Wilford A. Fischer and Norma J. Fischer, *A Book of Mormon Guide: A Simple Way to Teach a Friend*

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Reviewed by John Gee

Part of President Benson's exhortation to flood the earth with the Book of Mormon was to use the Book of Mormon to teach the gospel. His exhortation also included a challenge to "our Church writers, teachers, and leaders . . . to show us how to effectively use it [the Book of Mormon] as a missionary tool, and let us know how it leads us to Christ and answers our personal problems and those of the world." The Fischers' book is an attempt to accomplish this purpose. Indeed they may be commended for having made one of the first attempts to do this since President Benson's urge to move the Book of Mormon forward.

The book comes in two parts: a five-page pamphlet containing instructions for the member, and a seventy-two page reading guide for the use of the investigator along with the Book of Mormon. The reading guide is divided into two sections and twelve units; presumably each unit would constitute a reading session. The Fischers advocate either giving the guide with a Book of Mormon to a friend or using the reading guide to read the Book of Mormon with a friend. The latter option is probably the better of the two, and may be among the guide's better suggestions. Some people might find it awkward to give a friend a book which trumpets "A Simple Way to Teach a Friend" in gold letters on its cover.

On the face of it, the plan seems simple enough. The guide tries to introduce the Book of Mormon as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and then use it to teach the gospel. Though this may have been the Church's program in times past, it is not the approach used now. To its credit, the guide does mention four things to the member which should be a sine qua non for any approach that attempts to teach the gospel through the Book of Mormon: (1) The Spirit is the most important thing in teaching, and it is absolutely essential that it be present if the gospel is to be taught properly (D&C 42:12-17; 50:10-25; 1

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2  Ibid., 5.
pamphlet, p. 4). (2) “Let the Book of Mormon teach its own message” (pamphlet, p. 4). (3) “Be sensitive to your friend’s needs. Answer questions if you can. However, if you don’t know the answers, tell him that you do not know. Avoid discussions over controversial issues” (pamphlet, p. 3). (4) When prompted, ask your friend to take the missionary discussions (pamphlet, p. 4). The Fischers would have been better off had they followed their own guidelines.

To the authors’ credit, the guide is written in a fairly simple manner. The fourth unit is perhaps the best written; it is short, concise, to the point, and shows the Book of Mormon to teach its own message, having almost no commentary. The style of the guide is much like some of the Church’s manuals. Those members who deem the missionary discussions puerile will likely find this approach not to their taste. Those who do not will also likely have some reservations, for there are quite a few concerns which the guide does little to allay: How “simple” is the approach? Since the guide does not advocate using the entire Book of Mormon, how do the selections chosen assist the investigator in understanding the gospel? How well does this method adapt to use with languages other than English? How does this approach fit in with the current standard missionary discussions? Let us consider each of these points in order.

How “simple” is the approach? To follow through with this approach, the individual will likely need the following: Two copies of the guide (one for you and one for the investigator), a copy of Bruce R. McConkie’s A New Witness for the Articles of Faith, three pamphlets, and one to eight videos. This is in addition to the copies of the Book of Mormon and the Bible. This could become a very expensive proposition and seems to complicate the picture needlessly.

As a proselyting tool and teaching aid, the guide also suffers from the common pedagogical flaw of introducing concepts without explaining them. Instead of starting with the present understanding of the student or investigator and adding to that “line upon line,”3 the Fischers seem to herd the investigator through a complex maze of doctrines of the Latter-day Saints which have little to do with the first principles. The topics they discuss are, in order: scripture, the Catholic church as the great and abominable church, scripture (again, and for

3 Cf. Isaiah 28:13; D&C 98:12; 128:21; for examples of this in missionary work, see Alma 18:24-40; 22:5-14.
four more units), the nature of prophecy, free agency, the doctrine of Christ, orthodox thinking, the Church of Jesus Christ, and finally, faith, hope, and charity. Why are the first principles of the gospel postponed until the reader is halfway through the guide? The Fischers could have learned a lot by looking carefully at the way the Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel presents the principles of the gospel. Even looking at the last two versions of the missionary discussions might have helped.

