

INTERPRETER



A JOURNAL OF LATTER-DAY SAINT
FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

Volume 39 · 2020 · Pages 41 - 52

“To Seek the Law of the Lord”

James R. Rasband, Paul Y. Hoskisson,
and Daniel C. Peterson

Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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“TO SEEK THE LAW OF THE LORD”

Abstract: *This prefatory material to the festschrift for John W. Welch gives an overview of his exceptional life, full of variety and intensity. As James R. Rasband writes: “His candle burns bright whatever the project.” Hoskisson and Peterson characterize “Jack” as a “polymath” as they give a thumbnail sketch of the history of FARMS (Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies), which he founded and of the book which honors his numerous contributions. A final contribution to this installment provides a useful collection of highlights of his personal and professional life.*

[**Editor’s Note:** Part of our book chapter reprint series, this article is reprinted here as a service to the LDS community. This single article combines three items from the original book: the Foreword, Introduction, and Biographical Highlights. Original pagination and page numbers have necessarily changed, otherwise the reprint has the same content as the original.

See “*To Seek the Law of the Lord*”: *Essays in Honor of John W. Welch*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson and Daniel C. Peterson (Orem, UT: The Interpreter Foundation, 2017), ix–xx. Further information at <https://interpreterfoundation.org/books/to-seek-the-law-of-the-lord-essays-in-honor-of-john-w-welch-2/>.]

Foreword

James R. Rasband

I am honored to pen the foreword to this *Festschrift* for John W. Welch (Jack). A few years ago, Jack received the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer Award, the most prestigious academic

recognition awarded by Brigham Young University (BYU). At the time, I was serving as the dean of the BYU Law School where I have been Jack's colleague for the last 21 years. In that role, I was asked to assess whether his contributions had truly been "exceptional," as the award criteria demands. To answer the question I hypothesized writing a history of the university and asking whether the work of a nominated faculty member would merit mention in the long history of the university. Most of us, I suggested, would be thrilled with a footnote but, in my view, Jack's work could merit a whole chapter; it surely merits this *Festschrift* — celebratory 'feast script' — from the estimable colleagues whose work is assembled in this volume.

The story of Jack's discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon during his mission will likely be familiar to those who read this collection. I won't repeat the story. Those who want the details can read Jack's own reminiscence.¹ What I've always loved about the story is that it's pure Jack Welch, even at age 19. While most missionaries would have been eager to use their preparation day to explore the Bavarian Alps, Jack saw a poster for a New Testament class taught by the Regensburg Priests' Seminary and decided that he and his junior companion would attend. The first lecture touched on chiasmus and mentioned a new book by a German scholar on the literary art in the Gospel of Matthew. On the way back to their apartment, Jack insisted on stopping at a religious bookstore, found the book, and records that he "could not put it down."² Imagine Jack's missionary companion, wondering what was to become of P-days and how companion study was going to work. Jack's extraordinary wife of 48 years, Jeannie Sutton Welch, surely needs no such imagination; she knows — and loves — the drive and focus.

As readers will recall, upon learning that chiasmus in the New Testament was evidence of Hebraic influence, Jack was prompted to look for it in the Book of Mormon. He wrote: "[w]ith faith that this might be so, I got out of bed...went over to the desk on the other side of our one-room apartment" and commenced the search.³ We all know what he found. If part of religious devotion is asking hard questions in a faithful pursuit of truth, Jack's approach to chiasmus is the paradigm. His desire to learn more truth took him to the class at the Seminary, to the bookstore, and to devouring a book that was hardly regular missionary

1 John W. Welch, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 74–87, 99.

2 Ibid., 78.

3 Ibid., 79.

fare. Then, presented with a hard question — would the Book of Mormon really yield such evidence of Hebraic influence? — Jack set out in faith to discover an answer. He’s been doing so ever since.

From his undergraduate work on chiasmus, to his 1979 founding of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), to his influential role in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* and the Joseph Smith Legal Papers, and to his almost 25+ year editorship of *BYU Studies*, Jack has been asking — and encouraging others to ask — hard questions faithfully. The answers, of course, don’t always come as powerfully and clearly as they did that early morning in Regensburg, but his work has cast light upon question after question and had a powerful influence on the trajectory of Mormon Studies, particularly in linguistic analysis of the Book of Mormon. Jack is truly the sort of bilingual scholar that President Kimball in his *Second Century* address suggested was the necessary aspiration for all BYU faculty.⁴ Jack has spoken credibly to secular scholars of ancient and religious texts while simultaneously pursuing illumination from the doctrines and truths of the restored gospel.

