



STATEMENT DM-755

OF CITIES AND SWORDS: The Impossible Task of Mormon Apologetics

by James White

Summary

The Mormon organization FARMS is producing the most widely read and seemingly scholarly defenses of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith available in Mormonism today. The organization focuses primarily on a defense of the Book of Mormon as a historical document. Because its members are somewhat isolated from mainstream scholarship, many critics feel they often go out of bounds in their attitude toward those who disagree with their findings and conclusions. In their defense of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon they have been accused of using faulty arguments and inadequate evidence. Despite their use (or misuse) of scholarly references, they have not found much of an audience outside of the rather narrow confines of the Latter-day Saints community.

We shook hands and entered the small, and very stuffy, radio studio. There was hardly room for all of us, but we managed to squeeze ourselves around a tiny table. We began taking out our resource books — Bibles, copies of the Latter-day Saints (LDS) Scriptures, reference sources, and so forth. We also brought out the books we were going to be discussing live on the air on KTKK radio in Salt Lake City, the Sunday evening after the semi-annual Mormon General Conference: my own book, *Letters to a Mormon Elder*,¹ and the book *Offenders for a Word*, coauthored by one of my debate opponents that evening, Dr. Daniel C. Peterson.² Peterson was joined by Dr. William Hamblin. Both are professors at Brigham Young University and are leading figures in The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS).

This was not my first encounter with FARMS. I had just received a copy of the 1993 *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, a publication in which FARMS contributors review recently published works that touch on the Book of Mormon. Thirty-six pages of this volume were devoted to an article by L. Ara Norwood in review of my book. Having read the review, I could only hope the discussion this evening would take a much higher road.³

We talked about many things that evening. The first interaction involved their denial of the inerrancy of Scripture and their questioning of my belief in *sola scriptura*. Eventually, we made our way to the Book of Mormon and their belief that my statements about it in my book were far from accurate. Dr. Hamblin specifically pointed to my observations regarding the material cultures of the ancient inhabitants of this hemisphere, and took issue with my assertion that due to a lack of advanced metallurgy, those inhabitants did not have swords and armor.⁴ The interchange we had is most enlightening as to how FARMS representatives defend the Book of Mormon.

Dr. Hamblin: Let me ask Rev. White a question. Do you believe there were no swords in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica?

White: I believe that the culture that is presented in the Book of Mormon, where you have warfare utilizing swords, where you have basically old-world culture fighting, was not present.

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Dr. Hamblin: Were there swords in pre-Columbian America?

White: Metal swords like Joseph Smith describes? Not that I'm aware of.

Dr. Hamblin: Well, are you certain the Book of Mormon describes those swords?

White: When you say pre-Columbian America, are you meaning the place where *you* feel that the Book of Mormon took place or all of Mesoamerica?

Dr. Hamblin: All of Mesoamerica?

White: Between 600 B.C. and 421 A.D.?

Dr. Hamblin: Right.

White: I don't believe that there were swords in the sense of armed people, no.

At this point Dr. Hamblin handed me his newest book, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*,⁵ and chided me for making such statements without reading his book first. To the listening audience, it must have *seemed* as if he had won that point in the debate. For the convinced LDS person, FARMS came through again. But, did it really? The remainder of this article evaluates the merits of FARMS research and argumentation and exposes its inadequacies.

WHAT IS FARMS?

Based out of Brigham Young University, FARMS is the leading LDS "apologetics" organization today. While primarily concerned with defending the Book of Mormon as a historical document, FARMS publications often go beyond that narrow focus to provide a wider apologetic for Mormonism. Since the principal contributors to the effort of FARMS are among the leading LDS scholars, the materials carry an air of scholarly authority and acumen. Many of the publications are closely focused. An impressive range of hard-bound, professionally packaged books adds to the perception that FARMS is providing a scholarly, researched response to the critics of the Mormon faith in general and the Book of Mormon in particular. According to information made available electronically from FARMS:

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) encourages and supports research about the Book of Mormon, Another Testament of Jesus Christ, and other ancient scriptures.

FARMS is a nonprofit, tax-exempt educational foundation, established in 1979. Its main research interests include ancient history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of the scriptures, solid research and academic perspectives alone can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentative, concerning many significant and interesting questions about the ancient backgrounds, origins, composition, and meanings of scripture.⁶

FARMS publishes books relevant to Book of Mormon studies as well as other related areas of interest. The group also sends out a newsletter to subscribers on a bimonthly basis, *Insights: An Ancient Window*.⁷ This publication provides brief reports on seminars and research done in support of the historicity of the Book of Mormon. FARMS also produces the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*.

