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Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon. Vol. 3, Alma through Helaman*

Donald W. Parry

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Reviewed by Donald W. Parry

While Alice (of Wonderland fame) watched the White Knight slide down the poker, she discovered "a book lying near [her] on the table and . . . she turned over the leaves, to find some part she could read, 'for it's all in some language I don't know,' she said to herself. . . . 'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's rather hard to understand!'"¹ Many Latter-day Saints, like Alice, find themselves casually turning the pages of the Book of Mormon and thinking to themselves, "this is a pretty book, but it is rather hard to understand."

The major goal of the authors of the *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* is to provide a series of explanatory comments, a seriatim (point by point, or verse by verse) exegesis of the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon. The following quotation represents their summary posture and goals in writing the commentary:

The Book of Mormon is a pearl of great price. It contains a true story, the saga of a message, and is historically sound and accurate. It is a repository of doctrine, a sacred collection of some of the greatest theology ever assembled into one volume; literally a standard work, a divinely given measure against which we assess truth and error. More than that, it is a pattern for living, an invitation to come unto Christ and a guide for so doing.

Hence it is not enough for one to read the Book of Mormon, though that is a necessary beginning. It is not enough to study and teach from its saving doctrines, though for all Latter-day Saints to do such would lift immeasurably the level of gospel scholarship in the Church. Rather, we must come to live the Book of Mormon, to heed the counsel and direction

of its writers and compiler, to discover and abide by its precepts. In doing this we draw near to God. The Book of Mormon, then, is not just another treatise on religion; it is religion. It is the religion of Jesus Christ, who is its author. . . . We confine our commentary to doctrine: we focus almost exclusively upon the principles of the gospel, those precepts which lead men and women to Christ. (p. xv)

The authors emphasize four separate but related items in this introductory statement. (1) A testimonial is offered regarding the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is "true," "historically sound," and "accurate." It contains the "greatest theology" extant in a single work. It is a "divinely given" "standard work" which testifies concerning Jesus Christ. (2) McConkie and Millet indicate that the commentary will be confined to doctrine. The Book of Mormon is a "repository of doctrine," they write, and their stated intent is to "confine [their] commentary to doctrine." (3) The authors demonstrate a desire to teach their readers how to live the teachings and doctrines of the Book of Mormon. "It is not enough for one to read," "study and teach" the Book of Mormon, "rather, we must come to live the Book of Mormon" and to "abide by its precepts." As individuals read the Book of Mormon and then live by its teachings and principles, they find that they "draw near to God," for the Book of Mormon is a "pattern for living." (4) The authors focus clearly on the ultimate goal of the Book of Mormon; they teach concerning the name, mission, attributes, and characteristics of the Savior. They write that the Book of Mormon is "an invitation to come unto Christ"; it is "the "religion of Jesus Christ." He figures prominently in their commentary (e.g., pp. 57, 97, 258, 412-13).

The Structure of the Commentary

Volume three represents the third work in a series of four volumes. The structural format of the work is quite serviceable, as it is divided into larger pericopes as well as smaller literary sections. The text of the Book of Mormon is printed with the commentary. Boldface print brings out main ideas and related ideas. A running head at the top of every page provides the name of the scriptural book, chapter, and verse. A bibliography and subject and scriptural indices are provided at the end of the book.
Why a Doctrinal Commentary?

Moshe Greenberg once inquired of Gordon J. Wenham, the author of a well-known biblical commentary, regarding his major goals for writing the commentary. What, Greenberg asked, was your “agenda—e.g., purpose(s), intended readers, main interests, tensions and constraints (editorial, confessional, theological); balance of attention to textual criticism, historical-philological data, history of composition, literary appreciation, application and (history of) interpretation?”2 Such are the questions and challenges that face every scriptural commentator. Who are the intended readers? Which approach should be taken towards the scriptural text—doctrinal, historical, philological, literary? What tensions and constraints exist?

The approach used by McConkie and Millet, as it is clearly stated in their preface, is a doctrinal examination of the Book of Mormon. “We confine our commentary to doctrine, . . . the principles of the gospel, those precepts which lead men and women to Christ” (p. xv). It is important to grasp the authors’ utilization of the word “doctrine,” for the term exists in the title of the book and throughout the commentary. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English doctrine has been acquired from the Latin doctrinare, which means “to teach, to instruct.” Certainly the basic root meaning denotes “the action of teaching or instructing; instruction, a piece of instruction, a lesson, a precept.”3 The old Latin term doctor, meaning “teacher,” is a derivative of the same root.

Joseph Smith, who utilized the word “doctrine” scores of times in his talks, sermons, and correspondence,4 accepted the traditional usage of the term doctrine, i.e., in the sense of a gospel teaching, precept, or piece of instruction. For instance, he spoke concerning the “doctrine of repentance,” the “doctrine of election,” the “doctrine of translation,” the “doctrine of . . .