Unfortunately, the Fischers’ system often introduces meat before milk. For instance, the guide launches into a discussion about the difference between a prophet and a seer (pp. 9-10), and refers to becoming “like God, our Father in Heaven” (p. 39) before it ever mentions repentance (p. 58) or salvation through the atonement of Christ (p. 49, 59). There is even a unit on “Predictions and Free Agency” (a needlessly loaded title for Unit 7) before the unit on “Christ... Presents His Doctrine” (Unit 9). This approach inadvertently shifts the emphasis away from the saving doctrine of Christ to side issues which have only indirect impact, if any at all, on salvation.

Sadly, the result of this sort of approach may be seen about us, as most misconceptions which nonmembers have about the Latter-day Saint Church seem to stem from members having avoided the basics and having discussed other issues instead, a practice specifically forbidden by scripture: “And of tenets thou shalt not talk, but thou shalt declare repentance and faith on the Savior, and remission of sins by baptism, and by fire, yea, even the Holy Ghost” (D&C 19:31). The picture which emerges is like that of a castle with tall towers, where only the tops of the towers are present, standing in the air, without the foundation or the basic structure underneath them—an odd image indeed.

Since the guide does not advocate using the entire Book of Mormon, how do the selections chosen assist the investigator in understanding the gospel? The failure to include reading the entire Book of Mormon as an option must be considered a particular drawback to the Fischers’ system. The selections of

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4 Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel (Salt Lake City: Corporation of the President of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1986).

5 Principles meaning first things, basics and also chief things (Hebrews 6:1-2; Article of Faith); these are the most important.
the Book of Mormon which the guide suggests reading are 1 Nephi 5-6, 9-10, 13; 2 Nephi 2-3, 26-27, 29, 31-33; Mosiah 8; Helaman 14; 3 Nephi 1, 8-12, 15, 17-19, 27; 4 Nephi; Mormon 8-9; Ether 12; Moroni 1-7, 10; and, oddly enough, Isaiah 29 (though not in that particular order). The guide says that this totals seventy-two pages, but it really amounts to nearly ninety pages in the present editions of the English Book of Mormon. Additionally, the investigator is to read the seventy-four pages of the guide, bringing the total up to one hundred sixty-four pages, which would take one up to the record of Zeniff if one were reading the Book of Mormon straight through. If the Fischers were trying to save the investigator time by giving him less to read, it would seem that it would have been better to have a five-page pamphlet for the investigator and leave the seventy-two page book for the member. It seems to this reviewer that the time and effort of the investigator would be better spent in reading the Book of Mormon than in reading the Fischer’s guide, particularly since the idea is to “let the Book of Mormon teach its own message” (pamphlet, p. 4).

The Book of Mormon contains a good deal of story matter, but almost all of the narrative has been removed from the selections of the Fischers. Perhaps they think that by doing so, they can concentrate on the “doctrinal matters” of the book. This reviewer recalls a missionary companion who had never read the Book of Mormon until his mission (unfortunately no uncommon occurrence). Early during his mission, by his account, he was cramming, reading the book for the first time and trying to get the “doctrinal content” but found that he did not know the story and so that took the greater part of his concentration. He partially missed the point, but the Fischers seem to have missed the whole point: Though one must have the story before one can concentrate on the “doctrinal matters,” many of the important points of doctrine in the Book of Mormon are wrapped up in the story.

An example might help illustrate this point. Moroni 10:3-5 may be a general statement of how one receives revelation, but if our objective is to show the investigator the importance of receiving revelation and instructing him on how to receive this for himself, the Fischers have missed a goodly number of passages on this. To be sure, they have the investigator read Moroni 10, but the Book of Mormon, more than any other of the Standard Works, gives concrete examples of individuals’ receiving their first revelation. One immediately thinks of Lehi
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(1 Nephi 1), Nephi (1 Nephi 2), Enos (Enos 1), a “multitude” (Mosiah 4:1-3), the sons of Mosiah (Mosiah 27), Alma the Younger (Mosiah 27; Alma 5:46; 36), Amulek (Alma 8, 10), Lamoni (Alma 18), Lamoni’s wife and servants (Alma 19), Lamoni’s father (Alma 22), and “about three hundred souls” of the Lamanites (Helaman 5:49), but none of these is included by the Fischers. Before the Book of Mormon gives its famous general statement on how one receives revelation, it has already cited at least eleven concrete examples of people who have received a wide variety of revelations from God.

