

The Trajectory of Book of Mormon Studies
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We've been treated today to several good stories that make a presentation worthwhile. I am not sure that I have an entrancing story to tell you, but it will be a story of sorts, and it may provide some perspective of a certain value. I am concerned with the study of Book of Mormon studies, a field of work that can be called Book of Mormon studies.

However they might just as well say Church History studies, or any other field of study. I think there is merit in the potential benefit in performing studies in which we use the tools and materials of scholarship or science, to shed new light, to illuminate, and broaden our understanding of various fields of activity. What I call Book of Mormon studies has not really been considered a distinct domain of scholarship very often. I think it is becoming such, increasingly recognized as such, and what I have to say in the way the history of that activity, well I think it is becoming a more prominent field of study.

The text of the Book of Mormon, together with the its coming forth, and its influence, everything about the Book of Mormon constitutes largely an explored body of phenomena that deserves analysis and interest. The task is generally of the same nature as say the physical structure of an unexplored region to its geologists, may begin to direct their attention. What the geologist does is to take what he knows that is clarified, the geological structure of some other area, and plops it down on the new area that he wishes to shed light on, a transfer of method and ideas. In either case what one wishes to see done, is to make sense of the phenomenon the geologist wants to make sense of, the area that he began to examine. Studying, and carrying on what can be called Book of Mormon studies, also has the intent of providing, or like making sense of, the Book of Mormon.

Of course in the early days of the Church, those interested in the Book of Mormon made sense of the volume in one of two possible ways, neither of which more than skirted what can be considered scholarly study in that day. In the case of believers in the authenticity of the book, at best what they did was to borrow informally from early 19th century protestant interpretations of Biblical history and textual interpretation, that took a protestant position and pop that down on the Book of Mormon. So the first concerns in Book of Mormon study, were to show that the protestant Biblical positions agreed with the Book of Mormon ones, and therefore the Book of Mormon will sound correct and so is the Bible. That's not a lot of new light, they were confirming what they already believed. And those who doubted the authenticity of the book, the Book of Mormon made sense of it, but assuming that the Book of Mormon was fraudulent. They assumed that there were internal and external inconsistencies that would confirm their opinion, in the same way that other fraudulent documents could be detected by inconsistencies. Through the early decades of the Church's history the alternative view, to the one I had outlined was an unorganized attempt to correlate the cultural and geographical characteristics mentioned in the book with corresponding facts from the new world.

In 1844 in Nauvoo, the recently popular book published by John L. Stevens incidents of travel in Central America and so on, was used by some Church leaders to try to demonstrate that the Book

of Mormon made sense, as an historical account of ancient American civilization. Stevens said this reported in his book the "Discovery of the Great Mayan Ruins." Not much came of this effort in Nauvoo because none of the saints had mastered the content of scholarship. At that time that consisted a very little except Stevens' book, but they didn't know enough to do more than make a rather odd stab, at a correlation between Stevens' world ruins and the Book of Mormon account.

Aside from that one brief instance to provide an external context for the book, no other attempts LDS or non LDS, that displayed scholarly knowledge, appeared for many years. One reason obviously was in pioneer times there was no time for any version of scholarship, nor was there in fact any scholarship outside, that was relevant. Serious efforts of a scholarly nature to shed the light on the Book of Mormon began with three men; Sidney Sperry, Wells Jakeman, and Hugh Nibley. Their preparation to do work in this field had to wait until there were opportunities for employment. First of all opportunities in higher education for exposure to the tools of scholarship, and then for them to occupy their time, in an employed status doing scholarship that related to the Book of Mormon.

