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### Susan Easton Black, *Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon*

Camille Williams

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon* (1987), by Susan Easton Black.

Susan Easton Black, *Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1987. ix + 97 pp., index. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Camille Williams

Professor Black's brief book testifies of Christ, the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith and LDS doctrine; she is a believer writing for believers. The most engaging parts of the book are her personal experiences as a ten-year-old challenging a minister (pp. 1-4) and as a teacher watching her class show compassion (pp. 71-72). Both speak of her faith and insight.

In addition to bearing testimony, she questions the purpose of Book of Mormon scholarship (pp. 10-13), then outlines her own observations about names for Christ (pp. 15-31), about indicators of his body and passions (pp. 51-64), about his appearance to the Nephites (pp. 38-48), about Book of Mormon themes (pp. 31-34), and about the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith (pp. 80-84). Testimonies, of course, aren't subject to a review such as this, but her observations present us with an issue that requires further exploration.

I am puzzled by her attack against both the "gratuitous verbiage" of critics of the Book of Mormon (p. 10), also against the efforts of "sympathetic" archaeologists, anthropologists, and other scholars (pp. 10-12). Her assertion that some studies of the Book of Mormon "are intellectually stimulating but not always spiritually edifying," often missing "the Christ-centered purpose of the book" (p. 11), suggests in perhaps a too general sense that scholars lack or destroy faith. This seems an unhappy generalization, especially since it is followed immediately by a quantitative study of Christ's names and their frequency of use—a type of the analytical approach similar to those which she appears to condemn.

Surely the Book of Mormon deserves our best, most faithful scholarship not because we can "prove" or "disprove" our arguments, but because scholarly inquiry is another way of experiencing the text, and it is *that* experience, not the words we write about it, that convinces and converts.

Professor Black's focus on one clause on the title page—"to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations"—is valid; but it is likely that other scholars view their work as addressing other clauses on the same page. They may see their linguistic,

anthropological, or other studies as supporting the book's mission "to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers;... that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever."

Perhaps the problem lies not in academic inquiry itself, but in the kinds of questions we ask, the ways we gather data, and in the conclusions we draw. Professor Black's conclusions do not automatically follow from her lists and tables. It is unfortunate that she does not guide the reader through her analysis.

The claim that "each appearance of his name [Christ's] reveals something unique, something essential, and something deeply inspirational about him" (p. 16) is not obvious. Of the 101 different names referring to Christ 34% are *God*, another 34% *Lord*, 8% *Christ*; those names and percentages seem not unexpected; it is possible that many readers do not understand that Christ is being named when they see "Lord" or "God." Had she moved into the text to demonstrate, for example, how *Almighty* (2 Nephi 23:6) could not work well in place of *Lord God Almighty* (2 Nephi 9:46), her interpretation of the significance of the names would have been more convincing. The reader is left to work out the links between the data and the conclusions.

This lack of cohesive links between data and analysis persists throughout the section treating Christ's body and passions (ch. 4). It is left unclear how the charts of words relate to increased knowledge about Christ, his attributes, or his mission.

Much of the last third of the book is a summary of Book of Mormon themes as related to our own day, and a compilation of testimonies about Joseph Smith's mission. The summary and its supporting arguments include copious references to the Book of Mormon, but still do not take us into the Book of Mormon text itself. This is a weakness that might have been addressed at the editorial stage, where some unevenness of diction, and too frequent repetition of phrasing and metaphor could also have been corrected.

Professor Black's testimony permeates her writing. She has spent years studying the Book of Mormon, but for the most part her scholarly insights are less clearly communicated than they might have been.