FARMS is the main distributor of the LDS apologetic writings of Dr. Hugh Nibley. Eugene England of BYU has said that "Nibley is the finest scholarly defender of our [LDS] faith in our time."⁸ Nibley undertook the monumental task of trying to defend the Book of Abraham, for example, when the Egyptian papyri from which founder Joseph Smith claimed that book of LDS Scripture was derived came to light three decades ago. The FARMS catalog of materials lists no fewer than 13 books by Nibley and 27 articles.

Nibley is quite aged now, and other, younger LDS researchers and writers have begun to emerge from his shadow to take leading roles. The names of Dr. Daniel C. Peterson, Dr. William Hamblin, Dr. John Sorenson, and Dr. Stephen D. Ricks all appear regularly in FARMS publications. Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* has become quite popular among LDS readers, despite presenting what is known as the "limited

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geography" viewpoint of the Book of Mormon — a view we shall examine later. Peterson and Ricks have produced the popular-level LDS apologetic work mentioned above. Many laypeople in the LDS Church look to FARMS as the final authority on matters regarding the Book of Mormon and other LDS Scriptures such as the Book of Abraham. Those involved in evangelizing Mormons know that young missionaries, when faced with difficulties in their Scriptures, are quite likely to turn to FARMS materials for help, even though they are often unable to understand those materials fully.

FARMS OUT OF CONTROL

FARMS is virtually alone in the scholar's field of apologetic defense of Mormonism, and this fact has led to what many feel is an attitude of smugness on the part of FARMS contributors.⁹ FARMS writers are not afraid, for example, to use improper ad hominem argumentation when it suits their purpose. Evangelical researchers Jerald and Sandra Tanner, frequently the targets of LDS apologists, were treated to the customary FARMS charm in a review of their work, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon*.¹⁰ In that review, found in the fifth volume of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*,¹¹ Tom Nibley, son of Hugh Nibley, spared no words in making clear that he was condescending even to comment on the Tanners' work. Note the language used in this "scholarly" FARMS review: "our sagacious swamis" (275); "our super sleuths" (276); "our learned mentors" (276); "our gallant pedagogues, the Tanners" (278); "the febrile brains of our dedicated cognoscenti" (278); "our honored exegetes" (279); "our meritorious mentors" (280); "our learned oracles" (282); "our revered gurus" (283); "our perspicacious pedagogues" (283); "our canny counselors" (283); "our erudite educators" (284); "our formidable savants" (285); "our transcendent tutors" (287); and so on.

It is difficult to work through Nibley's review, as nearly every sentence drips with sarcasm. Likewise, L. Ara Norwood seems to have attempted to come up to Nibley's "standards" in his review of my own book, contained in the same volume (317-54). Norwood speaks of me as "merely an anti-Mormon clone, maintaining the same shape of bigotry and shallowness that inevitably come from the anti-Mormon cookie-cutter" (321); I am "a desperado who needs to win every argument at any cost, no matter how trivial" (320). And even when complimenting me, he manages to take shots at others (326).¹²

One might object that Tom Nibley and Ara Norwood are not representative of FARMS as a whole. Yet, the editor of the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* is none other than FARMS Board of Directors member Daniel C. Peterson. Peterson contributed an 86-page review in the same volume, critiquing *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know about Mormonism* by John Ankerberg and John Weldon. While much more soberly written than the articles by Nibley and Norwood, it also sets the tone for how FARMS responds to literature critical of the LDS position.¹³ Peterson's language is only one example of how FARMS views those who oppose its work. The words of Hamblin, another member of the Board of Directors, reflect the same sentiments.

A few years ago a book critical of the Book of Mormon was published titled *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*.¹⁴ Admittedly, editor Brent Metcalfe and the book's other contributors would not be identified as conservative Mormons; that is, Mormons who adhere closely to the earlier Mormon teachings and Scriptures. Their scholarly articles provide a real challenge to much of what FARMS accepts as gospel regarding the Book of Mormon. When I pulled this book out of my bag during the radio debate, however, Peterson laughed at it.

