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Abstract Review of “A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon” (1989), by Alan Goff.

Alan Goff, "A Hermeneutic of Sacred Texts: Historicism, Revisionism, Positivism, and the Bible and Book of Mormon." Master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1989. ix + 225 pp., bibliography.

Reviewed by Daniel B. McKinlay

The review set forth here is different from the others in this volume, inasmuch as the work under consideration has not been published. The justification for its inclusion is that it addresses a significant issue which stands at the heart of Book of Mormon studies, namely, the relative reliability of methodologies.

A quick glance at the bibliography reveals that Alan Goff has read widely in preparation for this thesis submitted to the English Department. He crosses into other disciplines, notably biblical studies and history, with admirable skill. His focus, as his title suggests, is on hermeneutics, or the means by which sacred texts (i.e., the Bible and Book of Mormon) may be interpreted.

The thrust of Goff's thesis seems to be aimed in two related directions. First, he issues a scathing indictment of Mormon and non-Mormon scholars who advocate revisionist, positivistic, and naturalistic interpretations of Mormon history and particularly of the Book of Mormon. Secondly, he proposes the value of employing several hermeneutical approaches to understand Book of Mormon texts, and he illustrates these techniques with certain episodes in the Nephite record. The outcome, in my opinion, is an exciting array of possibilities for understanding the Book of Mormon. Due to the constraint of space he is only able to give us a taste of how different hermeneutical devices can provide insight for us. He is not original in these applications; he relies on suggestions from predecessors in the field of biblical interpretation. But the cumulative impact of his examples gives weight to his thesis. The aim of this review is to discuss both sides of Goff's project.

In the first part of his thesis (and interspersed throughout the work) the author fires off a compelling challenge to revisionist scholars who begin Book of Mormon evaluations with the premise that it was sheerly the product of Joseph Smith's reaction to his prevailing culture. He renounces the validity of positivism, which holds that one can gather facts, let them speak for themselves, and thereby present objective truth for everyone's consideration. Similarly, Goff rejects histori-

cism, which he defines as the ability to reconstruct history as it actually was. In this argument he confronts especially Thomas Alexander (largely on his interpretation of Mormon history), Fawn Brodie, William Russell, and Wayne Ham. Repeatedly he uses "superficial," "naive," and "shallow" to describe the attempted analyses of the latter three to explain the Book of Mormon.

In reading Goff's thesis, I am under the impression that he is at least somewhat surprised that the above-named scholars, as well as others he mentions, presume to give authoritative evaluations of Book of Mormon texts by utilizing methods that are now discredited (p. 1). On pp. 6-7 he cites an excerpt of a letter Ron Priddis wrote to *The Daily Universe* at Brigham Young University, 29 October 1987, in which Priddis criticizes some of Richard L. Anderson's methods in dealing with the question of Joseph Smith and magic. Priddis concludes that "Anderson's approach to history is to align sources in ways that best support preconceived concepts, using the most lenient standards to evaluate data he finds useful and the most narrow allowances for sources which contradict his views." D. Michael Quinn, on the other hand, when dealing with the same subject, "has scrupulously followed his sources wherever they have led, letting history speak for itself." As Goff sees Priddis's position, the latter considers any handling of historical sources that disagrees with his own to be tendentious, whereas the historian who agrees with him is simply appealing to "brute facts," whose understanding is self-evident. The fallacy in this, according to Goff, is that there are no brute facts which in and of themselves present an infallible picture of reality. Any historical scheme we create is an interpretive venture. We take whatever data we can find and try to construct a plausible mechanism whose features cohere and make sense overall. But as Goff rightly says, "We always give the data meaning; evidence doesn't speak for itself" (p. 183). It is ultimately meaningless, even impossible, therefore, to claim objectivity. Hence, "our explanations of the past do not refer to what actually happened or the way things 'really' happen in the world—all our explanations are interpretations based on prejudices and ideologies as we encounter the data left to us from the past. We judge the historical evidence as we see it, not as it actually is" (p. 25). Not only are our conclusions based on prejudices and ideologies, but on value judgments, which are grounded on

“assumptions that cannot be defended, logically or empirically” (p. 29).

Along this line, Goff rejects the absolutist premise of Anthony Hutchinson, who claims that prophecy in the sense of predicting the future is nonexistent in the world of reality. According to Goff, “such a position doesn’t reveal what happens in the ‘real world,’ it reveals a theological understanding that excludes certain possibilities *a priori*” (p. 15). The best Hutchinson (or anyone else) can do is acknowledge that predictive prophecy is not real *to him*. But that does not necessarily preclude its existence.

