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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

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Joseph Smith Right on Target, New Book Shows

In his writings over the years, Hugh Nibley has often pointed out “hits” and “bull’s-eyes” in the Book of Mormon—details about the ancient world that were unknown until recent times but that Joseph Smith got right anyway. Serious Book of Mormon research took shape in the early 1900s but has accelerated in recent decades, establishing an entire field of scholarly endeavor and yielding many clues to the book’s ancient origins.

Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon, the Institute’s latest publication issued under the FARMS imprint, takes inventory of those striking discoveries of the past century. It conveniently summarizes more than 100 hits in 500-plus pages. The 12 chapters are separately authored by some of the most active Book of Mormon researchers, including the book’s editors: Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch. The cumulative effect is weighty.

Elder Neal A. Maxwell’s opening chapter on the process by which the Prophet Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon characterizes the translation as “a marvelous feat of inspiration.” The next chapter reprints Welch’s instructive study on the role of evidence in nurturing faith. The remaining chapters—which reflect academic perspectives ranging from ancient Near Eastern studies and anthropology to political science and Egyptology—include contributions by S. Kent Brown, Alison V. P. Coutts, John Gee, Noel B. Reynolds, Stephen D. Ricks, John L. Sorenson, and John A. Tvedtnes.

An appendix highlights an array of hits culled from Nibley’s voluminous writings. All of the hits covered in *Echoes and Evidences* are listed alphabetically at the end of the book with their corresponding page numbers. Icons in the margins throughout the book draw these hits to the attention of all readers.

Here is a sampling of the interesting observations in the book:

“Lehi’s dream is not at home in Joseph Smith’s world but is at home in a world preserved both by archaeological remains and in the customs and manners of Arabia’s inhabitants.”—*S. Kent Brown*

“Considering Joseph Smith’s educational background and his very limited knowledge of the Bible, . . . it is very doubtful that he could have extrapolated the details of asylum from the Bible and incorporated them into the story of the people of Ammon.”—*Alison V. P. Coutts*

“Nineteenth-century-American notions of romantic love are far removed from the patterns of Nephite and Jaredite courtships mentioned in the Book of Mormon, clearly separating the book in that regard from the cultural milieu of Joseph Smith’s day.”—*John Gee*

“More than fifty able English scholars labored for seven years, using previous translations, to produce the King James Version of the Bible, averaging about one precious page per day. The Prophet Joseph Smith would sometimes produce ten pages per day!”—*Neal A. Maxwell*

“Joseph’s level of education and familiarity with the Bible could not have equipped him with the requisite literary knowledge and skill to craft so many Hebraisms so seamlessly and correctly into the Book of Mormon text.”—*Donald W. Parry*

“The description of Columbus provided by 1 Nephi 13:12 . . . remains a remarkable demonstration of the revelatory accuracy of the Book of Mormon. It is only with the growth of Columbus scholarship in recent years . . . that English-speaking readers have been fully able to see how remarkably the admiral’s own self-understanding parallels the portrait of him given in the Book of Mormon.”—*Daniel C. Peterson*

“Joseph Smith went out on a limb when he included specific dates and population data in his translation of

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“Let Us Be Strong”: Nephi’s Courage in the Context of Ancient Near Eastern Military Exhortations

The ancient Near East often witnessed the rise and fall of powerful nations, a fact of life reflected in the literary and cultural traditions of the time. Given the constant specter of war, military leaders frequently needed to exhort their people to extraordinary levels of bravery. Literary evidence shows that the phrase to “be strong” was commonly used in a military sense. The Book of Mormon, with its roots in the ancient Near East, also reflects that usage.

Biblical scholar Michael Fishbane has noted that, judging “from a host of ancient Near Eastern and biblical sources, it is quite certain that phrases like ‘be strong’ or ‘do not fear’ originally served to exhort an individual to take courage in the face of a new and difficult task.”¹ He has further shown that in the Old Testament the phrase “be strong” was specifically used in military orations and exhortations.²

In his final speech as king of Israel, David, the founder of the newly established monarchy, admonished his successor to “be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man” (1 Kings 2:2). A survey of David’s discourse shows that this commandment was specifically articulated in military terms.³

With a similar statement, Moses counseled the children of Israel, who were preparing for a series of confrontations with the indigenous population of Canaan, to “be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the Lord thy God, he it is that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee” (Deuteronomy 31:6).

Moses then provided Joshua with similar counsel since, as Moses’ successor, he would lead the military charge: “Be strong and of a good courage” (Deuteronomy 31:7; compare Joshua 1:6–7). While these statements might not prove especially significant to Western ears, the mandate to “be strong” held considerable meaning in the ancient Near East.⁴

The charge to “be strong” appears in the Book of Mormon with the same connotation attested in ancient Near Eastern texts.⁵ Near the beginning of the book, Nephi provides an account of his family’s efforts to acquire the brass plates from Laban. After Laman failed to secure the plates, Nephi, who apparently modeled his narrative after the Exodus account, admonished his brothers to take courage with an exhortation similar to Moses’ military oration. In the face of this “new and difficult task,” Nephi encouraged his

brothers in a manner reminiscent of Near Eastern leaders:

“Therefore let us go up; *let us be strong* like unto Moses; for he truly spake unto the waters of the Red Sea and they divided hither and thither, and our fathers came through, out of captivity, on dry ground, and *the armies of Pharaoh* did follow and were drowned in the waters of the Red Sea. . . . Let us go up; the Lord is able to deliver us, even as our fathers, and to *destroy Laban, even as the Egyptians*” (1 Nephi 4:2–3).

