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Abstract Review of *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"* (1998), edited by John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks.

John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom."* Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998. xv + 661 pp., with appendix, bibliography, and scripture and subject indexes. \$24.95.

Reviewed by Keith H. Lane

Turning toward the Wisdom of King Benjamin

King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom" is a very important work, and students of the Book of Mormon will want to have it on their shelves and use it. Like a previous FARMS volume (*The Allegory of the Olive Tree*, copublished with Deseret Book), this book, a concerted effort by scholars, is devoted to a particular section of scripture—a smaller section even than those publications that have dealt with particular books of the Book of Mormon or the Gospels. I find this approach valuable in its effort to get us to read more closely and in greater detail than we often do. My review of this book could be summarized in two sentences: This is a good work. More work can and should be done.

This large volume is the result of a symposium presented in 1996, though clearly some of the articles are expanded and given more detail than is possible in a symposium. This book is intended primarily for the scholar or careful reader. Many of the articles, but particularly the textual commentary and notes, are not light reading and require the patience of close study. This is not to say that the material is cumbersome, but merely that this is not a book one can breeze through with only slight attention. King Benjamin's speech deserves no less.

The first article is Elder Neal A. Maxwell's "King Benjamin's Sermon: A Manual for Discipleship," wherein he uses Benjamin's speech to reflect on important aspects of being Christ's disciples and to urge us toward greater discipleship. Speaking about King Benjamin's speech, and reflecting on its importance and depth, Elder Maxwell comments:

What King Benjamin said with such clarity and humility about becoming more saintly and childlike, in my opinion, has a fulness and specificity unrivaled in all of scripture. In my opinion, if King Benjamin had uttered only the words in Mosiah 3:19, the verse would still rank among the great gems in all our scriptures. (p. 16)

Latter-day Saints will be edified as they read and consider Elder Maxwell's observations on this speech.

Other contributors to the volume include Hugh W. Nibley, John W. Welch, Stephen D. Ricks, M. Catherine Thomas, Bruce A. Van Orden, Terrence L. Szink, and Daryl R. Hague. Of the eleven articles following Elder Maxwell's, five are written by Welch, who is also coauthor of two other articles, one with Hague and one with Szink. To deal with each article would be too time-consuming for this review, so the best thing I can do is give a sense for what is in the book and urge readers to examine it for themselves.

Hugh Nibley's article, entitled "Assembly and Atonement," is characteristically interesting and challenging. Those who know Nibley's work well will note some return to and amplification of material he has previously written, though it is gathered here in a different way. Among other things, Nibley brings out the unifying power of the at-one-ment, not only to make us one with God, but also with each other. "In the eternal order of things, we are all assembled and bound together" either in an inevitable downward spiral or in covenantal redemption from such a fall—a redemptive condition made possible only by "the intervention of God himself who 'possesses all power'" (p. 143) and who gives more than is humanly possible. Nibley shows how this unifying power is clearly manifest in Benjamin's speech and the overwhelming impact it has on the people who hear it.

John Welch's article, "Benjamin's Speech: A Masterful Oration," reviews the speech in light of criteria for great orations. Welch argues convincingly that in the world of noteworthy sermons, Benjamin's speech triumphs, hands down. But it is at a place like this that I think more work can be done. This is not a criticism of Welch's article, but rather an observation and a challenge to Latter-day Saint scholars. For instance, if Benjamin's speech is regarded as great oratory, more might be written on its

rhetorical aspects, on how it seeks to persuade, and the means it does (and does not) use to seek such persuasion. Much of Benjamin's speech derives its power from the words given to him by the angel. How does one measure the oratorical impact of angelic words? Welch makes interesting and helpful insights that are valuable in themselves but that also open up other fields to be plowed.

