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Noel B. Reynolds

The Authorship of the Book of Mormon

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Summary

Noel Reynolds discusses scholarship in the Latter-day Saint community, particularly with respect to the question of the authorship of the Book of Mormon. In this overview of the book, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, Reynolds discusses the research of Richard L. Bushman, Richard L. Anderson, Royal Skousen, Hugh Nibley, and others.

Transcript
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The Authorship of the Book of Mormon

BYU Forum Assembly

May 27, 1997

Noel B. Reynolds

I am grateful for the invitation to tell you about a variety of important research projects related to the Book of Mormon. Scholars from many disciplines at BYU and elsewhere are turning their academic expertise to studies of the Book of Mormon that are expanding our appreciation for this great book and the prophetic messages it contains.

While my primary teaching responsibilities during my 27 years at BYU have revolved around courses in legal and political philosophy, I have frequently enjoyed the opportunity of teaching Book of Mormon classes as well. After years of rereading and teaching this book, I began to collect insights that developed into research interests and eventually published articles and books.

Enthused by this involvement and by the research of numerous other scholars, I accepted an invitation from the Religious Studies Center at BYU to edit a volume of papers by different scholars that would address the question of Book of Mormon authorship. That book was first published in 1982, and a new printing was released last year by FARMS (the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies).

Over the subsequent 15 years, many new studies have been completed and earlier ones have been significantly updated. As a result, a second volume of studies on Book of Mormon authorship will be released within a month, providing the occasion for my presentation today. Most of the studies I will describe below are reported in detail in one or the other of these two books.

Since the early 1970s there has been a dramatic increase in general interest in the Book of Mormon, particularly among Latter-day Saints. In less than two weeks there will be conference on Ancient Scriptures in the Restoration sponsored by FARMS and the Smith Institute for Church History at BYU. At that time I will present a wide variety of

evidence to show that the LDS community is reading and writing much more about the Book of Mormon in recent decades than ever before. The Book of Mormon is playing a greatly expanded role in Church Education, in Sunday School curricula, in missionary work, and in Church speaking and instruction generally. Even more important, understanding and appreciation for the divine origin and mission of this restored scripture is much clearer and stronger among Church members than ever before.

Many Book of Mormon research projects have implications for the continuing issues surrounding the authorship of the Book of Mormon. Most Latter-day Saints are aware of a minor industry in certain religious circles in the United States devoted to refuting Mormonism and to criticizing the Book of Mormon.

It may be of interest for you to hear what two young evangelical scholars recently told their own colleagues in comparing evangelical criticisms to the research published by faithful LDS scholars in recent years. In a paper that they hope to publish in a major theological journal, they pointed out that certain evangelical beliefs about Mormons are nothing more than myths or wishful thinking. For example, their research categorically refutes the following three myths that evangelicals frequently tell each other about Mormons:

Myth #1: There are no traditional (faithful) Mormon scholars with training in academic disciplines related to biblical studies or religion.

Myth #2: Mormons who seriously study biblical languages, theology, and philosophy abandon belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's prophethood.

Myth #3: Mormonism is crumbling as liberal Mormons have shaken the foundations of LDS belief.

These same evangelical scholars then went on to draw several conclusions from their study of the debate between Mormons and evangelicals, much of which focuses on the Book of Mormon:

Conclusion #1: There are many qualified Mormon scholars.

Conclusion #2: Mormon scholars and apologists have answered most of the evangelical criticisms.

Conclusion #3: There are no evangelical books that interact responsibly with contemporary LDS scholarly and apologetic writings.

Conclusion #4: At the scholarly level, evangelicals are losing the debate with the Mormons.

And conclusion #5: Evangelicals involved in the counter-cult (anti-Mormon) movement lack the skills and training necessary to answer Mormon scholarly apologetic.

They went on to explain, and I quote:

“Having read an immense amount of the scholarly literature published by LDS intellectuals; having read a great deal of apologetic material produced by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS); and having read or examined most evangelical works on Mormonism, we feel that we are justified in our conclusions.”¹

In the time allotted to me today, I would like to cite a small selection of examples of the kind of work that LDS scholars have been doing, particularly with respect to the authorship question. In the process, I hope you will gain new appreciation for the great complexity of the Book of Mormon, for the mounting evidences of its truly ancient origins, and for the creative work being done by faithful LDS scholars here and elsewhere.

