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E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon*

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Title

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Reviewed by Daniel B. McKinlay

This book is a breath of fresh air. It is a result of two men—brothers—taking seriously the plea of President Ezra Taft Benson to center our preaching, teaching, and writing around the Book of Mormon. It is thrilling indeed to live in a time when our prophet-leader, with vision and foresight, is encouraging us to “sustain” the Lord by relentlessly studying the Book of Mormon, not out of idle curiosity, but out of a recognition that it is a vital handbook specifically designed to prepare us to face the chaos which currently engulfs us. The Lord’s bequeathing of the Book of Mormon to us is nothing short of merciful as we gaze upon a world of skewed values.

The authors evince a thorough acquaintance with the Book of Mormon. Their style is lucid and understandable for any alert Latter-day Saint. However, those who are already familiar with the Book of Mormon as a whole will benefit the most from the many thoughts expressed. *Fathers and Sons* is also inspirational, which is not surprising, since the authors’ treatment of the Book of Mormon is reverential, and many who have read the Book of Mormon know that it contains a spirit that can be intensely moving.

The book has a logical format. After an introduction in which the authors quote statements of Church leaders on the important roles of fathers and mothers, they devote chapters to individual groupings of fathers and sons in the Book of Mormon. As we might expect, the authors begin with Lehi and Nephi, pointing out examples of their close bond, and they also make references to the less-than-ideal relationship between Lehi and his sons Laman and Lemuel. They continue with father-son relationships between Jacob and Enos; Mosiah, Benjamin, Mosiah II, and the sons of Mosiah; Zeniff, Noah, and Limhi; the two Almas and the three sons of Alma the Younger; Moroni and Moronihah; the two Helamans, the two Nephis, and Jonas; Mormon and Moroni; the line of fathers and sons among the Jaredites; and, appropriately, the Father and the Son. In the last chapter they offer some reflections on the overall theme of fathers and sons in the Book of Mormon. The book is an
extensive fleshing out of a short essay by President Benson in the book *A Witness and a Warning*; very possibly this essay was the catalyst that encouraged the brothers to write their book.

The expositional approach of the authors is very appealing. When dealing with a particular act or concept they cross-reference similar passages throughout the Book of Mormon. For example, they compare the praiseworthy qualities of the military leader Moroni with the character of Mormon (p. 155). As the sons of Mosiah on their mission to the Lamanites were instruments in the hands of God, so also was Nephi in facilitating the passage of the first colony to the promised land (pp. 82-83). Alma charged his audiences to remember their fathers—Lehi, Moses, and Abraham—and a Nephi of a later generation did the same (p. 188). The book is full of such fascinating comparisons. This technique serves to demonstrate the consistency within the Book of Mormon (as well as the Bible) by referring to patterns that recur throughout. It enhances our awareness of the tightly knit thematic structure that characterizes the sacred book. For all their individual differences, the prophets had many traits in common. For example, they recognized the sacredness of record keeping and of impressing the importance of it on their successors. Fathers had close relationships with their sons (this was true, at least, of the prophets). Sons of righteous fathers, even if rebellious for a time, eventually became spiritual powerhouses (Laman, Lemuel, and King Noah were lamentable exceptions).

Related to the methodology of comparing prophetic dispositions and activities is the authors’ welcome discussion of typologies. One of the authentic earmarks of the Book of Mormon is its frequent allusion to the Exodus as a theme of deliverance, which likewise was repeated in Israelite sacred texts and rituals as recorded in the Old Testament. With that as an overall archetype, the Nephites looked at the departure of the Lehite party from Jerusalem as their own national prototype, with themes of deliverance being repeated at various times (such as the groups led by Alma the Elder and Limhi, or missionary companions like Alma and Amulek at Ammonihah and the brothers Nephi and Lehi at a Lamanite prison). The very theme of the gospel in its restricted meaning is deliverance. Another significant typology dealt with by the authors is the *akedah*, or binding of Isaac by Abraham, as it prefigured the atonement (p. 37). Throughout Israel’s history, this symbolic event was influential in shaping Israel’s identity. Jacob discerned the tie-in
with Christ's central mission. For the purpose of the book, the authors recognize and point out in sundry ways the manner in which righteous fathers and sons reflect the relationship between the Father and the Son (p. 318). Following the divine example, for instance, Nephi was submissive to Lehi.

This book presents yet another study displaying the complex nature of the Book of Mormon. It is not the simple book it was assumed to be even a generation ago. In-depth investigations of the book continually augment our awareness that it is profoundly challenging in all directions. There is so much richness inherent in it that the inquiring heart and mind never tire of it; there are always fresh avenues of approach. Critics have not appreciated its magnitude.

