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Introduction

Daniel C. Peterson

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Author(s) Daniel C. Peterson

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Abstract President Ezra Taft Benson's call to emphasize the Book of Mormon is reflected in the effort of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies to promote the study of this book of scripture. The *Review* is founded on the deeply held belief that the Book of Mormon has immense value to both the Church and the world. The reviewers look at publications, both positive and negative, that deal with the Book of Mormon.

Introduction

Daniel C. Peterson

"I believe," said Jeffrey R. Holland in 1986, "that by Aristotle's standard the Book of Mormon is not only a good book; it is a classic."¹ Holland referred specifically to the structure and development of the book, and a good argument can be made that he is right. The narrative of the Book of Mormon, to choose just one aspect, is a far cry from the simplistic and naïve yarn which many of its dismissive critics claim to see in it. It is, in fact, much more complex and sophisticated than is recognized even by most of its professed disciples. But, of course, the Book of Mormon is not simply a great story well told. "To begin with," writes Elder Neal A. Maxwell, "the Book of Mormon provides resounding and great answers to what Amulek designated as 'the great question'; namely, is there really a redeeming Christ?"²

Yet, by and large, the Book of Mormon has not received the attention that it deserves. For all its potential significance in comparative religions,³ for all the historical influence which it

¹ Jeffrey R. Holland, "Conclusion and Charge," in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The Doctrinal Foundation* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 317.

² Neal A. Maxwell, "The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer to 'The Great Question'," in Nyman and Tate, *Doctrinal Foundation*, 1.

³ There have always been a few scholars who have recognized the world-historical significance of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon for religious studies. Eduard Meyer, with his famous *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1912), English trans. by Heinz F. Rohde and Eugene Seaich (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, n.d.), is perhaps the most illustrious example, but others come to mind. For instance, in an article entitled "Joseph Smith und die Bibel: Die Leistung des mormonischen Propheten in neuer Beleuchtung," which appeared in the *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 109/2 (Feb. 1984): 81-92, the Finnish scholar Heikki Räisänen appealed to European students of "Religionswissenschaft" to give Mormonism and its scriptures more serious attention. (The article by W. D. Davies, "Reflections on the Mormon Canon," *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (Jan. 1986): 44-66, is perhaps a step in this direction.) And in November 1987, when a group of prominent Islamicists gathered in Boston to discuss a colleague's new book on the

has undeniably exercised, for all the spiritual value attributed to it by millions of believing Latter-day Saints, it has been left relatively unstudied. The eminent Judaic scholar Jacob Neusner put his finger on perhaps one of the reasons for this odd situation in an article published over ten years ago. "Among our colleagues," he remarked, "are some who do not really like religion in its living forms, but find it terribly interesting in its dead ones." To take a prominent example, Neusner continues, the Book of Mormon "is available principally for ridicule, but never for study. Religious experience in the third century is fascinating. Religious experience in the twentieth century is frightening or absurd."⁴ The Book of Mormon has been, indeed, and as President Benson has been telling us, neglected—and by believers only comparatively less than by nonbelievers.

Perhaps this is beginning to change. Certainly the Prophet's call for renewed emphasis on the Book of Mormon has met a response among many members of the Church. And it can hardly be dismissed as self-congratulation—since I am a newcomer to the organization—when I say that the establishment of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies itself represents both a symbol of an apparent renaissance in Book of Mormon studies and a watershed in their development. But while F.A.R.M.S. is a manifestation of heightened interest in the Book, it is not the only manifestation. New theories on the origins and claims of the Book of Mormon

nature of scripture and canon in world religions, the Qur'ān was naturally their primary focus—but the Book of Mormon was a prominent secondary topic of discussion. And (to my delight) it was apparent that at least certain of the discussants knew something about it.

