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### John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (1991), edited by John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne.

**John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds.,** *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991. x + 274 pp., with scripture and subject indexes. \$8.95.

Reviewed by Cherry B. Silver

While Church members who regularly read the scriptures would not normally expect faith-promoting insights from scholarly exegesis of Book of Mormon texts, three reasons appear for appreciating the evaluations offered in this collection of essays on the Book of Mormon. These scholars build *outward evidence* that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document from a Hebraic culture transplanted to Mesoamerica. Through close readings of the text, they also find *internal evidence* that the book shows consistency and complexity, more than could have been devised by a nineteenth-century farm boy dictating a manuscript over a period of a few months. And in these complexities—the turns of plot, the background details, the covenants and types, the personality of authors, and particularly the multiple layers of meaning of significant words—these scholars uncover a meshing of language with life experiences that *heightens the spiritual message* readers will receive.

The twenty-three essays in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* bear the subtitle “Insights You May Have Missed Before.” Certainly, provocative subject matter is one strength of this soft-cover publication. The essays are advertised as “easy to read” and, while the editors have made sure that each essay clarifies its points from the text itself with few footnotes and no erudite sources, the authors do not talk down to their readers. In fact “subtle and profound” (p. 182), “rich and complex” (p. 168), and “remarkable consistency” (p. 255) describe the Book of Mormon they uncover. They seem to write with two goals in mind: (1) to elucidate the message of the book and augment the power of its doctrine and (2) to argue against unseen critics in behalf of ancient authorship and authenticity, of telling Hebraic influences, of meaningful biblical allusions, and of a Mesoamerican context for wars and customs.

The collection is divided into four sections. The first, “Authors and Editors,” invites us to feel the personality of individual writers. We sense Jacob’s anxiety from his use of the words *dread* and *lonesome* (Tanner, pp. 52-66). We see

Nephi's use of Lehi's journal for travel narrative and doctrinal prophesyings (Brown, pp. 3-14). Nephi consciously identifies himself with Moses (Szink, pp. 38-51) and even more specifically compares himself to Joseph and Moses in order to justify himself, the younger brother, as the dominant political leader (Reynolds, pp. 220-29). Mormon, the general, includes war texts because, in those events significant to him, he finds moral lessons (Hardy, pp. 15-28). John Tvedtnes alerts us to consistency in the section headings (colophons; pp. 32-37) and to editorial care in fulfilling promised explanations (pp. 29-31).

While essays in the second section, "Language and Literature," continue the argument for *internal consistency*, these scholars also point to *external evidence* that the Book of Mormon is based on ancient Hebrew vocabulary and literary structures. John Tvedtnes finds Hebraisms in Joseph Smith's expressions (pp. 77-92). The name of Ishmael's burial place, Nahom, seems to derive, says Alan Goff, from the Hebrew verb *naham*, suggesting (appropriately) "to mourn or to be consoled" in sufferings in the wilderness over which one murmurs (pp. 92-93). Further unveiling of the significance of types (Gileadi, pp. 197-206) and covenants (Ludlow, pp. 177-85, Ricks, pp. 209-19; Ostler, pp. 230-40) in the third and fourth sections links to Bible tradition in a convincing way.

Poetry, imagery, and *chiasmus* have previously been treated as evidence that the Book of Mormon relates to Hebraic poetic forms. In essays by Rust (pp. 100-13 and 132-39) and Welch (pp. 114-31), the spiritual meaning of these language patterns is elaborated. These essays connect with those in the third section, "Ideas and Themes," where Eugene England elaborating on "At-one-ment" and Louis Midgley on "remembrance" suggest ways in which the meaningful repetition of these themes exerts an awakening influence on the hearers, a call to action. "From the perspective of the Nephites, remembrance included active participation in some form. . . . To remember was to place the event upon the heart, or to turn the heart toward God" (p. 171).

In such blending of language and message the third level of consciousness raising occurs—the *heightening of spiritual awareness*. Just how does the reading of scripture alter a person's inner life? Is it stepping into another world, where the view of life is broader? Is it hearing godly injunctions with the heart or rereading a story that prompts application to a contemporary life situation? Some answers come from Rust's

assertion that words and images and rhythm have “a peculiar exaltation” and “acquire depth by repetition” (pp. 105-6). A further meshing of pattern with meaning appears as Welch unfolds the power of Alma 36 (pp. 114-31). Chiasmus refers to “arranging a series of words or ideas in one order, then repeating it in reverse order” (p. 114). Alma had told his conversion story in a straightforward manner in Mosiah 27:10-32, but in Alma 36 the poetic pattern of chiasmus dramatizes the darkness of his situation and the contrasting light. At the center of the chapter comes Alma’s calling upon the name of “Jesus Christ, son of God.” The structure of the chapter turns just as the conversion experience turns the man (p. 129).

Essays in the last section are broadly categorized as dealing with “Society, Politics, and War.” Kingship and political leadership are treated, along with coronations and covenant making, as they link to biblical tradition. The book concludes with defenses by William Hamblin and John Sorenson of the logic of patterns of war-making as described in the Book of Mormon, adding to the *external evidence* that this book “reflects its dual heritage of the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica” (p. 248).

No one, after exposure to the insights of these essays, will be able to think of the Book of Mormon in the same way again. Careful reading does make a difference. To sit down with *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* is like meeting a good friend who radiates exuberance over a new perspective, then coming away feeling buoyant with added light.