Sperry's Master's Thesis at the University of Chicago in 1926 addressed the relationship between the Book of Mormon, and the quotations therein from the prophet Isaiah. It represented the first attempt to examine the Book of Mormon text, using the methods of the scholar. Some of B.H. Roberts probings around that time, approached a level of scholarship, but lacked the depth to cross the threshold to genuine scholarly work. As early as 1938 on possible correlations between Book of Mormon features and Mesoamerican cultures. Nibley's orientation to study of the Book of Mormon came decade later. There were a few others, although they were not prepared in professional scholarship, and did not have professional positions, still proved on special topics, to make contributions that were not trivial. It may be noted that the stimuli for a most Book of Mormon studies up until the 1970s and 1980s were topics or problems "raised by non scholarly anti Book of Mormon critics", they raised the problems we tended to respond. But increasingly over the last 40 years where original questions had more often been addressed, topics that have seen worth intellectual probing for their own sakes rather than responses to criticism.

For instance my own work on Mesoamerican geographical and cultural context for the Nephites, has never been prompted by the concerns of critics. Probably the most influential original study, in the early period of this growth, was Jack Welch's recognition of the Kiasmus literary style. By the present day, most Book of Mormon scholarship is perused without regard to whether anti-Mormons raise the issues or not.

The pioneering efforts had only limited effect upon Latter-Day Saints, because of lack of publishing outlets. Up until about 1950 I believe that all scholarly Book of Mormon studies that were a permanent value, could have been accommodated on a shelf no more than three feet long. Lack of publishing outlets depended on the lack of readers or more realistically the lack of book buyers.

As a number of graduates from Church educational institutions increased in subsequent decades however, not only has scholarly literacy grown in the reader community, but also the economic means in the hands of the growing number of readers has spurred further publishing of serious Book of Mormon studies. Those who have memory enough of an older day, may just cast your minds back on what the F.A.I.R. bookstore, what it look like in 1950. Probably one small desk is all that would have been required.

Our perspectives on the trajectory of Book of Mormon research can be better focused by citing examples. But let me pause say a word about why I use the term trajectory. I suppose that there is a path, a definite path almost a life history growth, birth, growth and on to maturity and that Book of Mormon studies are on that trajectory or that path growing toward maturity. I don't think it's mature yet, it maybe adolescent but it's definitely beyond childhood. And I think when I was referring to the three fathers Sperry, Jakeman, and Nibley they were close to the birth of genuine scholarship.

Each of the cases that are incidence examples that I am going to give has significance in that it illustrates use of a novel concept, or analytical tool, to the Book of Mormon case. That is, in each case, the author of the study has taken a notion, a tool, or a set of ideas that has been successful in treating the Illiad, or the Bible, or English literature, or whatever. Some other area, and it seems to shed light, and they say if we had applied that to the Book of Mormon, would we also get light? Yes, it's all borrowing.

Few or none of us ever invent entirely new tools or concepts. Our strength and the strengthening utility of all scholarship or science is borrowing, and adapting effectively, whatever means have proved useful elsewhere. Here are selected examples that could easily be multiplied, and I started the list, the possibilities initially. It was easy to get up to 50, 75 cases so I just selected a few arbitrarily Case: Word print studies; they were first used to examine issues of disputed scholarship and secular literature, Shakespearean studies and what not. John Hiltman was one of the first to realize the potential of this tool for examining the question who wrote the Book of Mormon. Since then, there had been of course further studies.

Wells Jakeman first suggested in 1952 that volcanism, volcanoes in Central America, could explain aspects of the great destruction of Third Nephi. Subsequently geologists Kowalles and Baer, among others, have expanded on that notion and have been able to take advantage of data from an increasing number of cases known from history and archaeology.

Another case: Once it was among Latter-Day Saints only general recognition of, and commentary on the religious significance, of King Benjamin's sermon. Then Nibley followed by Ricks and others, saw value in adapting the model of the coronation of Israelite and other near eastern monarchs and applying that to the coronation of Mosiah. And they learned some important things about the Benjamin incident, by borrowing from the tradition in near eastern regal studies. And this has led them to consideration of other festivals and ceremonial occasions in the ancient near east that also are reflected in the Book of Mormon.

