Shades of Darkness

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Abstract  Review of “Dr. Shades’ review of FARMS Review of Books: How the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies deceives their fellow Latter-day Saints by creating the false impression that all is well in Zion.”
The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) must be striking a nerve in the anti-Mormon community. Yes, I mean the anti-Mormon community, not the non-Mormon community. There is a difference. A non-Mormon who writes about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is not necessarily an anti-Mormon, even if he gets some of his facts wrong. To me, an anti-Mormon is one who deliberately misrepresents the facts about the LDS Church and its scriptures, either by outright falsehood or by faulty logic or by innuendo. While a few amateurs fit this category, many anti-Mormons make a living trying to "expose" Mormonism. Many of them have "ministries" to which Christians are asked to make donations to help stamp out what they represent to be blatant falsehood and chicanery. The irony is that these people typically fit the pattern they claim to be describing.

In recent years, some of these anti-Mormons have taken up a new cause. Not content to condemn the LDS Church, they have now begun to condemn FARMS. Such criticism seems to have increased since FARMS became part of Brigham Young University. The message

Review of "Dr. Shades' review of FARMS Review of Books: How the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies deceives their fellow Latter-day Saints by creating the false impression that all is well in Zion." www.connect-a.net/users/drshades/farms.htm.
from these anti-Mormons seems to be twofold: (1) FARMS doesn’t really produce scholarly material, so don’t bother reading it, and (2) FARMS is a mere apologetics organization, so everything that comes from the organization is tainted with Mormon lies. Dr. Shades’s review follows this pattern.

**What FARMS Is and Is Not**

Before looking at Shades’s article in detail, I feel constrained to point out that FARMS is not the monolithic organization that these critics seem to think it is. Most of the books and articles published by FARMS are written by people who are employed elsewhere. To be sure, many of these individuals are BYU professors, but others have academic appointments in non-LDS universities, both in the United States and abroad. Still others are in private business, and several are lawyers. Even before I came to work at FARMS, the foundation published twenty-five of my articles and circulated two of my preliminary papers during a time when I was employed by a healthcare software company.

At this writing, the FARMS research department employs only five full-time people. Our function is to oversee research projects funded or sponsored by FARMS but conducted by people not employed by FARMS. Thus if a researcher needs a photocopy of an article, we obtain a copy of it. If he or she needs a book, we purchase it. On occasion, one or another of us actually writes an article that is published by FARMS, but we do it on our own time, outside of work hours. Thus, contrary to the assumption of many critics, we are not paid to do research to provide evidence for the Book of Mormon or to write reviews of books.

It is also important to note that FARMS has no official stand on anything except that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is authorized and directed by Christ himself and that its unique scriptures are authentic and authoritative. All too often, critics write about the “FARMS position” on such things as Book of Mormon geography and other peripheral issues. Aside from what I have stated, FARMS per se has no official position on any of the research matters
that it publishes. The only litmus test applied to manuscripts submitted to FARMS by LDS scholars is that the manuscripts must not contradict the divine origin of the LDS Church and its scriptures. (FARMS has published articles by several non-LDS researchers.) All books and articles submitted for publication are peer reviewed according to scholarly practices before being accepted, and the recommendations of these scholars weigh heavily in the decision to publish.

I should point out that, while most who have written books and articles for FARMS have impressive academic credentials, others do not. I am concerned, however, when critics suggest that what FARMS produces is not scholarship and dismiss it out-of-hand. Not surprisingly, the academic credentials of people who publish with FARMS are questioned only by the critics, never by bona fide scholars. Several who have written for FARMS have presented papers at meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and have published in periodicals such as the Journal of Near Eastern Studies and with the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The list of articles and books published in non-LDS scholarly presses by FARMS authors is impressive indeed. If the critics do not accept FARMS authors as scholars, those authors are at least so acknowledged by the world’s scholarly community.

A Shady Deal

Recently, a Web site article entitled “Dr. Shades’ review of FARMS Review of Books” came to my attention. It seems to represent a new genre of online anti-Mormonism. Shades subtitles his article “How the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies deceives their fellow Latter-day Saints by creating the false impression that all is well in Zion.” Of course, all is not well in Zion, but it’s not as bad as “Dr. Shades” and other critics suggest. I strenuously object to the implication that FARMS is out to deceive anyone. As I noted earlier, FARMS per se merely publishes what others write after subjecting their works to rigorous peer review.

