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Abstract Review of *Little Known Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (1989), by Brenton G. Yorgason.

Brenton G. Yorgason, *Little Known Evidences of the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Covenant, 1989. 49 pp. \$3.95.

Reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes

This booklet is based on a "Know Your Religion" talk presented by the author in 1988 in Scottsdale, Arizona. Yorgason, noted in Latter-day Saint circles mostly for his works of fiction, has undertaken a scholarly appraisal of the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, he is not well equipped to handle such a task and should, at the very least, have asked an expert to review the text before publication. It could also have used a good editor; because it is essentially a lecture, rather than a written composition, the book breaks most of Strunk's rules of style.

The book is also misnamed. Of its 49 pages, only 16 (Part Three) are really devoted to "evidences" for the Book of Mormon. Part Two comprises historical anecdotes about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Parts One and Four are more personal and consist of Yorgason's feelings about the Nephite record and its value in his life. These feelings represent, in my opinion, the only part of the booklet that can be said to be a valuable contribution. But more about that later. First, I shall explain my dismay at reading the rest of the book.

Yorgason's dogmatic assertions about such matters as Lehi's route to the land Bountiful and the location of the Book of Mormon Hill Cumorah bear evidence that he has not followed recent scholarly studies in these areas. Instead, he relies on discoveries of arrowheads and spear points in upper New York State (without regard to their age) and points to mass tombs (also ignoring their late date) and a "white lime" formed from the decay of human bones (ignoring the fact that animal bones are chemically the same as human). He notes a fort cut out of rock, as though it were "Nephite" (though he doesn't say so). The fort, he informs us, contained iron implements and was thought by an early visitor to have been constructed with the aid of gunpowder. These facts alone suggest a very late date, well after the close of Moroni's record.

The back cover speaks of Yorgason's identification of "physical evidences" for the Book of Mormon. Strictly speaking, physical evidences are artifacts found in an archaeological or historical context. Aside from the arrowheads, the spear points, the layer of "lime," and the fort—all of which

postdate the Book of Mormon history—there is nothing “physical” about the subjects discussed in the book.

The back cover describes Yorgason as “an entertaining historical scholar.” I would delete the last two words in order to give the statement greater accuracy. Historiography is not Mr. Yorgason’s strong suit. He unhesitatingly accepts stories he likes. The anecdotes in Part Two are interesting but should be used with caution. Many of them were told years after the events they describe. For example, Yorgason quotes from David Whitmer’s *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, a story relating how Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon. Would he have used, with equal acceptance, some of the other stories told in Whitmer’s pamphlet that contradict Joseph Smith’s own account?

The Whitmer account is supported by another attributed to Martin Harris, though it is actually secondhand. According to these accounts, during the translation of the Book of Mormon an English sentence would appear written in the stone. Joseph would read it for his scribe. When correctly written down, the sentence would disappear, to be replaced by another. Yorgason invokes this account to claim that the English recorded by Joseph’s scribes is a completely exact, perfect transcription.

Though long told among Latter-day Saints, the story does not ring true. The first problem is that of identifying “sentences” in the Book of Mormon. The original manuscript had very little punctuation, and sentences had to be determined by the printer, as Yorgason notes in another place. This punctuation was corrected in several later additions, but is still woefully inadequate in our current Book of Mormon. Scribal errors found in the original manuscript and corrected by Joseph Smith are perhaps the best evidence that the story of the disappearing sentences is untrue. Words may have appeared to Joseph as he rendered his translation, but the idea that they were verified as perfect before disappearing seems contradicted by the fact that Joseph made further corrections in the 1837 and 1840 editions. Prudence requires one to remain cautious when speaking about the means and methods used by Joseph Smith in translating the Book of Mormon.

The story of the cave full of plates inside the Hill Cumorah in New York is often given as evidence that it is, indeed, the hill where Mormon hid the plates. Yorgason quotes one version of the story from Brigham Young and alludes to six others collected by Paul T. Smith. Unfortunately, none of the accounts

is firsthand. The New York Hill Cumorah is a moraine laid down anciently by a glacier in motion. It is comprised of gravel and earth. Geologically, it is impossible for the hill to have a cave, and all those who have gone in search of the cave have come back empty-handed. If, therefore, the story attributed to Oliver Cowdery (by others) is true, then the visits to the cave perhaps represent visions, perhaps of some far distant hill, not physical events.

There is, however, reason to suspect the veracity of the story. Brigham Young, generally cited as a source, recounted it during the conference at which the Farmington Stake was organized in 1877. In the same discourse, President Young preceded the cave story by an account of Porter Rockwell and others finding a cache of Nephite gold which slipped away from them. The purpose of the President's remarks was to dissuade the Latter-day Saints from prospecting for mines. To accomplish his purpose, he told of the belief (commonly held by Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints involved in treasure hunting) that treasures can be moved about in the earth by their guardians. If this is the case, then who is to say where the plates were before Joseph and Oliver supposedly visited the cave? If they could truly be moved about, why not from Mexico, for example?