The procedures used to convey and illuminate the authors' thesis, in my opinion, stand as an attractive model in gospel scholarship. Appropriately, the scriptures are the base of the sources consulted, with occasional quotations from Church leaders, past and present, and noted Latter-day Saint scholars (e.g., Hugh Nibley, John Welch, John Tvedtnes, Truman Madsen). But observations from knowledgeable non-Latter-day Saint authorities who have a great deal of insight to offer enhance the work. The Clarks quote the latter mostly in the beginning of the book, but only sparsely thereafter, which was a disappointment to me. Where possible, continuing this line of exegesis would have enlivened the book. In the view of some, culling vital and pertinent scholarly findings from the non-Mormon community, as Noel Reynolds implies, can be part of "master[ing] the relevant literature" in our serious scriptural studies.\(^1\) Granted, this approach is not always necessary or preferred. Nevertheless, outside scholarship can greatly enrich our appreciation of the scriptures, as exemplified throughout Hugh Nibley's *Collected Works*, and as exhibited in some measure in the book being reviewed here.

There are a few minor areas in the book that might call for revision or improvement. One error, rather common, is calling Sam the younger brother of Nephi (p. 18). In another vein, in several instances, while quoting the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* and its counterpart set for the New Testament, the Clarks simply identify the authors they cite as eminent

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authorities. Some readers would no doubt prefer to have the authors named. The Clarks report and analyze in considerable depth many scenes and speeches within the Book of Mormon. In most cases their evaluations are dynamic and involving. A notable exception is their rehearsal of King Benjamin’s address (pp. 56-61) in which, for the most part, they simply recount the event in their own words. One might just as well read Benjamin’s talk firsthand. Also, they might have added a bit more to their commentary on Alma’s instructions to Helaman (pp. 134-39), enlarging upon the wonderful material they contribute there.

One idea that caught my attention was the authors’ discussion of the relation of Mosiah’s abrogation of the monarchy to the groundwork for that decree by King Benjamin (pp. 75-76), where the Nephites first covenanted to keep God’s commandments, and then approved a political setup that would require them to answer for their own sins. This reminds the authors of a phrase in Judges 17:6, 21-25, which exclaims that “in those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” Recognizing that these words would have been on the plates of brass, the Clarks suggest that Mosiah, familiar with the biblical account, wanted to have his people revert to a happier state of affairs as reflected in Israel before that nation had a king. This reading is possible, but we should be aware of an interpretation recommended by P. Kyle McCarter, which suggests that the passages in Judges refer to a time of chaos in premonarchical Israel, before the central site of worship was established in Jerusalem. The implication is that the Israelites were doing what was right in their own eyes as opposed to those of Yahweh. The king (David) subsequently centralized Israelite worship, thus encouraging the Israelites to do that which was right in Yahweh’s eyes rather than wandering off into other locations and doing what was right (or wrong) in their own eyes.2

Near the end of the book the authors point out that the last writers of the Book of Mormon did not write to their own posterity (Moroni had no posterity to write to!), but to us (p. 319). While that is true, Mormon and Moroni (as well as earlier recordkeepers such as Enos) seem to be primarily interested in

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the descendants of their Lamanite brothers. The Clarks recognize this in their closing statement on Moroni (p. 250). After all, kinship, as the Clarks point out, is of great importance in the Book of Mormon.

In keeping with the concentrated content of their book, the authors name fathers and sons as "the predominant theme of the Book of Mormon, in which the relationship of the Eternal Father and his Beloved Son is central" (p. 286). They have certainly built a strong case for this assertion, but while it does have support, one might well change the definite article in their statement to the indefinite article, and add that an equally compelling theme in the Book of Mormon is its graphic discourse on and enactment of the fall and redemption. The Book of Mormon prophets paint a bleak picture of the "natural man"; the melancholy meditation on the rebellious nature of mankind in Helaman 12 is illustrated through the entire book. That in the book which gives hope and relief, even luster, is the good news of Christ’s gracious offer of eternal joy, the price being a change of heart. The Book of Mormon tells us about people who sank to the lowest possible station in mortality and remained there. It also inspires us with accounts of some who were in open rebellion but then tasted the sweet fruit of solid conversion. It furthermore informs us of some who were steadily righteous throughout their life. The Book of Mormon, in short, describes the whole spectrum of the human condition. While it can be unrelievably depressing in transmitting to us an image of our dark side, it also provides us with the one and only process whereby we can overcome the sordidness of the world and reach into the sublime realms of our potential destiny, accompanying, with gratitude, the Savior who makes the whole thing possible.

*Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon* is a valuable book, a great contribution to Church literature, probably the very thing President Benson would like to see us produce. Generally, it is upbeat and geared to encourage improvement. It offers thoughtful ideas on how to implement Book of Mormon teachings in homes. It has much to offer those who are assigned to speak in sacrament meeting and who want to follow President Benson’s counsel to center our talks on the Book of Mormon.