

Scholarship and the Gospel

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Brothers and sisters, I would like to share with you this morning some scholarly developments that I think are very exciting. But, as I hope to persuade you, they are exciting not merely in an academic sense. If they were not more than that, they would have little or no claim on the attention of a university devotional assembly. I believe, and I know I am not alone in this belief, there is divine purpose in the things I will treat today. I believe that there is more going on here than our own merely human efforts can fully explain. Moreover, if I did not believe, passionately, that scholarship and the gospel belong together, I would not be here at Brigham Young University.

In November of this year, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, or FARMS, will celebrate its 20th birthday. John Welch and several of his fellow attorneys developed the idea for FARMS while car-pooling to work in Los Angeles. Since then, the foundation has grown in a remarkable fashion from a tiny shoestring operation to a substantial organization that sponsors and coordinates significant research, publishes weighty books, and distributes its findings to every corner of the globe.

I might add here my strong feeling that Jack Welch represents a striking instance—and hardly the last—of how uniquely qualified people and necessary resources have been raised up or provided at crucial junctures. Surely lawyers who possess expertise in tax-exempt foundations—accompanied by training in ancient languages and literatures at BYU, Oxford, and Duke—can't be all that common.

FARMS took a major step when Professor Welch joined the faculty of the law school here at Brigham Young University. Whereas the foundation continued to be independent and self-supporting, it received some very basic assistance—in the form of work space, for example—from BYU. And its proximity to the scholars and scholarly resources of the Church's flagship school was crucial to what FARMS would become.

One of the elements of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that distinguishes it from other Christian movements is its openness to scriptural texts beyond the Bible:

Daniel C. Peterson was a BYU professor of Islamic studies and Arabic when this devotional address was given on 3 August 1999.

Wherefore, because that ye have a Bible ye need not suppose that it contains all my words; neither need ye suppose that I have not caused more to be written.

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written.

For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the house of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all nations of the earth and they shall write it.

And it shall come to pass that the Jews shall have the words of the Nephites, and the Nephites shall have the words of the Jews; and the Nephites and the Jews shall have the words of the lost tribes of Israel; and the lost tribes of Israel shall have the words of the Nephites and the Jews.

And it shall come to pass that my people, which are of the house of Israel, shall be gathered home unto the lands of their possessions; and my word also shall be gathered in one. And I will show unto them that fight against my word and against my people, who are of the house of Israel, that I am God, and that I covenanted with Abraham that I would remember his seed forever. [2 Nephi 29:10–14]

Still, as the passage just quoted clearly says, the Book of Mormon by itself does not exhaust the treasures of revelation and scripture that we can expect to receive in this last dispensation. Nor does it seem that even our other standard works, the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price, represent the last that is to be received.

In a passage familiar to most Latter-day Saints, Isaiah prophesied of a people who would “be brought down,” who would “speak out of the ground,” whose “speech shall be low

out of the dust,” a “whisper out of the dust” (Isaiah 29:4). We generally take this to refer to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. But the recovery of the Book of Mormon actually unleashed a spectacular flow of ancient documents that have literally begun to be restored to us from “the ground” and “out of the dust.” The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Coptic Gnostic library at Nag Hammadi, in Egypt, are probably the most famous of these, but the list is considerably more extensive. Professor Hugh Nibley, who could be described without too much exaggeration as the “patron saint” of FARMS, has alerted us over the past half century to the immense importance that some of these documents may have for the study of Latter-day Saint scripture and doctrine.

Several years ago, through contacts established by Professor Truman Madsen, FARMS became involved with Dr. Emanuel Tov, the leader of the international editorial team working on the Dead Sea Scrolls, and with Dr. Weston Fields, the head of Jerusalem’s Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation. Out of those contacts emerged a project to produce an electronic, searchable version of the scrolls, drawing on BYU’s unique strengths in computer manipulation of texts in different languages and scripts.