In his recent study of the Book of Mormon translation process, Richard L. Bushman, professor of history at Columbia University, presents the details and evidence from the perspective of the original participants, including Joseph and Emma Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and other scribes and family members. Without referring directly to critical accounts, Bushman shows why alternative explanations of this process do not work and that the story told by these people should be taken seriously. Joseph Smith and his scribes

¹ Unpublished manuscript in possession of author.

ground out seven to nine pages of translated text each day for about 63 days. All accounts agree that Joseph never paused to review even the previous page or sentence, and he used no notes, books, or other reference materials. Joseph and his scribes clearly realized that they could never have produced such a book on their own. The words were given to Joseph, one line at a time through divine power and the medium of interpretive instruments like the seer stone, much like we today might read lines off a computer screen. For any mortal to dictate a 500-page book in this way, off the top of his head, would inevitably lead to wandering, repetition, contradiction, non sequiturs, and pointlessness. But the Book of Mormon has none of these failings. It is full of themes and stories, characters and events, and accumulating points and teachings that reward repeated rereading. The internal complexity and consistency of the resulting book is itself strong evidence that it could not have originated with Joseph and his scribes, working in this manner.

Richard L. Anderson, professor emeritus of ancient scripture at BYU, continues his historical investigations of the eleven men who were witnesses of the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated. In spite of the fact that most of them eventually had serious differences with Joseph Smith or even left the Church, all maintained the veracity of their original witness of the truth of the Book of Mormon and its divine origins.

One dramatic incident gives us the essence of their experience. David Whitmer was one of the three witnesses who disagreed with the way the Church was going and settled down permanently in Missouri, letting the Saints go their way to Nauvoo and then on to Utah. He once became deeply annoyed by persistent rumors that he had recanted his witness. Desperate for a means of quelling these false rumors, he purchased advertising space and published a proclamation in numerous newspapers, even as far away as Chicago. In this proclamation, he reaffirms the original experience of seeing the plates as shown to him by an angel and of hearing the voice of God commanding him to bear public witness of the same. In spite of every incentive to recant this witness, neither Whitmer, nor

any of the other ten witnesses ever did modify his original story. They rather chose to maintain their testimonies firmly to the end of their lives.

Royal Skousen, professor of English at BYU, has been studying the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon and related documents for several years. After minute examination of these manuscripts with all their corrections and other physical features, Skousen finds the eyewitness accounts of the translation process to be wholly credible and precise in their details.

As Joseph dictated without the aid of notes, papers, or even the plates themselves, relying solely on the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone, the scribes carefully recorded every word. The manuscript shows that Joseph dictated word groups of the same length rather than sentences. This may explain why the original manuscript had no punctuation. Joseph would spell out strange names the first time they occurred, and the scribes would correct them in-line if they had misspelled them. But then they would sometimes revert to misspelled versions when those names occurred again in the dictation. Many errors were caught when scribes read each transcribed line back to Joseph. If it was wrong, he would dictate the line again, and the scribe would make appropriate corrections above the line. Once it was recorded correctly, the line would disappear in the stone, and the next line would appear. This translation process, as described by the participants and substantiated by Skousen's examination of the original manuscript, did not seem to allow Joseph Smith much freedom in word choice. The Book of Mormon was not an ordinary translation.

The complicated production of the Book of Mormon, from its original writing by Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others to its most recent editings and printings, is a human process that has been well described. While errors may have been introduced with every step, many of these can be identified and corrected. But because so much of the original manuscript has been permanently lost, many of these errors may never be identified. Once Professor Skousen completes and publishes his critical text, we may have the closest text possible to what Joseph Smith actually dictated to his scribes in 1829.

For the last half century, Hugh W. Nibley, now emeritus professor of ancient scripture at BYU, has been launching a barrage of insights into the complexities inherent in the text of the Book of Mormon, complexities that could not conceivably have been produced by Joseph Smith or his contemporaries given the character of the translation process. Nibley pioneered what we might call the argument from complexity. Melvin J. Thorne, executive editor for FARMS, has developed a helpful analysis of this argument and sets forth a number of examples in the forthcoming authorship volume. Other examples that have impressed me in my teaching of the book include:

The book has three independent dating systems that are maintained accurately throughout. Different writers tracked time from the time Lehi left Jerusalem, from the initiation of the reign of the judges, or from the day the sign was given for the birth of Jesus Christ. Yet no confusion results, and dating sequences can always be reconstructed precisely.

