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**Title** “Polishing God’s Altars”: Fictionally Wresting the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract** Review of the Nephite Chronicles (1984-89), by Robert H. Moss.

Robert H. Moss, *The Nephite Chronicles*, including these novels:

*I Nephi . . . —A Novel of the Sons of Lehi*. Bountiful: Horizon, 1984. 132 pp. \$10.95.

*The Covenant Coat—A Novel of Joseph of Egypt*. Bountiful: Horizon, 1985. 174 pp. \$10.95.

*The Waters of Mormon, A Novel of Alma the Elder*. Bountiful: Horizon, 1986. 176 pp. \$10.95.

*That I Were an Angel, A Novel of Alma the Younger*. Salt Lake City: Acme, 1987. 181 pp. \$9.95.

*Title of Liberty, A Novel of Helaman and Moroni*. Salt Lake City: Acme, 1988. 232 pp. \$12.95.

*The Abridger, A Novel of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Acme, 1989. 212 pp. \$12.95.

*Valiant Witness, A Novel of Moroni*. Bountiful: Horizon Publishers, 1989. 182 pp. \$10.95.

### **“Polishing God’s Altars”: Fictionally Wrestling the Book of Mormon**

Reviewed by Richard H. Cracroft

It was Richard Mather, the early American Puritan divine, who insisted in his Preface to *The Bay Psalm Book* that “Gods Altar needs not our polishings”(sic); and it was Simon Peter himself who insisted that “no . . . scripture is of any private interpretation” (1 Peter 1:20). Nevertheless, well-intentioned men and women—Jews, Christians and Latter-day Saints alike—have often attempted, if not to polish God’s altar and privately interpret God’s word, at least to assist the Lord in awakening the responses of his less patient and studious children in their understanding of holy writ. Such scribes have reshaped, recast, rephrased, and restated the word of God by means of a seemingly infinite variety of scriptural commentaries, annotations, elucidations, interpretations, extrapolations, modern translations, poetic retellings, and dramatic and fictional renderings, in short stories and novels, the whole panorama of the holy scriptures. Proving Mather’s point, however, the various results of these renderings, always exegetic and didactic, seem seldom to ascend to literary or aesthetic excellence, and even less often to approach the literary and spiritual stature of the unvarnished Word of the Lord.

So it has been with the various literary recastings of the Book of Mormon. The impetus to retell the saga of the Nephites, Lamanites, and others is understandable, for the Book of Mormon remains as formidable to the young mind as the Old Testament and the letters of Paul. Still, the Book of Mormon lends itself to literary dramatization, packed as it is with stirring events and incidents which too often go unnoted, unappreciated, or even unreached by sluggish young (and old) readers, for whom the distance between 2 Nephi and 4 Nephi seems as long and Sysyphian (to evoke a pagan image) as the trek between Zarahemla and Shim.

To vivify and enliven the Book of Mormon, a variety of authors have literarily re-created portions or all of the book (in such variety, I must hasten to note, that my survey must remain *exhausting* but far from *exhaustive*). Dramatists from Orestes U. Bean (in 1902; see below)<sup>1</sup> to Ruth H. Hale, Clinton F. Larson (1961),<sup>2</sup> Orson Scott Card, and a number of pageant, radio, theater, and ward and stake one-act playwrights have brought ancient American prophets to the stage and microphone. Poets have also rendered the book's events with varying success, from Louisa Lula Green Richards's *Branches That Run over the Wall* (1904),<sup>3</sup> and Marion Sharp's *I Cry, Mormon* (1939),<sup>4</sup> to Orrin R. Wilcox's *The Book of Mormon Abridged in Rhyme* (1972).<sup>5</sup> Since the book is itself an epic, it lends itself naturally to epic and panoramic treatments, and there has been no dearth of Book of Mormon epics—again varyingly successful—from Orson F. Whitney, *Elias, A Epic of the Ages* (1904)<sup>6</sup>—only part of which involves the Book of Mormon; and Charles W. Dunn, *The Master's Other Sheep: An Epic of Ancient America* (1929);<sup>7</sup> J. E. Vanderwood, *A Story of the*

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1 Orestes U. Bean, *Corianton: An Aztec Romance* (n.p., c. 1902).