At one time the olive tree in the Book of Mormon was subject only for doctrinal and historical discussion, but now Jacob's "Hallowed Glory of the Olive Tree" become the substantial subfield

of interest in which an interesting variety of scholars have worked. Sperry originally conceived off and termed (2 Nephi 4) the "Song of Nephi". Later scholars, such as Russ, Perry, and Angelo Crowell have had much more to say about this passage, and about many other incidences of poetry in the Book of Mormon in light of scholarly studies of Hebrew literature.

Now a great deal is known, but by no means exhausted, about poetry in the Book of Mormon. Nibley was effectively the first to recognize it; ethnographic, descriptive, people descriptive and historical parallels drawn from studies on the near east both ancient and modern, are found in First Nephi's description of Nephi's report. This is one of the largest subfields of Book of Mormon studies and shows no signs of having been exhausted. There is a long history of misguided Latter-day Saint claims for parallels between archaeology and the native American historical traditions on the one hand, and the Nephi record on the other.

Starting with the interpretation or the interpreting of Steven's book in Nauvoo over 160 years ago, all of those suggestions were proved badly flawed. Only in the last few decades has LDS students mastery of the complex literature, the reports of the anthropology of ancient America insufficient to justify applying usefully archaeological and demographic models to Book of Mormon studies.

Textual study of the Book of Mormon and that began as early as Thomas Brookbank, has been greatly increased and commented on, and so forth in the Royal Skousen but I think he would be the first to recognize that he has not done all the work that has to be done. Nibley's first identification of Egyptian proper names in the Book of Mormon has been expanded, as others who continue the search in near eastern languages and the end has been by no means reached yet. Starting with Sperry's handful of examples the identified Hebraisms in the text of the Book of Mormon, by now number hundreds, surely others will be located and analyzed as time goes on. There are many more and I will not cite very many of them, a couple though. Brian Stubbs development of a massive database in the Uto-Aztecan languages has revealed that Hebrew language is at one time in ancient America hybridized with at least one Mexican family of tongues. Repetitive use of his tools promises to allow documentation of the same hybridizing phenomenon involving other new languages.

One area that I find begun, but barely, is the study of Nephite religion. I do not mean Nephite doctrine as interpreted in the point of view of the restoration. I mean religion as it was experienced by the Nephites. We do not read the Book of Mormon in those terms. We tend to think, well the Nephites pretty much thought the way we do, they just didn't have the language we have. Well, there is little that has been done.

One of the most interesting is Dan Peterson's treatment of Nephi's Ashera. He finds in Nephi, Nephi's text, the existence of the same female divinity that has been proposed in research on the Jewish cult. Well, rather than try to explain that further just note that we have much to do to try to shed light from the fields of religious studies and textual studies and biblical studies over to make more sense of Nephite religion.

Whereas the years have gone by, and scholarly study and publishing on the Book of Mormon has increased. Several dimensions of the process of that increase have become apparent. Together

they permit us to project some future changes. Here are trends I believe I detect in that trajectory of studies. There are seven of them. Overlapped to some degree, but not entirely.

The first point. Naive writings and thought that merely accepted notions that were common in the Church about the worlds in which the Book of Mormon peoples live, had tended to be replaced by ideas that are more critical and analytical from naivety to analytical and critical thought.

The second point. Questions that were formerly, mainly apologetic, or defensive against the challenges of critics, overtime have tended to be superseded by more original queries so I indicated above.

The third point. Systematic, exhaustive studies tend to substitute for random probings. At one time a bright idea was enough to think somebody should say something new about the Book of Mormon. Now we tend to feel one must at least see what everyone else has said on the subject first, and then perhaps to combine our efforts with someone elses efforts.

Stand alone or one shot research results are likely to become part of accumulative body of findings. Book of Mormon studies consist not just one item, two items, three items, four items but a cumulative body that is more and more integrated or interrelated. Works that are based in a single discipline, academic field, or those that use only a single research tool, tend to be replaced by contribution to wider scope, that combine the methods and findings of multiple fields, methods and specialists.