The Book of Mormon contains a complex system of religious teachings. These are presented in unique ways by different prophets in their own times and contexts. Lehi reports a vision of the tree of life. Nephi presents the gospel of Jesus Christ in conjunction with the vision of Christ's baptism. Jacob reports Zenos's allegory of the olive tree. Benjamin gives a great temple sermon. Alma teaches that the word of God was a seed that must be planted and nourished. Jesus gives the Nephites a modified version of his sermon on the Mount. While each of these enrich understanding of the basic teachings, they never confuse them or contradict one another.

The book's authors refer to a huge and complex set of source materials, including official records, sermons, letters, journals, monument inscriptions, church records, and ancient Israelite scriptures not known today. Yet, these writers always manage to maintain a consistent relationships between the sources and the final text.

Subtle and complex political traditions evolve early in the text and surface in a variety of forms in later sections, always plausibly and consistently. The complaints Laman and

Lemuel raise against Nephi in their earliest murmuring evolve into a national ideology that is still being invoked five hundred years later to justify Lamanite efforts to subjugate their Nephite brethren.

The book describes various ebbs and flows of ethnic interaction without ever losing track of even the most minor groups.

Hundreds of individual characters and place names are successfully introduced and tracked coherently.

The geographical data provided in the text is diverse and complex, yet when carefully analyzed turns out to make perfect sense and to match an identifiable portion of Mesoamerica quite well.

Because much of the research we are describing can be used to defend the Book of Mormon against its critics, scholars interested in these polemics have occasionally gathered up some of these studies and recast them as refutations of criticisms. Daniel C. Peterson, professor of Arabic literature at BYU, has proven to be a master of Book of Mormon apologetics. He frequently takes the time to respond in detail to the seemingly endless streams of criticism coming from the more visible anti-Mormon sources. His effectiveness should not be underestimated. In addition to the evangelical response quoted at the beginning of this talk, we have a first-hand report that one of his most vocal targets recently told a small East-coast audience that it was no longer profitable to pursue these debates about the Book of Mormon, and that Book of Mormon critics might do better by moving on to other things.

In one of his most recent forays Peterson responded to the recurring ridicule that has been heaped on the Book of Mormon for prophesying that Jesus would be born in “the land of Jerusalem,” without mentioning Bethlehem. In response, Brother Peterson and his associates have documented beyond any doubt that in ancient Israel, the term “land” was often used to indicate the rural area and villages associated with a larger city with the same name. Bethlehem is only five miles from Jerusalem, and would certainly fall in its

economic sphere as a smaller village at the time Christ was born. Furthermore, scholars have actually found ancient textual references to Bethlehem “in the land of Jerusalem.”

Most thoughtful readers of the Book of Mormon have probably wondered at the large numbers of people that the text describes as having descended from the two or three dozen original settlers in the Lehite colony. Anti-Mormon critics of the book have seized on this as intuitively valid evidence for the book’s fraudulence. James E. Smith, one of the chief architects of the Cambridge model, which is used widely by professional demographers for estimating historical populations, points out that population studies fail badly when they rely on intuition. In those cases where historical records can be most trusted, support is provided for this much less intuitive model of population growth and decline. Applying that model to the Book of Mormon accounts, Smith finds the numbers reported in the text to be on the high end of what would be predicted scientifically, but still within the range of plausibility. Relaxing any of his perhaps unduly conservative assumptions would move Book of Mormon numbers closer to the middle of the expected range. Most importantly, if the Nephites or Lamanites had absorbed any other unmentioned indigenous populations, the numbers reported in the text cease to be at all problematic.

One of the more perplexing aspects of the Book of Mormon has always been its emphasis on warfare. William J. Hamblin, associate professor of history at BYU, organized a scholarly symposium in which each participant focused on limited aspects of Book of Mormon warfare. The volume produced by that group demonstrated that in dozens of dimensions the assumptions and complex details of Book of Mormon warfare form patterns that are consistent with ancient as opposed to modern warfare, and specifically ancient Mesoamerican warfare. The text supports the idea that warfare was seasonal, suggesting a climate divided into wet and dry seasons. The histories suggest the possibility that like many other ancient civilizations, the Nephites had a military caste whose role was to provide military leadership and knowledge of strategy and logistics. Most of the weapons mentioned in the Book of Mormon can be matched with ancient Mesoamerican

implements of war. But Joseph Smith and his contemporaries could not have been expected to be aware of any of these features of ancient warfare.

