

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 27 · 2017 · Pages 223-228

Heralding a New Age of Book of Mormon Scholarship

Steven T. Densley Jr.

Offprint Series

© 2017 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

The goal of The Interpreter Foundation is to increase understanding of scripture through careful scholarly investigation and analysis of the insights provided by a wide range of ancillary disciplines, including language, history, archaeology, literature, culture, ethnohistory, art, geography, law, politics, philosophy, etc. Interpreter will also publish articles advocating the authenticity and historicity of LDS scripture and the Restoration, along with scholarly responses to critics of the LDS faith. We hope to illuminate, by study and faith, the eternal spiritual message of the scriptures—that Jesus is the Christ.

Although the Board fully supports the goals and teachings of the Church, The Interpreter Foundation is an independent entity and is neither owned, controlled by nor affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or with Brigham Young University. All research and opinions provided are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com

You may subscribe to this journal at MormonInterpreter.com/annual-print-subscription

HERALDING A NEW AGE OF BOOK OF MORMON SCHOLARSHIP

Steven T. Densley Jr.

A review of John W. Welch, Neal Rappleye, Stephen O. Smoot, David J. Larsen, and Taylor Halverson, eds., *Knowing Why: 137 Evidences That the Book of Mormon is True*. Covenant Communications, Inc., 2017, 380 pages including endnotes and biographical material. \$34.99 (paperback).

Abstract: Book of Mormon Central has produced a fantastic resource for students and teachers of the Book of Mormon. Knowing Why updates prior discoveries and provides new and interesting insights based upon solid scholarship.

In 1979, John W. Welch founded the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, known by the acronym “FARMS.” In its heyday, FARMS published regular research updates containing the most recent information regarding the study of ancient scripture, especially the Book of Mormon. I looked forward each month to receiving the FARMS newsletter so that I could see what new evidences were being discovered that supported the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

FARMS later compiled and published many of these research reports in a book called *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*.¹ As the information kept coming, FARMS published another book just a few years later called *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*.² They then produced an excellent compilation of this work called *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*.³

1. John W. Welch, ed. *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992).

2. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds. *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999).

3. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds. *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

In 2006, FARMS became a formal part of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, and FARMS was later absorbed into the Maxwell Institute's Laura F. Willes Center for Book of Mormon Studies. As FARMS faded away, so did the short, insightful, and ground-breaking articles that had been published regularly in support of the Book of Mormon.

Then, on January 1, 2016, a new era of Book of Mormon scholarship began with the creation of Book of Mormon Central, co-founded by Lynne Wilson and FARMS founder John W. Welch. The new organization hit the ground running by publishing short pieces highlighting Book of Mormon scholarship five times a week during the entire year. These articles were accompanied by short, high-quality video presentations, a podcast that provided the article in audio format, and, many times, original artwork created especially for Book of Mormon Central. The articles have often been supplemented by helpful infographics that summarize the material and that have been posted to social media sites such as Instagram, Pinterest, etc. The first 137 of the articles have been reedited, updated, and published in a new book entitled *Knowing Why: 137 Evidences That the Book of Mormon is True*.

Each article highlights some “historical, archaeological, cultural, linguistic, literary, legal, devotional or prophetic insight in the Book of Mormon” (p. xiii). In creating this new series, Book of Mormon Central created a new word to describe each entry: a “KnoWhy.” The origin and meaning of this new word is not very intuitive and takes some explaining.

It is common to hear Mormons, especially at a testimony meeting, say that they “know the Book of Mormon is true.” What is perhaps more uncommon is to hear an explanation of *why* they know it is true. When there is an explanation, it is commonly tied to such things as personal revelation that has come through applying Moroni's promise found in Moroni 10:3–5. Of course, personal revelation is a legitimate form of knowledge. However, there are other valid answers to the question “how do you know?”

As the Book of Mormon Central website explains, the Book of Mormon itself relates that, along with personal revelation, there are other ways we may come to know spiritual truths. When Alma was challenged by Korihor, Alma said, “I know there is a God, and also that Christ shall come” (Alma 30:40). Alma proceeded to explain *why* he knew. Rather than merely appeal to an inner witness Alma himself had received, he challenged Korihor with the evidence of witnesses: “the testimony of all these thy brethren, and also all the holy prophets.” Alma continued by

reasoning that “[t]he scriptures are laid before thee, yea, and all things denote there is a God; yea, even the earth, and all things that are upon the face of it, yea, and its motion, yea, and also all the planets which move in their regular form do witness that there is a Supreme Creator” (Alma 30:44).⁴ Alma not only testified, “I know there is a God,” he also explained why by providing the foundation for his knowledge.

With respect to the *KnoWhy* articles, the Book of Mormon Central website explains: “Each *KnoWhy* seeks to build up testimony, strengthening the ‘I know’ by providing substance, insights, and evidence, that can expand the reasons *why you know*.”⁵ This is not intended to diminish the central role of personal revelation. Rather, historical, archaeological, cultural, linguistic, literary, legal, devotional, or prophetic insights can help strengthen a testimony that is based primarily upon personal revelation. As Elder Jeffery R. Holland has said, “[T]ruly rock-ribbed faith and uncompromised conviction comes with its most complete power when it engages our head as well as our heart.”⁶

The people at Book of Mormon Central have taken seriously the divine command that we should “teach one another words of wisdom; yea, seek ye out of the best books words of wisdom; seek learning, even by study *and also* by faith” (D&C 88:118, emphasis added). As explained on the Book of Mormon Central website:

The dynamic and productive relationship between secular evidences and spiritual witnesses can be likened to many ordinary parts of our daily lives. Like two friends and allies, they work together to achieve shared goals in the pursuit of truth. Like two eyes, together they make depth perception possible. Like two legs, they allow us to walk the path of life

4. “Know KnoWhy,” Book of Mormon Central, accessed October 9, 2017, <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-knowwhy>.