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4 The word “doctrine” appears approximately 131 times in the Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith.
resurrection,” the “doctrine of ‘baptism for the dead,’ ” the “doctrine of laying on of hands,” the “doctrine of eternal judgment,” the “doctrine of revelation,” and the “doctrine of a plurality of Gods,” in each case having reference to a specific religious teaching or truth. Although McConkie and Millet do not provide a definition of the term doctrine, it is my opinion that the authors employed the word in the traditional sense, following (perhaps unknowingly) the definition given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and accepting Joseph Smith’s usage of the term.

In their doctrinal approach to the Book of Mormon, it is evident that the authors were skillful technicians, taking care not to produce preachy, devotional, or evangelical materials. Their tone was neither polemical nor apologetic. The commentarial language is indicative of a nondogmatic style, employing throughout careful language such as “it seems that,” “one may assume,” “perhaps,” “it may be that,” and so on. In keeping with the primary doctrinal goal of the work, various historical, geographical, linguistic, political, archaeological, and social aspects of the Book of Mormon are mentioned scarcely and randomly. When such outside comments are presented, it is solely in connection with related doctrinal concepts. Certainly the bulk of the commentary deals with fundamental doctrines, such as faith, repentance, baptism, the creation, the fall, the atonement, resurrection, the spirit world, the role of the Holy Ghost, joy, grace, justification, sanctification, the Godhead, the scattering and gathering of Israel, forgiveness, the last days, and the signs of the times.

**Commentarial Contributions**

“What makes for a good commentary?” asks Donald Juel. “Apart from some basic competence on the part of the author, the most obvious qualification is that it should be useful.” We may ask, is the McConkie/Millet project “theologically productive” (p. 231)? Does the reader gain sufficient doctrinal knowledge while reading the pages of this commentary? Will

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5 See *TJPJS*, 81, 149, 170-71, 179, 188, 338, 370.
6 Certainly the authors are well aware of the usage of the term “doctrine” in the Book of Mormon. See, for example, their commentary on the “doctrine of Christ” on pages 58-62 in volume 4 of the series.
the reader draw closer to God by studying its contents? In what manner is the commentary contributory? Although the individual reader will have to judge for himself/herself as to the exact value of the commentary, I would like to point out some of the book’s contributions to doctrinal knowledge.

The book identifies a number of scriptural types and symbols. “Costly apparel,” for instance, is “symbolic of submission to the world’s standards, an acquiescence to the allurements of appearance” (p. 4). An example of a type is found in the commentary of Alma 13:17-19, where it is established that Melchizedek is a type for Christ. Four items are listed, paralleling the prophet Melchizedek with Jesus (pp. 102-3). Also, members of the priesthood are types or symbols of Christ (p. 97); the city of “Ammonihah and Nehor are symbols—history as prophecy. Ammonihah and Nehor were to the nation of the Nephites what the Book of Mormon is to us—a warning voice” (p. 119); the brazen serpent was a type of Christ (p. 242); the law of Moses was “as one grand prophecy of Christ” (p. 250); the Liahona was a “representation” or “a reflection of Christ” (p. 282); and “Christ is the tree of life” and its fruit is representative of the “flesh and blood of Christ” (p. 35).

Today’s biblical scholars are constantly warned not to impose twentieth-century social ethics, concerns, and politico-religious viewpoints into history, not to impose their world view upon the peoples of the Bible. Rather, the scholars are told to view the biblical societies/peoples in their own world, their own immediate historical context. The Book of Mormon, however, invites modern-day readers to liken the scriptures unto their contemporary life situations, so that the timeless value of the sacred texts may be discovered. McConkie and Millet, drawing upon years of experience in teaching religion, are masters at likening the scriptures unto present-day readers. It is their belief that the Book of Mormon is “everlasting relevance. It is at once timeless and timely” (pp. 202-3).

A look at Korihor and his teachings will serve as an example of the manner in which the authors collimate the Nephite world with present-day society. Korihor, the renowned anti-Christ, taught a number of philosophical attitudes that are prevalent in today’s world. Korihor argued that “ye cannot know of things which ye do not see” (Alma 30:15). McConkie and Millet respond by writing, “this position is a radical form of empiricism, a pure naturalism” (p. 204). When Korihor states that “every man fared in this life according to the management of
the creature” (Alma 30:17), the commentators explain that “Korihor was a secular humanist, as was Nehor, his predecessor” (p. 204). When Korihor preaches that “whatsoever a man did was no crime,” the commentators demonstrate that “this is a form of ethical relativism, a statement that there are no absolute truths and thus no absolute values, no rights and wrongs” (p. 205). Korihor believed that “when a man was dead, that was the end.” McConkie and Millet show that this philosophy was a type of “nihilism, a denial of immortality” (p. 205).8

The Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon contains a number of elucidative definitions. The definitions are not conventional dictionary entries, but scriptural definitions, presented in the light of scriptural word usage. For instance, the term “prosperity” does not simply signify temporal goods or blessings. Rather, the term, as presented by the prophets of the Book of Mormon, has a deeper, richer meaning.