In the article, Shades terms FARMS an “apologetics mill,” despite the fact that very little of what FARMS publishes can be termed “apologetics.” Other anti-Mormon critics, including those with Web
sites, have also dismissed FARMS as merely an apologetics organization. In effect, they are saying that one cannot trust anything that FARMS publishes since it is “apologetic” in nature. I am sure that they know that most people will read “apologetic” as the opposite of “objective” and dismiss anything produced by FARMS. It’s an old ploy, used since the early days of the church, when critics began saying that it wasn’t worth reading the Book of Mormon because it was an imitation Bible, or blasphemous, or boring. Even today, many critics of the Book of Mormon appear not to have read the book but instead to rely on earlier criticisms.

Shades departs somewhat from the usual pattern in that he acknowledges that “to FARMS’ credit, their reviews of books published by faithful members are dealt with even-handedly . . . offering fair insights into their relative merits or lack thereof.” Most critics won’t give even that much. But Shades writes, “I don’t find the same sort of objectivity when they review anti-Mormon books. The reviews take on a decidedly antagonistic tone, betraying the reviewers’ bias.” Frankly, I see this as the pot calling the kettle black. He acknowledges that these are “anti-Mormon books”; by definition these books are extremely biased and are quintessentially antagonistic.

Shades’s suggestion that the “antagonistic tone” he sees in FARMS reviews of anti-Mormon writings is because “many of them [the reviewers] have the annual ecclesiastical endorsement to consider” is sheer nonsense. His argument presupposes that reviewers lack integrity, not wishing to put into print what they really feel. Anyone who reads the reviews can see that the reviewers are not shy about expressing their views. My bishop has never read anything I’ve published anywhere and has not the slightest clue what I may or may not have written in a review. Shades is not well served by this argument. I suggest that it betrays his desperation.

Reading the Shades article, one gets the distinct impression of a concerted effort on the part of the FARMS Review of Books to obfuscate when reviewing anti-Mormon works. This again ignores the fact that the Review is not a thinking entity any more than FARMS itself is. Rather, it publishes reviews written by various individuals whose employment and geographical locations vary considerably. There is
no official policy or edict from the editor (Daniel C. Peterson) that requires reviewers to take a particular view with regard to anti-Mormon writings. A disclaimer published at the beginning of each copy of the Review states that “the opinions expressed in these reviews are those of the reviewers. They do not necessarily represent the opinions of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, its editors, Brigham Young University, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the reviewers’ employers.” Having written several reviews, mostly of anti-Mormon publications, I can categorically state that the editor has never told me what I should write or what tone I should use. In most cases, he requested that I write the review, but in other instances I chose to do so.

The List

Shades’s article comprises a number of unsubstantiated generalizations. Even if one were to find some isolated examples of what Shades claims is going on in the FARMS Review of Books, it is clear to me that these are not the general rule.

What I find most ironic in the Shades piece is that it employs the same “bogus arguments” he attributes to FARMS. Most notable is the fact that it provides virtually no examples to back up its claims. Let’s look at each of the “bogus arguments” that Shades claims are used in the FARMS Review of Books.

1. “Joseph Smith didn’t really say that.” Shades points out “that FARMS knows full well that Smith made much use of scribes to do his writing for him.” This is a specious argument, since no reviewer I know of has ever used the “Joseph Smith didn’t really say that” rejoinder for something dictated by the prophet to one of his scribes. Rather, it is used in reference to second- or thirdhand statements, usually made long after Joseph’s death. The example given by Shades is a case in point. He refers to “Joseph’s explanation of 1,000 year old men living on the moon and tropical regions located at the North and South poles.” Neither of these pronouncements was recorded during Joseph Smith’s lifetime or under his direction. Indeed, the story of moon men was recorded by Oliver B. Huntington in 1881
and published in 1892, half a century after Joseph Smith's death. Huntington was not one of Joseph Smith’s scribes nor did he record the story during the prophet’s lifetime so that it could be verified by the prophet. Huntington is the only source of the story. Were none of Joseph’s other contemporaries sufficiently impressed by it to write it down?

2. “We are under attack.” To be sure, the Latter-day Saints really are under attack by anti-Mormons. This, in and of itself, however, is not a strong rejoinder, since it does not confront the issues behind the attacks. Shades suggests that the LDS reviewers themselves don’t deal with the issues, which is patently incorrect. He recommends that his readers “simply examine the issues at hand brought up by the book being reviewed”; I suspect, however, that he doesn’t really expect them to read for themselves the reviews that deal with those issues.

