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The New World Promised Land’s Economic Base

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A Call for Emendations
from Royal Skousen, editor of the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project

As I have been working on the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project, people have occasionally written or talked to me about passages in the Book of Mormon that seem strange or difficult. A good many have made specific suggestions about emendations (or revisions to the text). Surprisingly, a large percentage of these have ended up being correct or have led me to come up with an appropriate emendation.

Most of these suggestions have also been worthy of treatment in volume 4 of the critical text (which will deal with the analysis of textual variants in the Book of Mormon). In some cases, the suggested emendations will be discussed even if it turns out that the evidence doesn’t support making a change.

You may have noticed in the recent FARMS publication Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project that I gave credit in my last article (“The Systematic Text of the Book of Mormon”) for six different emendations. I have always felt that credit should be given for all suggestions that will be discussed in the critical text.

Thus far these suggestions have come from (1) ordinary readers of the Book of Mormon, (2) students in my textual criticism class at Brigham Young University, or (3) student researchers who have worked for me on this project. The main purpose of this letter is to explicitly extend an invitation to all interested readers of the Book of Mormon to send me any examples they might have of possible textual emendations or difficulties in the text that need to be considered.

Volume 4 of the critical text will be approximately 2,000 pages long and will appear in four separately bound parts. The first part, now in preparation, will cover the small plates of Nephi (from 1 Nephi through Omni), plus the Words of Mormon, and will appear sometime next year. My plan is to publish one part per year. So this means that suggestions for the text need to come in soon, especially those that deal with the first part of the text.

Please feel free to contact me directly.

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A majority of people in the modern world are absorbed in performing their daily work, conceived in terms of jobs, money, food, and other things practical and economic. Would it have been different for the Nephites or Lamanites? Not really. The center of their daily concerns, too, was “making a living.” But what that meant differed greatly from what we mean by the expression.

We read that, among the Nephites, “the men [did] till the ground, and raise all manner of grain and . . . fruit.” Meanwhile, the women did “spin, and toil, and . . . work all manner of . . . cloth of every kind.” By dint of such labor, the Nephites “did prosper in the land” (Mosiah 10:4, 5).

In Book of Mormon times, an agrarian life was crucial to a satisfactory society. When grain was insufficient, famine prevailed (see Alma 3:2; 4:2; Helaman 11:5–6; 3 Nephi 4:3, 6). Most people farmed. Yet nothing in the book suggests that the people prepared or cultivated the land using anything other than their own hands. Although “flocks and herds” were kept, it seems that they were used mainly for food (see, for example, 3 Nephi 3:22; 4:4).

The farmers had to produce in order to feed and clothe their families as well as the “thousands . . . , yea, and tens of thousands, who [did] sit in idleness” (Alma 60:22). The latter group no doubt consisted of
great worth of souls in mind (D&C 18:10), he said. Joseph learned the true extent of the Savior’s personal suffering upon receiving the revelation in D&C 19—the “final, indispensable lesson before he organized the church and the most significant lesson of the gospel,” Griffith said. He went on to note that lawyers, whose ideal role is to build communities based on the rule of law, are often “at the forefront of the push for riches,” which runs counter to the admonition in Jacob 2:18–19 and to the spirit of Moses 7:18 if that pursuit is not undertaken with the intent to bless others. Such purity of motive should be the mainspring of discipleship, he said.

