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PRESSING FORWARD: A REAL FEAST

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General Comments

In 1984 FARMS issued the first of its "Reports on Research in Progress." Since then, brief articles have appeared regularly as FARMS Updates. In 1992 the articles of the first decade were collected and published in one volume entitled Reexploring the Book of Mormon. This second volume, Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon, continues in the same vein with Updates from 1992 through 1999 accompanied by similar research articles that were published during this same period in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies.

Pressing Forward contains sixty-nine Updates in 298 pages; on average, each item is just over 4 pages long, including notes. These Updates, then, are not lengthy in-depth articles but rather bite-sized, easy-to-read reports of current research on the Book of Mormon. However, it should not be thought that their brevity is indicative of a lack of either scholarship or skillful research on the part of the authors. Many Updates arise out of cooperative research, and they are not released until they are carefully scrutinized by referees, thus ensuring that top-quality research is published. Contributors include many

whose names will be familiar to readers of Book of Mormon research: John Gee, William J. Hamblin, Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, John L. Sorenson, John A. Tvedtnes, and John W. Welch, to name just a few. With authors such as these, we are guaranteed quality research. It is indeed gratifying for members of the church to have access to this level of research carried out in defense of the Book of Mormon and to know that scholars of this caliber are able to answer objections and criticisms.

*Pressing Forward* contains an index of passages and a subject index arranged alphabetically. Most of the articles in the book are sequenced in correlation with the Book of Mormon passages to which they refer, beginning with an article entitled “Four Suggestions on the Origin of the Name Nephi” to “The ‘Decapitation’ of Shiz” as found in the book of Ether. (The final eight articles are historical studies with references to the Doctrine and Covenants or Joseph Smith’s history.) This sequencing of *Pressing Forward* is especially useful when the book is read in parallel with the Book of Mormon.

Although the book contains subject and scripture indexes, an additional index categorizing the Updates into the different areas of research might have been a useful supplement for those with specific research interests. For example, items that deal with literary comment could be indexed together for easy reference. This, however, is a minor criticism since the book is easy to navigate. The topics of each article appear in the recto headers and the book of scripture on which the article is based in the verso headers. Each Update, as one would expect, contains several useful notes for the reader who is interested in pursuing any particular topic.

**Discussion of the Articles**

I will not comment on every article in *Pressing Forward*. I will, however, look at a representative selection of the different topics discussed and the approaches used by the authors. One common and worthwhile approach that many of the Updates take is to show that names of people and places as well as other terminologies found in
the Book of Mormon are consistent with those of the ancient world. In the first article, Gee vindicates the name of Nephi by giving four suggestions of its origin, confidently concluding that Nephi is an attested Egyptian name.

In the second article, Jeffrey R. Chadwick gives the name Sariah similar treatment to that previously given the name Alma. Since the name Sariah does not appear in the Bible as a female personal name, the skeptic might suggest that Joseph Smith invented it. Chadwick’s article assures us that Sariah is a female Hebrew name, justified by a single reference to a “Sariah daughter of Hoshea” in an Aramaic papyrus.

The phrase a visionary man, as found in 1 Nephi, is not present in the King James Version of the Bible. However, by drawing on its Hebraic roots, Tvedtnes successfully demonstrates that it is nonetheless authentic. Tvedtnes, this time in company with Stephen D. Ricks, also gives suggestions for the Hebrew origin of three place-names found in the Book of Mormon: Zarahemla, Jershon, and Cumorah.

Another approach compares Nephite practices with established ancient practices. Angela M. Crowell and Tvedtnes do this when they compare the practice of blessing God after eating and being “filled,” as found in Alma 8:22. Parallels are found in various ancient texts, including rabbinical writings and a poem from the Dead Sea Scrolls. In a separate article, Tvedtnes—relying on stones from the archaeological site of Gezer, clay tablets from El-Amarna in Egypt, and the Dead Sea Scrolls—determines that the Book of Mormon practice of using the terms city and land interchangeably was also a custom in the Old World.

Similarly, Welch also compares Sherem’s accusations against Jacob as recorded in Jacob 7:7 with ancient Israelite law. On three accounts Sherem accuses Jacob of offenses which, if the individual is found guilty, are punishable by death. Welch traces each of these

accusations to preexilic Israelite law. These types of articles show that small details, which are probably missed by the casual reader of the Book of Mormon, add evidence to its claim of authenticity.

Comparing the forms and styles of writing in the Book of Mormon with Old World literature has, in the past, been another fruitful area of research. My particular favorite in Pressing Forward is Royal Skousen’s discussion of Hebraic conditionals. Skousen has found that the original English-language text of the Book of Mormon contained expressions that are uncharacteristic of English. One of these is the Hebrew-like conditional clause. In English, the conditional is commonly expressed as: “if x then y.” In Hebrew the same idea is expressed as “if x and y,” and although that form is peculiar in English, it makes perfect sense in Hebrew. Skousen counts thirteen examples of this type of Hebraic conditional in the first edition of the Book of Mormon that were removed by Joseph Smith in his grammatical editing for the second edition, published in 1837. This, Skousen points out, lends support to the idea that Joseph Smith’s translation was a literal one and that the language from which the book was translated was Hebrew or Hebrew-like.

