Review of Books on the Book of Mormon

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In 1984 the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.) began publishing a one-page monthly bulletin entitled “Update,” which was sent to a small audience of donors and interested researchers. The bulletin contained a timely and provocative report on some aspect of Book of Mormon studies often billed as a “new discovery.” This volume is a collection of eighty-five short articles, including most of these bulletins, and several other similar studies from the F.A.R.M.S newsletters, described by the editor as “brief readable reports of new research on the Book of Mormon, aimed at a general audience” (p. xi). Indeed each article averages two-and-a-half pages and is comprehensible to a general reader. Originally unsigned, these articles now bear the names of the authors and collaborators, with updated notes and bibliography, and many are accompanied by charts, diagrams, and photos. They are arranged as they relate to the Book of Mormon text from 1 Nephi through Moroni. Thus this volume represents and typifies a decade of F.A.R.M.S. research and vividly demonstrates how F.A.R.M.S. has stimulated, consolidated, and communicated the study of the Book of Mormon both to the scholarly and the general audience.

For example, many of these short Updates have been expanded and developed by their authors since their first publication into substantial studies published by F.A.R.M.S. or elsewhere, as noted at the end of each piece. For example, Welch’s article “The Sermon at the Temple” (pp. 253–56), originally presented in 1988, has been developed into a significant monograph, *The Sermon at the Temple and the Sermon on the Mount*. The Astons’ work in the southern Arabian peninsula (pp. 47–52) continues with archaeological surveys and excavations. Issues of textual criticism in the Book of Mormon (pp.

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Topics of Book of Mormon geography (pp. 145–49, 183–88) continue to be discussed in the burgeoning literature of Book of Mormon geographies. And issues of warfare (pp. 173–82, 189–92, 199–205) have been followed up by a F.A.R.M.S. conference on warfare and the publication of the proceedings.

Most of the articles in this volume are part of the apologetic tradition—written by the faithful believer, addressing questions posed by believer and nonbeliever alike, and read and relished for the most part by the believing insider. Hence the major theme of this collection is the defense or enhancement of the Book of Mormon. This defense is carried out by addressing some of the issues commonly raised by readers of the Book of Mormon. For example, how many of us have asked ourselves: How long did it take to translate the Book of Mormon? (pp. 1–8). What is the evidence that Columbus was directed by the Lord in his "discovery" of America? (pp. 32–36). Did Joseph Smith really say Lehi landed in Chile? (pp. 57–61). What did Charles Anthon actually say to Martin Harris? (pp. 73–76). Why was Joseph Smith identified as the "Author and Proprietor" of the Book of Mormon on the title page of the 1830 edition? (pp. 154–57). What were the gold plates made out of and how much did they weigh? (pp. 275–78). And then there are issues that many of us have never thought of, such as the relationship between the Liahona and lodestone (pp. 44–46), evidence of domesticated barley in America (pp. 130–32), possibilities for Book of Mormon "silk" and "linen" in America (pp. 162–64), prophecy among the Maya (pp. 263–65), and possible linguistic connections between Hebrew and Uto-Aztecan (pp. 279–81). Just when we have become accustomed to Book of Mormon parallelism (pp. 80–82) and chiasmus (pp. 230–35), now we learn there is also merismus, difrasismo (pp. 80–82), antenantiosis (pp. 96–97), epanalepsis (pp. 165–66), and last

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6 "Apologetics" comes from the Greek word apologia, meaning "defense."
but not least, climax (pp. 290–92). There is rarely a dull moment in this book.

Distinct from the apologetic articles, which deal for the most part with mundane issues (logistics, culture, customs, literary devices, geography, realia), there are several articles that try to get at the spiritual message of the Book of Mormon. I particularly liked Louis Midgley’s article about the importance of “remembering” (pp. 127–29), in which he documents a gospel principle presented throughout the Book of Mormon with its various ramifications in our own spiritual lives. This short three-page article elegantly outlines the entire theme of “remembering” from the title page through Moroni and is accompanied by a reference to a fuller treatment of the topic by Midgley in another volume and references to two excellent books on this same topic in biblical studies. Likewise, Noel Reynolds examines “The Gospel as Taught by the Nephite Prophets” (pp. 257–59), in which he identifies a distinctive six-point formula found throughout the Book of Mormon which serves as a paradigm of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This collection raises many significant issues that deserve further study and discussion. For example, what is the nature of the English translation of the Book of Mormon, what is its relationship with other ancient languages, and how are we to treat this translation language? While several articles attempt to elucidate language in the Book of Mormon by means of Egyptian, Hebrew, Greek, Maya, and even Uto-Aztecan, the variety of approaches employed reflects different assumptions regarding the English text of the Book of Mormon. Consider the following examples:

1. It seems clear from Book of Mormon contexts that the English terms “thieves” and “robbers” represent distinctive and different ancient words and concepts (pp. 248–49). This research argues that the Book of Mormon translation of specific ancient terms is precise.

