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### Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top. *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon. Vol. 4, 3 Nephi through Moroni.*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, vol. 4, *Third Nephi through Moroni* (1992), by Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top.

**Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Vol. 4, Third Nephi through Moroni*. Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1992. xix + 424 pp., with subject and scripture indexed. \$14.95.**

Reviewed by Darrell L. Matthews

A series with the title *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* carries with it a very heavy responsibility. The fourth volume of this series, written by Joseph Fielding McConkie, Robert L. Millet, and Brent L. Top, is good but falls short of fulfilling this responsibility. There are some sections and passages that are very good, but some weaknesses mar the volume as a whole. I also have reservations about series like this because I have seen people take the commentary in them as the absolute truth and brush the scriptures themselves aside. This was not the intention of the authors. They have intended this volume to draw people into the scriptures to study and compare the Book of Mormon with the other standard works and thereby increase in understanding of the gospel. In the preface to this volume the authors have written, "We recommend that when using this book the reader have in hand the modern editions of the LDS scriptures, so that he or she may take advantage of their footnotes, the Topical Guide, and the other supplementary material they provide" (p. xiv). This is always how we should approach scripture study.

In many regards, this volume is good, and, indeed, some sections are excellent. These include the full discussion of Christ's visit to this continent and the period immediately preceding it—in particular the Sermon on the Mount as taught here in the Americas; the commentary on Moroni 10:30–34; and the concluding chapter, "Lifting the Condemnation: The Sanctifying Power of the Book of Mormon."

The authors write, "A study of 3 and 4 Nephi is of inestimable worth in our coming to understand how to prepare for the second coming of the Son of Man, and also what life will be like during the Millennium" (p. 35). The calamities and disasters that occurred prior to Christ's visit to this continent are similar to what will precede Christ's Second Coming. The account in 4 Nephi also does give a good indication of what life will be like during the Millennium.

The commentary on 3 Nephi 11:31–41 is particularly good. This section discusses the doctrine of Christ. The authors write:

The Book of Mormon contains “the fulness of the everlasting gospel” (see Joseph Smith–History 1:34; see also D&C 20:8–9). While it does not contain all gospel teachings or practices of the modern Church, it nonetheless contains the “fulness of the gospel” in that it contains the Savior’s own teaching of what constitutes his doctrine or gospel. . . . Faith, repentance, baptism by water and by fire, enduring in faithfulness to the end, keeping the commandments and following the example of the Savior—these are all integral components of the doctrine of Christ. All the prophets have testified of these same principles and ordinances that are central to the plan of salvation. (pp. 59)

Many have wondered what the scriptures mean when they state that we must become as a little child in order to inherit God’s kingdom. In the commentary on 3 Nephi 11:37–38, the authors give one of the best explanations that I have seen. They write:

The natural man cannot comprehend the things of God (see 1 Corinthians 2:11–14) and as a result cannot embrace the saving principles and ordinances of the gospel. Becoming as a little child in order to receive the teachings of the Savior implies overcoming the natural man through the atonement of Jesus Christ. The requirement to become as a little child to enter into the kingdom of God means much more than childlike innocence. It implies a submission to the will of the Father and a recognition of our total dependence upon the Lord. (p. 61)

The commentary on the American Sermon on the Mount is all excellent. Due to this, individual sections will not be highlighted. We would all benefit by reading this section.