2 Clinton F. Larson, *Coriantumr and Mormon: Two Plays* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1961).

3 Louisa Lula Green Richards, *Branches That Run over the Wall* (Salt Lake City: Magazine, 1904).

4 Marian Sharp, *I Cry, Mormon* (Philadelphia: Dorrance, 1939).

5 Orrin R. Wilcox, *The Book of Mormon Abridged in Rhyme* (Mansfield, MO: n.p., 1972).

6 Orson F. Whitney, *Elias, A Epic of the Ages* (New York: Knickerbocker, 1904).

7 Charles W. Dunn, *The Master's Other Sheep: An Epic of Ancient America* (Logan, UT: J. P. Smith & Son, 1929).

*Ancestors of the American Indians: An Epic* (1936);<sup>8</sup> to Olive M. Wilkins, *From Cumorah's Lonely Hill* (1950);<sup>9</sup> and R. Paul Cracroft's little-known but remarkable epic, *A Certain Testimony* (1979).<sup>10</sup>

Writers of short fiction, limited in publication possibilities by the long-standing and doubtless wise policy of the Church magazines *not* to publish literary renderings of scriptural accounts, have nevertheless published short fiction about Book of Mormon events which range in scope from literal recountings of the text to imaginative and free-wheeling adaptations. But the audience has generally been Primary-age children and thus artistically limiting. Mabel Jones Gabbott and Louise Clark Gregson have published such retellings for children,<sup>11</sup> as have Clinton F. Larson, in his multi-volume and poetic *Illustrated Stories from the Book of Mormon* (1967-1972),<sup>12</sup> and Deta Peterson Neeley, in her appealing, enduring, and highly readable four-volume series, *A Child's Story of the Book of Mormon* (1949; 1973).<sup>13</sup>

More sophisticated fictional retellings of Book of Mormon stories for teenagers and young adults seem to have originated during the first years of the Home Literature movement, initiated by Elder Orson F. Whitney in his 1888 landmark address to the youth of the Church in which he called for a faith-promoting Mormon Home Literature "of our own," purposefully written by faithful Latter-day Saints for Mormon youth and young adults to offset worldly influences seeping into hitherto isolated Mormon settlements and adversely affecting a young generation of Saints who "knew not Joseph" or Brigham, and who had not been tested in the refiner's fire of Missouri, Illinois, or crossing the

<sup>8</sup> J. E. Vanderwood, *A Story of the Ancestors of the American Indians: An Epic* (Independence, MO: J. E. Vanderwood, 1936).

<sup>9</sup> Olive M. Wilkins, *From Cumorah's Lonely Hill* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1950).

<sup>10</sup> R. Paul Cracroft, *A Certain Testimony* (Salt Lake City: Epic West, 1979).

<sup>11</sup> Mabel Jones Gabbott, *Heroes of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1975), and Louise Clark Gregson, *Gregson's Stories of the Scriptures of Ancient America for Young and Old* (Independence, MO: Gregson's Storybooks, 1972).

<sup>12</sup> Clinton F. Larson, *Illustrated Stories from the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Promised Land, 1967-72).

<sup>13</sup> Deta Peterson Neeley, *A Child's Story of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1949; 1973).



plains—youth sensitive to eastern anti-Mormon, anti-polygamist attacks and vulnerable to accusations of Village Virus provincialism then circulating through the villages and towns of increasingly urban America.

