Harry L. Ropp, *Are the Mormon Scriptures Reliable?*

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Abstract Review of Are the Mormon Scriptures Reliable? (1987), by Harry L. Ropp, with revisions from Wesley P. Walters.

Reviewed by Diane E. Wirth

Included in this 1987 edition revised by Wesley P. Walters is a chapter reviewing “attempted defenses” of Book of Mormon archaeology. Also new is a discussion of Joseph Smith’s level of expertise in translating Egyptian. The chapter on “Witnessing to Mormons,” however, is virtually the same as in Ropp’s 1977 edition. The selected and annotated bibliography has also been updated since the first edition.

The book flows well from one topic to another—one of its few redeeming qualities. It commences with a brief rundown of the tremendous growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from its inception. The authors write that “it is the Mormons’ success in proselytizing that makes this book necessary” (p. 12). This book is, perhaps, rather better than the average anti-Latter-day-Saint book.

The first issue addressed is whether or not Mormons are Christians, and the remark is made that “people in general are not sure what it means to be a Christian” (p. 16). The authors then give their interpretation of common beliefs which, in their opinion, are held by all real Christians, i.e., the true nature of God, Christ, salvation, and the Bible. Scriptures are cited to support their views, but scriptures frequently quoted by Latter-day Saint writers to support Mormon doctrine are minimally used in this work. The first half of the book sets forth more Mormon doctrine than it does the authors’ interpretation of what they believe is Christian doctrine.

Rather than rehashing old arguments by anti-Mormon writers, I’ll move on to the more pressing topics under fire in my field of expertise, the Book of Mormon and New World archaeology. The following items from *Are the Mormon Scriptures Reliable?* are referred to as Mormon beliefs, but they are not always accurate: for example, “The Book of Mormon involves the migration of two groups of people from the Near East to the North American continent” (p. 32). The Book of Mormon does not designate the landing site as being in North America. “A third migration was small and unimportant” (p.
32). This refers to Mulek and the people who brought him to a new land across the sea. The people of Zarahemla, where the Book of Mormon tells us they settled, were more numerous than the Nephites and were hardly considered to be "unimportant" (Mosiah 25:2). Referring to Fawn Brodie's book,¹ the authors assert that Joseph Smith made a mistake by saying the Nephites produced barley (p. 36); however, barley has been found in the Americas.² Explaining the definition of Elohim, the authors refer to "Elohim" as "simply the Hebrew word for God" (p. 46). However, Elohim is indeed plural in form just as Joseph Smith said. The authors also claim that the Book of Mormon says the people made "coins of gold and silver" (p. 54). However, the word "coins" does not appear in the text of the Book of Mormon.

In addition to the above, the authors are of the opinion that if the Book of Mormon was written in Reformed Egyptian, one would find Egyptian writing in the Americas. Why? We have no reason to suppose that Reformed Egyptian was used by any other than an elect few—by those who were commissioned to keep the records. This form of writing was probably not used by the public.

In order to debunk Joseph Smith's abilities as a translator, the authors bring up the old Kinderhook controversy (p. 56), which has been settled once and for all as a forgery by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Joseph Smith's supposed statement that the Kinderhook plates were authentic and that they were the "records of the descendants of Ham," came from the journal of William Clayton, who wrote in the first person, as though from the mouth of Joseph Smith. A first-person narrative was apparently a common practice of this time period when a biographical work was being compiled. Since such words were never penned by the Prophet, they cannot be uncritically accepted as his words or his opinion.³

Attacking Latter-day Saint archaeologist John L. Sorenson's fine work, An Ancient American Setting for the

Book of Mormon, Walters rehashes theories of early Church members as to the geography of the Book of Mormon, never acknowledging that there has been no revelation or official statement by Church authorities on this particular subject. New hypotheses are continually being developed in all scientific fields. The same holds true for the so-called field of "Archaeology and the Book of Mormon."

It is true, as Dee Green wrote and as is quoted in this book, that "No Book of Mormon location is known with reference to modern topography" (p. 59). Writers on this subject, such as John L. Sorenson, are careful to state that they see a probable site as such and such—not that these locations are unequivocally to be identified with a particular Book of Mormon locale.