Stephen Ricks's article, "Kingship, Coronation, and Covenant in Mosiah 1-6," is another piece of solid scholarship that uses Near Eastern studies to illuminate both the context and content of Benjamin's speech. The section "From Dust to Exaltation" was for me one of the most enlightening in the whole book. Ricks cites scholarship that points to common motifs of "dust, kingship, covenant, enthronement, and resurrection" (p. 261) that run intertwined through ancient Israelite thought and demonstrates how such motifs run through Benjamin's speech as well. For instance, the careful reader can't help but notice the references to dust and particularly how the people of Benjamin are brought to see themselves in their own nothingness, their being less than the dust. Adding light to this, Ricks explains:

Texts that speak of being in the dust can refer to situations in which the covenant relationship between Jehovah and the king or his people has been broken. . . . In the case of Benjamin's people, they first viewed themselves as "even less than the dust of the earth" (Mosiah 4:2), but through the force and effect of their covenant they became spiritually begotten, born, free, and positioned on the right hand of God (see Mosiah 5:7-10). It was the covenant that raised them from the dust, both ceremonially and spiritually. (p. 262)

Such an insight gives me a better understanding of being "less than the dust of the earth" and of the lifting power of covenants; it also enriches my reading of this passage and similar concepts in other places in the scriptures. That is to say, Ricks's article not only sheds immediate light on the passage at hand, but assists and enlivens reading elsewhere.

M. Catherine Thomas's article, "Benjamin and the Mysteries of God," speaks of a guide by which God reveals his mysteries ("spiritual realities that can be known and understood only by

revelation," p. 278) to those who follow the priesthood and covenantal pattern to lead lives of righteousness. Benjamin enjoins his people to open their ears, hearts, and minds in order that "the mysteries of God be unfolded to them" (Mosiah 2:9). Thomas shows that the people truly open themselves to these mysteries with Benjamin's help and with the astounding help of an angel. The mysteries are revealed to them—and how! They receive both a real view of their fallen state and a real view of the love of God for them, as manifest in Christ's atonement. The effect on the people is tremendous. But, having said that, Thomas explains what is crucial for Latter-day Saints to understand:

What is impressive here is that Benjamin's people were already commandment keepers. It is not a mighty change from evil to goodness that they have undergone, like Alma or Paul, but a profound transformation from basic goodness to something that exceeded their ability even to describe. (p. 290)

Among other things, this experience is a partaking of the mysteries of godliness, which have little to do with all the intricate, perplexing theological questions we spin and everything to do with covenants, rebirth, joy, sanctification, and a fulness of God's presence. Thomas helps us see our way to the mysteries more clearly.

At the end of the book is the important appendix: "Complete Text of Benjamin's Speech with Notes and Comments." This I consider to be the most important section of the book, at least in terms of helping readers look much more closely at the text. The commentary is generally good, though in a few places uneven. Some verses and concepts get thorough treatment, sometimes using scholarship in Near Eastern studies to illuminate the context or meaning, sometimes citing a General Authority's comments or a scholar's insight on a passage or phrase. Some words or phrases are followed by a listing of other places in the scriptures where they recur. At other times, passages receive extended comments, but tend to leave even some of the current scholarship untouched. For instance, Mosiah 4:13–30 is dealt with at length under the title "Stipulations of the Covenant." In this section the material covered is treated as our part of the covenant—the things we must do. My criticism here is that this reading of the passage tends to

ignore a reading such as that given in James Faulconer's "How to Study the Book of Mormon"—a FARMS publication. Faulconer argues that the "And" that starts verse thirteen is a link forming a continuation of the fruits that result from remembering our own nothingness and the greatness of God. While no one would dispute that teaching children to live peaceably and not to quarrel, and remembering our deep obligation to help those in need, are things we should seek to do, these may be not so much stipulations of the covenant but the inevitable fruits of taking that covenant to heart and experiencing the transforming power of the atonement. This may be one instance in which we can see that grace and works commingle. We taste the goodness of God's love, and it leads to certain results. When read this way, what is mentioned in this passage is not primarily a list of what one must do (stipulations) but a description of what one will do—what results will flow—because of the influence of the Lord's grace and power given through the covenant. Now, while the reading I have just given this passage is not the only possible one, it is in such places where one can see the need for continuing discussion and debate.

I began this review by claiming that this is a good book and that more work can and should be done. No one would agree more with the last portion of that statement than those who have compiled this volume. *King Benjamin's Speech: "That Ye May Learn Wisdom"* will indeed help readers study this address in a new light and from fresh perspectives, but (to paraphrase the editors' introduction) it will be a long time before Latter-day Saint scholars ever wear out the depth and import of this humbly given speech.