Among the first to respond to the call to write “faith-promoting stories” was George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency and one of the most outspoken foes of novel-reading. Sensing the need to fight fire with fire, Cannon published *Book of Mormon Stories Adapted to the Capacity of Young Children* (1892),<sup>14</sup> which followed a short, 167-page, fictional retelling of *The Life of Nephi*.<sup>15</sup> Elder B. H. Roberts of the First Council of the Seventy joined President Cannon with the publication of “A Story of Zarahemla,” a heavy-handed attempt to extrapolate a story from the Book of Mormon.<sup>16</sup> This literary stumble, published in the *Contributor*, was nevertheless important because it led Roberts to a much more ambitious and successful attempt to render the Book of Mormon as fiction, in his novel, *Corianton*, which he published serially, also in the 1889 *Contributor*.<sup>17</sup> The novel is based on two unrelated but parallel stories from the book of Alma—the stories of Korihor the Antichrist (Alma 30) and Corianton and the “harlot Isabel” (Alma 39). Orestes U. Bean redacted *Corianton* into a play (which he subtitled, “An Aztec Romance”) which played to large audiences in Salt Lake City (where the role of Alma was played by Brigham S. Young, son of Brigham Young), Ogden, Omaha, Chicago, and New York City, where the later famous Gladys George played the role of Zoan (changed by Bean to *Joan*).

While Nephi Anderson, the best of the Home Literature school, avoided writing fiction about the Book of Mormon (he came closest in *Added Upon* [1898]),<sup>18</sup> now in its fiftieth

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<sup>14</sup> George Q. Cannon, *Book of Mormon Stories Adapted to the Capacity of Young Children* (Salt Lake City: George Q. Cannon & Sons, 1892).

<sup>15</sup> George Q. Cannon, *The Life of Nephi* (Salt Lake City: Juvenile Instructor Office, 1883).

<sup>16</sup> B. H. Roberts, “A Story of Zarahemla,” *Contributor* 10 (1889): 94-101.

<sup>17</sup> B. H. Roberts, *Corianton* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1902); originally published serially in the *Contributor* 10 (1889): 171-76, 206-10, 245-48, 286-90, 324-30.

<sup>18</sup> Nephi Anderson, *Added Upon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1898).

printing), the prolific and influential daughter of Brigham Young, Susa Young Gates, editor of the *Young Women's Journal*, would publish more than forty-five short stories, a number of which were retellings of Book of Mormon and Bible stories. One of her three novels, *The Prince of Ur* (1915),<sup>19</sup> was based in scripture. Elizabeth Rachel Cannon followed Gates's fictional lead by writing *The Cities of the Sun* (1911),<sup>20</sup> "stories of ancient America founded on historical incidents."

Following the few novels of the early Home Literature era, virtually no lengthier Book of Mormon fiction was published until Robert William Smith's *Other Sheep: A Saga of Ancient America* (1939)<sup>21</sup> and Geraldine Wyatt's *Doves of Peace* (1940).<sup>22</sup> Thirty years later, Helen Gilberts published *Sariah* (1970);<sup>23</sup> Jesse Nile Washburn published *An Army with Banners* (1972) and *The Sons of Mormon* (1972),<sup>24</sup> and Rolf Barlow Fox published two volumes, *Behold, I Am Moroni* (1976) and *The Sons of Helaman* (1980).<sup>25</sup> Elder Mark E. Peterson published his short novel, *The Jaredites* (1984),<sup>26</sup> not long before his death.

All of this literary history makes the appearance, over the past four years, of Robert H. Moss's seven-novel *The Nephite Chronicles* something like an event in the history of fictional treatments of the Book of Mormon. Moss, an Ed.D. and (presently) self-employed educator with long experience in teaching and educational administration, published *The Covenant Coat—A Novel of Joseph of Egypt* (1985),<sup>27</sup> in

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<sup>19</sup> Susa Young Gates, *The Prince of Ur* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1915; 1945).

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Rachel Cannon, *The Cities of the Sun* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1911).

<sup>21</sup> Robert William Smith, *Other Sheep: A Saga of Ancient America* (Salt Lake City: Pyramid Press, 1939).

<sup>22</sup> Geraldine Wyatt, *Doves of Peace* (Independence, MO: Herald, 1940).

<sup>23</sup> Helen Gilberts, *Sariah* (Independence, MO: Herald, 1970).