2. The words “strait” and “straight”—homophones in English with different meanings—have been interchanged in various editions of the Book of Mormon (pp. 260–62), apparently due to the fact that Oliver Cowdery almost always wrote “strait” when Joseph Smith said “strait [sic].” The meaning of these words must then be deduced from context, other scriptural passages, and the English dictionary from the time of Joseph Smith. This discussion suggests that the language of the Book of Mormon has already suffered in the process of trans-
mission, and that the English words may be explained by possibilities from the full range of English meanings.

3. The phrase known from the KJV of Isaiah 11:11 "islands of the sea," found only in the early portions of the Book of Mormon, is interpreted as evidence that the Nephites initially thought they were on an island (p. 283). Yet in Hebrew, as attested by virtually all modern translations, the Hebrew word (?) doesn't mean "island" at all, but rather "coastland," which would simply indicate the Nephites understood they had reached the promised land by boat. This argument would have us believe the KJV passages in the Book of Mormon are to be treated as precise and correct translations of the original language.

4. Finally, one of the authors puts forth the interesting theory that the directions north, south, east, and west in the Book of Mormon became confused between the Israelite culture and the Egyptian writing system, which resulted in the English word "north" really meaning "west," "south" meaning "east," and so forth (pp. 183-86). In other words, the Book of Mormon writers conceptualized their directions in Hebrew but wrote them in Egyptian characters meaning something else. The Egyptian was then correctly rendered, but the direction in English isn't the same as the original intent of the author. According to this discussion, then, the translation of the Book of Mormon is not so precise but must be examined, and, in some cases, modified in light of Hebrew culture and Egyptian language.

Each of these various arguments is based on significantly different assumptions about the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon. In one case the translation is so precise the terms "thief" and "robber" can carefully be distinguished in each occurrence; in another case "strait" and "straight" have become confused through textual transmission; the understanding of Isaiah 11:11 depends on an imprecise KJV translation, "island," instead of the Hebrew "coastland"; and in another case because of our understanding of geography "north" should be understood as "west." The lack of an ancient text makes much of this discussion hypothetical, but perhaps the time has come for serious work on the nature of the translation of the Book of Mormon. The forthcoming completion of an exhaustive critical
edition of the English Book of Mormon text will be an important resource for such studies.\(^7\)

In addition there is great emphasis in these articles on comparing Book of Mormon peoples and customs to various aspects of the ancient Near East and the Old Testament. For example, much is made about parallels of sacral kingship rituals found in coronation customs (pp. 66–68, 114–16, 124–26), comparing them with temple ritual. Yet Mosiah completely does away with kingship in Nephite society (Mosiah 29) and replaces it with the concept of the “voice of the people,” a concept that is quite unlike anything known from the ancient Near East or the Bible. What then are we to make of the importance of “sacral kingship” in the political sphere?

Likewise, many passages of the Book of Mormon are discussed and understood by comparison to Jewish feasts and festivals, part of the Mosaic law, largely documented from later rabbinic sources rather than the Old Testament. For example, Abinadi is seen in the context of Pentecost (pp. 135–38), the dancing maidens in the context of the Fifteenth of Av (pp. 139–41), Alma’s sons in the context of Passover (pp. 196–98), and covenant renewal in the context of the New Years’ Celebration (pp. 209–11). Many of these comparisons are compelling, yet the Book of Mormon is remarkably silent about any specific festival or ritual known from the Mosaic law. The only specific mention of practices from the law of Moses is the sacrifices and offerings offered by the people who are non-Levites and with the authority of the Melchizedek priesthood (Alma 13), which is not typical of the Mosaic law as practiced and recorded in the Old Testament. Perhaps it is worth considering the Book of Mormon practice of the Mosaic law. Did the Book of Mormon peoples practice the law of Moses precisely as outlined in the Old Testament?

Apologetics—the defense of the kingdom—is a genre whose integrity relies on accuracy and even-handedness. The articles in this book are written by specialists for readers with no particular expertise in the subjects treated. Therefore, most readers do not have the capability to check on either accuracy or overstatement in the arguments in these articles. There is need

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for caution in this regard. Arguments from two examples will suffice.