As one might expect, some Updates defend the practice of writing on metal plates. William J. Adams Jr. informs us of Dr. Gabriel Barkay’s find at an excavation site in Jerusalem. The dig, which was begun in 1979, unearthed a tomb dated to about 600 B.C. Among the finds were two rolled-up strips of silver, unknown elsewhere in the archaeology of this period. These silver plates contain quotations from the book of Numbers, confirming that religious texts were engraved on precious metal plates in Lehi’s Jerusalem and thus showing that Lehi’s search for the plates of Laban and his own writings on precious metal plates are real possibilities.

Five articles discuss swords in the Book of Mormon. Adams compares the sword of Laban to a sword found at a site three miles south of Jericho, and Tvedtnes compares it to a description of a sword in one of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Tvedtnes discusses the rod and sword as the word of God, Brett L. Holbrook talks of the sword of Laban as a
symbol of divine authority, and Matthew Roper deals with eyewitness descriptions of Mesoamerican swords.

The book also devotes considerable space to King Benjamin and his address, reflecting the growing interest in this topic. Two Updates based on the research of Welch, Terry L. Szink, and others introduce us to the ancient precedent for the use of towers in royal councils and ceremonies, while the longest article in *Pressing Forward* deals with ways in which King Benjamin's speech paves the way for the democratization of the government and politics in the land of Zarahemla.

Much of the work of FARMS involves defending the Book of Mormon, particularly in replying to critics of that foundational book of scripture. As expected, Updates also respond to criticisms of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In response to the criticism that Joseph Smith, or one of his contemporaries, was the sole author of the Book of Mormon, Philip A. Allred focuses on how the single word *state* suggests that Alma the Younger can be singled out as a distinct author within the book. Sorenson deals nicely with the minor criticism that there is no evidence of a tent-making or tent-using tradition in Mesoamerica.

Some of the articles, however, are not strictly apologetic in nature. Welch’s discussion of the connections between the visions of Lehi and Nephi and his explanation of why the Nephite economy was so volatile are of great interest to the student of the Book of Mormon and show just how complex and integrally sound the book is. Ken Haubrock gives an excellent appreciation of the life and personality of Sam, the brother of Nephi. Not only does he offer insights that most readers would overlook, but he also shows how, with just a careful reading of the Book of Mormon, our understanding and appreciation of the people of the Book of Mormon can be greatly enhanced.

As one may anticipate, these Updates vary in strength of argument. Some appear to be well supported with evidence, while others are a little more speculative. One that strikes me as leaning toward speculation is the article dealing with the shining stones of the Jaredites.
The claim here is that radioluminescent lights made from a porous silica matrix in which a phosphor is dispersed have recently been developed and that their qualities are consistent with those required of the Jaredite stones. In fairness to the researchers, they do not claim that their research is conclusive, and they admit that we can only speculate about the process that led to the Jaredite lights. Furthermore, it seems to me that one needs only to show that occurrences such as the Jaredite lights were possible in order to silence the critics. A stronger conclusion that shows us something that actually did occur or probably occurred is a bonus, but it is enough in most instances to settle for a weaker conclusion.

*Pressing Forward* ends with eight historical studies ranging from a progress report on fragments of the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon to a discussion of Joseph Smith’s access to library facilities in Harmony. The final article, appropriately, issues a warning of the dangers of jumping to conclusions. Using the lessons learned from the Grolier Codex, a document that was originally declared a fake by scholars but is now acknowledged as authentic, Sorenson and Welch highlight five mistakes made by those who judged the Grolier Codex a hoax and suggest that these mistakes are also commonly made by critics of the Book of Mormon.

Conclusions

This book will be of interest and value to most members of the church, especially to those wishing to keep up-to-date with the latest research on the Book of Mormon. I would also recommend this volume to any critics of the church since it may save them considerable time and effort in dealing with issues that have already been researched. For a long-time subscriber to FARMS, the research covered in this volume will, of course, not be new. However, this volume is still a useful addition to any library as the Updates and articles are conveniently gathered together in one place with adequate subject and scripture indexing.
These Updates do not set out to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, for a testimony of its truthfulness is a personal matter and must come from the Spirit. However, after reading *Pressing Forward*, one cannot help but marvel at the consistency of the Book of Mormon, both internally and in comparison with evidences of previous cultures. This volume, then, achieves what it sets out to do, which is to help all students of the scriptures to “press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ” (2 Nephi 31:20).