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Title Recent Trends in Book of Mormon Apologetics: A Critical Assessment of Methodological Diversity and Academic Viability

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Abstract This article discusses the evolution of Book of Mormon apologetics. Although Book of Mormon scholarship was originally intended for an exclusively Latter-day Saint audience, it has since broadened to address a more scholarly and secular audience.

RECENT TRENDS IN BOOK OF MORMON APOLOGETICS: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF METHODOLOGICAL DIVERSITY AND ACADEMIC VIABILITY

Benjamin N. Judkins

Terry L. Givens, in his most recent offering, *By the Hand of Mormon*,¹ presents students of American history with a new and vibrant look at the founding text of one of the fastest-growing religions in the world today. This work, his second from Oxford University Press, and now published in paperback, will reach large audiences both in the academic world and among Latter-day Saints more generally. Hopefully, this book, praised by those both inside and outside the church, will lead to a general improvement in the quality of discussion and debate regarding the Book of Mormon.

Givens advances many valuable new insights and conclusions. However, the premier contribution of this work is its careful and far-reaching review of the literature surrounding the Book of Mormon and its origins. Givens has shown himself to be a master of synthesizing large amounts of information and telling a single coherent story. It might take students new to the field years to discover for themselves all the various facets of the literature discussed in this single work. If for no other reason than this, *By the Hand of Mormon* is an invaluable contribution to the field.

Such a work, published by a respected university press, is precisely what is needed to increase both the visibility and accessibility of this

1. Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

literature to the wider academic community. Indeed, this seems to have been an overarching goal of many Latter-day Saint scholars for some time now and has no doubt contributed to the increasing methodological sophistication and professionalization of the field. This being the case, the success of Givens's book raises the question of how soon we will see an engagement with the scholarly world, as well as what the outcome of these discussions will be.

I examine recent developments in the apologetic literature surrounding the Book of Mormon in an attempt to address these questions. My purpose is twofold: first, I wish to develop a clearer typology of current trends in order to help students analyze new arguments and relate them to larger debates in the field. While many ways exist to group any large body of literature, for the purposes of the current project it is most helpful to construct the different schools of thought around the methodology that they employ and the theoretical assumptions that support them. Second, I plan to comment on what portions, if any, of this research would be capable of standing up to rigorous and sustained scholarly scrutiny by the larger academic community. This second goal must be recognized as theoretically ambiguous from the outset. The purpose of Latter-day Saint apologetic literature has never been to convince the wider community of the truth of our positions or the historicity of our scriptures. Rather, as Givens so eloquently illustrates, Latter-day Saint scholarship has tended to be an in-house project. The literature is composed of works written for the immediate community with the express purpose of demonstrating why belief is not irrational.² The mission of the LDS academic community has not, for the most part, been to demonstrate why belief is necessary but to show how a proper understanding of the larger historical, textual, and archaeological frameworks is *sufficient to allow* belief.

Having thus outlined my plan, I am not certain why the broader academic community would ever examine Mormon apologetic literature. Clearly, it was not intended for them and contains very little of interest to those outside the immediate community. Yet the increas-

2. Ibid., 118.

ing savvy and credentials of Latter-day Saint scholarship, as well as our growing involvement in more general scholarly efforts (such as the preservation of ancient texts or the dissemination of Dead Sea Scrolls facsimiles), may prompt an engagement between the two communities at some point in the future. This might happen if outside researchers were to begin to seriously consider how a Latter-day Saint viewpoint might skew scholarship in predictable ways. Indeed, some in the evangelical academic community have already begun to ask exactly this question.³ At what point, if ever, Latter-day Saint scholars will force a confrontation with the rest of the academic world is unclear, but it is an interesting matter for speculation. Yet the success of a work such as *By the Hand of Mormon* serves to push us toward such an engagement.

The current generational transition, symbolized best by the retirement of Hugh Nibley from the fray, has also opened the door for some reorganization of the literature and its priorities. Thus the moment seems especially auspicious for reexamining the major contours and trends in the field.

The current article is organized around the two methodological divisions that are most salient to understanding the nature of current scholarship, as well as its strengths and potential weaknesses. Briefly, these are external (archaeological) versus internal (ethnographic and textual) approaches. It is also important to consider what assumptions a given school makes about the nature of translation in its analysis of the Book of Mormon. Some approaches seem to lead to quite strong literalist views on this process, while others do not necessarily have a single coherent position.

It may also be appropriate at this point to say a few words about what this paper does not do. First, the literature reviewed for this project covers mainly the last ten years, unlike the much more extensive review offered

3. Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 19/2 (1998): 203. For their response to the perceived crises, see Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds., *The New Mormon Challenge: Responding to the Latest Defenses of a Fast-Growing Movement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002). Responses to *The New Mormon Challenge* have appeared in the *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1–2 (2002) and in the *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003).

by Givens. While I do discuss important works from previous decades that still have a substantive impact on current thought, no effort is made to survey these earlier periods systematically. Second, the literature that I have discussed tends to focus on Near Eastern cultural elements rather than on the Mesoamerican setting of the Book of Mormon. The greater part of the current literature approaches the question of historicity from this Near Eastern angle. While important research is being done on the Mesoamerican front, it would take a specialist in those fields to interpret it. Lastly, I have focused on trends in the quasi-official literature, produced by circles affiliated (at least informally) with Brigham Young University (BYU) and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). The bulk, though not all, of the academically responsible literature comes from these sources. These scholars possess much informal power when it comes to setting attitudes and trends. This fact alone should be enough to justify our interest in them.