Something else that emerged was the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, or CPART. FARMS established CPART when it became apparent that producing a scrolls database was a very, very big undertaking. CPART functions as a department of FARMS, specializing (unlike the rest of the foundation) in projects that, although they may well be of deep interest to Latter-day Saints, have no obvious or immediate Mormon connection and most likely have a largely non-LDS audience. Indeed, the mission of CPART is to make ancient texts (and some medieval texts) available, essentially without commentary or “spin.” What their audience then makes of those texts—and, indeed, what the Latter-day Saints connected with CPART make of them

when not wearing their CPART “hats”—is something with which the center, as such, does not concern itself.

Professor Noel Reynolds, who was then also the president of FARMS, served as the first director of CPART, and it was he, along with Professor Donald Parry, who spearheaded the scrolls project from its beginning.

Our involvement with the scrolls has put CPART, FARMS, and Brigham Young University at the very focus of current research in the area. Indeed, Weston Fields, the director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation in Jerusalem, has said that Provo, Utah, is now—along with Jerusalem itself and the University of Notre Dame—one of the three most active centers for scroll research in the world. CPART, for instance, owns one of the world’s largest collections of scroll images, and there are now four members of the BYU faculty (professors Donald Parry, Dana Pike, David Rolph Seely, and Andrew Skinner) working on the international Dead Sea Scrolls editorial team. When FARMS and BYU hosted an international conference on the scrolls in 1996, virtually every scholar in the field came from throughout North America, Europe, and Israel to Provo. Some of the people who attended were so famous—I had been reading their work since I was young—that I had assumed they were *dead*.

The FARMS/BYU compact disk of the Dead Sea Scrolls has been circulating to leading scholars in a beta version for some time now. Come September, the prestigious Dutch academic publishing house E. J. Brill, of Leiden, will begin to distribute it publicly.

Given the controversies surrounding the scrolls, and the difficulty that all but a few scholars have had in getting access to them during the 50-plus years since their discovery, their appearance in an easily searchable electronic version is a potentially revolutionary development. It will, I think, have incalculable ramifications for their future study. Soon anyone in the world will be able to work through

the scrolls—either in transcription or by studying enhanced photographs of the original documents themselves—in the comfort of his or her private study. The significance of such work for understanding the formative period of both Judaism and Christianity is incalculable.

It is gratifying to realize that Latter-day Saints, and the Latter-day Saint university, have played a pivotal role in this effort—an effort that truly brings the Dead Sea Scrolls “out of the dust.”

As FARMS and CPART began to assemble a team of people who could handle the demands of the Dead Sea Scrolls project, one of those who joined up was our computer and technical expert, Steve Booras. Brother Booras has been immensely helpful in that project, but he has also come to be our leader (in conjunction with others from the College of Engineering and Technology and among BYU’s computer specialists) in an entirely different field, where Latter-day Saint expertise is developing a worldwide reputation.

Multispectral imaging is a technology that allows us to take digital images of documents or document-analogues using the optimal areas of the spectrum for recovering the information they contain. Brother Booras took his equipment to the ancient Maya site of Bonampak, for instance, just over the Mexican border from Guatemala, to join an expedition jointly sponsored there by BYU, Yale University, and the National Geographic Society. The famous murals of Bonampak, which were painted around A.D. 800, are deteriorating, and it seemed urgent to capture the best possible images of them before they decayed any further. Using multispectral imaging, Brother Booras was able to capture beautiful pictures of the stunning murals. Astonishingly, though, the equipment was also able to detect hieroglyphic writing beneath the murals that nobody—including the ancient Maya themselves—had seen since the murals were painted over them 12 centuries ago. And this was done, as a

physician might say, “noninvasively”; there was no need to peel off or otherwise damage the murals to get at the underlying texts.

Since then, Brother Booras and Professor Gene Ware have used the same technology in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. There the challenge was posed by documents recently recovered from the ruins of a Byzantine church situated at the famous site of ancient Petra that had burned down in the early 500s of the Christian era. Carbonized but not quite destroyed, these Greek papyri had proven frustrating to conventional photographic techniques. But they can now be read, thanks to multispectral imaging.

