

The Book of Mormon is Yet a Sealed Record

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Introduction

In 1976, Elder Neal A. Maxwell made an interesting prediction: "*There will be a convergence of discoveries (never enough, mind you, to remove the need for faith) to make plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along.*" It was at about this time that a young attorney practicing in Southern California recognized a significant deficiency in the field of Book of Mormon research. This attorney, John W. Welch, had himself been a notable contributor to that research. A decade previous, while a young missionary in Germany, he had discovered the use in the Book of Mormon of an ancient literary structure called *chiasmus*. The deficiency he noted this decade later was related to the coordination and visibility of Book of Mormon research. There were, he concluded, many dedicated church members who were making insightful contributions to our understanding of this sacred book; but, the visibility of this work was often limited to family and friends. No organization existed to gather and publish these insights. No organization existed to serve as a sounding board to validate their worth nor to facilitate the scholarly interaction so necessary to meaningful and serious investigation. Thus, brother Welch decided that he would establish such an organization. He gave it the prestigious and almost prophetic name of FARMS: The Foundation for Ancient Research and Book of Mormon Studies. Little could he have imagined that his little organization would one day become a principal player not only in Book of Mormon research but in fields of ancient studies as diversified as the Dead Sea Scrolls and the deteriorating Mayan murals on the walls of the ruins of Bonampak.

When, in 1980, John Welch (better known as Jack) was invited to join the BYU law faculty, BYU graciously provided his fledgling organization with some office space on campus. This began a relationship which was destined to flourish over the subsequent years. By October of 1997, when President Gordon B. Hinckley invited FARMS to become part of the BYU family, more than 100 BYU professors had participated in some way in the work of FARMS. Today, the quality and significance of FARMS research and publications are universally recognized by serious and faithful Latter-day Saint students of the Book of Mormon. Certainly, there has been "*a convergence of discoveries*" that has contributed much to the making "*plain and plausible what the modern prophets have been saying all along.*" Perhaps, of even greater significance, these discoveries have shed new light on the *people of this book* and the unique and unappreciated artistry of their record. These discoveries have contributed not only to our respect for this sacred record but have opened up new ways of reading and appreciating the message handed down to us by these ancient prophets.

"God Is Not Pleased with our Neglect of the Book of Mormon"

In October of 1988, Jack Welch gave a devotional address to the BYU student body which he titled, "Lessons We Have Yet to Learn from the Book of Mormon." In that address he reminded these students of the Lord's words to his young church regarding their neglect of the Book of Mormon:

"The Lord has been after his Saints for a long time to do more with the Book of Mormon. As early as 1832, he chastised the members of the Church in Kirtland, Ohio, for neglecting the Book of Mormon, saying that "the children of Zion, even all . . . shall remain under condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon" (D&C 84:56-57). As recently as 1984, President Benson reissued this same stern admonition. In October conference that year, he said, "As I participated in the Mexico City Temple dedication, I received the distinct impression that God is not pleased with our neglect of the Book of Mormon" ("A New Witness for Christ," *Ensign*, November 1984, p.6). He made it very clear that we are still languishing under that same condemnation of 150 years ago. Despite all we have done in the past, we still have miles to go to understand and obey that which we have been given."⁽¹⁾

Yes, with all that has been accomplished in expanding our comprehension of the Book of Mormon, we still have miles to go. Brother Welch stressed to these students the necessity of a life long commitment if they would desire to grasp the depths of this book. He observed that because the Book of Mormon "is so full and rich, many of its dimensions remain sealed to all who do not make its study a matter of lifetime pursuit. . . . In its fullness, we have hardly scratched the surface. There are many lessons, of all kinds, that we have yet to learn from its pages."

Jack Welch and FARMS are engaged primarily in an intellectual examination of the Book of Mormon. Many see their work as only a search for Book of Mormon evidences and may even dismiss such efforts as unnecessary. "The Book of Mormon is to be accepted on faith," they declare. Of course they're right. B. H. Roberts gives us an important perspective:

"The power of the Holy Ghost . . . must ever be the chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon. All other evidence is secondary. . . . No arrangement of evidence, however skillfully ordered; no argument, however adroitly made, can ever take its place."