A point that Goff makes with regard to our attempts to re-create the past is too little recognized in scholarship in general. It is that the historian is required to fill in many gaps in his project. H. J. Cadbury pointed out some time ago that we have a paucity of knowledge from which to devise an accurate assessment of earliest Christianity.¹ Yet it is amazing how confidently some scholars propose explanations for sayings attributed to Jesus. Frequently form critics will take a given saying and conclude: Jesus could *not* have said this; it is, rather, a reflection of the situation in the early church, perhaps in Mark’s or Matthew’s community. Frankly, this kind of exercise amounts to second-guessing the texts. By what standard do we determine what Jesus said as opposed to what must have been invented by the early church and then attributed to Jesus? Does it help to say that the *logia* came from Christian prophets who understood them to originate from the resurrected Lord, only to be transferred to the mouth of the historical Jesus? Whatever the standard may be, one thing is inevitable: our conclusions depend on our own reasoning and the presuppositions we bring to the text. We fill in the gaps. But regardless of strong justification for our own view, other people seeing the same data may make sense of it in another way. To me Goff may overstate the situation a bit, but nevertheless makes an important point, when he says:

The historian doesn’t just take up the objective record and present it to the audience; he or she adds to the record concepts (such as evolution and theological notions) that the actors never would have considered; he or she makes connections the actors never made; in

¹ H. J. Cadbury, “The Dilemma of Ephesians,” *New Testament Studies* 5 (January 1959): 92.

[Martin] Marty's terms, he or she "invents." The historian invents, tells a story, invents a story based on the historical record. (p. 33)

Goff thinks that historians should let their audience know what assumptions underlie their position, although he admits that they may not always be conscious of some of them. And certainly, given the interpretive nature of history, "we ought to be tentative about our conclusions" (p. 33). This should be stressed. Our perceptions of life are often contingent upon models. Models are the basis by which we apprehend the various disciplines we study. They are convenient because they are attempts to make sense of the world as we see it. The more a model is able to answer questions within its sphere the better it is. I think Goff would agree that Old and New Testament criticism is based on models, and of course there are some givens that govern their use. An example is the documentary hypothesis of the Pentateuch or the Gospels. The division of the Pentateuch into four strains of tradition, designated as "J," "E," "P," and "D," provides us with a workable model; various pericopes that have points in common may fall into one of the four groups. One wonders, however, about the possibility of grouping slices of the scriptures, which also make sense within their own paradigm, into different categories, thus creating a different model. Historically, models have a way of being replaced by better ones. I suspect that eventually some bright person will come up with a model that will replace the one that is now dominant. But we should keep in mind that the working out of models requires filler or guess work; the plausibility of any model is dependent upon assuming that certain data can be understood in a certain way. But the possibility of those data being seen in other ways is ever present. A good example of this is found in Gospel criticism. Many scholars believe that Matthew and Luke used Mark, as well as another common document or oral tradition, "Q," as two of their sources. But William Farmer, following the lead of Johann J. Griesbach, has offered some rather cogent arguments which suggest that Mark was dependent upon Matthew. The debate has not ended.² Both views can make sense, depending upon how one looks at the evidence. It is possible that neither hypothesis is correct and that the story of the composition of the Gospels and their

² See William R. Farmer, *The Synoptic Problem* (New York: Macmillan, 1964).

possible influence on each other is still unknown. There are all kinds of possibilities.

Personally, I believe that the approach of Brodie, Russell, Ham, Hutchinson, and others of like mind—to disregard the possible antiquity of the Book of Mormon on the grounds that some features of the history of Judah prior to the Exile as presently understood by many scholars seem to preclude the book's authenticity—is precarious. It demonstrates restricted scope and does not consider the many possibilities available in understanding the text. Some of those possibilities may not even have occurred to anyone yet. Hugh Nibley in *Since Cumorah* gave some tentative suggestions on the Isaiah problem, and there is still room for further considerations.³

Some thinkers claim they have found parallels between the Book of Mormon and the America Joseph Smith knew. That may be so, but as Goff puts it: "I firmly believe that given sufficient determination and research, environmental parallels could be found to claim that the Book of Mormon would fit into any epoch and location" (pp. 44-45). Nibley has said essentially the same thing.⁴ In spite of some similarities between the Book of Mormon and Jacksonian America, I believe (and I sense that Goff does) that the Book of Mormon is so exotic that it portrays a civilization "from another age and another culture."⁵ But ultimately, as Nibley points out, the evidence proving or disproving the Book of Mormon does not exist.⁶ One's response to it is a matter of faith.

Goff's application of various hermeneutical approaches to selected texts in the Book of Mormon makes for exciting reading. He criticizes the facile assumption of Brodie and Ham that stories in the Book of Mormon were adapted from similar Bible stories (pp. 61-62). Such a conclusion underestimates the

³ Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 120-25.

⁴ Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 3d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 8-9; Hugh Nibley, *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, vol. 4 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 147-48; and Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989), 230.

⁵ Nibley, *Approach to the Book of Mormon*, xiii.