When Brothers Ware and Booras reported on their results at a meeting of papyrologists—specialists in the study and handling of ancient papyri—in Florence, Italy, Professor Marcello Gigante was in the audience. He immediately wanted to know if similar technology could be applied to ancient texts retrieved from the so-called “Villa of the Papyri” in Herculaneum, just outside Naples. Herculaneum was destroyed in A.D. 79 by the same horrific eruption of Mount Vesuvius that annihilated the people of nearby Pompeii. Since the 18th century, hundreds of papyrus pieces have come out of the ruins of the villa, simultaneously preserved and carbonized by the lava and mud in which they were covered. There is, in fact, hope that the main library is still there to be found.

Preliminary work by Brother Booras and Professor David Rolph Seely was spectacularly successful in making the papyrus texts—which seem to represent a wealthy library concentrated on Epicurean philosophy—clear and bright, as if they had just been written. It is even possible, in some cases, to see accidental marks inadvertently made by the scribe as he copied the text.

Accordingly, we have decided to send Steve Booras and his wife over to Naples in the fall to head up what will probably be a six-month project to produce clear digital images of the

ancient papyri of Herculaneum. In doing so, we will restore voices not merely from the dust but from the rock-hardened lava flow of a natural catastrophe that had effectively silenced them since the first century of the Christian era.

The Dead Sea Scrolls project and multispectral imaging represent the two areas in which CPART functioned until last year, when I was appointed the first full-time director of the center. I brought with me a project that had, until then, lacked a real institutional home. It has now found one in FARMS and its Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts.

In my own special field of Islamic studies, I had always strongly felt that more translations were needed of the major, classical texts of Islamic civilization. Barring such translations, one had either to become a specialist—to devote years of study to mastering difficult languages like Arabic and Persian (or Farsi)—or, essentially, to give up on reading most of the primary sources. Unlike classical Greece and Rome, for which multiple versions of Homer, Plato, Virgil, Aristotle, Ovid, and Sophocles are readily and cheaply available even for casual readers, it is very difficult for all but a specialist to gain access to al-Farabi, al-Ghazali, Avicenna, and their peers.

This is especially unfortunate, it seems to me, for a people who have received the divine command to “seek . . . out of the best books words of wisdom” (D&C 88:118). Some of the greatest books ever written—in philosophy, science, medicine, literature, and mathematics—were produced by the great world civilization of Islam. But they have remained largely inaccessible to the West.

So a few years ago, with the support of the BYU administration and vital help from several extremely generous donors, we were able to establish the Islamic Translation Series at Brigham Young University. So far we have published two volumes in the series with strong English translations and the original Arabic texts on facing pages, and we have many more

in the pipeline. In fact, the story with the Islamic Translation Series has been much the same as it has been for CPART in general: Successful completion of one project has drawn more attention, which has in turn brought in more projects. Various metaphors come to mind, such as a snowball rolling downhill and becoming an avalanche. More often, though, as I try to direct or at least to keep on top of what is happening, I think in terms of the old image of trying to take a drink from a fire hose. It is far better than a drought, of course, but a bit difficult to manage nonetheless.

During a recent trip to Tehran, I was promised two new manuscripts for the series. A professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem is proposing joint ventures. A member of the Martin-Buber Institut at Germany's University of Cologne has submitted two translations to us of Arabic medical works by the illustrious medieval rabbi, philosopher, and physician Moses Maimonides. Impelled by these new texts, we are establishing a subseries devoted to Arabic science.

The series is having international impact. I had imagined that it would, but I confess that I did not realize how soon or how much. Copies of our books have been presented to university leaders throughout Israel/Palestine and Jordan. The Grand Shaykh of al-Azhar University in Egypt, one of the oldest and most prestigious of Islamic educational institutions, has a copy, and the ambassador of Egypt recently requested 10 more copies for religious leaders in his country. An Austrian professor, a Latter-day Saint, has made formal presentations of the volumes to several leading libraries in that area of Europe, and I know that the First Presidency has offered volumes as gifts to a visiting Indonesian political leader and to Jehan Sadat, the widow of the late president of Egypt, when she came to Utah. Copies have been given to Muslim religious dignitaries from the People's Republic of China and to guests from Islamic areas of Russia.