As a long-time colleague, I can attest that Jack’s prolific contributions are the result of a prodigious work ethic. Few have been the Saturdays when I have been in my law school office and not encountered Jack working away in his own office on his latest book, article, or issue of *BYU Studies*. He’s still the young man who just can’t put the next book down. The result has been more than 250 publications on a range of topics, including Roman and Jewish law in the trial of Jesus, the use of biblical laws in colonial America, commentaries on the Sermon on the Mount and King Benjamin’s Speech, the Parable of the Good Samaritan, editing the Collected Works of Hugh Nibley, and even a practical guide to forming a partnership in Utah.

Lest one think Jack is all work and no play, Jack is an ebullient risk-taker. We’ve been members of the same church congregation for 21 years. When he was the bishop of the congregation, I worked with our young men. I recall one evening on a backpacking trip in the Uintah Mountains when a group of boys were carefully studying a jump from a lakeside cliff only to have Jack run by them whooping and plunging off the ledge into the water. To the boys’ surprise, the erudite Bishop Welch they knew on Sunday was quick to take the chance. Whether cliff jumping or joining

4 Spencer W. Kimball, “The Second Century of Brigham Young University,” *BYU Speeches*, 10 October 1975, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/spencer-w-kimball_second-century-brigham-young-university/.

his father on a heli-skiing adventure, the common theme is intensity. His candle burns bright whatever the project.

In September 2003, Jack gave a BYU devotional address in which he inquired what it meant to love God with all one's mind. His remarks were thoughtfully conceived but particularly powerful because they flowed out of long personal experience and conviction that serving at BYU demanded just such an effort. Jack closed his talk with a teacher's prayer for his students and, I believe, an entire university community:

May you not just pass through BYU, but may the spirit of this university pass through you.

May you know it is possible to love God with all of your mind.

May you love Him with invigorating questions.

May you perceptively discern between truth and error.

May your intellect be keen and sharp but never harm even the least intelligent of the children of God....⁵

Jack's own words capture for me what we celebrate with this *Festschrift*. I can think of no better way to honor him than by a collection of papers exploring yet more invigorating questions.

James R. Rasband is the Hugh W. Colton Professor of Law at Brigham Young University's J. Reuben Clark Law School. He received his B.A. from Brigham Young University and his J.D. from Harvard Law School where he was an editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. Following law school he clerked for Judge J. Clifford Wallace on the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit. He then practiced law at Perkins Coie in Seattle, Washington where his practice focused on Indian treaty litigation and the Endangered Species Act. He joined the BYU Law faculty in 1995 and has published a variety of articles and book chapters on public land and natural resources law topics. He is coauthor of *Natural Resources Law and Policy*, a groundbreaking casebook used in law schools around the country. Professor Rasband served as dean of BYU Law School from

5 John W. Welch, "And with All Thy Mind," *BYU Speeches*, 30 September 2003, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/john-w-welch_thy-mind/.

2009–2016. Prior to his appointment as dean, he served in the university administration as the Associate Academic Vice President for Faculty. He has also served in a number of other leadership positions in professional and academic organizations and is a Fellow of the American Bar Foundation.

Introduction

It is with affection and admiration that we dedicate this volume to a great scholar, John W. Welch, a polymath who is known to his many friends as “Jack.” We are honored to honor a man who has contributed prodigiously — as author, editor, and organizer — to a growing body of rigorous, faithful Mormon scholarship.

Jack started his life in the valleys of Southern California, but his unique journey into the scholarship of Latter-day Saint scripture and history — a journey that has had enormous impact on those fields and on a large audience — began when he was a young missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Germany. It was there that, serendipitously or not, he encountered the concept of chiasmus and, almost immediately thereafter, discovered the existence of significant chiasms in the Book of Mormon.

After completing bachelor’s and master’s degrees at Brigham Young University, his talents and interests took him to the University of Oxford and through law school at Duke University. There followed a promising period as an attorney in Los Angeles that proved to be just a short detour from his true vocation — an extraordinarily prolific academic career.

It was in Los Angeles that Jack recognized the need for a clearinghouse of solid Latter-day Saint scholarship related to the Book of Mormon. This led to his establishment of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, fondly known for many productive years as FARMS.

Early in the history of Brigham Young University’s J. Reuben Clark Law School, Jack was recruited to join its faculty. As part of the agreement, he brought FARMS with him, and he was eventually given some space on campus to house it.

In view of his background in law, his deep commitment to the scriptures and doctrines of the Restoration, and his interests and training in ancient history and languages, it was perhaps natural — but scarcely inevitable — that Jack also helped to create the “Biblical Law” section of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, in which he has been a major presence. In multiple senses of the phrase, Jack has

exemplified the injunction in Ezra 7:10 “to seek the law of the Lord.” Hence the title of this volume.