As I've pointed out in my book, A Challenge to the Critics: Scholarly Evidences of the Book of Mormon, numerous anti-Mormon writers, including Walters, have a fascination with pitting one Latter-day Saint scholar against another, as though there is no unity of opinion. Whether Latter-day Saint researchers agree on all aspects of archaeology and what is contained in the Book of Mormon is irrelevant to the truthfulness of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All men are entitled to their opinion, which has no bearing on Church doctrine.

Joseph Smith indicated that truth will yet spring from the earth, and I expect we will see things in the future that will further substantiate to the "doubting Thomas" that the Book of Mormon is indeed a factual, tangible record. Mesoamerican archaeology is in its infancy when compared to the numerous excavations of Egyptian sites. Any Mesoamerican archaeologist would admit we have yet much to learn, especially in regard to those years covering the Pre-Classic period, within which the bulk of the Book of Mormon story falls.

The authors then go through the Doctrine and Covenants, reviewing what to their way of thinking are inconsistencies with the original Book of Commandments and later editions of the now expanded Doctrine and Covenants (p. 63ff). Mormon belief in continuous revelation, or even the idea of filling in gaps

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This section is followed by a comparison between passages in the Doctrine and Covenants and relevant passages in the Book of Mormon, i.e., on the remission of sin and baptism, and on the matter of plural marriage. Both are examples of the authors' lack of understanding of the scriptures. For example, the latter subject of plural marriage needs to be read and interpreted properly.

The authors quote portions of Jacob 2:23-24, but fail to quote verse 30, which explains that there are times when men are commanded to obey laws for the purpose of raising "up seed unto me," which laws are unique and timely. This verse refers to the previous verses that state that men should have but one wife, unless otherwise commanded as we find in verse 30. Taking scripture out of context is a tool frequently employed by the anti-Mormon writer.

A major attack is directed toward the book of Abraham (pp. 79ff). Reasoning that numerous words cannot be derived from one Egyptian hieroglyph, and that today's Egyptologists have a different interpretation than Joseph Smith did, these two authors heap ridicule upon Joseph for his lack of scholarship. Never taken into account is the belief that as a prophet Joseph Smith had the ability, through the power of revelation, to give a full rendering of Abraham's original intent, regardless of the crude drawings these accounts were based on. Nor do the authors mention the fact that some of these papyri are known to be missing today.

The last chapter of this book, "Witnessing to Mormons," consists of methods to be used in winning Mormon souls into the Christian fold. Actually, many of these techniques are those used by Mormon missionaries to win converts to the restored church, e.g., "don't do verbal battle," "friendship is of the utmost importance," "being kind," "be able to teach," and so on. A warning is given, however, of the futility of attempting to approach or convert Mormon missionaries (p. 100).

To say that some things in the scriptures are figurative rather than literal is also a ploy used by anti-Mormon writers, especially with regard to verses pertaining to the physical attributes of God. Referring to the finger of the Lord in Ether 3,

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the authors write: "But his anthropomorphism does not prove that God has a physical body any more than Psalm 91:4 [KJV], 'He shall cover thee with his feathers and under his wings shalt thou trust,' proves that God is a cosmic chicken" (p. 107). Any reliable biblical scholar would acknowledge there are symbolic passages of scripture as well as literal passages—this remark was facetious and unscholarly.

Throughout this book it is pointed out that the Book of Mormon does not contain a detailed description of doctrines believed by the Church today, implying that these doctrines were added at a later time and that the full gospel is not contained in the Book of Mormon. Two factors are not taken into consideration: (1) Many doctrines are given as men become ready for them. The early Church of Jesus Christ was not prepared or ready to receive all these things at its inception. Now that we are living "in the fullness of times," more is given; and (2) what has been published as the Book of Mormon is only a portion of an abridgment of a large library of records. The balance of these records will be revealed in the Lord’s own due time.

Finally, I must add a personal note. My book, A Challenge to the Critics: Scholarly Evidences of the Book of Mormon, is never mentioned within the text of this work. It is, however, listed in the Bibliography with the note “A handy summary of the current Mormon arguments used to counter the Smithsonian Institution’s statements and to defend the Book of Mormon. Her heavy dependence on the scholarship of Brigham Young University writers undercuts the validity of many of her points.” The number of citations used in my footnotes by Latter-day Saint scholars is 28, whereas the number of non-Latter-day Saint scholars is 121, hardly a “heavy dependence on the scholarship of Brigham Young University writers.” Besides, an argument’s validity depends upon its intrinsic merits, and not upon its source.