⁶ Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, xiv.

extremely complex nature of the narratives, and reveals only a hurried, surface acquaintance with the stories. An example of this is the account in Mosiah 20 describing the stealing of the daughters of the Lamanites by the priests of Noah. Both Brodie and Ham see this as an adaptation of the story of the dancing daughters of Shiloah in Judges 21. Vernal Holley thinks the story came from Solomon Spaulding's novel (p. 64). Robert Smith sees greater affinities in this story with the rape of the Sabine women as told by Plutarch than with the story in Judges. Goff analyzes the trio of stories from Judges 19-21, the last one of which resembles in some ways the scene depicted in Mosiah 20; the similarities are "type-scenes" (p. 70). In looking at these common stories from antiquity we find that the stealing of the daughters of the Lamanites fits in with ease, and the behavior of the Lamanite fathers and daughters after the stealing makes good sense in light of the economic value virgin daughters had for their fathers. Having lost their unmarried or virginal status, the daughters lost much of their bargaining value. The only alternative for the daughters was to plead with their Lamanite families for their Nephite husbands (when they were later discovered), even if the priests of Noah were scoundrels. Goff provides a fascinating and fairly extensive discussion on this whole episode.

Drawing on studies by Terrence L. Szink, Leland Ryken, Brevard Childs, Nahum Waldman, and others, Goff analyzes the story of Nephi's broken steel bow. He notes that "the bow was a symbol of strength and leadership" (p. 95). A broken bow symbolized submission in treaties of a subservient king to his superior. The issue in Nephi's episode is submission to God, which Nephi illustrates liberally. The tensions of leadership (i.e., the complaint of Laman and Lemuel that their rightful role of leadership is being usurped) are attested throughout 1 Nephi and the first part of 2 Nephi. An examination of the leadership questions, the murmurings, and the miraculous deliverances suggests resemblances to the Joseph and Moses stories with the same themes. Goff considers this to be deliberate; he holds that Nephi wants to emphasize common patterns. In this regard Goff applies the intriguing thesis of Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, that archaic man felt that life was real when it was archetypal; the repetition of the events occurring at the foundation of the nation are 'real' events and ordinary events merely mundane; real events must be

enacted.⁷ Thus Goff concludes: "What would surprise us most, then, would be for Nephi *not* to cast his narrative in the Exodus language and tradition" (p. 101). I find the possibilities in this approach to be attractive.

In the last chapter of his thesis (chapter six), Goff interprets the themes in 1 Nephi by several different hermeneutical avenues. His intention is to illuminate the text, not to prove that it is true (pp. 114-15).

He starts by interpreting "Irreantum" (many waters, 1 Nephi 17:5) from what he calls a historical approach. To me it is more typological (which he himself mentions on p. 116). He discusses the several threatening images of the great deep in the Old Testament, particularly as they relate to chaos and the sea monster Rahab at the time of the creation of the earth. He then applies these facets of Old Testament imagery to the Lehighite voyage on the sea, with emphasis on the near swallowing up of the voyagers into the depths of the sea.

Next Goff gives a structuralist analysis of 1 Nephi. He does this by comparing the themes in 1 Nephi with those narrated in the accounts of Joseph in Egypt and more especially Moses. In these stories he identifies patterns of descent and death, which he arranges in groups of three. Symbols of death are shown when Joseph is cast into a pit, when he goes down to Egypt, and when he is incarcerated. Moses' symbols of death occur twice. The young Moses is placed in a river (Goff calls it a "sea"), he leaves Egypt (considered to be a symbol of death), and then he goes out to the wilderness. The later Moses goes back to Egypt to gather Israel, moves out to the wilderness, and then crosses the sea. All of these events represent the joint descent to death and then deliverance. Goff compares these citations to the fleeing out of Jerusalem (which replaces Egypt as signifying death), going out into the wilderness, and crossing the sea. He regards the account in 1 Nephi to be a "typological reworking of the Joseph and Moses stories" (p. 130). In this section he takes issue with Russell's comment that the whole story of 1 Nephi is problematic in that an Israelite in 600 B.C. would never have considered leaving the promised land with the intention of establishing an alternative one. I agree with Goff that Russell's conclusion is a hasty one and not well thought out.

⁷ See Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 7.

The author gives an archetypal comparison between many points of the Exodus and of Lehi's journey. Nephi explicitly reminds Laman and Lemuel of these similarities (1 Nephi 4:1-3; 17:23-44), and Goff painstakingly juxtaposes Book of Mormon and Bible passages, some of which have almost identical phrases. Again, Goff convincingly shows the plausibility that Nephi intends his recital to be read against the Exodus pattern.

