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Abstract Review of *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 3, *Alma through Helaman* (1991), by Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet.

Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*. Vol. 3, *Alma through Helaman*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991. x + 459 pp., subject and scripture indexes. \$14.95 .

Reviewed by J. Michael Allen

There is at least one unfortunate aspect of this book for which the authors need not bear responsibility: the advertising hype. Bookcraft, either out of genuine conviction or as a marketing ploy, describes the series of which the book under review is a part as "the definitive four-volume series on the Book of Mormon." This description is unfortunate for several reasons. First, people may take it as literally true, and may therefore assume that the book's pronouncements can be taken as authoritative and final. Second, such a description, again if taken literally, may discourage well-meaning but authority-conscious people from posing their own interpretations gained from careful, sincere reading of the Book of Mormon if those interpretations differ from that offered (too mild a word, really) in this "definitive commentary." My own experience indicates that it does not take a very imaginative reading of the Book of Mormon text to come up with ways of analyzing it which differ from the authors under review here, but which are equally valid interpretations of the text. Third, labeling something a "definitive commentary" could imply that this is the best we can do or hope for. And fourth, I think the whole notion of a "definitive commentary" on the Book of Mormon is ludicrous to begin with, given the fact that we have no gold plates to compare the text with, no well-established tradition of Book of Mormon criticism (in the constructive sense of the word), and constant injunctions from prophets Joseph Smith through Ezra Taft Benson to read the book constantly and carefully. One would almost gather from that that my interpretation is just as good as yours.

Fortunately, Professors McConkie and Millet make no such claims themselves to having written the "definitive commentary." Nevertheless, they do assume an air of authority in their commentary that is not inconsistent with such grandiose claims. In fact, this volume is not so much a commentary as it is a collection of mini-sermons, and potential readers should be aware that that is what they will get. If that is what you want,

this book is for you. If you are not keen on being preached to, however, you should perhaps look elsewhere.

But where? Such is the lamentable state of Book of Mormon scholarship that it is hard to know where to go for an alternative. We certainly talk about the Book of Mormon a great deal, and selected verses find their way into virtually every talk or lesson given in Latter-day Saint meetings. There have been numerous studies of various aspects of the Book of Mormon—from its textual origins to supposed archaeological support for either its antiquity or lack thereof—but, given the importance attributed to the book both by its own pronouncements and by the Church as an institution, there has been surprisingly little effort to get at the heart of the text and its message beyond its value as a proof-text for various interpretations of doctrine. Despite Harold Bloom's recent conclusion that he "cannot recommend that the [Book of Mormon] be read either fully or closely,"¹ for Mormons, who have a special stake in the book's truthfulness and teachings, the Book of Mormon cries out to be read very closely indeed, and to be probed subtly for layers of meaning and application.

Sadly, in my opinion, the volume under review here is not a step in that direction. Problems with the first two volumes in the series have been treated in detail elsewhere, and I recommend that the reader of this review consult these other treatments as well, since many of the same problems pointed out by reviewers of those two volumes persist in this one (and presumably in the fourth one as well), and there is therefore no need for me to repeat them at length here.²

McConkie and Millet describe their work as a "doctrinal commentary." Already this raises problems for me. I have no problem with the *idea* of a doctrinal commentary, but one wants to be certain of what is meant by the term. In their preface the authors state: "As in the first two volumes in this series, we

¹ Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 86. Despite Bloom's feeling that the Book of Mormon is "wholly tendentious and frequently tedious," the esteemed and prolific literary critic is generally quite complimentary toward Mormons. He is particularly enamored of Joseph Smith, whom he sees as the only genuine religious genius America has managed to produce.

² See the detailed reviews by J. Frederic Voros, Jr., in *Brigham Young University Studies* 29/2 (Spring 1989): 121-25; and Louis Midgley, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 92-113.

here 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).

This holds for all sections of the commentary except the portion dealing with Alma 43-62. Because they do not feel those chapters warrant a verse-by-verse commentary, they have chosen instead to "present a brief [6-page] essay in which are set forth some of the most salient doctrines and gospel principles" in those chapters (p. xv).