In an important contribution to the first authorship volume, Wilfred C. Griggs, professor of ancient scripture at BYU, pointed out that over the centuries the scholarly world has developed an arsenal of effective tools for exposing forgeries claiming falsely to be ancient texts. Yet in all the literature attacking the Book of Mormon, its critics do not use these standard tools. The reason, Griggs suggests, is that every reasonable attempt to evaluate the Book of Mormon as an ancient text has so far yielded positive, rather than negative results.

As a particular example, Griggs focuses on the Book of Mormon's account of the tree of life. Here is a dramatic and imaginative image, advanced boldly as an explanation for God's relationship to men here and hereafter. Is it modern or ancient? Griggs shows how this typology shows up in many forms in the ancient Near East, and especially in Egypt in a time frame suggesting possible connections with Lehi. In many similar passages, the Book of Mormon has all the earmarks of an ancient book, and only appears modern on more superficial readings.

The Book of Mormon presents a very different problem for Joseph's detractors than does the First Vision. Visions are easy to deny. They have no secondary witnesses; nor do they leave obvious historical artifacts that require explanation. But the 1830 Book of Mormon contained 590 pages of text, the most important kind of evidence historians can find. The book exists; it must be explained—even explained away—if Joseph's prophetic powers are to be discounted. And so the critics have tried a variety of alternative explanations, which Louis C. Midgley, BYU professor emeritus of political science, ably surveys.

The first critics agreed with Joseph—he obviously was not the kind of man who could have written such a book. So they looked around for someone who could have done it. Sydney Rigdon and Solomon Spaulding were early candidates, but neither can be

plausibly defended as the book's author. They were not even in the neighborhood. Later critics invoked epilepsy and other forms of psychological abnormality to explain Joseph's seemingly miraculous achievement—without noticing that there is no evidence for such abnormalities in Joseph's life. Nor are there any documented examples of such abnormalities ever contributing to the writing of such a complex book.

Some critics assumed that Joseph was a conscious fraud, but even this fails to explain how this highly complex work could have been produced by a man with so little knowledge of the world and its literature.

In 1945 Fawn M. Brodie attempted a supposedly gentler explanation, arguing that although Joseph's religious career began fraudulently, he gradually came to believe his own lies. Brodie was trying to make plain what many liberal Mormons were saying less publicly. But this did not solve any problems for the critics, and it provoked the young Hugh Nibley and others to do the scholarly work that exposed the weaknesses of her logic and evidence.

More recently, a few historians, who have trouble accepting Joseph's account—mostly because they do not believe in angels that can bring gold plates, have argued for some kind of middle ground that would accept the religious value of the Book of Mormon, but explain its origins as a product of nineteenth-century frontier culture. Midgley chronicles, evaluates, and criticizes all these approaches, documenting their meanderings, contradictions, and other shortcomings. He notes the recurring cycles in these explanations and their failure to take into account most of the recent research on the text of the Book of Mormon itself. He concludes that none of these alternative theories of Book of Mormon origins accounts for the facts of the case nearly as well as the original account given by Joseph Smith and the other witnesses.

Among the clearest internal evidences of the Book of Mormon's ancient origins are the large number of characteristically Hebrew literary structures. John W. Welch, professor of law at BYU, first discovered the chiastic features of the text as a missionary in the

1960s. In a series of publications he has developed the study of chiasmus as a structural device found in the Book of Mormon, the Bible, and in other ancient literature of middle eastern origins. Chiasmus is one of the more complex forms of parallelism, and is distinctive in that the repeated forms occur in reverse order. In summarizing the evidentiary value of chiasmus today, Welch finds it stands stronger than ever as clear evidence of a tradition of writing that understood and valued this particular literary structure for its aesthetics and its power to communicate at multiple levels simultaneously. There is no better explanation for the extensive occurrence of high-quality chiasms in the Book of Mormon than its ancient origins in a biblical tradition. At the time the Book of Mormon was published, no living scholar knew about chiasmus or knew that any book claiming ancient Hebrew origins should contain examples of this literary device. It was only later in the nineteenth-century that Biblical chiasmus was fully recognized and described to the scholarly world.

Jack Welch has completed many other Book of Mormon studies that could be described in this kind of presentation. He may well be the most productive Book of Mormon researcher of recent decades. For example, he has documented the presence of many forms and elements of ancient Near Eastern law in the Book of Mormon text.

Welch has also demonstrated a striking set of parallels between the Narrative of Zosimus, an early Christian text with earlier Hebrew origins, and Lehi's account in the Book of Mormon. While no one has been able to explain what the connection between these documents might be, the clear suggestion is that their origins must be of equally ancient date.