3. Blinding you with science. Shades writes that “although FARMS is made up of highly educated individuals, their Review of Books is clearly aimed at the lay membership of the Church.” Is he suggesting that only uneducated individuals should write for lay members of the church? Moreover, I disagree with his assessment. Most members of the LDS Church have never even heard of FARMS, and the Review is mostly purchased by people who have a high level of interest in the kinds of things that FARMS publishes. Shades suggests that “by deliberately using an overabundance of technical and scholarly jargon,” reviewers “create [a certain] impression in the reader's mind,” i.e., that if educated believers accept it, then others should simply follow their lead. I think this is an inflated view of the effect the reviews have on people. Jargon can’t replace facts, and most of the reviews I’ve seen have plenty of facts and very little jargon that can’t be understood by most people or easily found in a dictionary.

4. Demanding Godlike literary standards. This is unabashed hyperbole. No one expects anything produced by humans to be as perfect as something God would do. I presume that Shades, like other critics, alludes to the fact that some reviewers use the term *sic* in square brackets after misspelled words or incorrect phrases. Actually, this common publishing practice tells the reader, “I know it doesn’t look right, but that’s precisely what the author wrote, so don’t send letters.”
5. **Avoiding the issue.** Shades suggests that this “red herring technique . . . is probably the technique used most often” in the review. He accuses reviewers of “going off on several tangents and hashing out irrelevant information” to avoid “the main points brought up in the book being reviewed.” As an example, he notes that reviews of Charles Larson’s *By His Own Hand upon Papyrus* (which deals with the Book of Abraham) attack Larson’s inability to read Egyptian when, in fact, “what matters is whether Joseph Smith could read and translate Egyptian, by the power of God or otherwise.” To be sure, the latter is the real question. But how can someone like Larson, who doesn’t know Egyptian, judge Joseph’s abilities on this issue? Contrary to Shades’s protestations, the question of Larson’s linguistic abilities is indeed relevant to a discussion of his book.

6. **“That’s the same old anti-Mormon argument that’s been around for years.”** Shades sees this as a cop-out (my choice of words), suggesting that just saying these words asserts that “it must have been successfully addressed by LDS scholars long ago, thereby making the argument irrelevant.” He proposes that “the reason it is brought up yet again is because it has not been adequately addressed, and it’s still valid to this day!” Of all the untruths in Shades’s article, this one is the most blatant. I know, because I deal time and time again with the same old tired arguments and know for a fact that the critics almost never cite earlier LDS treatments of the criticisms. Let me give an example.

During the past several decades, Utah Ministries Inc. (UMI) of Marlow, Oklahoma, along with other anti-Mormon groups, has repeated over and over again the argument that the Book of Mormon name *Alma* is from the Hebrew word meaning “young woman” and could therefore not be a man’s name. The Hebrew word for “young woman” is more properly transliterated *almah* (without diacritics), but this doesn’t seem to bother the UMI people. On a number of occasions, LDS scholars have pointed out to them that the name *Alma* (without the final h) is attested as a Hebrew man’s name (*Alma, son of Judah*) in an ancient document found in a cave near the Dead Sea in Israel. (It is also attested in documents from the ancient Syrian city of Ebla, where a language related to Hebrew was spoken, and in several medieval Hebrew texts.) A responsible scholar would respond
to this information; however, the UMI people have on several occasions continued to republish their earlier assessment from time to time, each time ignoring both published LDS responses and the letters and e-mails sent to them about the issue. This, I find, is typical of anti-Mormon groups. And that is why we continually repeat that the argument is old and has already been dealt with. Usually, we give a reference to a published source containing the reply. (I'll return later to the issue of ignoring responses when I deal with another item on Dr. Shades's list; see “Incestuous citing,” below).

7. “That's been misquoted or taken out of context.” Shades suggests that this is just an excuse and writes, “If you don't believe me, pick up an anti-Mormon book, compare the quote with the Journal of Discourses or History of the Church, compare it again with the Mormon apologetics, and draw your own conclusions.” I heartily endorse doing this, though I realize—as I believe Shades does—that most people will not do so. They will simply rely on whichever author they trust more. I don't recall any reviewer claiming that something was misquoted or taken out of context unless it really was. Matthew Roper has collected several examples of passages quoted from the Journal of Discourses in which anti-Mormons leave out portions (usually marked by ellipses) that, if read, demonstrate that what they claim is not what the speaker really meant. A classic example is a quotation from Heber C. Kimball, who said that “God did not come himself” to Joseph Smith, which the Tanners use to demonstrate that there really was no first vision. Roper has demonstrated that the context of Kimball's statement in Journal of Discourses, 6:29, was not the first vision but the restoration of the priesthood by Peter and the revelation of the Book of Mormon by Moroni.1 And then D. Michael Quinn inferred a homosexual reading of Joseph Smith's words in History of the Church, 5:361: “and it is pleasing for friends to lie down together, locked in the arms of love, to sleep and wake in each other's embrace and renew their conversation.” George L. Mitton and Rhett S. James, citing the entire passage in context, noted that Joseph was delivering a funeral sermon and that he was speaking of lying down in