External versus Internal Evidence

Since the 1950s, the most brilliant light in Latter-day Saint scholarship and apologetics has been Hugh Nibley. In many ways he marked the roads that at least two subsequent generations of scholars are following. Nibley was also quite vocal on what paths would not, or should not, be taken. It would be naïve to think that his stance on these issues has had no effect on the direction of Book of Mormon scholarship. In particular, Nibley—due possibly to the perceived lack of success of the New World Archaeological Foundation (NAAF)⁴ and other large-scale archaeological expeditions in locating clear evidence for Latter-day Saint claims, which, it must be emphasized, was never the explicit goal of NAAF—was persistently hostile toward the role of archaeology in Book of Mormon studies.

For a work as grounded in artifactual reality as the Book of Mormon, this may be viewed as a rather peculiar stance. The very nature of the golden plates and their story seems to encourage an external methodological approach. The book presents itself as a literal history of mul-

4. See Daniel C. Peterson, “On the New World Archaeological Foundation,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 221–33.

tiple large civilizations and continues to be read that way by its ever-growing audience. This lends strong impulses toward an empirical and seemingly more scientific investigation of the archaeological record.

Yet we must address the question of whether one should allow a book's origin to totally set the agenda for how it is to be investigated, read, and understood. The strong tendency of the Book of Mormon to overwhelm all historically defined frameworks would seem to indicate that, yes, the best way to study it would be as history buried in the ground. Yet, as Nibley was always fond of pointing out, the extant archaeological record is spotty and incomplete at the best of times. Verifiable civilizations larger than the Nephites' have slipped into the sands of time never to be seen again.

Also challenging is how we are to understand the history we see related in the Book of Mormon. The Bible, too, purports to be a historical account of a historical people facing historical problems. All of this led scholars to read the Bible incorrectly for centuries. They assumed that a people as historically minded as the Jews could not have had myths, and thus the only proper framework for reading the Bible was history as defined by Western academic traditions.

Of course, later scholarship by the likes of Frank Moore Cross, Bernard Batto, Raphael Patai, Margaret Barker, and others has shown that it is impossible to understand the Bible without seeing it as a document rich in very unhistorical mythology (and this applies not only to books like Genesis, but also to histories like 1 and 2 Kings). Indeed, the very attempt to historicize that which could only exist and have meaning in another frame of reference is probably one of the greater mistakes that the field of Western humanities has made. Even Israel's experience of its day-to-day history was determined in large part by its cognitive mythological frameworks, which were clearly written back into its own sacred history. Thus, one of the questions facing biblical archaeologists is how to study a people whose history is a part of their own myth complex. What sorts of artifacts should one look for in this vastly more complicated and vexing setting?

It is not clear why these same issues should not be applicable to the Book of Mormon. After all, it claims to be a product of the same culture and historical theories that ultimately gave us the Bible. How

the Jaredites actually fit into the Nephite myth complex and what evidence of them one can rationally expect to see are examples of issues that have yet to be addressed by the Latter-day Saint scholarly community. Finding answers to these questions using external sources is difficult, and Nibley despaired of ever being able to use archaeology to its full effect in defending the Book of Mormon.

However, a new generation of scholars is moving ahead with various archaeological projects with surprisingly good results. Rather than focusing on Mesoamerica, an area that has yet to yield anything identifiably “Nephite” in character, recent work has focused on Lehi’s departure from the Near East. These studies are viewed as the most promising development to date in many FARMS and Latter-day Saint academic circles. They may also demonstrate a return to respectability for archaeology in the Book of Mormon literature not seen since the early days of Thomas Ferguson.⁵

In a 1999 article in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, S. Kent Brown discussed a new find by a German archaeological team working in Yemen.⁶ Archaeologists working on an excavation of a temple near Marib uncovered an altar with an inscription bearing the name Nihm (an ancient tribal group). This find was immediately hailed as significant due to Marib’s proximity to the spice trails leading southeast along the coast of the Empty Quarter. Book of Mormon scholars had postulated for some time that the most probable escape route for Lehi and his family was along this ancient highway. If correct, this would likely place Lehi’s point of departure for the New World somewhere in Oman.⁷

5. See Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, “*Ein Heldenleben?* On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons,” in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 175–219.

6. S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place That Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66–68. See Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 56–61.

7. Warren P. Aston and Michaela K. Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi’s Journey across Arabia to Bountiful* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); and S. Kent Brown et al., “Planning Research on Oman: The End of Lehi’s Trail,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 12–21.