Several years ago Donald W. Parry produced *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns*, showing Book of Mormon readers how extensive the use of parallelisms are in that text. Parry has identified Book of Mormon examples of most biblical forms of parallelism. In the forthcoming authorship volume he documents three specific parallelistic patterns in their Book of Mormon exemplifications—

climactic forms, synonymous parallelisms, and alternating parallel lines. Parry provides helpful explanations of these poetic and rhetorical structures, which are richly illustrated with clear examples from the text of the Book of Mormon.

Parry points to the simple example of climactic parallelism that occurs in Mormon 9:12–13. Notice as I read this how four key words are repeated, creating parallelistic structures, and the whole passage progresses quickly to a climax, starting with creation and ending with man's return to the presence of the Lord:

Behold, he created

(1) *Adam*, and by

Adam came

(2) *the fall of man*, and Because of

the fall of man came

(3) *Jesus Christ*, even the Father and the Son; and because of

Jesus Christ came the

(4) *redemption of man*, And because of the

redemption of man, which came by Jesus Christ,

they are brought back into his presence.

Not only does the recognition of parallelistic structures enrich our reading of the Book of Mormon, it also constitutes one more impressive challenge to Book of Mormon critics. In addition to explaining how Joseph Smith could have written the book, they now must explain how he could have silently introduced such beautiful examples of Hebrew poetic structures.

John A. Tvedtnes recently offered an original analysis of another impressive Book of Mormon complexity. Taking his cue from Paul's conversion accounts as related variously in several New Testament passages, Tvedtnes focuses on Alma's accounts of his own conversion experience and its retellings in different Book of Mormon contexts. Through careful analysis of each of these passages, Tvedtnes shows us the rich emotional content of

Alma's memory, as well as the doctrinal implications Alma has drawn from the experience and how these recurred to him and developed in each retelling. Building on this analysis, Tvedtnes is also able to show that each of these passages is actually being quoted by Mormon from the original record, rather than being reported in third-person format. Finally, Tvedtnes details the ways in which each of the retellings is unique and yet helpfully elaborates the others with additional information. Taken as a whole, they are consistent, different in detail, and highly reinforcing of one another. Given the translation process, this is again a seemingly impossible achievement if Joseph or anyone besides Alma himself was composing these widely separated passages.

In the 1982 authorship volume, Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, BYU professors of statistics, presented the first comprehensive statistical wordprint study of the Book of Mormon. Using computerized text and powerful statistical techniques, they were able to establish that the different sections of the Book of Mormon were authored by different people, and that none was authored by Joseph Smith, Sidney Rigdon, Oliver Cowdery, or other nineteenth-century candidates put forth by Book of Mormon critics.

More recently, applied physicist John L. Hilton and five of his fellow scientists in the Bay Area (three being non-LDS) repeated that study using a wholly different and more conservative form of wordprinting analysis. Again, different authors were detected, and none corresponded to the nineteenth-century candidates. More recently, in retirement as an adjunct professor of statistics at BYU, Hilton has used his techniques to identify anonymous writings of the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes, to show which of Francis Bacon's works were authored chiefly by his staff of secretaries, and even to help the FBI identify possible authors of the Unabomber's Manifesto.

Geographical speculations have fascinated Book of Mormon readers from the earliest years. If the book is a true ancient record, the Nephites lived somewhere in real time and space and in a real historical and cultural context. The history of Book of Mormon studies has always featured vigorous efforts to identify that geographical and cultural context

during Nephite times (600 B.C.– 421 C.E.). Two distinct geographical contexts are featured in the Nephite portion of the record. The first is the journey from Jerusalem across the Arabian peninsula. The second is the promised land itself where Lehi's descendants dwelled for a thousand years. I will deal with these in reverse order.

John L. Sorenson has identified and collected over seventy competing geographical theories that have been advanced for Nephite lands. His own careful analysis has shown us that while the text itself presents an internally coherent and consistent geography, many of the assumptions Mormons and others have made about that geography since 1830 cannot be correct. For example, his careful analysis of the text shows us that the entire Nephite saga played out in a limited area probably less than 500 miles in diameter. Further, the usual LDS assumption that the New York hill where Moroni buried the gold plates was the same as the Book of Mormon's Hill Cumorah, where Mormon had his great records repository, doesn't work very well. The text shows that Mormon's Hill Cumorah was only a few hundred miles from Zarahemla. And Moroni had custody of the plates for 36 years after he had fled from the conquering Lamanites at Cumorah before he buried them in New York. Anti-Mormons have complained vigorously against Sorenson's limited geography, and want to insist that Latter-day Saints are officially committed to other traditional theories—which are much easier for them to refute.