The gospel is not just a set of things we are supposed to understand, important as that may be, but it includes actions, else what is the point in being “judged according to [our] works” (Alma 11:41)? The gospel, as the scriptures define it, is a series of actions: Jesus “came into the world, . . . to be crucified for the world, . . . and to cleanse it from all unrighteousness” (D&C 76:41), “the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved” (3 Nephi 11:32-33). In all these activities, only one (belief) might arguably be claimed to be only an intellectual activity. The story is essential, for the gospel requires action and not just philosophical contemplation. The Book of Mormon, through its story line, is better at demonstrating this than any other book of scripture. These were real people, who actually did things, and whose deeds effected their salvation. The Book of Mormon traces the consequences of many of these actions, but by leaving almost all the story out, the Fischers have unfortunately obliterated this fact. If the Book of Mormon were “inspired fiction” (whatever that may be; see Jacob 4:13; Enos 1:6; Ether 3:12), the examples in the text would be worthless, and we might as well pull them from The Scarlet Letter, The Lord of the Rings, or a Harlequin romance.

Also, the story is essential for understanding the context of the “doctrinal passages.” Although it is understandable to omit 1 Nephi 4 to avoid having to explain the slaying of Laban, omitting the first couple of chapters of 1 Nephi obliterates the entire setting. Under the Fischers’ system, we must wait until chapter 6 to find out who the narrator is, or where the narrative takes place. The guide gives no help here.

Instead of giving a summary of what the reader is missing by skipping through the book, the guide will often pontificate, sometimes at length, on what the reader should be getting from the reading. So much for letting the Book of Mormon speak for
itself. Why do we need a page and a half exegesis of Genesis 49:22-26 to explain 1 Nephi 10:11-13 when the closer literary parallel, which both Lehi and Nephi seem to be making use of, is the parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5?

How well does this method adapt to use with languages other than English? If this approach is to be directed toward the Church’s worldwide missionary efforts to preach the gospel “among all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people” (D&C 112:1), it should adapt to those friends of ours whose native language is not English and might prefer to read it in their native tongue, or might be incapable of reading English. To help facilitate this, in many languages the Church has published selections from the Book of Mormon to be used until the entire work is translated. These selections have been chosen by the brethren for their value and importance. Urdu, Persian, and Cambodian are languages in which this is currently the case, and less than five years ago, Arabic and Greek were also in this situation. Unfortunately, the Fischers have not taken this into account, and Units 1-5, 7-8, and 12 would be adversely affected if the Book of Mormon selections are used (in cases where the entire Book of Mormon has not yet been translated). This is not an idle point. Though the present reviewer served a “state-side” mission, he had the opportunity and obligation to work with individuals speaking each of the languages listed above, who also could not read English. Many proselyting programs work well in theory, or among Americans, or with English-speaking people, but flop when an attempt is made to take them across linguistic or cultural barriers. If our goal is to flood the earth, and not just the English-speaking parts of it, then we should be more sensitive to some of these problems. On the other hand, this problem of the Fischers’ guide might actually be a blessing, for the core of the gospel is presented in Units 6, 9-11, and these are the ones left unaffected by the selections in the abridgment of the Book of Mormon.

How does this approach fit in with the current standard missionary discussions? The following are the suggested reading assignments in the current standard discussions (though specific assignments are left to the missionaries), which are organized in six parts:
Part 1: Moroni 10:3-5; 3 Nephi 11.6  
Part 2: 2 Nephi 31; Mosiah 2-5; 3 Nephi 27.7  
Part 3: 3 Nephi 11-18; Mormon 7-9.8  
Part 4: Alma 11-13, 34; Helaman 14.9  
Part 5: No specific passages are suggested, but it is assumed that the investigator is reading the Book of Mormon through from start to finish.10  
Part 6: Finishing the Book of Mormon if possible.11

The only overlap between the two approaches to reading is 2 Nephi 31; Helaman 14; 3 Nephi 11, 15, 17-18; Mormon 8-9—a fair amount of the specific recommendations of the missionary discussions, unless you consider that the investigator is encouraged to read all of the Book of Mormon. The discussions present the milk first; the Fischers do not. The discussions do not use concepts until they are explained; the Fischers do. The discussions are flexible; the Fischers’ system is not. The Fischers’ system seems to be completely independent of the missionary discussions, which, if presented as they were conceived, are a far superior system to that of the Fischers. There seem to be many other mistaken notions throughout the book. Some of these become bothersome after a while, at least to this reviewer.

The Fischers have an annoying habit of referring to the Book of Mormon as “the book of Joseph” (book, pp. viii, 6; pamphlet, p. 2). This comes from the Fischers’ emphasis on the prophecy in Ezekiel 37; but the reference might be confusing to those church members who might recall that the book of Joseph was supposed to be a record on papyrus which the prophet Joseph Smith seems never to have to translated.