Part Three of Yorgason's book details some of the linguistic evidences for the Book of Mormon. Most of it is "extrapolated from [Yorgason's] frantic note-taking" during two presentations on the Semitic nature of the Book of Mormon given by Dr. Sami Hanna of the University of Utah. Typed transcriptions of fireside talks by Dr. Hanna have been circulating for some time, and I have read some of them.

I first met Sami Hanna in 1968, when I began teaching Hebrew at the University of Utah. I took several Arabic classes from him and served with him on some faculty committees. He is a fine man and an accomplished Arabic scholar, but he knows no other Semitic languages and has no training in comparative Semitics. Nor does he know ancient Egyptian or its later form, Coptic.

Some of the statements attributed to Hanna are perhaps misunderstandings on Yorgason's part. For example, the back cover says that Hanna's Arabic translation "made available the Book of Mormon, in Arabic, to over 800 million Moslems, including 125 million Arabs." In the text (p. 37), the same figure is given for readers of Arabic, while it is stated that "only

several hundred thousand . . . speak and read Hebrew.” The author of this statement is evidently unaware of the fact that most Muslims do *not* speak Arabic, and that there are at least several hundred languages spoken by various Muslim peoples throughout the world. As for Hebrew-speakers, the Israelis, now going on four million strong, would be surprised to learn that they are “only several hundred thousand” in number.

Because he does not know Hebrew, Hanna took up the practice of calling the original language of the Book of Mormon “Semitic.” Make no mistake; he means Arabic. Comparing the Nephite record with Arabic is not an entirely unfruitful endeavor. However, a comparison with Hebrew, the Nephite native tongue, would have been better.

Yorgason, evidently following Hanna, lists the Semitic languages as “Syrian,” Hebrew, “Ancient Egyptian,” Arabic and Aramaic, and shows Semitic as a relative of “Afro-Asian.” There are several basic errors in the linguistic pedigree chart he includes in the book. Aramaic and Syriac (Yorgason’s “Syrian”) are, in fact, the same; the Hebrew name for Syria is Aram. Egyptian is not a Semitic language at all, but is one of the subdivisions of Afro-Asiatic. The Semitic family is also part of the Afro-Asiatic family. Hebrew is just as closely related to ancient Egyptian as it is to other Afro-Asiatic languages spoken today, such as Beja, Somali, Hausa, Berber, Chadic, and others. Major ancient Semitic languages not listed on the chart include Akkadian (with later Assyrian and Babylonian forms), Ugaritic, Eblaite, and several Epigraphic South Arabian dialects. The chart further fails to note the Canaanite group of Semitic languages, of which Hebrew, Phoenician, and Punic are a part.

Yorgason (or Hanna?) is also wrong in saying that Hebrew and Arabic are the only Semitic languages still employed today. Several Aramaic dialects are spoken in a few Syrian villages, while others are used in the liturgy of various Christian churches. Samaritan also retains its liturgical value. Amharic, a Semitic tongue, is the principal language of Ethiopia, where its earlier form, Geez, is still used in Christian liturgy.

If, therefore, the Book of Mormon was “originally written in the Egyptian language,” then Arabic can be of only minimal assistance in ascertaining that fact. There are differences of opinion among Latter-day Saint scholars about the exact nature of the writing on the plates, but the majority of those qualified to speak on such matters believe that the underlying language was Hebrew, with Egyptian symbols used to represent the Hebrew

words. (Examples of such writing have been found in archaeological excavations.) If this is true, then a comparison with Hebrew would be the most valuable.

To say that Hanna's Arabic version was a translation of the Book of Mormon "back into its original Semitic cultural format" is an exaggeration at best. Hanna also exaggerated the importance of the Arabic translation by stressing that it was "our Church leaders," "the First Presidency," or "the Brethren" who asked him to do the work, and that it had been decided to do Arabic first because so many more people read Arabic than Hebrew. While living in Israel, I was involved in the groundwork of the plans to prepare the Hebrew and Arabic translations of the Book of Mormon. During President Harold B. Lee's visit, we asked him if a Hebrew translation could be approved. It was subsequently decided that, in order to avoid offending the Arabs, the two would be prepared at the same time. Both projects, however, were coordinated through the Church Translation Department, as with all other "emerging languages." Thus, the decision to translate the Book of Mormon into Hebrew and Arabic originated with the officers of the Jerusalem Branch and was not a deliberate attempt on the part of the Church to reproduce the "original" of that sacred volume.