The most useful critique of the many geographies that have been advanced for Nephite lands was offered some years ago by John Clark, professor of anthropology at BYU. Clark prepared several maps to demonstrate the basic relationships existing between certain Book of Mormon sites that any geography based on the text must exhibit. Anyone attempting to solve the geographical puzzle must minimally meet the criteria that Clark has summarized from the text itself. To ignore these, as most such theories do to one extent or another, is to fail to take the text fully seriously.

Although there has been less scholarly discussion of the journey of Lehi's company through the Arabian Peninsula, we may now be much more confident of knowing

approximate or even precise locations where some Book of Mormon events occurred there. Warren P. Aston, an Australian travel agent, and various associates over the last decade have used the text of the Book of Mormon and the historical and scientific knowledge available for that part of the world to identify sites that seem to fit completely and uniquely with those described in First Nephi.

Following an old suggestion from Ross Christensen, Aston has demonstrated that the Book of Mormon Nahom, where Ishmael was buried and the company turned due east, corresponds quite naturally with modern Nehem, the only site in the Middle East bearing this name. Aston has demonstrated that this name has been associated with that area for at least 1500 years. It is located very close to the main junction of ancient frankincense trails in northern Yemen, where those trails veer to the east. Though this site was never a city, it features large numbers of ancient burials that go back to the time of Lehi and beyond.

Equally tantalizing is the textual description of Bountiful, the seashore site where Lehi's party camped three or more years while building the ship on which they crossed the Pacific ocean. The text mentions almost a dozen facts about that area, most of which seemed impossible, given the early nineteenth-century understanding of the Arabian coastline.

Again, Aston has identified one site on the southern coastline of Oman that appears to meet all of the textual requirements for Bountiful. Wadi Sayq lies almost due east from Nehem. It is accessible from the inland plateau, but only after passing through a long and rugged wilderness. It is naturally fertile, being watered liberally five months out of the year by monsoons that come off the Indian Ocean and park on its shore, penetrating a mile or so up the wadi. This area once featured forests with trees suitable for building ships, as is demonstrated by the shipbuilding reputation of the ancient Omani seafarers. Readily available iron has been located in small deposits within the area where the Lord could have showed Nephi to obtain metal to make tools.

The site features an obvious mountain or mount. Nephi twice mentions the mount where he frequently resorted to pray. Water from natural springs is available year round. Until this century there was an inlet suitable for launching ocean craft. It was used in Islamic times as a small port, as is evidenced by its Arabic name, Khor Kharfot (or Port Fort). This inlet and others on this coastline have been blocked by the beach since the rivers of Oman dried up sometime within the last century.

At the west end of the beach are the ruins of about eight small buildings and a surrounding wall that are estimated to date to the first or second millennium B.C. These ancient dwellings were positioned immediately above 200 foot cliffs from which a troublesome brother could readily be thrown to his death in the rocks and waves below. No other site on this coastline meets all these criteria. Book of Mormon critics have long insisted that no site ever would. Only someone who had been to this unique place in ancient times could have described it in such precise detail as did Nephi in chapter 17.

CONCLUSION

The kinds of evidences that I have reviewed here represent only a small fraction of the research results coming forth from a large number of scholars. This sampling should be adequate to show that the most reasonable explanation for the Book of Mormon is that it is just what it claims to be. It is a record of Hebrew émigrés who left Jerusalem and found their way to the New World, where their descendants lived for over a thousand years before losing their tradition of prophecy and record keeping. That evidence should give critics pause, and it should encourage young Latter-day Saints whose testimonies might be fragile or wavering in the face of concerted attacks from anti-Mormons or liberal doubters. Finally, all who have firm testimonies of the veracity of the Book of Mormon know that such knowledge is a gift of God that comes after study and prayer. The scholarly studies can help us in many ways, but they do not establish testimony, which is a form of spiritual knowledge. I want you to know that my testimony of the Book of Mormon is precious to

me. I am so grateful for the knowledge that it contains the writings of ancient prophets of God, that its pages contain the gospel of Jesus Christ taught in its plainness, and that its witness of Jesus Christ is true. I am delighted to be able to share that testimony with you. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.