Herculaneum Papyri Project: Preliminary Findings

Dr. Gianluca Del Mastro, a professor of philosophy at the University of Naples and a visiting professor in BYU’s classics department, reviewed progress on interpreting and electronically preserving the Herculaneum papyri using multispectral imaging techniques developed at BYU. Calling the MSI images a revolution in reading the carbonized papyri, he showed examples of how he has been able to discern scroll text that was previously unreadable. For example, the images have made it possible to read text in depressions of wrinkled fragments and to distinguish congealed layers of papyrus from one another and ink strokes from fibers. The images have also enabled scholars to identify individual scribes. One intriguing find was a reference to a previously unknown tragedy by Euripides. In March, Del Mastro matched two fragments from Philodemus’s “On Poems.” He said that the fragile papyri, which date from 1000 B.C.E., have deteriorated 10 percent in the past seven years but now are electronically preserved. Del Mastro concluded by noting the discovery in 2000 of seven papyri (15 fragments) from two houses in Herculaneum, one of which (Casa de Bicentenario) appears to have housed the first Christian community in the city. #—reported by Larry Morris and Mike Parker

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Church, the Race Issue, and Misplaced Apologetics”; D. Jeffrey Meldrum, associate professor of anatomy and anthropology, Idaho State University, on “The Children of Lehi: DNA and the Book of Mormon”; and Michael D. Rhodes, associate research professor of ancient scripture, BYU, on “The Book of Abraham: Dealing with the Critics.” The papers by Roper and Tvedtnes will appear in the forthcoming issue of the FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 2). #—reported by Larry Morris and Mike Parker

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complexity, with proper recognition of the value of religious belief. Faith in God offers meaning and purpose to people around the world, especially to those who suffer from poverty or illness. Any fair-minded discussion of religion ought to acknowledge this, he said.

Other speakers and topics at the conference included the following: Roger R. Keller, professor of church history and doctrine, BYU, on “The Grace of Apologetics”; Armand L. Mauss, emeritus professor of sociology, Washington State University, on “The Priests, record keepers, architects, merchants, artists, and judges, who all seemed idle compared with the hardworking farmers who were the ideal (exemplified by King Benjamin, who “labored with [his] own hands,” Mosiah 2:14). Then there were the elite at the pinnacle of social, political, and economic power who demanded support. For example, King Noah taxed his Zeniffite subjects to provide sustenance for the elite (see Mosiah 11:3–8; also Mosiah 7:22; Alma 60:21–22; 3 Nephi 6:10–12). But the economic system also supported a variety of respected craft workers, such as “curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it” (Helaman 6:11).

An economic surplus stimulated trade, and it made at least some people rich (see Mosiah 24:7; Helaman 3:10; 6:7–8). Furthermore, certain regions were more productive than others: central Zarahemla had to supply the Nephite army in the southwest quarter continued on page 8
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of the land, for instance (see Alma 57:6; 58:4, 7), and the land of Melek was a food exporter (see Alma 62:29).

While hunting may have been an idealized traditional activity among the Lamanites, at least according to their biased Nephite neighbors (as in Enos 1:20), the high population level that the Lamanites reached, reflected in the size of their armies, cannot be accounted for except on the basis of settled agrarian living. Most Lamanite commoners must have been farmers too.

With all of this daily labor, ancient life did not provide “jobs,” designated economic roles that let men predictably go to work to earn a living. We can be sure that 95 percent of the Nephites and Lamanites, like people in the rest of the ancient world, simply toiled daily at the hard work in front of them without the complex structure of specialized “jobs” or “careers” that organizes the lives of many of us today. —adapted from John L. Sorenson, Mormon’s Map (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 88–89

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS


The FARMS Review (vol. 15, no. 2), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, features reviews and articles on DNA issues, the Mountain Meadows massacre, and secret combinations, as well as responses to a so-called insider’s view of Mormon origins. Available December 2003.

Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, edited by John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann Seely, will help readers to imagine what Jerusalem was like around 600 B.C. Subjects include culture, family life, agriculture, politics, religious practices, inscriptions, law, and international relations. Available early in 2004.

Evidences and Witnesses of the Book of Mormon, by Daniel C. Peterson, provides an intriguing look at the evidences that support the Book of Mormon as an ancient text. It also looks at the lives and testimonies of those who were witnesses to the coming forth of the “keystone of our religion.” Copublished with Covenant Communications on two cassettes or CDs.

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