<sup>24</sup> Jesse Nile Washburn, *An Army with Banners* (New York: Carlton, 1972), and *The Sons of Mormon* (n.p., c. 1972).

<sup>25</sup> Rolf Barlow Fox, *Behold, I Am Moroni* (Salt Lake City: Grante, 1976), and *The Sons of Helaman* (Bountiful: by author, 1980).

<sup>26</sup> Mark E. Peterson, *The Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984).

<sup>27</sup> Robert H. Moss, *The Covenant Coat—A Novel of Joseph of Egypt* (Bountiful: Horizon, 1985).

which he virtually takes Thomas Mann-like imaginative freedoms with the life of Joseph, adding a tender wife and children and details which sweep far beyond the scriptural account of Joseph to flesh out the outlines of his life. Pleased with the success and reception of this fictional format, Moss then turned to the Book of Mormon, in which he also soars imaginatively beyond the scriptural perimeters of the lives of Nephi, Alma, Alma the Younger, Helaman and Moroni, Mormon, and Moroni, son of Mormon.

*The Nephite Chronicles*, written to transform these Book of Mormon prophets into flesh-and-blood realities for contemporary young adult and adult readers (though the novels are doubtless enjoyable for teenagers), recounts the adventures of the American prophets in lively and often vivid narrative, and in detail which soars far beyond the scope of the Book of Mormon, while remaining anchored to the scriptural text, but seldom citing actual scriptures. For readers who know the Book of Mormon, however, the scriptural text becomes a resonating sounding board against which the fictional text reverberates, sometimes quietly, sometimes loudly, but always intriguing to the reader who knows the plot and its episodes and is curious to learn how Moss, who occasionally wanders far afield, will bring us home to the familiar scriptural base.

Moss is an imaginative plotter and innovator: Helaman, in *The Title of Liberty*, for example, recognizes with a knowing twentieth-century smile that his father wrote in "the ancient chiasitic, mirrored poetry form of the Hebrews"—and illustrates it (p. 51). In *The Abridger*, Moss treats the reader to Mormon's dramatic end in a sword-fight with an enemy patrol (p. 211). In *Valiant Witness*, Moss, freed from the Book of Mormon account, follows Moroni through thirty-six hitherto mysterious years, back and forth across North, Central and South America, during which journeys he preaches the gospel, establishes the tradition of the "Pale One" (Moroni, not Christ) among the Indians, is crucified but is spared to visit the sites of future temples and valleys where the Saints would gather. After depositing the plates, Moroni dies—whereupon Moss, in a segment which may not have been attempted since Nephi Anderson's *Added Upon*, follows Moroni into Paradise, where he meets with the Savior and the ancient prophets, visits earth from time to time, and prepares for his role in the Restoration of the gospel to the Prophet Joseph Smith, Jr. Moss then recounts the Restoration, through Moroni's eyes, detailing his increasing



personal relationship with the Prophet Joseph, who says to Moroni, on embracing him at their parting, "You have been more than a friend. I look forward to an eternal association with you" (p. 177).

Typical of Moss's novel fictional soarings are those found in his treatment of Alma the Elder, *The Waters of Mormon*, the third novel in the *Chronicles*. In the preface, Moss presents necessary "background" so he can plunge into Alma's story *in medias res*. Alma, he tells us, appreciably enriching our "knowledge," is the son of "Abimolam and Marji, King Zeniff's daughter," and is the nephew of King Noah, who removes the faithful Abimolam from the priesthood but appoints the sycophantic young Alma as one of his priests. Amidst the preaching of Abinadi and Alma's acceptance of the prophet's words as he is burned at the stake, Moss weaves the twentieth-century-like family life of Alma and Esther, his wife of one year, and their baby, Zoram (to be joined, later, by siblings Netta, Leesa, and Alma junior—and two dogs, Bones, then Noah). Alma, on the way to visit Rebecca, one of the most alluring of his several concubines, watches his fellow priests, Nakka and Tay, accost and beat Abinadi, whose preaching Alma himself has reported to Noah. Stunned and moved by Abinadi's call to repentance, Alma forgets his concubines and worldly ways, repents, and defends the prophet before the king, for which he must flee the city. Alma, assisted by his friend Helam (we're back to the text: Helam is Alma's first baptism), finds a cave where he lives alone, undergoing a cleansing conversion and hearing the voice of the Lord first forgive him and then call him "to preach to this people."