one’s grave near one’s friends so as to be with them on resurrection
day.2

8. *Ad hominem* attacks. I had to laugh when I read this, for *ad
hominem* argumentation (yes, a bit of jargon, I’m afraid!) is the thing
in which anti-Mormon writers excel. Shades is not immune, and
most of his article comprises *ad hominem* statements. I recommend
that anyone reading this review go to his article and read it to see
what I mean. You can find it at www.connect-a.net/users/drshades/
farms.htm. (But go there quickly before he reads my words and be-
gins making changes to cover his tracks.) Essentially, an *ad hominem*
is an argument directed at the individual rather than at the issues. I
must admit that I have seen a few such arguments from Latter-day
Saints, including some who have written for the FARMS Review of
Books. Most, however, discuss the issues themselves. In fairness, I ac-
knowledge that some anti-Mormon writers discuss the issues as well.

“Chuckle” Chimes In

At this point, Shades supplements his list with one said to have
come from “a BYU graduate, agnostic Mormon, and recovering
FARMSaholic.” I find it interesting that this individual, who goes un-
der the very appropriate name “Chuckle,” should use a loaded term
such as “FARMSaholic.” In the past couple of years, a number of
anti-Mormon writers have taken to writing about “the FARMSboys.”
Yes, FARMS publications must really be striking a nerve. Anyway,
here are the items from Chuckle:

1. *Poisoning the well* (or Korihor’s press). Chuckle claims that
“FARMS has carried on a campaign against Signature Books since
the early ’90s,” and, consequently, “FARMS hesitates to recommend
books coming from Signature because then they will look hypocriti-
cal.”3 I can categorically state that FARMS has no such policy. In

2. George L. Mitton and Rhett S. James, “A Response to D. Michael Quinn’s Homo-
157–58.

3. But see David Rolph Seely’s review of The House of the Lord: A Study of Holy
Talmage; and Grant Hardy’s review of Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon
Narratives, by Mark D. Thomas, in this issue, pp. 417–27 and 83–97, respectively.
1994, Dan Peterson asked if I would like to review Brent Metcalfe's book, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, which Signature had published. I hadn't seen Brent for a decade, but I considered him to be brilliant, so I was eager to see what he had done and therefore agreed to write the review. At the time, I had no idea that Metcalfe and his coauthors were critical of the Book of Mormon. As I read, I found numerous problems and so stated in my review. I was unaware that my review would appear in an issue of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* entirely dedicated to the Metcalfe book (vol. 6, no. 1). Still, I was happy to read most of the other reviews, for I learned much from them. (I acknowledge that one review seemed to me to have little substance, but it was still fun reading.)

2. *Making a mountain out of a molehill.* I suppose everyone does this from time to time, but I have found the critics to be the most proficient at it. Chuckle thinks that the *Review* was out of line publishing "a review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* that was longer than the book itself" and that "William Hamblin devoted a novella-sized (75 pages) review to a *Dialogue* article on Kabbalah," etc. *New Approaches* represented a significant attack on the Book of Mormon and was worthy of a significant reply containing real gems of scholarship. I suspect that other reviewers feel as I do. I note that, in connection with his "molehill" complaint, Chuckle deplored "the review of Quinn's *Same-Sex Dynamics.*" The fact is that Quinn is wrong on so many points and cites so many things out of context that he also deserved the lengthy treatment. As a trained historian, he should know better, and it was appropriate for the reviewers to show how he had abandoned scholarly values just to promote his personal agenda. As for lengthy treatments, I suppose Chuckle and Dr. Shades will object that this current review is longer than the Shades article itself. But, like the books mentioned above, it deserves to be thoroughly analyzed.