⁴ Jacob Neusner, "Religious Studies: The Next Location," *Bulletin of the Council on the Study of Religion* 8/5 (Dec. 1977): 118. From the context of his statement, Neusner seems to share with Heikki Räisänen the assumption "was jedem historisch denkenden Nicht-Mormonen ohnehin klar ist: Das BM ist ein Produkt des 19. Jahrhunderts" (Räisänen, "Joseph Smith und die Bibel," 82). We should not be surprised or distressed at this: While one can perhaps believe the Book of Mormon to be a modern production and still accept it as scripture (at least, there are a few who claim to do so), it would be rather difficult to believe the Book to be ancient and authentic and *not* regard it as scripture. Thus, of *course* even sympathetic non-Mormons will tend to view it as a creation of the nineteenth century; otherwise, presumably, they would not be non-Mormons!

proliferate not only without but, for perhaps the first time in any significant way, within the Church. Some of these are, in my frank opinion, pernicious. A few are simply retoolings of theories which have been around since the nineteenth century. But they are presented, in many cases, with a persuasive force which merits the most serious and honest attention. For those who occupy themselves seriously with the rising field of Book of Mormon studies, they cannot simply be dismissed.

As The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints continues its remarkable emergence from the obscurity and isolation of the Great Basin to the status of a truly global institution, it and its beliefs will undoubtedly come under yet more scrutiny. And, since the Book of Mormon is crucial to the claims of the Church, it is inevitable that it too will be examined and cross-examined by both sympathetic and unsympathetic observers. Inescapably, it will come under attack. (What surprise in this, since it has been under attack now for sixteen decades?) It is, therefore, and will ever be the duty of believers in the Book of Mormon to "be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh [them] a reason of the hope that is in [them]" (1 Peter 3:15). Not to *prove* to the world that the Book of Mormon is true. Such an outcome is probably impossible, and almost certainly inconsistent with the noncoercive plan of salvation adopted before this world was. Rather, we need simply to show that there is room for faith, that belief is not something which honest and rational human beings must sadly forego.

But a deeper knowledge of the Book of Mormon is not merely desirable in order to reinforce our apologetic armor. If that were the case, the Book of Mormon would be no more useful to us than a piece of worthless peripheral territory is to a city under siege. If the Book of Mormon served only to increase the perimeter we must defend against attack, we would be well-advised to cast it off.

This *Review* is founded on the deeply held belief that the Book of Mormon has immense value to both the Church and the world. The challenges of the years ahead will not be merely, or even largely, challenges of opposition. Rather, they will include the rapid growth of the Kingdom, the widening gap between Zion and its alluring but decadent rival, Babylon, and the difficulties of planting the gospel in foreign nations and cultures which we have up until now barely touched. They will involve materialism and violence, international conflict and weakened

faith, infidelity and the lust for status and power. All of these problems, and many others, are addressed in the Book of Mormon. A more profound understanding of the Book is imperative if we are to meet the tasks which lie ahead.

This is the first issue of what we hope and plan to be an annual review of books written about the Book of Mormon. It is simultaneously a response to the greater manifested interest in the Book of Mormon, and a part of that trend. We undertake this enterprise with some concern that our intentions be properly understood. As Latter-day Saints, we belong to a culture which values kindness and the accentuation of the positive. This is quite proper, and entirely Christian. Criticism in the commonly used sense of the term—and the reviewing of books written by fallible mortal authors will always entail a certain amount of such criticism—is something that our culture is wary of, and with some justification. Too often, it can be unhelpful, unfair, cruel, and self-aggrandizing. Of Babylon, and not of Zion. I hope that we have successfully avoided that tendency in our first attempt.

Furthermore, “criticism”—pop definitions notwithstanding—need not be negative. (I think naturally of the publication, a few years back, of the F.A.R.M.S. “Critical Text” of the Book of Mormon. Shortly thereafter, one newspaper ran a headline announcing “Group Publishes Text Critical of the Book of Mormon.”) There is much to admire in some recent publications on our subject, much that is useful. To borrow a phrase, “there are many things contained therein that are true” (D&C 91:1). But if discernment is necessary in reading those ancient texts, so too it is necessary in reading the increasing number of books and articles appearing annually about the Book of Mormon. We do not intend in this *Review* simply to stand back and attack all those who are attempting to contribute to our knowledge of the Book of Mormon. Rather, we intend to criticize in the pure sense of the word, which goes back to the Greek *krino*, “to separate, choose, decide.” Discernment, after all, is a gift which each one of us is encouraged to develop. We are to “lay hold upon every good thing” (see Moroni 7:12-19). “Prove all things,” admonished the apostle Paul. “Hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