As used in Helaman 3:24, prosperity is “spiritual in nature and linked to the blessings of the Church membership resulting from faithfulness” (p. 342).

What is the “night of darkness” mentioned in Alma 34:33 and Alma 41:7? It is a descriptive name for the spirit world (p. 255). Is “eternal torment” (Alma 36:12) a torment that lasts forever? No, rather “eternal” represents the nature of the torment, not the duration, for it “comes from God who is Eternal” (p. 264). As utilized by the Book of Mormon prophets, what do the expressions “order of God . . . after the order of his Son,” “holy order,” and “order of God,” signify (see Alma 13 and Helaman 8:18)? The expressions have reference to the Melchizedek Priesthood (p. 376). The authors provide scriptural definitions of many other concepts, including “vain things” (p. 6), “anti-Christ” (p. 201), “yielding up one’s heart unto God” (p. 344), and joy (pp. 188-89). Concerning joy, the authors write:

Joy is characteristic of the presence of the Holy Ghost, from whom it comes. It is experienced only when the Spirit is present, and that most acutely in the manifestation that our sins have been remitted, in the

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8 Elsewhere, the reader is warned against modern-day priestcrafts, false churches, and reaching spiritual plateaus, and is taught how to become a missionary by learning about the Nephite missionary movement (see ibid., 5, 32, 135).
knowledge that our path is pleasing to and approved by God, and in helping others find the way to light and salvation.

Perhaps few Book of Mormon students will pick up the *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and read the work straight through like a novel. Rather, it is probable that many readers will turn to the commentary for regionalized studies (i.e., searching for commentary based on a specific verse or pericope). Those who turn to the volume for an answer to a specific question may be delighted with what they find. The following question, for instance, has been posed in a number of settings. After receiving a visitation from God, Alma said, “methought I saw ... God sitting upon his throne” (Alma 36:22)? Why did the prophet employ such circuitous language (“methought”) rather than a direct pronouncement such as “I saw God?” It is the view of the authors that the expression “is one of moderation and temperance, of modesty in speech. The stories are told without embellishment” (p. 267). Another example of the commentators’ ability to answer questions can be cited. Helaman 11:1-23 states that Nephi sealed the heavens so that there might be a famine. Why, it might be asked, are some famines sent from God? According to the commentators, “famine is one of heaven’s most eloquent sermons. When virtually all else has failed to get the attention of the rebellious and turn them to God, famines have succeeded. Famines can strip men of every sense of self-sufficiency and turn their eyes and ears to the voice of heaven (see Isaiah 51:19; Jeremiah 14:13-18; Amos 4:6)” (p. 390).

Many other challenging questions are addressed in the commentary. What was the “first provocation” mentioned in Alma 12:36 (p. 91)? In what manner did God “hate” the Lamanites (Helaman 15:4; p. 418)? Why were “many” but not all of the graves of the righteous opened at the time of Christ’s resurrection (Helaman 14:25; p. 415)? In what manner are “private sins” harmful to all of mankind (p.401)? What are the basic differences between temples, sanctuaries, and synagogues (Alma 16:13; 120-21)? Why do angels not visit all the wayward children of righteous fathers, as was the case with Alma the Younger (Alma 36:4-11; p. 263)? What elements are present when one is born of God (pp. 267-68)? Under what priesthood capacity did priests and teachers serve (Alma 15:13; p. 117)? What is the connection between love and passion (p. 287)? Can
a trance serve as a source of revelation (pp. 137-41)? What is the meaning of an "infinite atonement" (p. 247-48)? What does it mean to "wrest the scriptures" (p. 103-4)? By responding to these and scores of additional questions that arise from the books of Alma and Helaman, volume three of the *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* accomplishes its goals—to provide a seriatim exegesis of the Book of Mormon.

It should be remembered that scriptural commentaries, like all writings, reflect the perspective of the author(s). This work was written by believers in the restored gospel for others who also believe in it. The commentary is a doctrinal (teaching/instructional) aid which emphasizes the weightier concerns of the gospel, i.e., the first principles of the gospel, the atonement, missionary work, and others. The authors place Jesus Christ prominently at the center of every page of the work, and then invite the readers to make the teachings of the Book of Mormon effective in their own lives.