

Introduction

In December 1984, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), based in Provo, Utah, issued its first monthly Update. Since that time, researchers have written and circulated a steady stream of innovative findings and insights. The results of the first decade of that research were collected in 1992 and published as *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*. The present volume is a continuation of that project, comprising Updates from 1992 through 1999, together with similar short studies published during that same period of time in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, all edited for current inclusion. Encapsulated here is nearly a decade of ongoing exploration about the Book of Mormon, pressing forward with further research on the words and messages of the Book of Mormon.

As was explained in the introduction to the 1992 volume, the Updates are brief, easy-to-read reports of new research on the Book of Mormon, aimed at a general audience. They set forth the essence of a research topic and new discoveries that bear on it. They represent ongoing studies from a variety of fields. They report intriguing ideas and developments that emerged while reexploring the Book of Mormon from many perspectives.

Most Updates shed new light on a particular passage or concept in the Book of Mormon. As before, this book arranges these short studies in the order that those key passages or concepts appear in the Book of Mormon.

Many of these Updates have emerged from collaborative research efforts, and no Update has been released without close scrutiny by several scholars. In many cases, the Updates were the leading edge of new discoveries that were subsequently developed, expanded, debated further, and published in scholarly articles or books. And in a few cases, Updates have corrected previously published information when new data have made obsolete old assumptions. For example, John Gee's 1997 article revealing the Egyptian shawabti-figurines found in El Salvador as forgeries corrected the tentative information put forth in a 1984 Update.¹

At first, FARMS wanted to communicate research developments to a small audience of donors and researchers. However, the Updates proved so popular that they were soon distributed in annual packets. Eventually the demand became so great that they became and have remained a regular part of the FARMS newsletter.²

The sixty-nine chapters in this book chronicle much of the ongoing Book of Mormon research of the 1990s. Not all Book of Mormon research projects lend themselves to short Update treatment, of course, but in many cases a topic can be opened up to the public by such a report. Often they remain the most useful, concise statements available on the topic or issue.

In many ways the Updates have changed the face of Book of Mormon research. No longer are new scholarly insights into the Book of Mormon held in remote corners of cluttered file cabinets. Approaches taken and discoveries made by Hugh Nibley and others a generation ago³ have expanded in type and number. Respect for the Book of Mormon has grown because of FARMS research and publications like the Updates. President Gordon B. Hinckley has praised these efforts. "FARMS represents the efforts of sincere and dedicated scholars. It has grown to provide strong support and defense of the Church on a professional basis," he said. "I wish to express my strong congratulations and appreciation for those who started this effort and who have shepherded it to this point. I see a bright future for this effort."⁴ Even scholars who are critics of the LDS church, such as the

evangelicals Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, consider FARMS “the primary producer of academic defenses of Mormonism.”⁵

These Updates will interest all people who want to know what’s new in Book of Mormon research. They will be informative to inquisitive minds—old and young—who want to know the questions that many scholars are asking, researching, and answering. They will appeal to minds that enjoy thinking about novel approaches and prospecting for new information. They will appeal to all who enjoy learning more about the Book of Mormon—its messages, language, and setting; its astonishing details, miraculous existence, and incomparable mission.

Believers of the Book of Mormon as ancient scripture, however, realize that human ingenuity will never be enough to answer all questions about its origin and contents. But people can separate the questions that cannot be answered (either in whole or part) from those that can. Then they can work on the viable ones, gather relevant information, and propose and evaluate possible answers as far as current knowledge will allow.

Thinking this way about Book of Mormon issues has been a part of Latter-day Saint intellectual history since the days of Joseph Smith. After reading an extract from Stephen’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, the Prophet commented: “We can not but think the Lord has a hand in bringing to pass his strange act, and proving the Book of Mormon true in the eyes of all the people. . . . The world will prove Joseph Smith a true prophet by circumstantial evidence, in experiments, as they did Moses and Elijah.”⁶ Thus, to probe and ponder the circumstantial evidences of the scripture’s truthfulness is one of the purposes of Book of Mormon research.

Circumstantial evidence, however, is not the primary source of knowledge that the Book of Mormon is true. Perhaps still the clearest statement to this effect was published by B. H. Roberts in 1909. His classic comments embrace both the primary evidence that comes from the Holy Ghost and all other forms of evidence, which, although secondary, may still be of first-rate importance:

It is frequently the case that a proper setting forth of a subject makes its truth self-evident; and all other evidence becomes merely collateral, and all argument becomes of secondary importance. Especially is this the case when setting forth the Book of Mormon for the world’s acceptance . . . that its truth shall be attested to individuals by the operations of the Holy Spirit upon the human mind. . . .

This must ever be the chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon. All other evidence is secondary to this, the primary and infallible. No arrangement of evidence, however skilfully ordered; no argument, however adroitly made, can ever take its place; for this witness of the Holy Spirit to the soul of man for the truth of the Nephite volume of scripture, is God’s evidence to the truth. . . .

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. . . . [However,] I would not have it thought that the evidence and argument presented in [here] are unimportant, much less unnecessary. Secondary evidence 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.⁷

All who have given their time and talents to the continuing task of researching and writing these Updates, as well as those who have helped produce and distribute them, echo these convictions and perspectives of Elder Roberts.

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Notes

1. See John Gee, "New and Old Light on Shawabti from Mesoamerica," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 64—69.
2. Anyone interested in receiving the newsletter, now issued twelve times a year, is invited to contact FARMS at P. O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, UT 84602, or at 1-800-327-6715.
3. See especially volumes 5—8 on the Book of Mormon in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987—88).
4. "FARMS Joins BYU Community," *Brigham Young Magazine*, spring 1998, p. 8; see also reports in the *Deseret News* (4 November 1997) and in *Insights* (October 1997).
5. Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics, and Evangelical Neglect," *Trinity Journal* 19 (1998): 182 n. 7.
6. Joseph Fielding Smith, ed. and comp., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 267.
7. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1909), 2:vi—viii.