Re-entering the city, he visits his wife, Esther, who had already been converted on hearing Abinadi preach in the square. It is a fact of Moss's novels that each of the prophets in *The Nephite Chronicles* is blessed with a spiritual yet sensuous and affectionate woman who makes it difficult for her husband to leave her embraces and return to the battle for souls. Esther is such a passionate woman, wonderfully responsive to her husband's manly caresses and evoking some very unprophetlike reactions: " 'You make it very hard to leave,' [Alma] said, holding her soft lithe body tightly against him. Another long kiss and he released her. She wrapped her fingers in the hair of his chest and laughed teasingly. He turned her towards the door, and with his open hand spat her behind. She was still laughing quietly as she went inside. 'I love you' he whispered"

(p. 39)—these are scriptural accounts such as we have not experienced since breaking out into cold sweat on first being surprised by “The Song of Solomon”!

Emboldened by the Lord, Alma establishes a congregation and leads them, assisted by miracles not chronicled in the book of Mosiah, first to the Waters of Mormon and then, fleeing before Noah’s army, down into the rain forest, complete with all the tropical birds, jaguars, lizards, mosquitoes, and chattering monkeys, and cedar, mahoganies, sapodillas and breadnut trees that we have longed for in the often laconic original, to the land of Helam. There, busy amidst the building of a civilization, Moss’s Alma is confronted by post-Freudian family problems: “A pent-up flood of words erupted from Esther’s lips. ‘Everyone else seems more important to you than the children and I. All day I never get to see you, and as soon as you get home all you want to do is eat and go to bed.’ She buried her face in Alma’s chest.” Responds the Prophet: “‘I have neglected the most important part of my life. That will change.’ Esther snuggled close to him, drawing comfort from his large, strong body” (p. 63), and they take a restorative family home day outing up the slopes of Tanza, “the volcano that smokes but does not erupt.” These idyllic years in Helam are abruptly concluded with the invasion of Amulon and his Lamanite troops, and the young Ruth (who will become Alma the Younger’s wife) is abducted with other young Nephite virgins to serve in the heathen temples. Alma’s passive response to the invaders and Ruth’s abduction angers the young Alma and triggers his nascent rebellion against his father and the Church, which was reorganized after the fleeing captives survive the trek through leopards, crocodiles, and a jaguar attack on Alma the Younger. Ultimately, he is welcomed at Zarahemla. Working with King Mosiah, Alma becomes high priest of the land and all is well—save for Esther’s terminal illness and son Alma’s rebellion. The story from there is generally familiar: Alma prays constantly for a miracle to bring young Alma to repentance, for his son’s false teachings have spread throughout the land and threaten the Church. But in this account the Lord speaks to Alma the Elder and urges him to be of good cheer, for Alma the Younger “will serve me as you have served me.” Esther, who wisely identifies her son Alma’s problem as a lack of self-worth and a sense of inferiority, soon dies, and Alma mourns, especially when his errant son attends the funeral but will not speak to his father. Not long after, while working in

his office in the temple at Zarahemla, Alma is called out onto the steps of the temple, where the sons of Mosiah have carried his unconscious son from the jungle. They describe how an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and Alma gives thanks that his prayers have been answered. Alma the Younger, responding to two days of fasting and prayer, awakens and proclaims his vision and his conversion to Christ. Soon thereafter, Ruth is freed from captivity and marries Alma the Younger, now a successful missionary, and Alma and Mosiah wrap up their ministry and reign by translating the twenty-four plates of King Limhi's people and establishing the government of judges in the land. On his last mortal day, the aging Alma attends a final Church service, and then enjoys a family home evening: "Zoram, Micael and their sons, Lehi and Aha, were there. Netta . . . was there with her four children. Leesa, Abelon and their three girls had come all the way from Melek to be part of the family gathering. Alma [the Younger] was there with Ruth and Helaman." As he held the baby Helaman, Alma senses, "This is he through whom the priesthood lineage will be carried" (p. 73), and, content, Alma returns to his home and to his death, at which Esther comes for him, and they stride off, hand in hand, into Eternity.

