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Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses 2020 Interpreter Foundation Conference September 18-19, 2020

Centralizing Scriptural Resources Ryan Dahle

[1] I'd like to thank all who have made this conference possible, and particular appreciation goes to Jeff Bradshaw for his countless hours to ensure its success. The Book of Moses contains some of the most sublime revelations from heaven, so it's encouraging to see a surge of scholarly enthusiasm towards its study.

[2] My remarks today will discuss the efforts by Book of Mormon Central to offer a helpful, centralized resource for studying the Book of Moses and other content from the Pearl of Great Price. Many in today's audience may be familiar with [3] Book of Mormon Central. Its primary goal is to "build enduring faith in Jesus Christ by making the Book of Mormon accessible, comprehensible, and defensible to the entire world." We've pursued this objective in a variety of ways, such as by

- [4] creating an online archive for Book of Mormon scholarship,
- [5] repackaging scholarly material in more accessible formats such as the short articles which we call KnoWhys,
- [6] developing a scripture app called ScripturePlus which links scholarly content to specific verses in the Book of Mormon,
- [7] and by utilizing various forms of media—such as videos, artwork, and podcasts—to help spread the message of the Book of Mormon to as wide of an audience as possible.

[8] The Book of Mormon may be the keystone of our religion, but it certainly doesn't stand alone against a skeptical world. Other important stones—such as the Book of Moses and the Book of Abraham—provide additional buttressing in the arch of faith. Like the Book of Mormon, these and Joseph Smith's other revelations about the ancient world have something important to say about the reality and authenticity of the Restoration.

[9] In his visions of the future, Nephi prophesied that such records would come forth, and that together they would help compensate for the loss of plain and precious truths. Evidence for the antiquity of the Book of Moses and Book of Abraham helps establish the truth of the Book of Mormon, which, in turn, helps establish the truth of the Bible, and vice versa.

In part, it's been to facilitate an awareness of these mutually supportive relationships that Book of Mormon Central has created another website called Pearl of Great Price Central. [10] The first content we developed for this website was for the Book of Abraham. Between August 2019 and the end of January this year, we published 40 Book of Abraham Insights, [11] which are basically short articles that, in most cases, draw upon the available published research and make it more accessible for a general audience.

Scholarly studies of the Book of Abraham involve highly specialized topics in fields such as [12] Egyptology, textual criticism, and Church history. So addressing some esoteric concepts has been unavoidable, but hopefully we've managed to make some of this dense scholarly material more approachable for everyday readers.

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In addition, we've created a [13] bibliography of scholarship on the Book of Abraham, a study edition of the text, and several videos that help visually communicate responsible approaches to its content. We hope these resources help dispel confusion and misinformation about this inspired volume of scripture.

This year happens to be the 200th anniversary of Joseph Smith's First Vision. [14] To help commemorate this sacred event, Pearl of Great Price Central published 20 Insights on this topic between February and April of this year. [15] These insights have been compiled into a digital book, and we once again created a substantial bibliography. These resources correspond to Joseph Smith's 1838 account of his history, excerpts of which are presented in the Pearl of Great Price as Joseph Smith—History.

At this point, you may be wondering if anything has been done for the Book of Moses, since that's what this conference is all about. The answer, happily, is yes. [16] A weekly series of Book of Moses Insights was begun earlier this year and will continue through most of 2021. Over 20 articles describing ancient affinities in content, wordplay, and literary style to the Enoch account in Moses 6–7 have already been posted.

[17] For those who have general queries about the Book of Moses, a very helpful FAQ has been provided. It helps answers questions such as

- How Did We Get the Book of Moses?
- How Was It Translated?
- And Does It Have a Basis in History?

[18] A Book of Moses bibliography will also be offered. It provides alphabetically and topically organized references. We hope this will increase awareness and use of the many relevant, but otherwise scattered, publications on this topic.

A new Pearl of Great Price Study Guide, with text and detailed commentary, is slated for publication in book form at the end of 2021. [19] And, finally, plans are underway to somewhat redesign the Pearl of Great Price Central website and to make some of its features more functional and its contents more accessible.

Many of these efforts have been in collaboration with Jeff Bradshaw, who has considerable expertise and interest in the Book of Moses. Clearly, there is a lot to be said about this volume of holy scripture, and the proceedings of this conference will no doubt add substantially to what has been published.

[20] Together, Book of Mormon Central and Pearl of Great Price Central offer many lines of evidence that can help strengthen faith in Jesus Christ and in the Restoration of his gospel and church. Eventually, these evidences will be compiled together and summarized in yet another centralized website—this one called “Evidence Central”—[21] which has officially launched today and is made possible through the generous support of the Charis Legacy Foundation.

Just as there's a need to make the contents of the scriptures more accessible and understandable, there's also a need to identify, summarize, and categorize the various evidences of their authenticity. This is the goal of Evidence Central.

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Currently, Evidence Central has a single interface, which offers users a unique way to navigate and quickly access evidences pertaining to the Book of Mormon. Other interfaces will follow, which will provide various types of navigation. Over 100 evidence summaries are currently available. We anticipate that eventually there will be many hundreds of these short articles, each of which will be carefully documented, richly illustrated, and concisely worded.

At some point, we will begin to draw upon the resources from Pearl of Great Price Central for evidence summaries pertaining to the Book of Moses and Book of Abraham, and perhaps even Joseph Smith's history. In the end, there will be a single location where someone can quickly navigate, identify, and comprehend the collective body of evidences pertaining to the Restoration.

These efforts, of course, should not be seen as a quest to prove that Jesus is the Christ, or that his church has been restored to the earth, or that Joseph Smith was a true prophet. God never intended to verify these spiritually significant truths through mere secular evidence. The Holy Ghost will always be the ultimate arbiter of truth. [22] But, as Elder Jeffrey R. Holland has remarked,

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. Thus armed with so much evidence ... we ought to be more assertive than we sometimes are in defending our testimony of truth.

Latter-day Saint scholars are often armed with an abundance of evidence, but the general membership of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints typically is not. They are largely kept from the available information simply because they don't know it exists or where to find it. Evidence Central will hopefully help meet that need better than ever before.

[23] As can be seen from the proceedings of this conference, the Book of Moses has an important role to play in this effort. In many cases, its contents have found remarkable corroboration in ancient texts that have only surfaced long after the Book of Moses was published. The world is free to speculate about the non-miraculous processes that might *possibly* have led to such correspondences. But for those who don't limit themselves to naturalistic assumptions, the Book of Moses offers a host of good reasons to believe in Joseph Smith's prophetic calling. The text's evidentiary power goes hand in hand with its doctrinal and theological significance. Revelation and reason both point towards the same conclusion—this book is from God and it is deeply relevant for our lives today.

Hopefully, the growing number of centralized resources provided by Book of Mormon Central can help communicate these realities to ever wider audiences. And we at Book of Mormon Central sincerely thank the many dedicated scholars who make this undertaking possible. After all, we would have little to centralize if it weren't for organizations like *The Interpreter Foundation* and many others, who provide credible academic venues for this valuable research to be published.

Thank you.

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