On pages 38-44, Yorgason gives a list of "Semitic Characteristics of the Book of Mormon," based on Hanna's talks. Some of them are valid, for they apply to Hebrew as well as Arabic. Others lack substance, however. We shall examine some of these.

- Hanna notes that the Semitic languages are written from right to left, which is the way Joseph Smith described the writing on the plates. To Latter-day Saints, who already accept Joseph Smith as a prophet, this is indeed evidence that the writing on the plates could have been Semitic. But it means nothing to nonbelievers, since Joseph wrote that statement several years after the translation, by which time he had already studied Hebrew. It is interesting that he expressly compared the writing direction with Hebrew, not with Arabic or Egyptian.¹

- Hanna stresses (Nos. 2-4) the paucity of capital letters, paragraphs, and punctuation in the original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, and attributes this to the fact that these are lacking in the Semitic languages. The phenomenon is more

1 HC 1:71.

likely attributable to the fact that Joseph Smith dictated the *English* text to a scribe, who didn't know where to add the punctuation. Capitalization in the original manuscript is erratic. These features are therefore not evidence for a Semitic original.

- In No. 5, Hanna notes that the Semitic languages have only two "tenses" (a word he would not have used for a more sophisticated audience). He illustrated the reflection of this by referring to the use of compound past tenses with "did" in the Book of Mormon. But since the Book of Mormon has *more* than two tenses in its verbal structure, this can hardly be taken as serious evidence of a Semitic origin.

- The fact that the Book of Mormon numbering system (e.g., "in the twenty and first") corresponds to Semitic (No. 7) may be equally well attributed to the influence of the King James Bible, which follows the same system, and whose language forms the basis for the English of the Book of Mormon.

- While many of the names in the Book of Mormon are Semitic (No. 8), many are not.

- Hanna asserts (No. 9) that the sentence structure of the Book of Mormon is Semitic. While this is often true, it is not true of the entire book; otherwise, it wouldn't make sense in English.

- Hanna says that "The idioms used in the book are purely Semitic." There are some Semitic idioms in the Book of Mormon, but they are not "purely Semitic." Indeed, some of the "Semitic" examples he gives are also English. Thus, the idiom "turned him(self) about" (rather than "turn around") is found in the English song "Hokey Pokey." The term "stiffneckedness," while assuredly Semitic, is so common in the King James Bible that it has become an English idiom. The use of the word "moon" in place of "month" in the Book of Mormon loses some of its impact when one realizes that the word "month" derives from "moon," with the suffix "-th." And Hanna's rendering of "a special kind of curved sword" for the word *ziff* ignores the fact that the word is used in a list of raw materials used for adorning buildings! A more reasonable etymology would be the Hebrew word meaning "brilliant," perhaps referring to a type of metal or metal alloy (such as electrum).

Of particular interest are Yorgason's comments about the word "curious" in the Book of Mormon: "I had always related the word 'curious' to 'strange'; but according to Dr. Hanna, 'curious' actually refers to an instrument of 'skilled' or 'elegant'

workmanship." Hanna is, of course, correct, but not from the Semitic point-of-view. This was, in fact, a primary meaning of the English word "curious" in Joseph Smith's day, as any dictionary of that era or one with etymological notes will attest.

There are many evidences for the Semitic background of the Book of Mormon. Most of the best such evidences are not given in Yorgason's booklet, however. He should have referred to the many other articles written on the subject, including the half dozen I have published. In contrast to Yorgason's 49 pages, the body of linguistic evidence for the Book of Mormon could fill several volumes.

Yorgason calls Hanna's talk "perhaps the most crowning, [*sic*] experience in this treatise." I found it the most disappointing, not only because Hanna lacks the expertise to discuss the Semitic languages and Hebrew, but also because Yorgason relied on notes concerning a subject he does not understand.

In my years of researching the language of the Book of Mormon and reading the work done by other competent scholars, I have become very impressed by the vast array of linguistic evidence for the book's antiquity and authenticity. Yorgason's book, rather than supporting that evidence, is, in my opinion, harmful to the cause of the Book of Mormon. It may impress those who don't have the background to weed out its inaccuracies, but it will undoubtedly be more fuel to the fire being built by critics of the Book of Mormon. To them and their audience—potential converts to the restored Church—Yorgason will appear to be another example of "Mormon" incompetence and gullibility.

In fairness, however, I must reiterate that I was delighted by the accounts of Yorgason's personal experiences with the Book of Mormon, found in the early and later portions of the book. His testimony is, in fact, the strongest evidence he presents for the Book of Mormon. And, in the final analysis, it is the strongest evidence any of us could want.