Since Hugh Nibley, scholars have been looking for a place along this route that bore the name Nahom. This, they hoped, would indicate the place where Ishmael could have been buried. Significantly, Nephi's story also indicates that this place already bore the name before the group arrived (they did not name it themselves) and that it would be the proper sort of place to bury a loved one (Ishmael was buried there but presumably died somewhere else). The temple at Marib seems to fit the description in that it was close to a large grave complex and had the same consonant construction (NHM) used in both Nihm and Nahom. This usage of the name NHM in the complex dates back to the period of Lehi's exodus.

In Welch's view, the Marib find is the single most significant development in Book of Mormon studies in a decade. Evidently that sentiment is shared—the research has been reviewed in the *Ensign*,⁸ and Givens has called it “the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon.”⁹ The find was even mentioned in an April 2001 General Conference address.¹⁰

Also interesting is the fact that the direction from this temple to the area of the coast of Oman that Brown and others are proposing as the location of Bountiful is nearly due east (the direction of travel indicated in the Book of Mormon). Multiple iron deposits have been found in the local coastal area of the proposed Bountiful. While these deposits are small, both could yield tons of ore, more than enough to make the few tools Nephi needed.¹¹

As exciting as these discoveries are, a few cautionary notes are in order. First, the mainstream scholarly community has yet to offer a countertheory or a challenge to the Latter-day Saint interpretation of the findings. Our reconstruction of the vowels in the name seems to be relatively secure, meaning that we need not reject the reconstruction a priori. However, there may not be any reason to privilege our

8. See “Book of Mormon Linked to Site in Yemen,” LDS Scene, *Ensign*, February 2001, 79.

9. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 120.

10. John K. Carmack, “United in Love and Testimony,” *Ensign*, May 2001, 76–77.

11. Wm. Revell Phillips, “Metals in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 36–41.

reading of this tribal name over a number of other possible reconstructions either.

It is instructive to remember that the noted Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin and many others spent much time and energy trying to prove that they had located the walls (and gates) of biblical Jericho. Even though Jericho is accepted as a historical place and its location is relatively well known, they were never able to generate a consensus in support of their finds. Eventually, the field dismissed their theories after much scrutiny and acrimonious debate with the biblical minimalist school.¹² This should be a cautionary tale for us. We are seeking to establish something much more controversial than the fact that Jericho had walls, and we have much slimmer evidence (a reconstructed tribal name on a set of pagan votive altars) than Yadin and others brought to bear. When we consider the fact that not a *single piece* of evidence is universally accepted by the entire academic community for the existence of a preexilic Jewish kingdom, we must ask ourselves how likely these recent finds are to stand up to serious cross-examination in a field that will not be inclined to accept our preferred interpretations of these sites. Following the traditional pattern of Latter-day Saint apologetics, these finds serve more to demonstrate the rationality of belief to those who already believe than to convince others of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Nibley was familiar with these controversies. Still, it appears that a different generation of scholars has yet to learn biblical archaeology's most powerful cautionary lesson—claims to large, ground-breaking finds may be so controversial as to prevent them from being accepted.

More interesting are archaeological projects that seek to situate the Book of Mormon narrative within the emerging general picture of the ancient Near East rather than to declare some place (Yemen,

12. For a recent discussion of this and other controversies involving the minimalist school, see Zeev Herzog, "Deconstructing the Walls of Jericho: Biblical Myth and Archaeological Reality," *Prometheus* 4 (2001): 72–93. For the original archeological notes proposing that the city of Jericho was in fact uninhabited at the time of the Joshua story, see Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Excavations at Jericho*, vols. 1–2 (London: British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, 1960–65).

Oman, or Chile) to be a Book of Mormon land. Take, for instance, the seemingly counterfactual statements in the Book of Mormon regarding the mixing of Hebrew and Egyptian scripts or language usage patterns. A number of sources coming to light over a wide geographic and temporal range demonstrate the existence of such practices. The accumulation of these many small pieces of evidence, helping to build a new and unexpected picture of cultural practices, may shed more light on the Book of Mormon's historicity than any single large find.

Archaeological evidence now supports the practice of writing in a transcribed Semitic language, using modified Egyptian scripts, going back as far as the eighteenth century BC. Perhaps the best early example of such artifacts recently discussed in conjunction with the Book of Mormon would be the Byblos Syllabic inscriptions—an example of a document produced in a Phoenician city and inscribed on “copper plates.”¹³ In fact, many examples of Egyptian and hybrid writing are associated with Byblos during the Bronze Age.¹⁴

Even more relevant from the point of view of Book of Mormon scholars is the discovery of two silver scrolls, excavated from a secondary bone repository in burial cave 24 on the west side of Hinnom Valley in Jerusalem. The significance of this discovery, made by Gabriel Barkay in 1980, was not immediately evident, as the oxidized strip of silver could not originally be read. The process of unrolling the strips took three painstaking years; significantly, the scrolls were dated to 600 BC. They contained a brief inscription very similar to

13. William J. Hamblin, “Metal Plates and the Book of Mormon,” *Insights* (July 1994): 2, quoting from George E. Mendenhall, “Byblos Syllabic Inscriptions,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:178–80.