In 3 Nephi 17:5–12 Jesus gathered the sick and the afflicted around him and proceeded to heal them. The commentators write:

Perhaps no chapter in holy writ can compare with this in illustrating the godly attributes possessed by the Savior—tenderness, love, compassion, mercy, and even the display of emotion. . . . It also becomes easy to think of the resurrected Lord only in such terms as power, omniscience, and glory. This passage graphically reminds us, as Paul declared, that “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Hebrews 4:15). Our love and adoration for the Savior and our commitment to submit wholly to him and follow him with “full purpose of heart” (2 Nephi 31:13) are enhanced when we understand not only who he is but also what he is like. (pp. 114–15)

The authors are to be commended for stating when there is a difficult passage. They note this in several instances; I will refer to only one. In Ether 3:15 the Lord states that he had never shown himself unto man. In the commentary to this verse the authors write, “This is a difficult statement” (p. 276). From the scriptures we know that Jehovah had appeared to Adam, Seth, Enoch, Noah, and possibly others. In the commentary that follows the authors cite scriptures and recognized Church authorities to offer different possible explanations. This could have digressed into pure speculation, but it did not. This discussion is handling a difficult passage that deals specifically with doctrine, so it deserves some controlled exploration. The authors proceeded very well in this instance. They should have followed a similar pattern with other scriptures.

Another excellent section is in Moroni 10:30–34. This is Moroni’s invitation and challenge for all to come unto Christ. In the commentary to verse 32 we read:

The Saints are commanded to be perfect. . . . We are never justified in lowering the lofty standard held out to the followers of the Christ. Nor are our actions or attitudes approved of God if we suggest that the Savior did not mean what he said when he called us to the transcendent level of perfection. Our task is not to water down the ideal, nor to dilute the directive. Rather, we must view our challenge with perspective, must see things as they really are and as they really can be.

The fact of the matter is that no man or woman except Jesus—not even the greatest Apostle or the mightiest prophet—has ever traversed this mortal sphere perfectly, without flaw. Only the Son of the Man of Holiness stayed on the strait and narrow path perfectly. But he commands us to be perfect. Is it too late for us, given that we have already sinned? No, for perfection is a process, a lengthy process which begins here and continues hereafter. (pp. 372–73)

There is hope in Christ. We should never despair.

The concluding chapter in this volume is also a highlight. The authors discuss the importance of the Book of Mormon. They review what the prophets (especially President Ezra Taft Benson) have taught about the importance of reading and studying the Book of Mormon. No group of people anciently had this record. It was compiled by the last Nephite prophets and was hidden up for our day to help and warn us of the pitfalls in modern life. The authors emphasize the importance of the Book of Mormon: “This volume is not just a book about religion. It *is* religion. . . . Our challenge, therefore, is not just to read and study the Book of Mormon; we must accept and apply its doctrines and philosophy—we must live it” (p. 383).

While there are some excellent and inspiring sections of this volume, the weaknesses noted below dull the overall effect of this book. The first weakness I noticed while reading the preface is that there is no indication of the intended audience of this book. Is it meant for newly baptized members of the Church, investigators, or those with a firm gospel foundation? The point that brought this question to mind was the statement in the preface that the “primary author” of the Book of Mormon “would be Jesus Christ” (p. xiv). This is a true statement because Christ taught and revealed the gospel truths to the prophets of the Book of Mormon. He is the one who instructed and inspired the prophets to write this sacred volume. He is not, however, the author of the book in the common, modern sense of the word. The concept could be difficult for new members or investigators to understand.

The authors do not digress into discussions of languages, culture, and history. They deal with the doctrines of the Book of Mormon. Unfortunately, they also indulge in occasional doctrinal speculation. For example, the authors discuss the point at which the spirit enters the body—at birth, at conception, etc.

(p. 6). The answer has not been revealed, so there is no doctrine on the matter. In 3 Nephi 26, where Jesus teaches the children and loosens their tongues so that they can speak, the authors again speculate, this time about what the children said. "We are left to conjecture about their messages. Was the veil parted to allow them to speak of life in the first estate? Did they discourse upon life among the gods in a celestial environment? Did they reveal doctrinal mysteries which today's world could not receive?" (p. 172). Why conjecture? The Lord did not see fit to give us this information. Yes, it would be nice to know and, yes, it is enjoyable to think about the possible topics of their teachings, but the place for this is not in a doctrinal commentary.