Elder Roberts then teaches us that this primacy of a spiritual witness does not diminish the value, even the necessity, of intellectual evidence as a tool in accomplishing the Lord's work: "Evidence and argument . . . in support of truth, like secondary causes in natural phenomena, may be of first rate importance, and mighty factors in the achievement of God's purposes." Then he makes this most profound observation regarding the need for us to build our faith on a sound intellectual foundation:

"To be known, the truth must be stated and the clearer and more complete the statement is, the better opportunity will the Holy Spirit have for testifying to the souls of men that the work is true."

Elder Maxwell has often echoed this message of Elder Roberts. Using the words of Austin Farrar, Elder Maxwell clearly states the place of evidence in the world of faith:

"Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows that ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."

The Book of Mormon Remains Sealed by Many Seals

It is this "climate in which belief may flourish" that has attracted many to the work of FARMS. Powerful arguments supporting the validity of the Book of Mormon have emerged from the research sponsored or supported by FARMS. Yet, of greater value may be their contribution to our understanding of the message of the Book of Mormon and particularly the organization and presentation of that message. In 1988 Jack Welch said that much of the Book of Mormon yet remained sealed to most students. He went on to describe the nature of many of these seals:

"It is sealed to us by our unfaithfulness and lack of prayer. It is sealed to us by our inattention to detail and background information. It is sealed to us in part by its nature because it is an abridgment. It is sealed further by our failure to listen to the Brethren and to apply the teachings of the Book of Mormon to ourselves daily. It is sealed when we take its divine origins and simple elegance lightly. It is sealed when we fail to see the people of the book as they saw themselves. It is sealed when we don't blank out *our* eyes and when we don't stop hearing what *we* want to hear. We must sit back and let the Book of Mormon speak to us, instead of us to it."

These are interesting and challenging words: "Sealed by our inattention to detail;" "Sealed when we take its divine origins and simple elegance lightly;" "Sealed when we fail to see the people of the book as they saw themselves." And this last may seem to many to be particularly strange, even contradictory: the book is "sealed when we don't *blank out our eyes* and when we don't *stop hearing what we want to hear.*" We sometimes are critical of the biblical interpretations of our friends of other religious persuasions. We may feel that they have sometimes decided to accept a doctrine, then gone to the Bible to find its support. Isn't this some of what Brother Welch is suggesting that Latter-day Saints sometimes do with even the Book of Mormon? Rather than deeply studying its meaning, do we sometimes use it as little more than a source of good quotes? Since we've read it before, we may believe we already know what it says. As we reread the same words each year, as counseled by prophets, do we really take the time to ponder the full meaning of those words? Have we learned to:

- Recognize the literary structures so painstakingly employed by these prophet authors to organize, enhance, and clarify the meaning of their message?
- Slow read the Book of Mormon, with an understanding of both the meanings of words and context in which principles and doctrines are taught?
- Recognize the big picture, the way the organization and structure of whole chapters has been carefully crafted so as to enhance and further emphasize the meaning of the underlying text?
- Recognize in detailed recounting of conversion experiences the manner in which the Lord would have us teach His plan of life and salvation?

- Appreciate the value and significance of all those war chapters?
- Recognize the *gospel formula*?
- Interpret the types and shadows of last day's history?

In addition to Book of Mormon evidence, FARMS research has illuminated these and many other topics relating to our understanding of the Book of Mormon message. We have been admonished by the Lord to seek "*out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study and also by faith*" (D&C 88:118). In the best books we find the accumulated wisdom of our culture. In the best books about the Book of Mormon we can find the accumulated wisdom of the great minds of faithful servants of our Father in Heaven who share with us the results of their *faith filled* study. Jack Welch recognized that as scholars worked together and shared their insights, the resulting synergy could bring to that research a quality and depth which would exceed the sum of its parts. Similarly, our individual study can be greatly enhanced as we tap into the scholarly research now available to all Book of Mormon students through FARMS publications and symposiums.

Now, I'm here using "FARMS" as a representative or symbol of all quality Book of Mormon scholarship. With the incorporation of FARMS into the BYU family, I see it as the principle spokesman for serious BYU Book of Mormon research. (The publication, *BYU Studies*, is currently an exception to this broad characterization, but the editor of *BYU Studies* is now Jack Welch, and the focus appears more and more to be history and practice rather than Book of Mormon research.) President Hinckley has highlighted the necessity of a continual emphasis on the intellectual realm of our lives: "*There is incumbent upon each of us . . . the responsibility to observe the commandment to study and to learn. . . . None of us can assume that we have learned enough.*" The scriptures, particularly the Book of Mormon, should be a primary focus of that study. The insights coming from FARMS can help us focus that study — even to learn what to study and how to study.