The authors seem to be interested in "pure" doctrine, or doctrine somehow devoid of externals. But is there such a thing? In a work such as the Book of Mormon that does not just present doctrine statically but offers a history of a people and God's dealings with them as a means of teaching doctrine, "doctrine" cannot be separated from the people who live it, teach it, struggle to understand it, and reveal it. In other words, is it *possible* to "confine" oneself to "doctrine" when trying to explicate the Book of Mormon? This seems to reveal a static view of doctrine that is more interested in finding and making pronouncements than in elucidating the subtleties behind God's dealings with his children, and his children's understanding of him. What is doctrine, then, that it is to be treated apart from the language, history, and style of the Book of Mormon? Here, it appears to be a series of authoritative-sounding pronouncements—a stern *summary*, at a superficial level, of one view of the text, a distillation of one strand of twentieth-century Mormonism spoken in tones of solemn authority. One passage (commenting on Alma 5:1-9) gives an indication of the authors' view of history:

History is the collective memorial of a people; its lessons are most poignant and should be written in our hearts and souls. It is a reservoir of wisdom from which we need to drink deeply and frequently. It is in the past that we find direction for the present and the future. The annals of the faithful inevitably give us reason for gratitude and humility, out of which grows a renewed sense of obligation. (p. 26)

No wonder, then, that Professors McConkie and Millet are not interested in seeing doctrine in connection with history. To them, the past exists to speak to the present (it is a "memorial," not a memory), and looking at the past in its own context seems to be of secondary or lesser importance. Reading this commen-

tary, one could almost get the impression that Alma, Amulek, Lamoni, and all the rest lived in Utah Valley in the late twentieth century. They would be quite comfortable listening to general conference. Or speaking in it, for that matter. Of course I recognize that God is "the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Hebrews 13:8), so that in a sense that should not matter, but the fact is that doctrine *does* change; or, if you prefer, the way in which God presents doctrine and the way in which his children understand it changes.

Further, the authors profess to give us a "doctrinal commentary," apparently assuming that there is general agreement regarding the definition, nature, and sources of doctrine. A random but fairly substantial survey indicates that their most frequently cited authority is themselves (both the other volumes of this commentary and other works), followed by Bruce R. McConkie (*Mormon Doctrine*—there's that word again—as well as other works), and then Joseph Smith.

Other important terms are either tossed off or passed over with no explanation. The authors state that the Book of Mormon is "a sacred collection of some of the greatest theology ever assembled into one volume" (p. xv). It is a bit surprising that they even mention theology, given their apparent anti-intellectual bias (discussed below). Like it or not, theology is an intellectual exercise, an effort to apply reason to religious faith and to revelatory experience, to explain religious principles specifically through the use of reason and intellect. Joseph Smith's application of both reason and revelation in his theological explications should be an example to all Mormons interested in "theology." But the authors of this volume do not tell us what they mean by theology, nor do they ask the kinds of questions or engage in the kind of analysis that one normally thinks of as serious theological inquiry.

I am interested in the Book of Mormon for several reasons—primarily, of course, because as a believing Mormon I regard the book as scripture, but more specifically I am interested in it as a scholar, as a teacher, and as a student of God's word. But the ways in which I read it vary depending on my purposes. And while I do not suppose that everyone reads the book the same way I do, here I can only respond to the way in which the commentary by Professors McConkie and Millet addresses my needs. As a historian and scholar, I find it of little use. I have already mentioned that the authors do not look at historical context or developments over time. Perhaps this

should not be any more surprising than the anti-intellectual bias of the authors. However, it is a bit puzzling, given the fact that these are professional teachers of scripture to bright university students (students who, my own experience tells me, are capable of—even hungry for—serious, challenging study of their scriptures). The bias is nonetheless there, clearly stated in the authors' preface to volume 2:

We make no pretense to being [trained scholars]. . . . As to the world's scholarship, it ought to be observed that the best of man's learning, as it has been directed toward the Bible, has not resulted in an increase of faith in that holy book. . . .