14. It is important not to overgeneralize on the basis of Byblos alone. Throughout the Bronze Age this city was a virtual dependency of the Egyptian government. It was used as a major export center for local cedar (a precious commodity in Egypt) and other goods. At a certain point the leading families of Byblos were given, or took, Egyptian names and titles and were quite versed in a variety of Egyptian cultural matters. The Egyptians did not generally enjoy this level of influence throughout the region. For a basic overview of the relationship between Egypt and its neighbors during the Bronze Age, see Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

Numbers 6:24–26.¹⁵ This find is important for a number of reasons. First, it definitively verifies a tradition of inscribing sacred texts upon precious metals in Jerusalem at Lehi’s time. But even more important, this is the oldest attested quotation of any part of the Pentateuch, demonstrating its existence before the Babylonian captivity. This point, contested by biblical minimalists, is an essential requirement for Lehi to have had the five books of Moses on the brass plates.

Recent smaller finds have also demonstrated that scribes in the region were versed in both Egyptian and Hebrew scripts and occasionally mixed the two (for instance, adopting Egyptian numbers or words). Examples of clerical records, magical spells, and religious texts have been found on both papyri and ostraca ranging from the Bronze Age to the second century BC. These and similar finds are helping to place the reference to “reformed Egyptian” (Mormon 9:32) on the golden plates in its proper historical context and to support the overall historicity of the Book of Mormon.¹⁶ If one is looking for external evidences of the Book of Mormon, it will probably be an accumulation of many small finds, rather than a single inscription or breakthrough archaeological discovery, that will provide the most sound and defensible arguments.

Internal Evidence: Textual versus Ethnographic Approaches

While current Latter-day Saint scholarship seems to be placing increased emphasis on the search for external evidences, another approach, pioneered by Hugh Nibley, seeks to defend the Book of Mormon through internal evidences. Increasingly, however, two

15. William J. Adams Jr., “Lehi’s Jerusalem and Writing on Metal Plates,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 204–6; Dana M. Pike, “Israelite Inscriptions from the Time of Jeremiah and Lehi,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 76, 213–15.

16. John A. Tvedtnes and Stephen D. Ricks, “Jewish and Other Semitic Texts Written in Egyptian Characters,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 156–63. For more on the issue of Egyptian scripts, see John Gee, “Two Notes on Egyptian Script,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 (1996): 162–76.

separate approaches to internal evidences are emerging. One relies on detailed textual and grammatical analysis and brings with it, by necessity, certain strict theories of the origin and translation processes.¹⁷ The other seeks for broader cultural and literary correspondences and does not necessitate the strong ad hoc assumptions about the nature of translation (which is not to say that some authors do not hold them anyway).

Textual School

Early in his career, Nibley pointed to certain literary anomalies in the Book of Mormon (especially in 1 Nephi) that seem to be consistent with its claimed origins.¹⁸ This generated substantial interest in subjecting the work to textual analysis. But it would probably be more accurate to place the genesis of the modern textual school with a 1967 lecture in Germany on ancient biblical poetic forms. The lecture was attended by a young missionary named John Welch. Intrigued by the existence of poetic forms in the Bible, Welch decided to see if these forms (known since the eighteenth century but rarely commented on until the beginning of the twentieth) were also in the Book of Mormon. Many examples of complicated poetic structures, including chiasmus, presented themselves; possibly the most elegant example is found in Alma 36.¹⁹ The use of literary and textual tools to investigate the Book of Mormon has since been embraced by the main Latter-day Saint apologetic circles, including FARMS.

17. See, for instance, any of Royal Skousen's works on creating a critical text of the Book of Mormon. For a typical example of the uses of this work, see a recent article: Noel B. Reynolds and Royal Skousen, "Was the Path Nephi Saw 'Strait and Narrow' or 'Straight and Narrow?'" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 30–33; for a response to this argument, see Paul Y. Hoskisson, "Straightening Things Out: The Use of *Strait and Straight* in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 58–71.

18. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988).

19. John W. Welch, "A Masterpiece: Alma 36," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1991), 114–31.

While much of the primary research utilizing this approach was conducted previous to our time period, it should be noted that the school is still strong and continues to produce work.²⁰ In 1997, Kevin L. Barney published an article expanding his previous work on *enallage*. Briefly, *enallage* is a switch between single and plural tenses for dramatic or poetic effect, a device common in the Old Testament.²¹ This work is valuable since most readers who follow the literature are by now aware of parallelism, but some important devices other than *enallage* have received less attention.

Welch's discovery of chiasmus and the subsequent exploration of other archaic poetic forms has generally been a very positive development in terms of internal evidences. Yet a subjective quality to the reading of any text cannot be avoided. Thus a chiasm may, in some cases, exist more in the eye of its beholder than on the page. Those attempting to use these literary forms in their analyses need to be on constant guard against forced readings. Not every investigator asks questions such as "Is this the sort of place I would logically expect the text to suddenly break into verse?"