Hamblin personifies the FARMS attitude, especially as it relates to challenges presented by scholars such as Metcalfe. In what is probably the most infamous mock in the history of FARMS, Hamblin included a hidden message in his review of Metcalfe's work in the 1994 *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*. When the first letters of each paragraph of Hamblin's review before publication are put together, they spell, "METCALFE IS BUTTHEAD." Hamblin has insisted that it was just a joke for the sake of Daniel Peterson, the editor,¹⁵ but the fact is that the acrostic message was kept in the article all the way into the printing process. At that time cooler heads prevailed, and the project had to be called back from the presses and redone to eliminate this childish name-calling.

FARMS METHODOLOGY

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How does FARMS go about providing a defense of the Book of Mormon against the overwhelming evidence that points to it being the creative product of Joseph Smith, Jr., rather than the historical record of an ancient culture? A few observations are in order.

First, one will find a tremendous amount of effort being put into the citation of non-LDS scholars. FARMS wants the acceptance of the scholarly community outside of Mormonism, and therefore every effort short of acknowledging Mormonism's deficiencies is made to establish scholarly credibility. FARMS writers go to great lengths to document that they have done their homework in non-LDS scholarly literature covering such subjects as archaeology, anthropology, and linguistic studies. Unfortunately, the untrained reader may think that this indicates a wider historical and scholarly support for *specific* and *unique* LDS beliefs or claims than actually exists. A careful reading of the sources used will reveal support outside of the LDS community for only nondisputed issues that are not, therefore, *at issue* when it comes to the historicity of the Book of Mormon or the validity of Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Abraham.

Another item that can give a false appearance of scholarship to the reader of FARMS materials is what I will call "mutual citation" — the leading LDS experts will often be found citing . . . themselves. Nibley is cited by just about everyone. Then Robinson will cite Sorenson, Sorenson will cite Hamblin and Ricks, and Peterson will cite them all. While it may present an imposing list of sources on paper, in reality this self-citation does not provide a meaningfully wide spectrum of the scholarly community.

FARMS regularly promotes an image of scholarship, but serious problems with FARMS scholarship readily appear when they attempt to defend specific and unique elements of the claims of Mormonism. We will focus on two examples of how FARMS works to provide Mormons with a reason to continue believing in Joseph Smith's prophethood *despite* all the evidence to the contrary. We begin with John Sorenson and his views on the Book of Mormon.

WHERE IS THE HILL CUMORAH?

Sorenson suggests that the Book of Mormon story took place in a relatively small area¹⁶ in Central America. The theory that focuses attention on Central America itself has been around in Mormon circles for quite some time. Many have pointed to the area around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as a likely spot. FARMS even publishes Sorenson's *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (1992), which presents maps of where cities theoretically might be located, where battles took place, and so on.

One major objection to this idea comes from the necessary relocation of the Hill Cumorah, to somewhere in Central America. This hill in upstate New York is where Joseph Smith allegedly found the "golden plates" on which the Book of Mormon was written. It is also supposed to be the site of the final cataclysmic battle between the ancient Nephites and Lamanites. Sorenson provides citations in his *Source Book* (371-90) regarding the viewpoint of the past leaders of the LDS Church on the location of Book of Mormon events and of the Hill Cumorah. Not only have leaders like Joseph Fielding Smith spoken out against the limited Central American view,¹⁷ but the evidence is decidedly against such a theory having been espoused by Joseph Smith. Quite to the contrary, Smith's own story of "Zelph, the White Lamanite" lays to rest any theory that limits Book of Mormon events to a small area in Central America. Joseph Smith recorded how, while walking near the Illinois River, he and his followers came to a mound of dirt:

The brethren procured a shovel and a hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot, discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs the stone point of a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death. . . . The contemplation of the scenery around us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms: and subsequently the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea to the Rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part — one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.

The significance of this story from Joseph Smith is striking. He obviously believed that the events of the Book of Mormon, including the great battles recorded therein, took place, not just in a small portion of Central America, but in the upper reaches of North America as well. In light of this "revelation" Joseph Fielding Smith wrote, "It is absurd for anyone to maintain that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess this northern land."¹⁸ Yet FARMS apologists — ready to abandon such an idea, since there is no supporting archaeological or historical evidence from North America — come up with two different Central America locations for "Cumorah," all in the effort to maintain the historical reality of at least some of Joseph Smith's fertile imagination.

What we have here is a rewriting of Mormon belief in a form more readily defensible. For the Mormon who agrees with the statement "Mormonism stands or falls with Joseph Smith,"¹⁹ recognizing the obvious fact that Smith's story is not historically sound is simply not an option — hence the tremendous effort to select and rework the facts to fit a foreign reality. Indeed, the fact that Mormon scholars go to such lengths is an indication of how important the integrity of their prophet is to their entire religious system.