Scholars are far too wont to sift the sands of faith through screens of their own making, and in doing so often find themselves left with nothing but the rocks of their own unbelief. Similarly, with some concern we sense among many Latter-day Saints a preoccupation with "evidences" to "prove" the Book of Mormon. In such evidences we may find fuel for testimony, but only if the fire of testimony already burns brightly. Such things . . . are not the source of testimony and thus have no profitable place in proselyting efforts. (vol. 2, p. xiii)

While I am in full agreement with the authors that there are problems with scholarship on both the Bible and the Book of Mormon, I find the passage quoted above more than a little disturbing. Is the Book of Mormon only to be used for proselyting? Is every application of intellect and reason to the text and message of the book a search for "evidences"? Whatever happened to sincere, personal study of the scriptures, illuminated by the light of both faith and reason? Is that to be dismissed as useless for proselyting, and therefore of no value?

If this is the attitude with which our university students are taught to approach the scriptures, can we really expect them to become the kind of people who can reconcile discovered and revealed truth without feeling they have to reject one or the other? This concerns me since I am one of those expected to help them learn discovered, reasoned truth, and at the same time demonstrate to them that such truth is compatible with the restored truth of the gospel. I believe that it is compatible, but my task is not made any easier by such statements as the one quoted above.

As a Gospel Doctrine teacher in Sunday School, I also find the commentary of little value, for two reasons. First, it is primarily a summary of what one might find anywhere else. In other words, there is nothing new here—primarily, no new *thinking* about the Book of Mormon. And second, when I teach I do not preach, I discuss. The kind of treatment found in this commentary will not lend itself easily to the exchange or evaluation of opinions.

Finally, as a student of scripture I find this commentary of limited value. The reasons for this should be clear by now: there is little new insight, little probing of the text beyond its superficial value as a source of authority for one's opinions.

Lest anyone accuse me of being overly harsh on the volume under review, let me state (if it is not already obvious) that much of my lamentation stems from my feeling that, while President Benson's constant exhortations have probably resulted in increased reading of the Book of Mormon, the level of serious study of the Book of Mormon remains low. McConkie and Millet would like to see a higher "level of gospel scholarship in the Church" (p. xv). How is this to be encouraged? I cannot help thinking of a passage from Ellen M. Rosenberg. She was commenting on the Southern Baptist use of the Bible, but I think that her remarks can also apply to the use of the Book of Mormon (and the Bible as well, for that matter), among Latter-day Saints. In the passage below, I have inserted "Book of Mormon" where Rosenberg has "Bible," and "speaker(s)" where she has "pastor(s)"; otherwise, the quotation is verbatim:

The [Book of Mormon] itself is less read than preached, less interpreted than brandished. Increasingly, [speakers] may drape a limply bound Book over the edges of the pulpit as they depart from it. Members of the congregation carry [the Book of Mormon] to church services; the [speaker] announces a long passage as text for his sermon and waits for people to find it, then reads only the first verse of it before he takes off. The Book has become a talisman.³

If I were reviewing this commentary for a different audience, I might not be so critical. It is the task of any

³ Ellen M. Rosenberg, *The Southern Baptists: A Subculture in Transition* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 134.

reviewer, however, to try to understand his or her likely audience. I assume most readers of F.A.R.M.S.'s publications, including this one, are intelligent students of scripture who want to apply both their faith and their intellect to the study of sacred writ. The authors maintain that

it is not enough for one to read the Book of Mormon.
. . . It is not enough to study and teach from its
saving doctrines. . . . Rather, we must come to *live*
the Book of Mormon. (p. xv)

This commentary *will* appeal to a certain readership (though I am not sure that it will be the readership I have described above), and if it helps them do as the authors here urge us to do, it is a worthwhile volume, despite its weaknesses. The only way to "live" the Book of Mormon is to take it into our hearts and minds, explore it, wrestle with it, probe its subtleties, try to understand what happened as Joseph Smith himself worked to understand it and make it understandable, and try to understand what God is doing by inspiring its writing. Having done all this, we might succeed in making it a part of us and in acting in accordance with what we have learned.

The objective that Professors McConkie and Millet have set for this commentary is "that by using it readers will be strengthened in their faith and built up in their commitment to Christ and his restored Church and kingdom" (p. xvi). A reviewer should first judge a book by the standards the authors set for themselves, and I, too, hope that this objective is accomplished. But, as I have pointed out, the tone and manner in which the authors go about pursuing their objective call into serious question not their sincerity—there can be no doubt of that—but their ability to appeal to people who really want to roll up their sleeves and dig into the Book of Mormon—"doctrine," "theology," and all.