to the work of the Institute—primarily work on the Bible, the Book of Mormon, early Christianity, and the ancient Near East.

Named in honor of the eminent late scholar Hugh W. Nibley, this fellowship program fosters the next generation of faithful scholars. For the academic year 2011-2012, the Institute awarded Nibley Fellowships to the following students:

Continuing Nibley Fellows

Matthew L. Bowen, Old Testament, Catholic University of America; **Jason Combs**, New Testament and Christian Origins, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; **Ryan C. Davis**, Hebrew Bible/Ancient Near East, University of Texas at Austin; **Courtney J. lnnes**, Jewish-Christian Relations, Cambridge University; **Seth Korman**, Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Vanderbilt University; **David J. Larsen**, Biblical Studies, University of St. Andrews; **Daniel O. McClellan**, Biblical Studies, Trinity Western University; **Jacob Rennaker**, Ancient Near Eastern Studies, Claremont Graduate University; **Avram R. Shannon**, Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism, The Ohio State University; **Thomas K. Sowards**, Hebrew Bible, University of Texas at Austin; **Joseph Stair**, Mesoamerican Archaeology, University of Kentucky.

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To date, the Institute has awarded 244 fellowships to 82 individuals.

LDS graduate students interested in applying for a Nibley Fellowship for the 2012-2013 academic year should submit a completed application form and all supporting documentation by July 31, 2012 (applies to both first-time and returning applicants). The Nibley Fellowship guidelines and an application form are available at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/nibleyfellowships. Queries may be e-mailed to nibleyfellowships @byu.edu. ◆