Most recently, in the wake of the decision by new leaders at the former FARMS to take that organization in a very different direction, Jack has been centrally involved in the creation of Book of Mormon Central, a cloud-based clearinghouse for Latter-day Saint scholarship regarding the Book of Mormon.

Volumes such as this, which celebrate the life and career of an esteemed colleague, are typically described with the German term *festschrift*, a word that denotes not only festive celebration but esteem, respect, and gratitude for contributions that deserve to be honored. We deliberately use the word in the subtitle of this book, intending to express precisely those sentiments.

Those of us who have watched and worked with Jack over many years of extraordinarily rich productivity have sometimes wondered whether he ever sleeps. We have benefited enormously from his work, and wish him many more years of energy, good health, and remarkable insight.

We are grateful for the financial support of the Sorenson Legacy Foundation, which has enabled us to produce and publish this token of the deep appreciation that we and our collaborators feel for John W. Welch — both for his almost innumerable contributions and for the remarkable man himself, our friend — and for the indispensable help of Shirley Ricks and Allen Wyatt, without which it would never have become a reality.

Paul Y. Hoskisson
Daniel C. Peterson

John Woodland Welch: Biographical Highlights

It might be that at least in Latter-day Saint circles, Jack Welch (as he is called familiarly) is best known for his discovery of chiasmus (poetic parallelism) in the Book of Mormon, but his academic accolades stretch far beyond this landmark event. That being said, the discovery of chiastic structures was only the beginning of his development of a significant corpus of literary studies of the Book of Mormon, not to mention establishing it firmly as an ancient text. Because of his work, no one can doubt that the complexity of this Book of Mormon literary form far surpassed the abilities of a farm boy from upstate New York with a minimal education.

Of the Book of Mormon, Welch has said, “Since the time I was a young man, I have always felt very satisfied in my testimony of the Book of Mormon. At first, I believed that the book was true with little or no evidence of any kind at all. Perhaps because I never expected to find much in the way of proofs or great evidence for the Book of Mormon, I have been even more richly satisfied by those things I have learned or found....I am grateful to two witnesses, a good seminary teacher and a truth-loving Sunday School teacher, whose joint influences prompted me to see the Book of Mormon as a spiritual tutor. With this book, I had my first experience in asking God for wisdom, as James 1:5 challenges, when, as a high school junior, I put Moroni 10:4 on the line, kneeling by my bedside. I cut my spiritual teeth on the Book of Mormon and learned to recognize the promptings of the spirit. I learned that one of the gifts of the Book of Mormon is that a person can know that it is true without yet knowing everything it contains.”⁶

Early Life

John Woodland Welch was born on October 15, 1946 to John S. and Unita Welch. Jack recounts: “I grew up in the home of a consummate lawyer. Upon the advice of my parents, who always held out hope I would become a lawyer, I studied a fair amount of Latin in high school taught by two dedicated women....Then, as a college freshman in one of Professor Hugh Nibley’s Book of Mormon classes at Brigham Young University in 1964, I became aware of the great extent to which the cultures of the ancient Israelites, Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, as well as the general milieu of the ancient Near East, shed light on the political and social world out of which Lehi, Nephi, and their ensuing civilization is said to have emerged....Nibley’s command of a wide array of ancient sources and his facility in linking diffused texts enriched his faith and moved the inert cerebral mountains of many of his students, mine included.”⁷

6 John W. Welch, “Good and True,” in *Expressions of Faith: Testimonies of Latter-day Saint Scholars*, ed. Susan Easton Black (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1996), 232–33.

7 John W. Welch, *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), xii–xiii.

1966–1968 Mission and Introduction to Chiasmus

“In 1967, midway through my two years as a missionary for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, I was stationed in Regensburg, Germany, where I learned in a theological lecture in the local Catholic seminary about chiasmus (a significant literary form in the Bible). I was led a few days later to find several excellent examples of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.”

Education

Welch received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from BYU (BA in History, MA in Latin and Greek). As a Woodrow Wilson Fellow, he studied Greek philosophy at Oxford University. Returning to the States, Welch received his JD from Duke University.