Three gala dinners have been held in Washington, D.C., Beverly Hills, and New York City to celebrate the series. President Bateman and a member of the Council of the Twelve spoke at each of them to audiences of Islamic community leaders, academics, and dozens of Muslim consuls and ambassadors. At the event in Washington, D.C., a number of senators and congressmen attended; in New York, the senior members of the staff of the secretary general of the United Nations were present and enthusiastic. More than one said to us, effectively, "No other group treats us with the respect that you show to us." We are now discussing receptions that will be hosted by the embassy of Egypt in Washington and by two or more Islamic countries at the United Nations in New York early next year to mark the publication of additional volumes.

Probably most touching to me, though, was an encounter during my recent trip to Iran. Three female university students, clad from head to toe in coal-black chadors, approached rather tentatively and handed me a handwritten note thanking me, in earnest if quirky English, for the Islamic Translation Series. If I had had any doubts that the series could serve as a small but real bridge between sometimes estranged cultures, that settled it. There are probably not two more alienated countries right now than the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran, yet this small academic project managed to rise above differences of religion and politics.

Now let me say at this point that I do not relate these anecdotes to take pride in them or to boast. I myself am astonished at the reception that CPART's efforts are receiving. And, again, I cannot help but think that there is something—Someone—at work here, something far beyond our meager and sometimes stumbling efforts.

My one concern continues to be: Do we have the resources—human and financial—to handle all of the opportunities that are coming our way?

The potential projects arriving on our doorstep seem to be endless. We have been asked, Can you do the same thing for Maya glyphic texts that you have done for the Dead Sea Scrolls? Answer: Yes, we can. Can you, another asks, do a similar project with Greek, for the New Testament and for related papyri? Yes. And with comparative ease. The WordCruncher software developed here at BYU is a marvelous tool; it is fundamental to the Dead Sea Scrolls database and would be at the heart of any other such project. So we are exploring prospects for working with the Ancient Biblical Manuscripts Center in Claremont, California, on a global New Testament text project, and we are thinking seriously about papyrus collections in Europe and on the monastic peninsula of Mount Athos in Greece. I personally hope that we can someday move forward with a project on the great ancient cuneiform library at Ebla, now that Professor Terry Szink has joined the faculty at BYU.

Thus far we have found the resources arriving on our doorstep when we needed to move forward. And, I admit, I've come almost to expect them. During a visit to Provo, the Egyptian ambassador asked if we could do a database for Coptic, the ancient Christian language of Egypt, like the one we have produced for the Dead Sea Scrolls. Again the answer is yes. And, thanks to a generous donation, we now have Dr. John Gee working on the FARMS staff, a specialist in late Egyptian. So we are very well situated if we choose to move in that direction. Recently, too, we have had indirect contacts with leaders of the Armenian Christian community, and the question has arisen whether we should attempt to do something with Armenian manuscripts. This is an interesting possibility; Armenia was the first country in the world to declare itself Christian, and many ancient documents, their originals long since lost, are now preserved only in Armenian. But, I worried, Armenian is a very much neglected language in the West, and we had literally

nobody who could handle it. But not to worry: Suddenly there appeared an Armenian woman, Irena Abramian, with a graduate degree in engineering and computer science, a specialist in databases who speaks Russian and Armenian natively and who studied classical Armenian at the university. Additionally, she speaks fluent Hebrew. Thus we hired her to help us finish up the scrolls database while we prepare to launch an Armenian undertaking. If we had *designed* someone to assist us in an Armenian project, we could not possibly have improved on her. It is experiences like these, almost too numerous to mention—indeed, almost uncanny—that impel me to see some sort of divine purpose in these things, and to expect further such experiences.