1. The discussion of “Textual Criticism of the Book of Mormon” (pp. 77–79) demonstrates passages where the Book of Mormon text agrees with other ancient texts which were not “available to Joseph” (p. 77). The reader is given the impression that ancient texts verify the differences between the Book of Mormon and the biblical text. Four examples are given:

The first is found in 2 Nephi 20:29 (=Isaiah 10:29) where the Book of Mormon renders Hebrew “Ramah” as “Ramath.” The form “Ramath” is the correct rendering of Hebrew “Ramah” in construct position—when it is followed by another noun: “Ramath-lehi” (Joshua 19:8). We are assured the forms “Ramata” and “Rameta” occur in a later unnamed Aramaic Targum and a Syriac text. To a person who does not know much about textual criticism this seems like evidence of the correctness of the spelling Ramath. But this is problematic. Both of these texts are in different languages from Hebrew. Have the spellings in Aramaic and Syriac been influenced by the construct form in Hebrew? What is being implied here? Is it possible a common Hebrew place name was spelled correctly only twice in antiquity, besides the Book of Mormon, and both times in Aramaic and Syriac and not Hebrew? Did Nephi sometimes speak Aramaic or Syriac? Is it possible Oliver Cowdery mis-spelled the word as in the case of “strait” and “straight”?

In the second example the author tells us Joseph Smith added an “it” to his rendition of Isaiah 48:11 in 1 Nephi 20:11 not present in any Greek or Hebrew text. In fact, the Book of Mormon adds “this” rather than “it”—which is found in KJV English in italics. Again we are assured “it” (or “this”?) is found in an unnamed Syriac manuscript, an Aramaic Targum, and a scribal correction to the Isaiah scroll from Qumran. A look at the Dead Sea Isaiah scroll (1Q Isaa) shows a scribal correction, but not the one claimed by the author. The correction in the margin adds Hebrew ki (KJV “how”) conforming to the Masoretic Text which is the basis for the King James Version—translated in this passage “how” in the KJV as well as in the Book of Mormon. Hebrew poetry often ellipses such particles which would be rendered “it” or “this,” which are necessarily supplied by the translator—as demonstrated by the host of words in the KJV in italics. Furthermore, a Targum is not meant to be a precise translation of the text at all but rather a paraphrase, and the addition of such a particle is typical of Targumic renderings. The argument
for textual evidence in this case is inaccurately presented and much weaker than claimed.

The third example is found in the 2 Nephi 27:3 quotation of Isaiah 29:7 where the Book of Mormon leaves out "Ariel"—just as the Jewish Aramaic Targum does. But the Targum replaces Ariel with "city"—as might be expected in a paraphrase. The Book of Mormon replaces it with "Zion," which is a perfectly acceptable substitute for Ariel. There is no textual evidence that parallels the Book of Mormon reading here.

In the end there is only one good example provided, noted many years ago by Sidney Sperry, of how textual criticism verifies a Book of Mormon reading—the example in 2 Nephi 12:16, which seems to include a line known only in a Jewish Targum and the Septuagint.8

Considering the many textual differences between the Book of Mormon, the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Septuagint, there is a surprising lack of textual evidence supporting Book of Mormon readings. This, of course, is not to say the Book of Mormon does not preserve authentic ancient readings, but rather suggests textual diversity was much greater in antiquity than is witnessed by more recent texts and versions.

2. The article about biblical evidence for the existence of Mulek (pp. 142–44) is significant, and the evidence is very suggestive to a Latter-day Saint reader, but the argument is seriously compromised by overstatement. It begins, "Biblical scholarship now bears out this Book of Mormon claim: king Zedekiah had a son named Mulek" (p. 142). But biblical scholarship, as noted throughout the article, has only suggested that Zedekiah had a son Malkiyahu (KJV Malchiah), and if so, it is possible that this name could be related to Mulek. These are only possibilities. The article cites 2 Kings 25:7 as biblical proof of Mulek’s survival, which says, “the sons of Zedekiah were killed,” but never says, “all the sons of Zedekiah were killed.” This is a valid observation. Next, the article cites Jeremiah 38:6, which mentions “Malkiah (= Heb. Malkiyahu) the son of Hammelech.” While the KJV renders Hammelech as a proper name, the article points out it is more likely it means simply “the king,” and thus the phrase may be translated “Malkiah the son of the king.”