A Latter-day Saint Web site purports to have found the "key" to the so-called Davidic Chiasmus (a simple variation of other well-documented forms).²² The site provides a set of rules whereby readers can find these literary structures for themselves. And find them they do—in both ancient scripture and modern revelation. The fact

20. For three recent book-length studies, see Hugh W. Pinnock, *Finding Biblical Hebrew and Other Ancient Literary Forms in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999); John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1999); and Richard Dilworth Rust, *Feasting on the Word: The Literary Testimony of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1997).

21. Kevin L. Barney, "Enallage in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 113–47; and Kevin L. Barney, "Divine Discourse Directed at a Prophet's Posterity in the Plural: Further Light on Enallage," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 229–34; David Bokovoy, "From Distance to Proximity: A Poetic Function of Enallage in the Hebrew Bible and the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/1 (2000): 60–63.

22. See Jared R. Demke, "Interpretive Key to Understanding the Davidic Pattern: FAQs," ed. Scott L. Vanatter, *Davidic Chiasmus and Parallelisms*, www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/3500/ (accessed 29 April 2004).

that chiasmus appears to show up in the Doctrine and Covenants has led these individuals to expect it in any document that was partially the product of divine inspiration. Casting even wider nets, they have found the same pattern in dozens of political documents and even in Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. Applying their rules, I have also been able to locate the Davidic Chiasmus in such presumably uninspired works as modern novels and the Manhattan telephone directory (a text that is totally random and can therefore reflect any pattern one cares to project upon it). All of this illustrates the need to set clearer ad hoc guidelines as to what sorts of parallels we are willing to accept as nonspurious. Otherwise, through lax application, the search for ancient poetic and interpretive forms could very well become a Mormon Kabbalah.²³

Another key is to locate poetic forms arcane enough that Joseph Smith could not just have picked them up by reading the Bible. Barney has located examples of word groups in both the Old Testament and the Book of Mormon. Basically, a word group is formed when related words or concepts are used serially as a rhetorical device to make some central point.²⁴ As the reader may suspect, this pattern is used frequently in the Book of Mormon. Yet it is simple and obvious enough that it has been picked up in other places as well. For instance, when the British comedy troupe Monty Python wishes to lampoon the Bible (such as the extensive quotation from the *Book of Armament*, chapter 4, provided by Brother Maynard in *Quest for the Holy Grail*), they employ word groups to great comedic effect. Clearly, most Latter-day Saints would be uncomfortable with the assertion that this troupe of off-color comedians is receiving revelation because they are sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of biblical grammatical usage. Interestingly enough, their audience (most

23. See John W. Welch, "Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (1995): 1–14.

24. Kevin L. Barney, "Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 15–81; see John A. Tvedtnes, "Word Groups in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 262–68; and James T. Duke, "Word Pairs and Distinctive Combinations in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 32–41.

of whom do not read the Bible frequently) is also sensitive enough to this usage to understand the humor. If Joseph Smith grew up immersed in the text of the Bible, one must wonder how much more sensitive to these constructions he would have been. What other ancient poetic forms could he have detected and added to his own vocabulary?

In our zeal to find evidence of ancient poetic forms, we should not set the bar so low that it becomes meaningless in terms of serious apologetics, or even analysis. Not all scholars do this, and many of the structures pointed out by Welch and others are undeniably complex and clearly the product of a conscious authorial effort. Yet these gems can easily become obscured behind a pile of rather weak and dubious examples.

More than other approaches, the textual school also raises the issue of the nature of translation and revelation. If one argues for the historicity of the Book of Mormon based on certain very specific patterns of word usage or grammatical intricacies, one is almost de facto obliged to adopt a direct, word-for-word theory of translation. While providing a theoretical basis for expecting ancient literary forms (thus solving one set of problems), such an approach makes it increasingly difficult to deal with the Isaiah problem and extensive use of New Testament texts (and their theology) in this theoretical framework. Some solutions to these problems, such as those provided for consideration by Blake Ostler, are invalidated by the textual school's basic assumptions.²⁵

In addition to complicating matters with regard to the Book of Mormon, a literal theory of translation also complicates our ability to use and talk about the Bible. John Welch, Ann Madsen, and many other Latter-day Saint scholars continue to adhere to a "one Isaiah" position, often reasoning that two out of Isaiah's three parts *must* have been on the brass plates since they are quoted in the Book of Mormon. The idea that the third part (never quoted, along with the late first chapter) must also have been there, or that the same individual wrote and edited all three parts, requires further critical interrogation.²⁶

25. Blake T. Ostler, "The Book of Mormon as a Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source," *Dialogue* 20/1 (1987): 66–123.

26. For some variations on the textual approach to Isaiah in both a biblical and Book of Mormon context, see Donald W. Parry, *Harmonizing Isaiah: Combining Ancient Sources*

Also elusive is the contention made by some students of the textual school, when writing in other contexts, that the entire Pauline corpus must have been written by Paul, that all the Gospels were written by the stated authors within a few years after Christ's death, or that Moses literally came down off the mountain with the five books of the Torah dictated from the mouth of God. It would appear that overly literal theories of translation and transmission could lead one to make (or reinforce) a group of assertions about the nature of scripture that, while respectable by the standards of seventeenth-century biblical scholarship, must be considered very marginal today. The Isaiah problem is only the tip of the iceberg facing students of the textual school.