Nephi’s admonition not only begins with the biblical phrase “let us be strong,” but it also reflects a military connotation. This usage is also seen at the beginning of Nephi’s address, where Nephi attempts to rouse his brethren with the statement “behold he [the Lord] is mightier than all the earth, then why not mightier than Laban and his fifty, yea, or even than his tens of thousands?” (1 Nephi 4:1).

From these statements it appears that Nephi adopted the oratorical techniques used by Near Eastern military leaders in their efforts to strengthen their audiences’ resolve to go forth and accomplish a difficult task.⁶ In so doing, Nephi demonstrated both his faith in the Lord and his reliance upon the cultural traditions of biblical society. ■

Notes

1. Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988), 384. See his study “The ‘Sign’ in the Hebrew Bible,” *Shenaton: An Annual of Biblical and Near Eastern*

- Studies* 1 (1975): 217–19 [in Hebrew].
2. See *ibid.*
 3. David specifically advises Solomon to seek vengeance against his political enemies in 1 Kgs. 2:5–9.
 4. Similar passages from the Hebrew Bible include Deut. 20:1; 31:23; Josh. 1:6; 1 Chron. 22:13; 28:20; 2 Chron. 19:11. Equivalent phrases are known from ancient Akkadian and Sumerian texts. The longevity of this usage is attested in Paul's first-century admonition to Timothy (see 2 Tim. 2:1–4).
 5. For example, compare David's admonition to Solomon to "*be thou strong therefore, and shew thyself a man*" (1 Kgs. 2:2) with Lehi's exhortation to his sons to "arise from the dust . . . and *be men*" (2 Ne. 1:21).
 6. As seen in Deut. 20:1–4 ff., most Near

Eastern military exhortations contained similar elements. For example, a priest was required to encourage Israelite troops before battle. Among other things, he was instructed to say, "Let not your hearts faint, fear not, and do not tremble, neither be ye terrified" (v. 3).

By David E. Bokovoy

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the Book of Mormon. Only in light of sophisticated analysis . . . can modern readers appreciate how true to actual human experience such details in the Book of Mormon are."—*Noel B. Reynolds*

"The series of events outlined in Mosiah 1–6 reflects what biblical scholars call the 'treaty/covenant pattern' in ancient Israelite literature—a literary feature that was completely unknown when the Book of Mormon was published in 1830 and was not identified and studied until the past two generations."—*Stephen D. Ricks*

"No one in the nineteenth century could have known that cement, in fact, was extensively used in Mesoamerica beginning at about this time, the middle of the first century B.C."—*John L. Sorenson*

"The fact that the three earliest known manuscripts with Bible text are, respectively, written on metallic plates, written in a reformed Egyptian script reflecting an underlying Semitic language, and hidden away for future discovery demonstrates that the Book of Mormon fits an ancient pattern."—*John A. Tvedtnes*

"Similarities between the laws of Mosiah and Eshnunna and the Egyptian mathematical papyri (which were unknown in Joseph Smith's day) show yet another way in which the Book of Mormon presents specific details whose roots run unexpectedly deep in ancient societies."—*John W. Welch*

The editors note that while not all of the hits discussed in the book carry equal weight, they all are of "significant probative interest." As substantial as the book is, each point by necessity receives brief treatment compared to the quantity of supporting scholarship—by LDS and non-LDS scholars

alike, in many cases—that could be added if space allowed. As the editors explain, "The selections in this book serve especially as points of entry into the ongoing world of scholarship concerning ancient civilization."

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Nibley on How Time Vindicates the Book of Mormon

"Even if every parallel [in the Book of Mormon] 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."

—*The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (1989), 325–26, quoted in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*

Echoes and Evidences does not attempt to cover the waterfront of all Book of Mormon scholarship; rather, it skims the cream of that extensive academic literature and will acquaint readers with a rich array of keen observations that go a long way toward increasing appreciation of the ancient character of a most remarkable book. (To purchase a copy of *Echoes and Evidences*, use the enclosed order form or visit the bookstore section of the FARMS Web site.)

INSTITUTE NEWS

Institute's MSI Images Featured in ACOR Series

The Institute is pleased to have assisted with a new publication by the American Center for Oriental Research, in Amman, Jordan. Titled *The Petra Papyri I*, this volume on the carbonized scrolls from ancient Petra features 26 full plates of multispectral images taken by Steven Booras and Gene Ware during their Institute-sponsored work of imaging the Petra papyri. Access to the superior MSI images enabled scholars to transcribe the burned scrolls with greater accuracy than ever before. The Institute looks forward not only to providing additional images to ACOR for the remaining volumes of its Petra series, but also to further assisting the international scholarly community through its work in electronically preserving ancient texts.

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATIONS

FARMS Review of Books (vol. 14, no. 1–2), edited by Daniel C. Peterson, reviews books on Book of Mormon geography limited to the Great Lakes region, a book on the life of Joseph Smith, a book by evangelical scholars who challenge LDS apologetic scholarship, and other books. Available in late November 2002.

Revelation, Reason, and Faith: Essays in Honor of Truman G. Madsen, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and Stephen D. Ricks, contains scholarly essays on such topics as Joseph Smith and the earliest history of the LDS Church, temples, Judaism and Mormonism, theology, and philosophy. Available in late November 2002.

Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon, edited by Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, collects some of the most striking evidences for the Book of Mormon as an ancient record. Available in mid-November.

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

FARMS makes interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

It is hoped that this information will help all interested people to "come unto Christ" (Jacob 1:7) and to understand and appreciate more fully the scriptural witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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