Some while ago, another person, a Syriac Orthodox priest, approached us and asked us whether we could do a database for Syriac. Again the answer was yes. Syriac is the Christian form of Aramaic, the language spoken by the Savior during his mortal ministry. It is also the language of a very rich and very old Christian literature. This priest donated to us the substantial collection of Syriac microfilms that he had been working on for many years. He also put us in contact with Mar Bawai Soro, a bishop of the ancient Assyrian Church of the East, a Nestorian church that has historically been based in Iraq.

Bishop Soro, in his turn, has been of invaluable help as we move forward with an effort to make Syriac literature more accessible to the world. In February I traveled with Dr. E. Jan Wilson, the associate director of CPART, to Beirut and to Rome to look into possibilities of working in those areas. In both places it was Bishop Soro who made crucial contacts for us.

In Beirut we were the guests for a week of Father Samir Khalil at the Jesuit residence there. Father Samir is one of the leading experts in the world on the literature of Eastern Christianity, and he arranged for us to meet with representatives of, or even to visit, major collections at his

university and at monasteries in the area around the city. We had gone with the question, first, whether or not there were Syriac manuscripts available for digitizing, and, second, whether their custodians would allow us access to them. The answers to both questions were resoundingly positive. There are huge manuscript resources in Lebanon, and—warned, perhaps, by the destructions of the recently concluded 15-year Lebanese civil war—the keepers of the collections are, so far as we can determine, eager to have their treasures “backed up” electronically. Indeed, we found great willingness to help. One person there who has proven to be a great friend is a Maronite Catholic college professor of Lebanese extraction who was raised in Salt Lake City.

With all of this in mind, we are sending Dr. Wilson and his wife, Eileen, to Beirut in September for at least a year. There they will prepare digital images of Syriac and Christian Arabic manuscripts and, perhaps, Armenian materials, which exist in Lebanon in great abundance. Lebanon is the entryway to the rich but (in the West) almost forgotten libraries of the ancient Christian Orient—in Syria, Turkey, and Iraq, as well as in Lebanon itself.

The service that this will provide is considerable. I don’t need to tell you that the region we are discussing here has a long history of political instability. That means that access to the documents has often been spotty, and, even more than that, it means that their very existence is in perpetual danger. All it takes is one Molotov cocktail and an entire ancient library can disappear. This is not merely a theoretical possibility: Thousands of manuscripts have vanished in the past few decades alone. And, not infrequently, we don’t even know what we have lost, since they have either been inadequately cataloged or not cataloged at all. Moreover, even under the best of circumstances, it is difficult to get at the manuscripts, since they very often do not exist in centrally accessible places but, rather, are scattered

among mountaintop monasteries whose locations were chosen deliberately for their inaccessibility and whose administrators do not want frequent visitors. By making all or most of the Eastern Christian literary tradition available in computer-searchable form, however, we allow scholars and others to work with the manuscripts in their own offices, without needing to touch the often fragile documents or to pester isolation-seeking monks or to deal with the difficult politics and travel of the region. And we put them all together, creating a virtual library far better than any single collection in the Middle East or beyond.

Permit me here to say something about Christian Arabic literature also. Millions of Arab Christians live in the Near East and have done so since Arabic became the dominant language in the region in the mid-seventh century. They are, in fact, in many cases, the descendants of the earliest converts to Christianity in the region of its birth. Yet the study of Christian Arabic materials is neglected in the West. Why? Because Arabic is thought of as the language of Islam—which, of course, it is. Thus those who study Arabic do so almost without exception in order to gain entrée to the world of Muslims, medieval or modern, whereas students of Christian history almost never think of Arabic as a valuable tool for that field. So the impressive heritage of Christian Arabic falls between two stools, a victim of Western academic specialization.

We intend to take steps to remedy that problem, for hundreds of Christian Arabic manuscripts sit on the same library shelves with Syriac manuscripts, having been written by the same people and used by the same communities. Thus we foresee making these materials available in compact disk form along with the Syriac documents. And a selection of them will be published in searchable, transcribed versions.