The Relationship Between *Faith* and *Study*

Jack Welch has suggested some analogies to illustrate the relationship between *faith* and *study*. He begins with the *bicycle-built-for-two metaphor*. In this metaphor,

"The relationship between reason and revelation is likened to two riders on a tandem bicycle. When both riders pedal together, the bicycle (the search for truth) moves ahead more rapidly. Each rider must work, or the other must bear a heavy and perhaps exhausting burden; but only one (that is faith) can steer and determine where the bicycle will go, although the other (reason) can do some backseat driving. . . .

"To turn to another metaphor, the correlation of faith and reason works like our two eyes (representing mind and spirit); working together they give depth to our sight, and with the aid of a pair of binoculars (representing scholarship and revelation), we see close up and in bold relief many marvelous things. For this process to work, however, both eyes must be healthy and both lenses in the binoculars must be clean and in focus.

"I also like to think of faith and reason as two arms working together to play a violin. One hand fingers the strings and the other draws the bow. When these two distinct functions are

brought together with skill and purpose, they produce expressions that ontologically transcend the physics of either part individually. According to this view, for an LDS scholar to proceed on either spirit or intellect alone is like trying to play a violin with only one arm."⁽²⁾

Certainly, we are all aware of the necessity of some study as a prerequisite to faith. Moroni's famous exhortation to "ask God" concerning the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon was couched in a context of having first read and pondered. Paul declared: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God." Today, we would add *reading* to Paul's formula, but the sense of his message is not altered: *some knowledge is a necessary prerequisite to faith!* I believe that what Jack Welch is suggesting in his metaphors is that faith directed study is also a necessary prerequisite to the deepening of that faith. President Hinckley was undoubtedly speaking of this kind of study when he gave this prerequisite to saving faith : "*It will take study of the word of God. It will take prayer and anxious seeking of the source of all truth.*"

If I Study the Scriptures, Isn't That Enough?

Prayer coupled with "anxious seeking." This is the path to faith and understanding. Yet, the quality of that learning will remain limited and circumscribed by the quality of that which we study. Of course there can be nothing of higher quality for this study than the scriptures themselves. As we prayerfully and anxiously pursue our studies of the sacred word all that the Lord would have us know will be revealed — right? I am constantly impressed with the economy of the Lord as he dispenses truth to man. Usually, there are few who share the same "aha" experience. Once a truth is revealed to a man we generally must go to that source for our understanding.

We fully understand, when speaking of that truth given to prophets, that this is the only source. We understand the fallacy of the claim, "I don't need a prophet — the Lord will reveal to me all I need to know." Yet, some seem to feel they can go on their own with respect to that understanding which is *revealed* to the scholar. Yes, I said revealed! You don't really believe (do you?) that young Elder Welch discovered Chiasmus on his own? He wasn't a prophet, yet new truth *for the whole church* was revealed to him. Similarly, truth is revealed to the scientist, the musician, and the philosopher, as they obey the universal laws of study and dedication that are the prerequisites of inspired insight. I'm certain that God also directs, in a like way, the efforts of his dedicated saints, even if they qualify as scholars, as they apply themselves to the faithful study of His word. I'm not suggesting the revelation of new principles or practices to any but prophets. Rather, I'm talking about expanded understandings. Just as the discovery of chiasmus has expanded our comprehension of the manner, power, and beauty, of the ancient presentation of gospel principles, so other discoveries by experts and amateurs have and will continue to expand our appreciation and comprehension of the Book of Mormon. How foolish is the man who says, "I don't need the scholar — I can figure it all out myself." How many of us on our own would:

- Recognize the bad grammar of the Book of Mormon as good Hebrew?
- Appreciate the difference between a *thief* and a *robber* as these terms were used anciently?

- Be able to identify the rich chiasmic structures found throughout the Book of Mormon?
- Recognize the relationship between King Benjamin's discourse and ancient coronation ceremonies?
- Detect the Jaredite influence on Nephite culture?
- Recognize the significance of the structure and symbolism of apocalyptic literature to our understanding of the Book of Mormon?