Sixth. Lone wolf scholars tend to become rare. Their place has been taken increasingly by study teams or cooperative groups led by sharing their findings, advance further and faster. And seventh. Adequate public level communication of results becomes more difficult or unlikely as the results, the complexity of the results increases. In other words it harder to get a handle for the public on what is being done or has been done because it just harder to talk about, and there is more complexity.

These tendencies have precise parallels when the field of the history of ideas or intellectual history looks at any field of research. For example in astronomy, there was a time when the only real tool was eyeballing the heavenly bodies through a lens When the use of radio detection in stars became available the field of astronomy greatly expanded both in capabilities and in findings and there are of course others such tools.

Another instance. The use of global positioning systems has revolutionized the discipline of geography, and the range of questions that it can successfully ask and answer. Again the use of more innovative and large scale computer information systems has had profound consequences for several fields of study. One of them has been multispectral imaging pioneered by Steven Booras and others at FARMS, in analyzing the Dead Sea Scrolls, and now, since then in other documents.

Having the new tools means new things, new questions can be addressed successfully. The trajectory I see ahead for Book of Mormon studies has a number of significant components, but

they may be disturbing. The first is we need very much to ask and pursue better questions, keener, less naive, more productive of work. Second point is that we need more researcher, more minds, minds who can borrow a greater variety of useful paradigms, tools, schemes or thought, that have not previously been used in Book of Mormon of studies. In fact we need more minds to provide alternative in perspectives on the questions that are long been around. Are there no new ideas to be thought of in regard to Isaiah in the Book of Mormon, surely, the last word has not been said.

But more minds do not mean naive minds. Whoever will provide new and productive results must become thoroughly conversant with the best of what has been done. To do that they must read all of the relevant literature. All of it. Unfortunately, in the field of the Book of Mormon studies, there are not many good tools to allow that to be done well. For instance, when one consults the comprehensive bibliography on the Book of Mormon prepared for FARMS by Perry, Miller and Thorne, my examination indicates that at least 95% of the sources cited there, are literally no value to mature scholarship. They are passé except for a few. This does not mean that earlier students should be disrespected. They did the best they could, but they had limited tools, with limited results.

It seems unlikely that for the foreseeable future there will be much increase in the number of professional or at least professorial researchers on Book of Mormon topics. So there is a great need for vocational scholars, amateurs if you will, one's who don't get paid for doing it. And at their best these can be very good. One of my fondest examples of an vocational scholar, was a blacksmith from Evanston, Wyoming, Reed Putnam, who became interested in the question; what was the material from which the golden plates were made. And he became somewhat educated in metallurgical matters far beyond blacksmithing, and concluded soundly that it the material probably was tumbaga, an alloy of gold and copper known from Mesoamerica. One, avocational scholars don't need to be intimidated, they just need pick their fields where nobody else is doing anything. Then they are the experts. And that's very much worth while. Well, in order to seed a new crop of avocational workers and sympathetic critical readers on Book of Mormon subjects, there is need for improved communication networks.

FAIR and its website and meeting's such as this, are one of the growing means of spreading the language and the findings of Book of Mormon studies. Think how much LDS literature could benefit from having our own Isaac Assymov, or Steven Gould, or Isley. We need people who know the field, or fields, subfields and then can write very well. Some of us are not gifted particularly in both areas.

Despite several kinds of problems or obstacles that I can foresee that I am confident that Book of Mormon studies can become and is in the process of becoming an area of increasingly responsible and sophisticated scholarship and I think that's good. Thank you.

Watch the entire lecture on our Youtube site at:

Pt. 1- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yVcZhRW7Zc>

Pt. 2- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PQIu-50NIVk>

Pt. 3- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuFKe2FukgI>

Pt. 4- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDKkk1HfzTo>