That is what this project is designed to do. There is value for anyone in peer review. That fact has long been recognized in academic fields ranging from chemistry to comparative literature. We often fail to notice, even in daily life, the things that we do

amiss. It requires someone else to point them out to us—a wife, a child, a friend, sometimes even an enemy. The garden of Book of Mormon studies will produce more abundantly and healthily if its gardeners and consumers are adept at distinguishing edible plants from weeds.

The metaphor is deliberately chosen. We hope for a plenteous harvest, but weeds must be recognized for what they are. Where there is shoddy writing or shallow reasoning, we hope to point it out. Not that we necessarily enjoy doing so—although on those rare occasions where there is dishonesty or bad faith, it is a positive if not altogether saintly pleasure to draw attention to it. (No such occasions occur in this volume, although they have in the past and, no doubt, will in the future.) Rather, we hope in a modest way to improve the quality of writing and thinking on the Book of Mormon, our own not excluded, by signaling defects and areas of potential improvement. But the purpose of the garden, the goal of the gardener, the ambition of the hungry onlooker, is to harvest wholesome vegetables and delicious fruit. Obsessive weeding for its own sake is just that—obsessive. Unfruitful. Although this *Review* will not hesitate to point out bad work, we will enjoy much more the opportunity to draw attention to things that have been well done. If we can encourage a wider circulation for good ideas and enriching insights, we will be delighted.

We welcome diversity of viewpoints and approaches. A varied diet, to continue the metaphor. Simply because this *Review* is published by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies does not mean that archaeological, geographical, and philological avenues are the only ways to approach the text. They are not even the most important ways. Far from it, although they can be of valuable assistance to other approaches as well as being interesting and stimulating in their own right. Any important text—and the Book of Mormon is certainly in that class—can be profitably read in a multitude of ways. No one way—and this is one of the articles of faith underlying this enterprise—is exclusively valuable. I myself have found benefit in reading the Book of Mormon sometimes rapidly, sometimes very slowly, occasionally in a different language, sometimes looking for doctrinal themes, at other times trying to puzzle out historical issues, sometimes searching deliberately for the spiritual guidance in which at all times I have found it so rich. Each approach has its value. One of the great testimonies to the Book of Mormon, I feel, is that it stands up so

well—and yields so very much—to all manner of readings. Thus, we have included in this *Review* not only materials that might be expected to appeal to people (like much of the leadership of F.A.R.M.S.) who have special interests in the ancient world, in Mesoamerica and the Near East, but also writing of a more devotional kind. And we have included something from the anti-Mormon camp, as well. Indeed, we have tried to cover all the book-length items concerning the Book of Mormon which were published in the interval 1987-1988. (Previously published reviews of major books before this time have been collected and are available from F.A.R.M.S.) There have been, we know, some omissions. We will attempt to pick these up in the next issue, and we would be grateful to any of our readers who might bring other items to our attention.

Those books that we review in this issue are presented in alphabetical order, by author. In the two cases where more than one review is given of the same book, we have printed these in alphabetical order by reviewer. No effort has been made by the editor or by anyone else connected with this *Review* to harmonize the viewpoints expressed here, or to guide the reviewers. The editorial hand has been relatively light. The opinions expressed in these reviews are solely those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent those of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or the respective institutions with which the authors are affiliated.

There remains the opportunity to thank all of those who have helped in the production of this *Review*. To the reviewers, who responded so well at short notice and at a rather inconvenient time; to Janet Twigg of the F.A.R.M.S. office, who secured the books and sent them out for review; to Shirley S. Ricks, who entered the reviews into the master computer disk and established them in a uniform and pleasing format; to Glen Cooper, who compiled the Bibliography; to all of these I express my gratitude.