5. “Know KnoWhy,” BookofMormonCentral.org.

6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “The Greatness of the Evidence” (speech, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, August 16, 2017). <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/article/transcript-elder-holland-speaks-book-of-mormon-chiasmus-conference-2017>. In the same address, Elder Holland added, “I believe God intends us to find and use the evidence He has given — reasons, if you will — which affirm the truthfulness of His work.” He further said, “Our testimonies aren’t dependent on evidence — we still need that spiritual confirmation in the heart of which we have spoken — but not to seek for and not to acknowledge intellectual, documentable support for our belief when it is available is to needlessly limit an otherwise incomparably strong theological position and deny us a unique, persuasive vocabulary in the latter-day arena of religious investigation and sectarian debate.”

smoothly, and like two hands that cooperate in playing a violin, they produce beautiful music of the soul. Functionally, they are like “two riders on a tandem bicycle. When both riders pedal together, the bicycle (the search for truth) moves ahead more rapidly. Each rider must work or the other must bear a heavy and exhausting burden. Only one (faith) can steer and determine where the bicycle will go, although the other (reason) can do some back-seat driving.” Faith and spiritual witness must always lead the way, but reason and evidence can and should make a contribution to the success and enjoyment of our journey.⁷

In addition to this meaning of the word “KnoWhy,” the format of each KnoWhy article takes one step beyond merely providing reasons for belief. Each article “shares something to know and explains why that thing is worth knowing” (p. xiii).

Each article is also well-supported with citations to the most recent research on the Book of Mormon, from a broad range of sources. It is interesting to note that articles reference not only what are considered to be orthodox believers but sometimes less-orthodox believers as well as non-Mormon scholars. While there is a clear effort to produce faith-promoting material, it is also clear the authors of these articles made an impressive effort to use the best information available regardless of whether or not it came from believing members of the Church. Each article also includes a list of one or more sources that can be explored for more in-depth information.

While it is a paperback book, it is printed on high-quality paper with brilliant colors. Each article includes artwork that helps to introduce the topic. Some of the art is photographic and some is in the form of paintings, drawings, and sculpture. It is interesting to note that much of the art was produced in response to a 2016 art contest sponsored by Book of Mormon Central. Therefore, as one might expect, the quality of the art in the book is somewhat uneven. However, it is exciting to see that Book of Mormon Central is encouraging a new generation of artists to produce art that illustrates the stories of the Book of Mormon.

Graphical material accompanies some of the articles, such as tables comparing various concepts or verses of scripture. However, it

7. “Know KnoWhy,” BookofMormonCentral.org, quoting John W. Welch, “The Role of Evidence in Religious Discussion,” 261, in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 283.

is unfortunate that none of the infographics have been included. They would have been an interesting and helpful addition to the text that appears in the book.

The book does not indicate who wrote each article. What is known is that there are five editors and 38 peer reviewers. Among those listed as editors and reviewers are some of the top Book of Mormon scholars, including John W. Welch himself.

The book is organized to coincide with the books of the Book of Mormon from Nephi through Alma. Each article references a specific verse or verses in the Book of Mormon. This makes it convenient for teachers and students to find material to supplement lessons and personal study. However, unlike on the website, there is no subject index, making it more difficult to find articles addressing specific topics. It should also be noted that it ends with commentary related to Alma 29. So we can look forward to at least one more volume with the KnowWhy articles that supplement the remaining books of the Book of Mormon.

As the title suggests, there are 137 separate articles; however, not all present what would be described as “evidences” that the Book of Mormon is true. Rather, some of them are explanatory or devotional in nature such as an article explaining how the Book of Mormon was used to help inform early Church leaders on how the restored Church should be run, (pp. 4–6) and excerpts from the testimony of Elder Jeffrey R. Holland regarding the Book of Mormon. (pp. 322–23)

Many of the articles cover topics that will be familiar to long-time students of the work produced by FARMS, such as chiasmus, Nahom, barley, horses, reformed Egyptian, etc. However, the most recent research pertaining to these topics is included here, adding new insights and significant weight to prior conclusions.

Furthermore, there has been groundbreaking research and new discoveries since the last of the FARMS publications was issued. Royal Skousen has published his work on the critical text of the Book of Mormon, and Brant Gardner, Mark Wright, Kerry Hull, and others have published a significant amount of research in the field of Mesoamerican studies. Many of the articles in *Knowing Why* have benefitted and relied upon this research.

In short, *Knowing Why* is a fantastic resource for students and teachers of the Book of Mormon. It provides interesting insights based upon solid scholarship. With the demise of FARMS, it also marks a welcome and significant step forward in continuing the effort to

encourage scholarly study of the Book of Mormon and to publish the evidences that support its authenticity.

Steve Densley Jr. *is an attorney and is licensed to practice law in Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington. He graduated with university honors from Brigham Young University with a combined bachelors and masters degree in public policy and political science. As an undergraduate, he was an assistant editor on the Pi Sigma Alpha Review. He received his law degree from Brigham Young University, where he was a member of the Law Review and the National Moot Court team. He has published articles in the Utah Bar Journal, the Journal of Law and Family Studies, and Meridian Magazine. He was the executive vice president of FairMormon from 2013-15. He has been recognized in SuperLawyers Magazine as one of the mountain states' rising stars and has been listed numerous times in Utah Business Magazine as being among the Utah legal elite. He has appeared on CNN, C-Span, NPR, BBC Radio, KUTV, KTVX, KSL Radio, KTKK Radio, and Swiss TV.*