In the commentary on Mormon 2:19, the authors speculate that the reason Mormon was able to keep his spirits up and continue to be faithful in the gospel is that he had been sealed up to eternal life. This may have been the case, but to my knowledge it is never stated anywhere. It is also totally immaterial to our study of the Book of Mormon. Whether Mormon had received the assurance that he would have eternal life or not does not matter in our personal quest for eternal life. I believe that it is possible that this is the case, but why should one speculate and "read between the lines and wonder" (p. 219)?

In the majority of cases, the authors take the scriptures at their word and interpret them literally. However, there are a couple of places where they try to second-guess the Book of Mormon authors and have a hard time accepting what they have written. One such place is in the commentary to Mormon 8:10: "And there are none that do know the true God save it be the disciples of Jesus, who did tarry in the land until the wickedness of the people was so great that the Lord would not suffer them to remain with the people; and whether they be upon the face of the land no man knoweth." In the accompanying commentary the authors write, "We cannot tell from the text whether Moroni here speaks of things as they really are—that there are literally no believers besides himself left in the land—or whether at a time of discouragement and despair he yields (quite normally) to a moment of hyperbole" (p. 243). Do the authors have any good reason to assume that things were different than how Moroni describes them? I cannot see any reason to doubt him.

Another example of the authors' questioning what the Book of Mormon says is in Ether 2:14. We are told that the Lord "chastened [the brother of Jared] because he remembered not to call upon the name of the Lord." In the commentary we read:

It seems highly unlikely that a man of the spiritual stature of the brother of Jared—one who has received marvelous manifestations and had previously exercised great faith in the Lord—would suddenly cease praying to his Maker. It may be that what this verse is saying to us is that Mahonri Moriancumer was chastened by the Lord because he had not fully followed and implemented the counsels of the Lord previously received. It may be that in the relative comfort of the seashore he had allowed his prayers to become less fervent, more casual and routine. He may have been calling upon the Lord in word, but not in faith and deed. Verse 13 perhaps suggests this: they “dwelt in tents upon the seashore for the space of four years.” The Lord had taught them and prepared them, but it appears that they had tarried too long, for which the brother of Jared was chastened. (pp. 269–70)

All of this is pure speculation. Although it may be difficult to imagine that the brother of Jared stopped praying, this is what the verse actually says. This could be interpreted as the commentators have done, but the Book of Mormon text does not say that. The idea that he was chastened because they had tarried too long at the seashore is also not supported by the scriptures. They did stay at the seashore for a considerable length of time but there is no indication that they had previously been told to move on or that they were dragging their feet. Once again this is pure speculation and second-guessing of the Book of Mormon authors.

Another weakness of the volume is the inconsistent manner in which the authors refer readers to other sections of commentary in this series. Usually when they are referring to a section in a different volume, they refer to it as *Commentary* and then give the volume and page number. When they are referring to commentary in this volume, they usually say, “See commentary on” and then give the scriptural reference. Unfortunately, they do not use these styles consistently, thus leading to confusion.

For the most part the authors’ use of quotations from other Latter-day Saint works is very good, usually referring mainly to General Authorities. There is one major exception to this throughout the volume—their very common practice of quoting from their own previously published writings. This is a major



weakness of the book. It is wonderful that they have been able to write and publish on important topics, but in a doctrinal commentary it would be a better practice to try to focus as much as possible on writers who are General Authorities. These leaders have written or spoken authoritatively on nearly every doctrine of the Church.

That the authors have firm testimonies of the Book of Mormon is obvious from the commentary. The problem is that at some points they seem to have gotten caught up in their own commentary. This is a good volume for those already well versed in the gospel but would probably be confusing for those newly introduced to Latter-day Saint doctrines. There is a need for doctrinal commentaries. But again, their danger lies in the fact that some people then rely more on the commentary than on the insights that can come personally to all of us by our own scripture study. The authors state several times that this volume is to be used in conjunction with scripture study, not as a replacement for it. This is great advice for all of us to remember.