After Dr. Wilson and I concluded our February visit to Beirut, we traveled to Rome,

where we met with Bishop Soro, our Assyrian friend. There, thanks to contacts he had established, we were able to meet also with Father Farina, the prefect of the Vatican Apostolic Library, regarding a project to digitize a portion of that library's very fine collection of Syriac materials. It seems that there are no insuperable obstacles to such a project. Neither the prefect nor his ecclesiastical superiors—thanks to a remarkable series of contacts and experiences—appear to have any objection to admitting a group of Mormon scholars to their collection and jointly publishing an electronic selection of their manuscripts with Brigham Young University. (At this point, I would like you to consider for just a second how very noteworthy that is.)

Bishop Soro hopes that any work that we do with the Vatican on a CD will prove to be only the beginning. And, in fact, others at the Vatican have suggested that we move beyond their Syriac collection to their vast wealth of Greek biblical manuscripts. Bishop Soro has now been to BYU on two different occasions and has learned a bit about Latter-day Saint beliefs. During our time with him in Rome, he suggested a theme for a second Vatican-based CD: We could do something, he said, about the deification of human beings. Your people would be interested in that, wouldn't they? He remarked that his encounters with Mormons had resensitized him to the former prominence of that doctrine in his own very old tradition. He has actually delivered a sermon on the topic, which he says was one of the best received sermons he has ever given.

There is, as I hope you can see, no shortage of work to be done. We hope, for instance, to launch a dual-language series of selected Syriac texts in translation on the model of the Islamic Translation Series. The leading authority in the field, Professor Sebastian Brock of Oxford, has already signaled his willingness to help. (One of his former graduate students, by the way, is a British Latter-day Saint, a returned

missionary, whom we also hope to involve in the effort.)

A dual-language series in Christian Arabic literature is also in our plans for the near future. Father Sidney Griffith, of Catholic University, the foremost name in the field in North America, has enthusiastically offered his services.

Each of these projects would benefit scholars, of course. But the dispersed communities of Eastern Christianity—many of them now refugees in the West and losing their languages—would gain from having their literary heritage easily accessible in both the original language and in translation. Frankly, I can think of few projects that are so likely to win friends for Brigham Young University and the Latter-day Saints among other Christians and that so perfectly fit the exhortation to our university community to “go forth to serve.”

Can we do it? We have the technical ability. In that regard, we have no current rivals. I am utterly convinced that if the Lord wants us to do it, we will. The supporting donors, the necessary contacts, and the competent workers will arrive when needed. Thus far, they always have. This is bigger than we are.

Why BYU? Why FARMS and CPART? Why can we do these things where others have failed to do them, or even where others have tried and failed? Apart from the divine impetus and help that I firmly believe has grounded our efforts thus far, there is something unique about our community that helps us. These are matters of religious import for us and not merely of scholarly interest. These are certainly far more than just ways to make a career mark. We really do believe in the coming forth of ancient documents in the latter days. It is an element of our faith. And, in our community, something of the disadvantage of academic specialization is overcome by the fact that we are, all of us, religiously interested in ancient documents. Thus our specialists in antiquity can draw on the enthusiastic, devoted, and

indispensable help of engineers and computer scientists and technologists who share their interest and commitment. I don't know of many other places where that would be true, and I am deeply grateful for it.

I return, in closing, to the prophecies of the coming forth of ancient texts "out of the dust." With other believing Latter-day Saints, I have always known that this would happen. What I had never realized is that there is now a very strong likelihood that those documents will come forth through Brigham Young University. We are at the absolute center of the process. These documents are coming through Utah.

And, in the process, these projects and these contacts with people we could never have hoped to meet and regions we could not have dreamed of affecting only a short while ago are helping to bring the Church "out of obscurity"—as was prophesied would happen (see D&C 1:30).

Brothers and sisters, I hope you can sense some of the momentousness of this, at least as I see it, and I hope I have been able to convey at least a portion of my own excitement and conviction. I bear you my testimony that the Church is true, that the gospel has been restored, and that the Lord is active in his work, in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.