Not all approaches to the Book of Mormon as a historical document generate these problems. In fact, it may be possible to deal with multiple authors of the book of Isaiah in purely textual terms.²⁷ Yet the attitude of retreating behind a fundamentalist posture and refusing to seriously address these problems is disturbing. It is hard to believe that any research would stand up to academic scrutiny if it fails to engage the last hundred years of scholarly thought.

Ethnographic School

True genius is set apart not just by the depth of its understanding but also by the breadth of its reach. It is this later characteristic that truly made Hugh Nibley distinct. While Nibley was among the first to point out the importance of textual forms, he was never fully pulled in that direction. In fact, most of Nibley's efforts went into identifying and discussing unique texts, beliefs, and patterns of behavior found in the Near East and demonstrating how these same general patterns were present in Latter-day Saint scripture. By so doing, he hoped to

(Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001); Donald W. Parry and John W. Welch, eds., *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998); John W. Welch, "Authorship of the Book of Isaiah in Light of the Book of Mormon," in *Isaiah in the Book of Mormon*, 423–37; Victor L. Ludlow, *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982).

27. One may even be able to muster the academic sources to argue for one Isaiah without turning to the brass plates as a crutch. However, current trends in Isaiah scholarship are making this task increasingly difficult.

date these texts to *at least* the period of late antiquity and hence create a space where rational individuals could allow their faith to grow.

For years this approach has been the main school of Book of Mormon scholarship. Its goals have been modest—to show how the practices, beliefs, and traditions of Lehi’s people were congruent with certain modes of life in antiquity. Methodologically, the approach was, and continues to be, the loosest of all the schools discussed. This has led to frequent charges of “parallelomania,” not all of which have been unfounded.²⁸ Yet this same lack of rigor has an advantage in that it does not privilege any single theory of translation.²⁹

Many of the most interesting arguments in favor of ancient origins of the Latter-day Saint scriptures have come out of this school. Nibley’s work on the accuracy of 1 Nephi from the perspective of desert nomads stands out as one of the first and still most readable products of the field.³⁰ His later work examining Enoch and Abraham in a pseudepigraphical setting brought superb research skills and a fine argumentative sense to bear on the issue. Current writers strive to hold this torch aloft with varying degrees of success.

Much of the work currently being done by this school does not seem, even on the surface, to be a defense of the Book of Mormon. Rather, it appears and functions as an explanation of some difficult or interesting passage, using the tools of comparative religion. Through the careful employment of these tactics, the average Latter-day Saint may be repeatedly exposed to the idea that the Book of Mormon is a wholly ancient text that can be understood best in terms of other ancient (rather than nineteenth-century) texts without ever realizing that they have been part of an apologetic project. Literally too many books and articles fall into this school to cite them all. Official or quasi-official presses publish

28. Douglas F. Salmon, “Parallelomania and the Study of Latter-day Scripture: Confirmation, Coincidence, or the Collective Unconscious?” *Dialogue* 33/2 (2000): 129–56. See William J. Hamblin’s review of Salmon’s article in “Joseph or Jung? A Response to Douglas Salmon,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/2 (2001): 87–104.

29. It does, by assumption, see the Book of Mormon as an ancient text, though possibly an expanded one.

30. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*.

many of these. Rather than attempt to review all of them, I will mention two works that are relatively indicative of what is available.

The first is S. Kent Brown's book *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla*.³¹ Published by the BYU Religious Studies Center in 1998 and intended to offer cultural exegesis on the Book of Mormon, the book also succeeds in conveying a lot of powerful arguments as to its historicity without ever explicitly or obviously addressing this issue. Chapters such as "Recovering the Missing Record of Lehi" and "The Exodus Pattern in the Book of Mormon" provide interesting internal discussions of the Book of Mormon while almost subconsciously defending the work's historicity. In the final analysis, this sort of work might actually be the most useful to the Latter-day Saint reader, not because it makes the clearest and most defensible apologetic arguments (a project that does not interest most members of the church anyway), but because it conveys enough historical information to substantially improve the quality of an individual's personal scriptural study.

Also in the same general school is *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne.³² This work presents sixty-nine short articles on a variety of both comparative religion and more clearly apologetic topics. While concise, it offers an exceptionally good overview of the developments in Book of Mormon scholarship from 1992 to 1997. The majority of the works presented in this period continued to focus on internal evidences, and many of those pieces were ethnographic in orientation. Yet conversations with scholars in the field lead me to believe that more weight is often put on the textual studies.³³

31. S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1998).

32. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

33. For an example of a more openly apologetic work, see Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997). Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), summarizes the best evidences and theories in favor of the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon.