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8 “The Restoration,” Discussion 3 of Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel, 3-1.  
9 “Eternal Progression,” Discussion 4 of Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel, 4-1.  
10 “Living a Christlike Life,” Discussion 5 of Uniform System for Teaching the Gospel, 5-1.  
The Fischers also emphasize that a prophet to be such must write scripture. They use Lehi to illustrate this point: "Lehi made two predictions and he wrote scripture; therefore, he was a prophet" (book, p. 3). By this argument, one could argue that Muhammad and Nostradamus were prophets, but Aminadi (Alma 10:2), Samuel the Lamanite, Lorenzo Snow, Heber J. Grant, George Albert Smith, David O. McKay, Joseph Fielding Smith, Harold B. Lee, and Ezra Taft Benson are not, for none of their writings is canonized. The situation here is even more ironic because we have none of the writings of Lehi himself, but only excerpts of his sermons recorded by Nephi. Jesus himself left us no book by his own hand, but, for Peter, he was the prophet par excellence (Acts 3:22-23, and Clementine Recognitions, passim). This definition of a prophet must be viewed as highly inaccurate.

Another questionable topic which the Fischers spend time on is finger-pointing at Christianity in general, and the Catholic church in particular (though to their credit they never mention the Catholic church by name), as the great and abominable church of the devil. Yet it is not so for the Book of Mormon. As far as the Book of Mormon goes, one could point fingers at the Greek Orthodox church or any number of Protestant denominations as well as the Catholic church; but then again, we might find that some of the Latter-day Saints meet the description as well (cf. Alma 4:6-12; 3 Nephi 6:21-30). According to the Book of Mormon, however, who are we to point fingers (cf. 3 Nephi 14:1-5; Moroni 7:18)? Each can only examine himself and ask, "To which do I belong" (cf. Mosiah 5:9-14; Alma 5:38-39)? That great and abominable church . . . is the whore of all the earth" (1 Nephi 22:13), yet "he that fighteth against Zion, both Jew and Gentile, both bond and free, both male and female, . . . they are they who are the whore of all the earth" (2 Nephi 10:16); so anyone who fights against Zion belongs to the great and abominable church. Or we might define the great and abominable church by its desires: "The gold, and silver, and the silks, and the scarlets, and the fine-twined linen, and the precious clothing, and the harlots, are the desires of the great and abominable church" (1 Nephi 13:8). In sum "all churches which are built up to get gain, and all those who are built up to get power over the flesh, and those who are built up to become popular in the eyes of the world, and those who seek the lusts of the flesh and the things of the world, and to do all manner of iniquity; . . . belong to the kingdom of the devil" (1 Nephi
22:23; cf. 3 Nephi 6:15). "After all these things do the Gentiles seek" (Matthew 6:32); but the Saints are commanded not to worry about these things (cf. Matthew 6:19-34; 3 Nephi 13:19-34; Jacob 1:15-3:12; D&C 6:6-7). The Nephites were the happiest of all people (4 Nephi 1:15-18) until they sought such things (4 Nephi 1:23-29). Of course, the true church would also have the name (3 Nephi 27:8) and the doctrine (3 Nephi 11:32-40), but it also lacked the desires of the great and abominable church. As far as taking out the plain and precious parts of the scriptures, the Fischers might as well blame the modern textual critics12 and the form and redaction critics13 for such things just as much as the second-century Christians14 or the medieval monks, the last being in many ways the most blameless. Here also the Fischers' discussion is very misleading.

If someone feels inspired to introduce his or her friend to the gospel through the Fischers' system, then by all means he or she should do so. If this guide actually works in introducing people to the Book of Mormon and converting them to the church, then perhaps it will have served its purpose, but it might also show us that the Book of Mormon is successful in "lead[ing] us to Christ and answer[ing] our personal problems" in spite of our best efforts to prevent it.


14 For an example of how drastic the changes in the text can be, see the way Matthew 7:23 is quoted in 2 Clement IV, 5 (ca. A.D. 110) and then in Justin Martyr, 1 Apology XVI, 11 (ca. A.D. 150), and compare both with the way it stands in the present editions where the earliest manuscripts to attest this verse (P86, 01 Sinaiaticus, 03 Vaticanus) all come from the fourth century.