ABOUT THOSE SWORDS, DR. HAMBLIN

In our radio debate Hamblin graciously provided me with a copy of his book on warfare in the Book of Mormon. Included in the work is an article by Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill titled "Swords in the Book of Mormon."²⁰ The authors struggle mightily to find in known Mesoamerican culture some parallel to the swords described in the Book of Mormon. The wording is mercilessly plain: 1 Nephi 4:9 describes Laban's sword, saying:

And I beheld his sword, and I drew it forth from the sheath thereof; and the hilt thereof was of pure gold, and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine, and I saw that the blade thereof was of the most precious steel.

No problem here, for the context is still Old World. But, we read in 2 Nephi 5:14-15 (which moves the context to the New World):

And I, Nephi, did take the sword of Laban, and after the manner of it did make many swords, lest by any means the people who were now called Lamanites should come upon us and destroy us. . . . And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance.

In Alma 57:33 we also read:

And it came to pass that they did in a body run upon our swords, in the which, the greater number of them were slain.

So far we have here swords that are sheathed and made of precious steel. Note that Nephi makes many more of these "after the manner of" Laban's sword. Laban's sword itself remains a popular item for a long time in the Book of Mormon (Words of Mormon 1:13, Mosiah 1:16). In Alma we read of men running upon swords and dying, a most understandable result of running into a sword like Laban's. 2 Nephi 24:19 likewise speaks of some being "thrust through with a sword," an obvious reference to being impaled by a blade. While this passage is a citation from Isaiah, it clearly was considered applicable within the context of Book of Mormon events.

Then in Alma 17:37 we read of Ammon's exploits with his sword:

But behold, every man that lifted his club to smite Ammon, he smote off their arms with his sword; for he did withstand their blows by smiting their arms with the edge of his sword, insomuch that they began to be astonished, and began to flee before him; yea, and they were not few in number; and he caused them to flee by the strength of his arm.

Here we have another obvious reference to a steel-bladed sword, just like the sword of Laban. What is more, we read in Alma 1:9 of a man who "drew his sword." This is perfectly understandable, since the sword of Laban had a sheath and was carried like any other sword.

In Alma 44:12 we read further:

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Zerahemnah . . . was angry with Moroni, and he rushed forward that he might slay Moroni; but as he raised his sword, behold, one of Moroni's soldiers smote it even to the earth, and it broke by the hilt; and he also smote Zerahemnah that he took off his scalp and it fell to the earth. And Zerahemnah withdrew from before them into the midst of his soldiers.

Two important items should be noted: first, the swords in the Book of Mormon have "hilts," just as the sword of Laban. Also, Zerahemnah ends up getting scalped in the process of the fight, an event understandable when fighting with swords. But the Book of Mormon is even more plain, as it states in the next verse:

And it came to pass that the soldier who stood by, who smote off the scalp of Zerahemnah, took up the scalp from off the ground by the hair, and laid it upon the point of his sword.

Here the scalp is placed upon the point of the sword, and shown to the crowd.

All of this is perfectly understandable, is it not? Why have I labored the obvious fact that the Book of Mormon portrays warfare throughout its history that includes as part and parcel metal swords with blades, hilts, and sheaths? Well, recall what Dr. Hamblin said to me on the air in Salt Lake City concerning swords in pre-Columbian America. He affirms their existence, but in so doing he is engaging in the most egregious redefinition of terms. As anyone can see by reading *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, Hamblin's means of rescuing Joseph Smith is to attempt to draw a parallel between the clearly Old-World sword of Laban, and hence of the Nephites, with the Aztec *macuahuitl* or *macana*. Hamblin describes it: "The 'macuahuitl' was constructed from a long staff or large paddle-shaped piece of wood. Sharp obsidian flakes were fixed into the edges of the wooden blade, giving it a deadly cutting edge" (338-40).

Note the illustrations accompanying this article comparing the sword of Laban and the *macuahuitl*. Here Hamblin tries to tell us that what the Book of Mormon is *really* talking about is a war club with sharp rocks embedded in it! He then has to work very hard to explain how such a club could scalp someone while fighting, why the Book of Mormon refers to the "hilt" of these swords (the *macuahuitl* doesn't have a hilt), and how such a war-club can be "drawn" from a "sheath." (He suggests that "these references could describe grasping or brandishing a sword before combat rather than actually 'drawing' it from a sheath" [343].) Moreover, Hamblin has to explain how such swords could have been made "bright" (Alma 24:12), and what Nephi was talking about when he said he made their swords after the pattern of Laban's sword.