While offering new and exciting exegesis is one of the main advantages of this school, it is also capable of both reorienting our most fundamental views of biblical cultures and producing very interesting apologetic arguments. One of the most recent studies attempting to accomplish both of these goals is Daniel C. Peterson's "Nephi and His Asherah."³⁴ In the previous decades, newly translated texts and archaeological finds have forced a sea change in how preexilic Israel is imagined. One of the most disturbing finds to emerge from this realignment for orthodox scholars is the growing realization that ancient Israel was far from monotheistic, even in the officially sanctioned cult. Instead, there was a hierarchy of Sons of God (possibly symbolized by the menorah),³⁵ ordered by family relations. The consort of El (God the Father) was a female deity called Asherah. As El's personality was increasingly collapsed into his son's (YHWH), Asherah's role was transformed from mother to wife. Eventually her identity was subsumed as well, making way for modern monotheism. Raphael Patai and others have demonstrated at length how this pattern of belief survived many purges to eventually reemerge in medieval Kabbalah.³⁶

The Latter-day Saint community is increasingly becoming aware of these and other radical critiques of ancient Israel through the works of authors outside our tradition, such as Frank Moore Cross, James H. Charlesworth, James L. Kugel, Elaine H. Pagels, and, most recently, Margaret Barker, among others. Barker's arguments about the existence of a second god in ancient Israel, the importance of the early Enoch literature, and the previously unsuspected links between the ancient temple cult and

34. Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25. For a more extensive treatment of the subject, see Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243.

35. Margaret Barker, *The Gate of Heaven: The History and Symbolism of the Temple in Jerusalem* (London: SPCK, 1991).

36. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 3rd ed. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990). See Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Garden of Eden narrative have been especially well received by the Latter-day Saint academic community in recent years.³⁷

Obviously, this radically reformulated (but increasingly well attested) vision of ancient Israel differs from anything available in Joseph Smith's day. Thus one might think that it could prove a potentially devastating critique to the historicity of the Book of Mormon. If Joseph were consciously crafting a vision of ancient Israel, he would almost surely have crafted the wrong one. However, Peterson has shown, through a careful and innovative symbolic analysis of Nephi's vision of the tree of life, that the Book of Mormon actually supports this revised historical view. He goes on to make a convincing argument that the underlying symbolism behind that vision can only be understood in its full richness if we take Asherah's dual aspect as Mother of God and Tree Goddess into account. Without this vital piece of information, it is not clear why a vision of the mother of God would answer Nephi's questions about the meaning of the tree in his father's vision.

While Peterson's argument starts off strong, the reader gets a feeling that some of his later assertions are forced. In fact, this is a common trend in much of the literature in the ethnographic school.³⁸ Perhaps in our enthusiasm we may impose more weight on our parallels than they can bear. That fact notwithstanding, research that places the Book of

37. Margaret Barker, "The Great High Priest," *BYU Studies* 42/3-4 (2003): 65-84; Margaret Barker, *The Great Angel: A Study of Israel's Second God* (Louisville, KY: Knox, 1992); Margaret Barker, *The Lost Prophet: The Book of Enoch and Its Influence on Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1988); and Margaret Barker, *The Older Testament: The Survival of Themes from the Ancient Royal Cult in Sectarian Judaism and Early Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1987). See Kevin Christensen, "The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi's World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 449-522. Kevin Christensen, "Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker's Scholarship and Its Significance for Mormon Studies," *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001).

38. For example, this same pattern is also evident in Welch's frequently discussed article comparing Lehi's vision to the Zosimus narrative. This piece begins by offering one of the best literary parallels to a Book of Mormon narrative, then trails off toward the end. See John W. Welch, "The Narrative of Zosimus and the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 22/3 (1982): 311-32.

Mormon within the rapidly emerging picture of the ancient Near East is likely to be valuable both in defending the work's historicity and in providing powerful new exegetical tools for its readers.³⁹

The challenge is to place clear ad hoc restrictions on what sorts of cultural or mythic parallels we are willing to accept as nonspurious. After all, parallels can be generated by a variety of pathways. They may be the result of Carl Jung's archetypes, forced readings, or random chance. While these possibilities can never be eliminated, they can be controlled by being clear about what parallels are likely to have been considered substantive by the ancient authors themselves and by specifying why we should expect to see similarities in the first place.

I am also attracted to this school of thought in that it does not pressure scholars to adopt any particular theory of translation and transmission, as the textualist school does. The issues of translation involved here are clearly complicated and beyond the scope of this article. They cut right to the heart of the meaning of religious experience and the phenomenology of language. Until these issues are addressed and solved in some compelling way (a project that may not even be possible), I think we need to bracket these questions rather than build theories based on our assumptions about what the process ought to have been.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a typology of current Book of Mormon (apologetic) scholarship employed in FARMS and other Brigham Young University circles. Obviously, any typology that sets out to create overly rigid categories is vulnerable to the claim that it does not perfectly account for all subjects. Some may fit in more than one category, while others (hopefully the minority) fall through the cracks completely. Yet the real value of this exercise has been to compare and

39. Note, for instance, a recent piece on the Web site of FAIR (Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research). In a 2001 article entitled "Do We Have a Mother in Heaven?" Kevin L. Barney draws on both the ancient Asherah traditions and Peterson's article in defense of the church's modern theological stance on the issue of gender and deity, www.fairlds.org/pubs/MotherInHeaven.pdf (accessed 10 March 2004).

contrast different aspects of a literature that is almost always viewed as a unitary whole. By doing so, I hope to gain traction on the methodological issues that underlie these scholarly efforts, as well as to isolate trends that show the greatest potential.