4. Brent Metcalfe and I are still on cordial terms, disagreeing on issues but each unwilling to demean the other.

5. Although this may not be true in terms of word count rather than page count.
3. Books by General Authorities. Chuckle claims that "objectivity goes out the window here. Nary a criticism." Not many books written by General Authorities have been the subject of reviews, and Chuckle claims that if anyone wrote a negative review of a book by a General Authority he would "probably lose their [his or her] ecclesiastical endorsement and thus be forced to resign from BYU." But any scholar is grateful for constructive criticism; that is how progress is made.⁶

4. Reviewing FARMS books. Chuckle claims that "FARMS reviewers seem less than objective about FARMS books." He seems to have missed the review in which one of my articles (in the FARMS book Warfare in the Book of Mormon) was panned by the reviewer.⁷ Believe me, I noticed. Still, given the high quality of the books produced by FARMS, I think a serious reviewer would be hard-pressed to find fault with them. As I said earlier, each book or article goes through a peer-review process in which the author finds himself defending his position and digging up additional material to support his work. These publications also go through rigorous source checking, during which process the FARMS publications staff checks every reference in every article and book to ensure that the passage says what the author claims and that the bibliographic information and pagination are correct. I know of no other publisher that goes to this much trouble to ensure accuracy. This is not to say that FARMS publications are perfect, but seemingly more care is taken than in most publishing houses.

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⁶. But we did give a negative review to a book by H. Verlan Anderson, formerly of the Seventy; see Ralph C. Hancock’s review of The Book of Mormon and the Constitution, by H. Verlan Anderson, FARMS Review of Books 9/2 (1997): 1-10. We have also reviewed books by President Ezra Taft Benson (1 [1989]: 12) and Elder Jeffery R. Holland (10/2 [1998]: 7-8)—and these two books are the kind of hortatory or homiletic writing that no communicant Latter-day Saint is likely to have a problem with.

5. **Incestuous citing.** A number of other critics have leveled this same complaint against FARMS publications. Chuckle writes, "FARMS reviewers have an annoying habit of referencing and promoting articles and books by other FARMS writers. They'll reference a few FARMS articles and pronounce the issue closed." At the risk of annoying Chuckle further, I'd like to ask him to get serious. In order to demonstrate a point that has already been established by oneself or by another scholar, it is normal to cite the earlier study. This is a common practice in the worldwide scholarly community, and it surprises me that Chuckle, who claims to be a BYU graduate, has never been exposed to the practice in his academic studies. Anthropologists publishing in the *American Anthropologist*, for example, frequently cite articles previously published in the same forum. It's a normal academic procedure. In my opinion, some of the best Book of Mormon work has been published by FARMS, so it's natural, when writing about the Book of Mormon, to cite those earlier publications. When it comes to critics who continue to raise the same issues but do not respond to the information published by FARMS, it is even more important to draw attention to those responses in reviews of those critics' work.

6. **Talking out of both sides of their mouth.** It's hard to comment on this one, since Chuckle gives no examples. He says that FARMS denies being "the last word on Mormon scholarship or apologetics," yet "they smugly laud their own books." A scholarly publication recognizes scholarship wherever it finds it. A brief glimpse at the editor's picks will show FARMS books in a small minority since the choice is large.

7. **Turning a review into a testimony meeting.** Chuckle seems not to have attended a testimony meeting lately; otherwise, he'd have used a different term. Again, the *Review* is a scholarly publication and sticks to that tradition.

**Shades Has Company**

Following the list provided by Chuckle, Shades appends a piece from an online bulletin board that lists "the five skills of an LDS
apologist,” written by one “SteveR.” Since the writer’s list is accompanied by neither explanations nor examples, I shall not dignify it with a response.

After citing the contributions from SteveR, Shades lists other Web sites that contain similar information. One site is described thus: “Read what some people think FARMS really stands for,” and concludes, “Not for the humor-impaired!” I find a bit of irony in this, since neither Shades nor Chuckle seems to appreciate the humor in some of the reviews published by FARMS. It seems that humor is a one-way street for them. I hasten to add that we at FARMS have, indeed, laughed at some of the suggested meanings of the name.

Good Advice

Near the end of his article, Dr. Shades writes, “Don’t just take our word for it, though. Go to FARMS Review of Books and see for yourself!” I echo this sentiment, though for totally different reasons. There are some real gems of evidence for the LDS scriptures in the reviews, and it’s too bad that more people don’t read them. Some of the best Book of Mormon and Latter-day Saint history research shows up in the reviews—research prompted by things written by the critics. From that perspective alone, I am grateful to have the FARMS Review of Books.