Law Practice and Development of Study of Chiasmus

Welch practiced law from 1975 to 1980 in Los Angeles with O’Melveny & Myers. “During this time, I edited a collection of studies entitled *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, which contains analyses of several...legal texts, notably the narrative of Haman’s injustice in the book of Esther, the case of the blasphemer in Leviticus 24, and the stoning of the Sabbath breaker in Numbers 15. In this work, I was fortunate to collaborate with Yehuda T. Radday (a faculty member at the Technion in Haifa)....Professor Radday brought Professor Bezalel Porten of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem into this project. As a lawyer, I was especially intrigued by Porten’s discovery of chiasmus in Aramaic legal papyri from two family archives from the fifth century BC.”⁸

Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

In 1979, Welch created the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) and served on the Board of Directors up to and during the time FARMS was brought into Brigham Young University in 1999. (FARMS was eventually renamed the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship.) Among the many publications Welch either wrote or edited while directing FARMS, perhaps the best-known series is the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (1985–2010).

8 Ibid., xiii–xiv.

Career at Brigham Young University

“In 1979, an invitation from Rex E. Lee, dean of the newly formed law school at Brigham Young University, to join its law faculty gave me an opportunity to combine my professional interests in law with the study of ancient scriptures. Dean Lee told me that if I would teach one business-related course, I would be free to teach anything else I wanted. Almost in jest, but testing to see if he really meant what he had just said, I asked, ‘How about a course on Babylonian law and the Book of Mormon?’ Without a second’s hesitation, he smiled and said, ‘That would be perfect. I can’t think of anything better. That’s the kind of thing we want at this law school.’ I was surprised at his response, but recognizing this as a chance to see where further research in this direction might lead, and with careful consideration and the concurrence of my wife and family, I accepted the position.”⁹

Since 1991, Welch has been editor in chief of *BYU Studies*. In 1996, Welch was named the Robert K. Thomas Professor of Law at the J. Reuben Clark Law School of Brigham Young University and in 2010 he was designated the Karl G. Maeser Distinguished Faculty Lecturer, the most prestigious award given by the University.

Other important contributions during Welch’s time at the University include significant involvement in organizing the BYU Museum of Art’s exhibit of the Minerva Teichert paintings of the Book of Mormon in 1998 and in planning and executing the Joseph Smith Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress in 2005. In addition, he is one of the contributors to the BYU New Testament Commentary project.

Society of Biblical Literature

In 1982 Welch presented a paper entitled “Ancient Near Eastern Law and the Book of Mormon” at the regional meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) in Denver, Colorado. Since that time, he has not only presented papers and served on the executive committee of the Biblical Law Section of the SBL, but in 2005 he organized at the national SBL level a now-permanent section called “Latter-day Saints and the Bible,” which he continues to chair.

9 Ibid., xiv–xv.

Encyclopedia of Mormonism

Welch played a major role in the organization and editing of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, published in 1992, and has been responsible for its continuing availability on the web.

Masada and the Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1997, after months of negotiation with the Dead Sea Scroll Foundation, the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in collaboration with the Israel Antiquities Authority and the Israel Ministry of Tourism, the Schussheim Foundation, and the Israel Exploration Society, Welch was largely responsible for bringing this landmark exhibit to the BYU Museum of Art. It ran from March to September 1997. In conjunction with the exhibit, there was an equally landmark conference on the Dead Sea Scrolls hosted by BYU, with scholars coming from all over the world. The events spawned a traveling Dead Sea Scrolls exhibit which went not only all over the United States, but eventually to Europe.

Publications

The list of Jack Welch's publications is extensive, but it is worth mentioning that his study of the Sermon on the Mount as a temple text has received worldwide acclaim. In 2009, Ashgate in London published his *The Sermon on the Mount in the Light of the Temple*. And *Illuminating the Sermon at the Temple and Sermon on the Mount* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999) continues to be a seminal work on the subject for Latter-day Saints. His *Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon*, published in 2008 by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, brought together Welch's many years of research in the fields of ancient law and the Book of Mormon in a groundbreaking work that brought new insights into many overlooked and important details. A selected list of his publications can be found at the back of this volume.

Book of Mormon Central

Besides teaching at BYU, editing *BYU Studies*, being a contributing editor to the Joseph Smith Papers project, lecturing around the world, writing and editing books, Welch has been instrumental in the creation of a website called "Book of Mormon Central." This website is gathering a vast searchable archive of material relating to Book of Mormon research. In addition, through the use of email, video, and podcast presentations it proposes to invite all people, especially the rising generation, to:

- Build faith in Jesus Christ
- Learn and cherish pure doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3-4)
- ‘Remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon’ (D&C 84:57)
- Access scholarly evidence from Book of Mormon Central (BMC) to answer hard questions about the Book of Mormon, including its origins — so that they may know the truth of all things” (Moroni 10:5)¹⁰

Family

Welch is married to the former Jeannie Sutton, and they have four children and seventeen grandchildren.

¹⁰ <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/about>