Still, regardless of such imaginative plot devices, lively dialogue, neatly contrived flashbacks, and interesting though fabricated details about wives and family and genealogy, and notwithstanding a plethora of fictitious detail about American geography and geology and Nephite sociology and anthropology, the characters in *The Nephite Chronicles* remain less than complex, less than psychologically realistic, less than spiritually compelling, less than authentic. At last, the reader comes away entertained—but not moved to a deeper understanding of the prophets of God in ancient America nor of the doctrines on which they staked their lives.

The problems may be less a fault of Moss's art, whose narrative moves well (and reminds one of Nephi Anderson's middle and later novels), than of Moss's purpose, which is inherently at odds with his selected genre of the novel. Via fiction, Moss attempts to transform spiritual giants into flesh and blood human beings with whom modern readers can identify. But he desires to effect this transformation without diminishing their spiritual greatness and charisma. It is a futile and perhaps thankless effort, for his subjects are men-of-God—spiritual and political and (often) military giants; they are the stuff of legends;



they are heroes more than protagonists, and must remain so to the reader of their lives centuries later, if they are to have an impact on the reader and remain true to the intent of the book's compilers and translators.

In a review of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* in *New York Magazine*, the novelist Tim O'Brien writes that, "The heart of nonfiction . . . is to dispel mystery. But the heart and art of fiction is both to generate and to celebrate human mystery, to allow ambiguities and contradictions to resonate, to explain little of a character's inner drives operating in a dramatic context."<sup>28</sup>

In an age of literary realism which deconstructs heroes and prefers the existential victim, one pits the mystical, fictional, humanized, heterodoxical rendering of Jesus in Nikos Kazantzakis's novel, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1960), against Franco Zeffirelli's nonfictional, almost ethereally remote but heroic *Jesus of Nazareth*. Both renderings are remarkable, but Zeffirelli's Jesus, firmly rooted in the Evangelists' accounts of Christ's life, strikes the viewer as authentic—and does not expect the viewer to "identify" with Christ, with God Incarnate, but to stand all amazed. Nonfiction is the *right* genre for the life of Jesus. In his novel, conversely, Kazantzakis tears the mantle of divinity from Christ and, persuading the reader to accept that *donnée*, enables us to approach Jesus on our human terms, as an extraordinary but possibly deluded man—one of us. It is a fascinating thesis, an interesting exercise, but one not harmonious with the life and mission of the historical Jesus.

Perhaps Lew Wallace, in *Ben Hur* (1880), and Lloyd Douglas, in *The Robe* (1942) and *The Big Fisherman* (1948) showed us the better uses of fiction by dealing fictionally with characters and matters tangential to the life of Christ, a ploy of indirection which enables the authors to avoid standing directly on "holy ground" while celebrating, in smaller-than-giant protagonists, the "human mystery" and the resonating "ambiguities and contradictions" of men and women caught at once in the gospel net *and* the talons of the world.

Perhaps *Ben Hur*-like stories about the Book of Mormon will give future writers the access to the book which Robert H. Moss attempts by his too-direct and too-human portrayal of the prophet-giants of ancient America. Meanwhile, we still await a fictional treatment of the Book of Mormon which can

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<sup>28</sup> Tim O'Brien, Review of Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song*, *New York Magazine*, 15 October 1979.

accomplish for this unique volume that which John Milton accomplished poetically for the Holy Bible in *Paradise Lost*—polishing God's altar to a sheen that reflects not only the joy of man, but, almost certainly, the smile of God—to the blessing of both.