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Part Three: Letting the Text Speak for Itself

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PART THREE



LETTING THE TEXT SPEAK FOR ITSELF

Because most critics of the Book of Mormon have started from the position that the book couldn't be true—either because they don't believe angels exist or because they fear Mormonism may threaten their own religious commitment—they have not bothered to take the book seriously at all. Admittedly, even the LDS community itself did not carefully study the book for over a century after it was first published, but the book itself will inevitably provide the most important evidence for or against its own authenticity. Classical scholars detect forgeries principally through careful examination of purported texts, and since midcentury, LDS scholars in particular have increasingly turned to the text as the appropriate source for discovering whether the book is authentic. In this section, scholars present a variety of findings that have come from painstaking and detailed analysis of the text and the stories the authors unintentionally tell below the surface. It is these kinds of textual studies that are proving to be the most effective defense of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

As the original discoverer of the elaborate literary

pattern of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, John W. Welch looks back over three decades of study and debate and asks just what can be proven by the existence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. His modest and careful responses to that question are wide ranging. Chiasmus reveals much about the Book of Mormon writers and their culture and poses formidable evidence of the book's antiquity. Donald W. Parry also looks at poetic and rhetorical patterns in the text, concluding that the occurrence of three typically Hebraic literary structures is strong evidence of ancient composition and that careful attention to these structures will enhance our understanding of and appreciation for the text.

John L. Hilton approaches texts quite differently, letting his computer do the analysis by counting and comparing selected words in defined relationships. It has been demonstrated elsewhere that individual authors leave a unique stamp or wordprint on their writings that can usually be detected through this kind of analysis. On the basis of this finding, Hilton asserts that neither Joseph Smith nor any of the other candidates for authorship of the book set forward by critics could have written the Book of Mormon. Their wordprints are closer to each other than to any part of the book. Furthermore, the parts of the book that claim to be authored by different prophets do in fact have distinguishable wordprints. Statistical analysis of the text confirms Joseph Smith's explanation of the book's origins.

James E. Smith demonstrates how the book tells stories its authors never considered by demographically analyzing population growth through Nephite history. Applying the most advanced techniques currently available to demographers for estimating historical populations, Smith carefully and conservatively examines the numerous incidental references to certain people in the record. Numbers that may seem excessively high from an intuitive or common sense

perspective he shows to be well within the range of plausibility as defined by the demographers' model.

The final two contributors to this section analyze textual content. John A. Tvedtnes points out the close linkage between three different passages that recall in their own ways the dramatic events and emotions of Alma's conversion. Tvedtnes shows how these multiple remembrances enrich and expand one another and how typical this phenomenon is in other similar records. John W. Welch compares elements of the Book of Mormon to an early Christian document that was dropped from the canon in the sixth century. Although we cannot yet explain how or why the Narrative of Zosimus contains revelations that match some distinctive elements of Nephi's writings, comparing the Narrative, which existed only in unavailable Syriac and Greek forms in 1830, to the Book of Mormon shows they must have some common connection. That connection would have to be ancient because Zosimus is dated to the time of Christ or earlier.