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INTRODUCTION

As we stand at the threshold of the twenty-first century, the achievements of the last hundred years stand out in bold relief. Just as many astonishing and incredibly useful discoveries have been made in numerous areas of research—from technology to medical science—surprising advances have similarly been made in the field of Book of Mormon studies. In 1909, when B. H. Roberts published the first two volumes of his *New Witnesses for God*, drawing together his favorite evidences in support of the Book of Mormon, no one could have dreamed of or anticipated the outpouring of discoveries in that book that would follow in the twentieth century. *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* takes inventory of many of the most striking of those discoveries that support the claim that the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith from bona fide ancient records.

During the twentieth century, many writers contributed to Book of Mormon research. Among the most important yields of evidences were those set forth in the three volumes of Roberts's

New Witnesses for God (1909, 1911), in which Roberts focused mainly on the theology of the Nephite prophets but also wrestled with the historical, geographical, and cultural implications of their records. Janne Sjodahl produced a significant one-volume commentary, the first of its kind, *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (1927), which examined a variety of cultural and linguistic dimensions of the book. In 1942, Francis Kirkham published a two-volume work, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, focusing on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in the 1820s.

It was not until the late 1940s and 1950s that Sidney B. Sperry and Hugh W. Nibley began examining the Book of Mormon extensively in the context of ancient cultures. Sperry, ultimately in his *Book of Mormon Compendium* (1968), looked to ancient Israel for background information behind the words of Lehi, Nephi, and their descendants.

Nibley, in his groundbreaking volumes *Lehi in the Desert* (1952), *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1964), and *Since Cumorah* (1967), widened the scope of inquiry and looked throughout the ancient Near East, Egypt, Arabia, Israel, and the Mediterranean world for answers to such questions as, “Does [the Book of Mormon] correctly reflect ‘the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time’? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the *mise-en-scène* mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?”¹

Occasionally, Nibley likened Joseph Smith’s translation of the Book of Mormon to shooting arrows and being right on target, scoring “hits” or “bull’s-eyes.”² For Nibley, such dead aim in the Book of Mormon occurs whenever a certain detail has significant and astonishing parallels to the an-

cient world, especially when those parallels were unknown to the world at the time of Joseph Smith. At times, Joseph hit not only the broadside of the ancient cultural barn but the bull's-eye as well, and with his eyes blindfolded to boot. Referring to the book of Ether alone, Nibley wrote, "The list of bull's-eyes is a long one," and the "percentage of hits is not less staggering."³

Nibley explained further:

Even if every parallel were the purest coincidence, we would still have to explain how the Prophet contrived to pack such a dense succession of happy accidents into the scriptures he gave us. Where the world has a perfect right to expect a great potpourri of the most outrageous nonsense, and in anticipation has indeed rushed to judgment with all manner of premature accusations, we discover whenever ancient texts turn up to offer the necessary checks and controls that the man was astonishingly on target in his depiction of general situations, in the almost casual mention of peculiar oddities, in the strange proper names, and countless other unaccountable details. . . . As the evidence accumulates, it is not the Prophet but his critics who find themselves with a lot of explaining to do.⁴

In this work, Nibley was not alone. Dozens of other scholars, trained in biblical studies, archaeology, classics, history, law, linguistics, anthropology, political science, philosophy, Near Eastern studies, literature, and numerous other fields, began noticing similar hits arising out of their own fields of study. Books and articles in the field of Book of Mormon studies blossomed.⁵ In the 1980s and 1990s, research updates were published monthly in the newsletter of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, and those cutting-edge reports were collected and published in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (1992) and *Pressing Forward with the Book*

of Mormon (1999). Also during those two decades, the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University produced a series of volumes containing scores of additional essays on various features of the Book of Mormon.⁶ Scattered among all these publications were so many further hits that it became difficult for new readers to get up to speed in studying the Book of Mormon.

In order to help people find access to this substantial body of research, the editors of the present volume set out to identify, collect, catalog, and publish as many such hits and other Book of Mormon parallels to the ancient world as possible. With the help of other colleagues, we scanned the entire scope of Book of Mormon research and collected many impressive findings from the last part of the twentieth century. We then invited several of the most active Book of Mormon researchers to select and summarize a number of these discoveries, as well as those from previous generations of scholars. The result is a rich array of keen observations, mainly uncovering details that Joseph Smith, in all likelihood, had no possible knowledge of in 1829 while he was translating the Book of Mormon. The present collection does not exhaust all of the possibilities, but it will help readers, especially those not fully conversant with the research literature, to skim the cream of this extensive and sometimes hard-to-find academic literature.

Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon comprises twelve chapters with more than one hundred hits or other evidences and ancient parallels. The opening chapter holds special significance because it was authored by Elder Neal A. Maxwell, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. All of the contributors add distinct perspectives of knowledge to Book of Mormon studies because they represent a wide variety of professional fields, including Hebrew, Arabic, Egyptology,

biblical law, political science, education, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Mesoamerica, and Jewish studies. The appendix contains hits culled from Dr. Nibley's writings.

Not all of the points presented in this volume carry equal weight. Some are obvious bull's-eyes, and others simply hit the outer edges of the target. Some of these echoes from the ancient world reverberate loudly, others faintly. Some are stronger, some are weaker, but all are of significant probative interest. In collecting and selecting these items, we have tried to include

- points that are clearly present in ancient sources,
- items that are clearly reflected in the text of the Book of Mormon,
- details that are relatively obscure or subtle,
- patterns or practices that are complex or intricate,
- features that are unusual or distinctive,
- information that was little known in the 1820s,
- scholarship that was unavailable to Joseph Smith, and
- insights that require considerable training to detect or appreciate even today.

Although many questions remain to be explored in the world of Book of Mormon research, important advances have been made in the twentieth century, and those strides are becoming more widely recognized.

Astute readers will notice few areas of overlap between the points selected and discussed by the various contributors to this volume. This is not coincidental, for the participants have met together and coordinated coverage. Over the years, these researchers have openly shared, critiqued, appreciated, and benefited from one another's work. The editors have deliberately sought to minimize areas of overlap by assigning or

shifting the discussion of particular topics among the authors, always with the consent of those asked to defer.

Readers should understand that the points discussed in this volume are only brief summaries. Behind each one stand various scholarly sources, both ancient and modern, as well as the analyses of several scholars, who are frequently but not always Latter-day Saints. Thus, the selections in this book serve especially as points of entry into the ongoing world of scholarship concerning ancient civilizations.

We hope this book will be easy to use. For readers' convenience, each hit has been identified in the margin, and the index lists each of these points alphabetically.

We express great appreciation to Don Brugger, associate director of publications at FARMS, for his tireless assistance in helping to bring this volume together and to completion. Daniel McKinlay extracted the hits from the works of Hugh Nibley. Many others in the FARMS editorial and research departments also contributed significantly to this volume.

Now we invite readers to enjoy a survey of echoes and evidences of the Book of Mormon as an ancient book, as Book of Mormon research moves forward into the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. Hugh W. Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, ed. John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 4.
2. See, for example, *ibid.*, 255, 263.
3. *Ibid.*, 255.
4. Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 325–26.
5. A good summary of this scholarship is found in Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).
6. See, for example, Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: Alma, the Testimony of the Word* (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992).