Another approach Goff takes is literary-formal. He shows how certain words and clauses recur. For example, Nephi records that the women bore children and they also bore the difficulties of the journey. While I suspect that Goff is right in saying that both forms of bearing were "manifestations of God's grace" (p. 155), I am not so sure that the same word was used in the Nephite language for the two meanings. In this section of the thesis he also shows us verses in the Book of Mormon in rhetorical patterns. The way he reconstructs them makes them look especially orderly in ways that are not apparent when we read the straightforward prose in our copies of the Book of Mormon. Some may say that Goff's quasi-poetic recasting of the verses is artificial and was not thought out by Nephi in precisely these forms. Yet Goff demonstrates a clear-cut and neat mode of thought which may give us insight into the workings of the Semitic mind of 600 B.C. A closer scrutiny of Goff's arrangement of the verses suggests that Joseph Smith was not aping Jacobean prose when he translated the Book of Mormon—the positioning of the clauses within the discourses or conversations recorded by Nephi is more complex than that. There is considerable parallelism in those verses.

Finally, Goff discusses the typological approach. He notes that the Book of Mormon is loaded with typological allusions. He emphasizes that Nephi built a ship according to a peculiar pattern revealed by God, just as the building of Moses' tabernacle was specifically revealed. Both in turn were patterned after the creation (though, on p. 181, Goff refers to the view of Bernhard W. Anderson that the creation was understood in light of the building of the tabernacle; some may take issue with that). This section contains ideas similar to those discussed from other hermeneutical angles. Indeed, most of them are closely related: the teaching principle of symbols looms large.

While reading Goff's thesis, I caught a couple of problem areas that should be noticed. On pp. 45-48, he addresses the literary provenance of Lehi's dream. He refers to the fact that Mark Thomas considers the description of the dream to be an

apocalyptic writing. Since it is assumed (Thomas takes it as already settled) that apocalyptic originated in the Hellenistic period, several hundred years after the Exile, the Book of Mormon's claim to authenticity is undermined. In effect, Goff believes that Thomas looks at the complex relationship between prophecy and apocalyptic superficially and confuses the whole issue. Goff then refers to the watershed study of apocalyptic by Paul Hanson, wherein the author proposes that the roots of apocalyptic reach back to the exile. While Hanson's thesis has much that is compelling in it, we should be aware that it has been the object of a formidable critique.⁸ Recognizing, however, that there is still much to say for Hanson's argument, many questions about apocalyptic still linger and await more in-depth research.

On pp. 109-11 Goff takes up a difficulty as perceived by Russell. The latter wonders why the Pentateuch is not reflected much in the Book of Mormon (Goff's thesis demonstrates that many subtle features of the Torah are evident for those who read the Book of Mormon beyond a surface level). Russell asks about the apparent lack of more overt things: the dietary or ritual laws and the detailed legislation. Goff turns to the Old Testament documentary hypothesis and quotes from Robert Morgan, who declares that the priestly stream (P) of the Pentateuch (which theoretically contains those features which concern Russell) was not known before the Exile. Goff reasons that "if we accept the documentary hypothesis" (p. 110), naturally we will not find dietary codes and the like in the Book of Mormon. But if the documentary hypothesis as it now stands is faulty there may be other reasons why Nephi does not allude to them. Actually, Morgan includes "the complex rites of atonement" in the list of peculiar priestly features. Does Goff want to discount the sacrifice and burnt offerings in 1 Nephi 5:9; Mosiah 2:3-4; 3 Nephi 9:19-20, and the many references to the atonement in the Book of Mormon? These questions deserve further attention.

While Goff offers many stimulating possibilities to ponder, I consider his most valuable insight to be stated in these words: "The text has no single meaning. Like all complex

⁸ Robert P. Carroll, "Twilight of Prophecy or Dawn of Apocalyptic," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 14 (October 1979): 3-35; Paul D. Hanson, "From Prophecy to Apocalyptic: Unresolved Issues," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15 (January 1980): 3-6.

texts, the Book of Mormon resists our attempts to claim that we know what God means, finally and completely" (p. 84). The author reminds us that "each explanation of a text is itself a construction" (p. 182). The fact that we can look at the Book of Mormon (and the gospel as a whole for that matter) from all kinds of perspectives only enhances the richness of our literature. Antagonists of the Book of Mormon have tended not to examine that book very closely. As Goff states it: "Because the revisionist critics I have questioned in this study assume that the Book of Mormon is a shallow novel, their interpretations end up demonstrating a superficial book. This shallowness is as much a result of the superficiality of their own approach as it is of anything in the book itself" (p. 184).

I am impressed with the mind and vigor of Alan Goff. I think he has much to offer the Mormon audience. Those who read this review with interest may be frustrated by the general inaccessibility of the thesis (it is located in the library at Brigham Young University). It is to be hoped that after polishing his prose Goff will edit and submit for publication the content of his thesis and other projects to which he alludes.