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Some scholars (as discussed by Avigad)\textsuperscript{9} believe "son of the king" refers to a low office in the royal court,\textsuperscript{10} while others believe it refers to literal sons of the king.\textsuperscript{11} So it is possible Zedekiah had a son named Malkiyahu, though the article cites only scholars who argue the latter position.

The article then gives numerous possibilities how to derive Mulek from Malkiyahu.\textsuperscript{12} Malkiyahu is a theophoric name, meaning it contains the name of God Yahu (KJV Jehovah). It probably means "Yahu is king." A similar theophoric name, Berekyahu (KJV Berechiah), is attested in a Hebrew seal in its long form, Berekyahu, though it is found only in the Bible in its shorter form, without the theophoric element, as Baruch.\textsuperscript{13} A shortened form of a name is known as a hypocoristicon. By analogy we expect a form of Malk, or melek "king," as the shortened form of Malkiyahu. The problem is there is no known parallel in Hebrew, or any other Semitic language, that can explain the derivation of Mulek from Malki. The article lists a series of possibilities including the Hebrew \textit{qutl}, Ugaritic and Phoenician \textit{mulk}, Punic \textit{molk}, Hebrew \textit{molek}, Amorite \textit{Maluk}, and Akkadian and Eblaite \textit{Malik}. One is reminded of Charles Anthon's confident statement about the characters copied from the gold plates which Martin Harris brought him—"they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyrian, and Arabic" (Joseph Smith—History 1:64). Whenever one sees a list of possibilities as disparate as these, it is clear there is no one convincing parallel. There are serious problems with each of the proposals made. In Hebrew the noun \textit{melek} is a \textit{qatl}-type noun, not \textit{qutl}—as evidenced by \textit{malk}. Ugaritic and Phoenician \textit{mulk}, Punic \textit{molk}, and

\textsuperscript{9} Nahman Avigad, "Jerahmeel and Baruch," \textit{Biblical Archaeologist} 42/2 (Spring 1979): 117.
\textsuperscript{12} It is worth noting the vocalization of Mulek may not even be the original Semitic vocalization. The vocalization of the name could have changed from the time the Mulekites left Jerusalem until it was recorded by the Nephite writers in the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, the spelling that we have is based on a transcription of Joseph Smith's pronunciation and transliteration of these names for early nineteenth-century frontier English.
\textsuperscript{13} Avigad, "Jerahmeel and Baruch," 115–16.
Hebrew molek, as noted by the article, are probably from a different root than Hebrew malk, and it is not clear if Hebrew molek represents original or artificial vocalization. Amorite, like Hebrew, is a West Semitic language, but the vocalization Muluk is only attested at Mari—a long way from Israel in time (1800 B.C.) and space (Syria). In regard to Akkadian and Eblaite Malik, a scholar has noted, “in vocalized West Semitic names of the Iron Age we find only the form milk.”

In conclusion, the article quotes an unnamed “prominent non-Mormon ancient Near Eastern specialist” as saying, “If Joseph Smith came up with that one, he did pretty good [sic]!” This scholar is portrayed as being “in general agreement that ‘Malkiyahu, son of the King’ might very well be a son of King Zedekiah and that the short-form of the name could indeed be Mulek” (p. 144). But why is the name of the so-called specialist omitted? A similar allusion to an unnamed “professional” in an anti-Mormon book (a common ploy in anti-Mormon literature) was criticized by reviewer John Gee in the last issue of the Review of Books on the Book of Mormon. A reference to a scholarly authority requires a name; otherwise it is meaningless.

The danger of overstatement is illustrated by the fact that many of the “possibilities” suggested in this short piece on

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14 George C. Heider, The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment (Sheffield: JSOT, 1985): 226–28. Heider presents the possibility Hebrew molek may be derived from Hebrew m-l-k “to reign” (the root of the name Malkiyahu) but admits “such a phonological shift [is] otherwise unknown in Hebrew.” I am indebted to Dana Pike for several of the references cited in the notes.

15 The most recent scholarship argues there is no Ugaritic molk; see Heider, The Cult of Molek, 142–43. The vocalization of Hebrew molek has been debated for years. Some scholars have argued the vocalization is artificially analogized to Hebrew bosheth “shame” attested in the change of baal names to bosheth names; for discussion, see Heider, The Cult of Molek, 223–28.


17 Jeffrey H. Tigay, You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions (Atlanta: Scholars, 1986), 18. In addition, studies of the root m-l-k have concluded “none [of the names] is vocalized in the Masoretic Text with an ou vowel between the /ml and the /II/.” The expected noun of the root mlk element in Malkiyahu is melek, with suffixes malki or malkam.; see Heider, The Cult of Molek, 229.