These are just some of the contributions of recent scholarly insight.

The Volume of Book of Mormon Research is Overwhelming

Now, if you're convinced of the value of FARMS research in your study of the Book of Mormon, you'll want to know how to obtain this wonderful material so that you might begin to absorb it. The problem is that trying to keep up with FARMS research is very similar to trying to drink out of a fire hose. Their volume of publications is staggering. There is, however, a good place to start: get a membership in FARMS and receive their monthly newsletter.⁽³⁾ Also included with this membership is a subscription to the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. This is a marvelous magazine style publication, with two colorful issues per year.

But, as explained above, FARMS is not the only source of outstanding Book of Mormon scholarship. BYU Symposiums, the work of BYU professors, BYU Studies, Ensign articles, publications by General Authorities: all important sources of inspirational and scholarly insights, helping to unlock the seals of this ancient record. Again, the volume of quality and significant Book of Mormon scholarly commentaries is overwhelming. Added to all of these published sources is the BYUTV Book of Mormon Discussions. Here, four BYU professors spend 30 minutes in a session, discussing the significant messages and meaning of a selected number of Book of Mormon chapters.

The principle objective of this Cometzarahemla.org is to provide the average Book of Mormon student with an introduction to the contributions of contemporary Book of Mormon scholarship. It is hoped that the presentations included on this site will make the insights flowing from this research more accessible to the average Book of Mormon student. These presentations are drawn principally from FARMS and BYU publications. They are organized so as to provide, following introductory discussions of language and translation, a generally chronological exposition of these insights. What is presented here is little more than an introduction to each topic — a condensed version of the more detailed presentations as given in the references. At the same time, drawing from multiple sources as these articles do, there are times when the view presented here might be more complete than that contained in any individual source publication. Also, what is presented is mainly the conclusions. Justification and support, together with more detailed discussion, example, and analysis will generally be found in the references.

Sooner or Later the Book of Mormon will be Unsealed

In 1988 Jack Welch claimed that for most of us much of the Book of Mormon was yet a sealed book. He identified many seals which must be unlocked before we will fully appreciate and understand the treasure we have in the Book of Mormon. How are we doing as we approach the new millennium? Have we got those seals unlocked? Brother Welch promised those faithful students, "Sooner or later the Book of Mormon will be unsealed in your life." He reminded his audience that Isaiah, speaking of the last-days, prophesied that "in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book, and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness" (Isaiah 29:18). And he pointed specifically to Isaiah's depiction (Isaiah 29:24) of those who had been blind and deaf as becoming seekers of understanding and students of doctrine. As we near this next millennium we must be very close to Isaiah's *last-days*. How are we doing? Are we yet among Isaiah's blind and deaf, or have we become true seekers of understanding, and dedicated students of doctrine? Are we still unaware of the seals? Or, are we finding the keys which will unlock the fullness of the Book of Mormon in our lives?

Jack Welch concluded his 1988 address to those BYU students with this sobering warning:

"At the final judgment we will also see these words again. The books of life will be unsealed, and all things shall be made manifest, whether they be good or whether they be evil. The words of the Book of Mormon will figure prominently on that day, for they are the words by which you and I will be judged. As God has spoken it, these words will stand as a bright testimony at the judgment (Mosiah 3:23-24, Moroni 10:27). We hope that day will not be the first time the Book of Mormon is truly unsealed and laid opened before us."

References:

1. This talk is included in the 1987-88 issue of *Brigham Young University Speeches*. It is also available from FARMS in both video and audio format. All quotations and most concepts presented in this article are from either this talk or from: John W. Welch, "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," included in *Nurturing Faith Through the Book of Mormon*, the proceedings of the 24th annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium, 1995.
2. Welch, "The Power of Evidence in the Nurturing of Faith," pp. 151 & 160.
3. Call 1-800-327-6715, visit the FARMS website at <http://farms.byu.edu>, or write: Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, Utah 84602-7113. Members receive a monthly issue of the FARMS *Insights* newsletter, a subscription to the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (two issues per year), a yearly catalog of FARMS publications, notification of recent and planned FARMS publications, and discount rates on these and others publications of interest to the LDS student of the scriptures.