I heartily recommend the reading of Hamblin's article as a classic example of the apologetic methodology of FARMS. As anyone knows who has read Nibley's attempted defense of the Book of Abraham, or Sorenson's attempt to find the horses of the Book of Mormon,²¹ Hamblin is simply following those who have gone before him in doing his best to rescue a false prophet from the singular verdict of history. Once again, such attempts reveal the importance that Mormon apologists attach to Joseph Smith. They also reveal the sheer desperation of their cause.

THE FUTURE AND FARMS

FARMS is expanding its facilities and its outreach. It is moving into the Internet and making its information available to a wider audience. Those who are involved in evangelizing Mormons need to be aware of the apologetic materials produced in Provo under the FARMS banner.

The example of FARMS should challenge orthodox Christians to seek, by contrast, the highest level of accuracy and integrity in the work of witnessing. What is more, as in all apologetic work, we should be reminded to look very closely at the arguments presented by those who deny the gospel of grace. In a culture accustomed to sound bites and surface-level thinking, we need to learn to look below the surface and ask logical, insightful questions. When such thinking is applied to the materials produced by FARMS in defense of Joseph Smith, the result is clear. No veneer of scholarly acumen can make a culture appear in history that was not, in fact, there. And no amount of work by FARMS can make Joseph Smith something he was not: a prophet of God.

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NOTES

¹James White, *Letters to a Mormon Elder* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1993).

²Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, *Offenders for a Word: How Anti-Mormons Play Word Games to Attack the Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Aspen Books, 1992).

³My response, and rebuttal, of Norwood's review is available on our web page at <http://net387.texas.net/ao.html>.

⁴White, 139.

⁵Stephen B. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1990). Hamblin wrote in the flyleaf, "May this book improve your third edition."

⁶This particular material was obtained from the FARMS Internet web-page at the following address:

<http://kolmogorov.che.psu.edu:2222/farms/farms.html>.

⁷The author subscribes to this newsletter in order to monitor the publications and activities of the group.

⁸As cited in the FARMS 1995 catalog, 38.

⁹A personal example comes to me from the FARMS contributor who reviewed my book. When I was delayed in responding fully to Norwood's article by other issues (including the writing of two books), he began sending me notes in the mail. The term *taunting* is surely appropriate for such comments as these: "I think your decision to not respond to my FARMS review-essay is itself a response of sorts. It tells me and many others who are aware of your involvement with the Book of Mormon that you are not equipped to handle criticism of your work. Even more so, you are not prepared to deal in any serious way with Book of Mormon studies. Thanks for confirming what I already sensed: the Book of Mormon is way over your head" (letter of December 12, 1994).

¹⁰Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Covering Up the Black Hole in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1990).

¹¹Daniel C. Peterson, ed., *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: 1993), 5: 273-89.

¹²Norwood even went so far as to contact our ministry, seeking information and offering to *publish* my book, *Letters to a Mormon Elder*, should we not find another publisher to pick it up! He never indicated his relationship with FARMS, nor the fact that he was working on a scathing review of the book he was offering to help us republish.

¹³See pp. 5, 54, 83. BYU Professor Louis Midgely notes on p. 139 of the same volume that Dr. Peterson is the source of an admittedly "contemptuous label" for anti-Mormons: "antimormonoids."

¹⁴Brent Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993).

¹⁵See Jerald Tanner and Sandra Tanner, "A Disgusting Joke?" in *The Salt Lake City Messenger*, June 1994, 9-10.

¹⁶Thus relieving LDS apologists from having to find much in the way of material culture since it would be unlikely to stumble into the "right" spot.

¹⁷Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1981), 3:232-43.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 3: 238. What is more, if Joseph Smith and his companions could unearth direct physical evidence of the Nephite civilization with nothing more than a shovel and a hoe, how can modern LDS apologists account for their lack of such evidence despite the tremendous efforts they have made in Mesoamerica?

¹⁹See Joseph Fielding Smith's discussion of this in *Doctrines of Salvation*, 1:188.

²⁰Ricks and Hamblin, 329-51. It is interesting to note that in the 31 endnotes for this article, 26 cite other sources, and 9 of the 26 cite either FARMS materials or FARMS contributors. What is more, the citations from non-LDS sources are relevant to items that are not in dispute.

²¹John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and Provo, UT: FARMS, 1985), 295-96.