Mulek are consequently incorporated as unquestioned facts by a presumably naive author in his article “Mulek” in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism. In the Encyclopedia, we learn “Mulek is a nickname derived from melek (Hebrew ‘king’), a diminutive term of endearment meaning ‘little king.’” But a hypocoristicon (shortened form without the theophoric element) is not necessarily a diminutive, nor does a shift in vowels make a diminutive. And since there is no way of demonstrating Mulek is a short form of Malkiyahu in the first place, how can one speak of a diminutive? The author continues, “Its longer form occurs in the Bible as Malkiyahu”—again, a statement that cannot be substantiated. The author correctly observes that Malkiyahu can be shortened by dropping the theophoric ending—just as Baruch is the shortened form of Berekyahu, and that the vowels can change when the theophoric ending is dropped. Thus we are left with Malki or some variation. The author of the Encyclopedia article explains that Mulek comes from Malki “since a is often assimilated to o or u in the vocalic structure of most Semitic languages.” It is true the long a or a short accented a can shift to an o or a u vowel in Semitic languages, but the a in Malki is short and unaccented (characteristic of segolete nouns like melek) and thus does not shift to o or u by any known linguistic rules. There is no attestation of a biblical name from the root m-l-k in Hebrew with an o or a u vowel between the /ml/ and the /ll/. The bibliography of the Encyclopedia article lists four articles, but the article from the F.A.R.M.S. volume is the only one that suggests or discusses the derivation of Mulek from Malchiyahu. So from possibilities in this F.A.R.M.S. article, some of them very tenuous, we now find in the Encyclopedia of Mormonism assured statements of fact based on the same evidence overstated in the “preliminary study.”

This could have been avoided with a more cautious statement of the evidence. Indeed, as the Book of Mormon reveals, Zedekiah had a son named Mulek, who survived the destruction.
of Jerusalem and his father’s death (Omni 1:15–16; Mosiah 25:2; Helaman 6:10; 8:21), and there is a possible reference to him in the Old Testament in the existence of one “Malkiyahu son of the king” (Jeremiah 38:6). It is quite remarkable that this biblical name of a possible son of Zedekiah shares the same root consonants with Book of Mormon Mulek. And it is certainly possible Mulek comes from or is related to the biblical name Malkiyahu. But this relationship cannot be explained by any known rules or parallels from comparative Semitics. In support of this relationship there are many attested phonological shifts in Semitic languages that cannot be easily explained, but the shift from Malkiyahu to Mulek is only hypothetical at this point since it is not attested in Semitic languages. Until further documentation, it remains as a tantalizing possibility which cannot be proved. It is possible that future study or discovery can add further light to the possible connection between Mulek and Malkiyahu. In the long run overstatement and inaccuracy tend to compromise rather than enhance the aims of apologetics.

At the time these articles first appeared, they were “preliminary” in nature, and many are accompanied by such disclaimers. But in this volume we are assured that “No Update has been released without close scrutiny by several scholars” (p. xi). I would recommend even more stringent review of this kind of material before it goes to press. There are Latter-day Saint scholars who are trained in many of these areas—and if they aren’t proficient maybe non-Latter-day Saint scholars—with names—could be consulted.

The editor of this volume, John Welch, clearly delineates in his preface the intended purpose of the authors of the articles in this volume. Quoting from B. H. Roberts, he reminds us of the importance of the Holy Ghost as the “chief source of evidence for the truth of the Book of Mormon.” And yet, following Roberts, “Secondary evidences 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” (pp. xiii–xiv).24 A reader who follows this admonition, relying primarily on the power of the Holy Ghost to teach the “truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5), and who reads the articles in this volume in the perspective intended by their authors, as secondary evidence of the Book of Mormon, will be richly rewarded.

Collections such as these are an important contribution and catalyst to serious study of the Book of Mormon. This volume is also an important resource for anyone teaching the Book of Mormon who is likely to be asked some of the questions discussed by the articles in this book. But it should be read with caution. Book of Mormon studies are still in their infancy. The editor and authors constantly remind us of the preliminary nature of most of these studies. Professor Welch urges us in our study of the Book of Mormon to identify those questions that may be answered through research and study to “work on the viable ones, gather relevant information, and propose and evaluate possible answers as far as current knowledge will allow” (pp. xii–xiii). There is still much to be done, much to be discussed, and many of these preliminary conclusions will be discarded, modified, and enlarged in the years to come.