The work of those who seek external evidences is clearly gaining a prominence in the post-Nibley era that it has not seen in the last fifty years. This movement is being buoyed by the strength of many of the recent finds, particularly the inscribed altars in Yemen. Many Latter-day Saint scholars point to these developments as the first clear external evidence of the Book of Mormon's historicity. It is hard to overstate the impact that these recent discoveries have had on the Book of Mormon community. However, the history of biblical archaeology should teach us to treat such developments with all due caution. Finds that are seen as controversial are all too easily explained away by their opponents; this process is abetted by the incomplete nature of the archaeological record. The seeming enthusiasm with which the "discovery" of the walls of Jericho was received, only to be later discredited by the biblical minimalist school, should serve as a powerful cautionary note. As exciting as the Yemen find is, it is unlikely that a single discovery, if controversial in nature, will gain universal assent.

More likely to advance our cause with the wider scholarly community are the myriad small finds, almost all by archaeologists and historians who are not Latter-day Saints, that are rapidly changing our vision of life in the ancient Near East. Particularly helpful have been the discoveries of inscribed metal scrolls and hybrid writing systems. Inevitably, more material of this sort is waiting to be discovered, and it will only strengthen our case.

Even more promising are the internal evidences that the Book of Mormon offers. The textual school has done a generally excellent job of illustrating the existence of ancient literary forms in the Book of Mormon. The examples of chiasmus from Alma and Mosiah continue to be among the most impressive internal evidences.

Two challenges face the textual school today. The first is to continue to find new and striking patterns that will have as great an impact as those that were uncovered in the 1980s and early 1990s. The

law of diminishing marginal returns indicates that this might not be easy. As I previously noted, word groups are just not as convincing as many of the previous observations in the literature. Second, the textual school seems to mandate some very strong assumptions about the Book of Mormon and how it was translated. Without much effort, these same assumptions can spread to the Bible and lead Latter-day Saint scholars to defend stances that are now the exclusive territory of fundamentalist Protestants and ultraorthodox Jews. Clearly, no apologetic research that is open about these assumptions will even receive a hearing, let alone be accepted, by the wider community. If the textual school wishes to avoid intellectual marginalization and isolation, it must develop ways to seriously confront and deal with the problems posed by those passages in the Book of Mormon that echo texts from Isaiah and the New Testament. Unfortunately, it is not clear that they perceive their isolation as a problem or are interested in taking steps to broaden their potential appeal.

The ethnographic school, founded and championed by Hugh Nibley, cannot point to a single large achievement or discovery on which to rest its laurels—rather, it seeks to situate the Book of Mormon as an ancient document through a slow and steady process of building up literally thousands of parallels with the ancient world. It is more in the traditional Latter-day Saint vein of seeking to open a space for rational belief rather than attempting to “prove” a proposition (an exercise that the current philosophy of the scientific method shows to be impossible anyway). This is not to say that the school has not shown great promise. In fact, it has probably made the most substantial contributions of all. Especially helpful are recent efforts to use the work of Margaret Barker and others to situate the Book of Mormon in the emerging vision of what life in the ancient Near East must actually have been like. Efforts to show the Book of Mormon’s compatibility with this world (knowledge of which was totally unavailable to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries) serve both to reinforce the historicity of the work and to provide a powerful new lens for examining its essential message. The recent work of Daniel C. Peterson, John Gee, John A. Tvedtnes,

and others all offer striking new ways of reading the text—even some of its most Christian, nineteenth-century–sounding sections.

The ethnographic school itself is not free from methodological issues. One must specify what cultural parallels are expected in a given place and what sorts of parallels would be significant before conducting any investigation. At a minimum, an ongoing dialogue between theory and empirical investigation must occur. If it does not, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to defend a set of correlations against the charge of spuriousness. In fact, it is the lack of such theoretical considerations that has led to the not totally unjustified charge of parallelomania, particularly with regard to Nibley's work.

However, these problems can largely be dealt with through proper research design and a greater sense of perspective when presenting our findings. For instance, rather than simply presenting *all* the parallels between the Book of Moses and the ancient Enoch literature at once,⁴⁰ Nibley could have begun with a discussion of Mani's brief review of an *Apocalypse of Enoch* as provided in the Cologne Codex. After seeing which points an ancient reader (like Mani) found significant in the Enoch literature, he would have been in a much stronger position to point out those very same issues and images in the Book of Moses. Suddenly the parallels we find take on meaning, and we are less susceptible to charges of engaging in fishing expeditions and forced readings of the primary texts.

The ethnographic school also has the advantage of not mandating any specific theory of transmission. Thus difficult questions surrounding the nature of translation can be bracketed while the overall study of the Book of Mormon goes forth. In the long run, we can probably expect this school to be the most productive, provided it can resolve some of its pressing methodological issues.

40. Hugh Nibley, *Enoch the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1986).