Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology.*

Davis Bitton

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Author(s)   Davis Bitton

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Abstract   Review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* (1993), edited by Brent Lee Metcalfe.

Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed., *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*.

Reviewed by Davis Bitton

Brent Lee Metcalfe, a technical editor for a computer company, has compiled a book that is likely to create a stir. Although he wrote one of the articles, it is the assembling of all of them that has created the book *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*. As always, when compiling such a work, everything depends on the principle of selection, a question to which I shall return.

But first let me say that these authors have a perfect right to say what they wish to on this subject. Some of their comments may be tasteless, others without merit. It is at least discussable to what extent they individually or collectively are "steadying the ark," presuming to instruct those above them in the Church, a practice that Joseph Smith in 1833 pronounced "contrary to the economy of God."[1] For nonmembers, apostates, or those who attribute no meaning or value to their membership, such a question would be of no moment. And one can always wonder about the proper forum and timing for raising these kinds of intellectual questions. It seems doubtful that Sister Charles's Sunday School class is the proper place. But if they are indeed providing a viable alternative explanation of the Book of Mormon or calling attention to problems within it, are they not entitled to do so? It is a free country.

I am not entirely comfortable with labeling this an anti-Mormon work, for I don't see hatred of the Church and a determination to destroy as the prime motive behind it. On the other hand, whatever the intention of individual authors, the label is not entirely misapplied either. In any case, one thing is sure: the compilation will be exploited by the Mormon-haters.

The ten articles are attacks on the Book of Mormon from different directions. Or, as Metcalfe and some of his band would prefer to say, attacks on the *traditional* view of that work of scripture. If responses are to be given to these challenges, they will probably most effectively be done on an individual basis, chapter by chapter. Those familiar with scholarly controversy

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1   *HC* 1:338.

will not expect that the book or its critics represent "the last word." There is no last word on such matters.

My brief essay is of more general import. Remembering that there are readers for whom all of this is virgin territory, I wish to call attention to the fact that the recognition of "problems" in the Book of Mormon began early, with Alexander Campbell, who, like Dan Vogel, was certain that it was simply a discussion within a narrative framework of several religious questions being argued about in the 1830s. Campbell and the other nineteenth-century critics saw other problems: cement, elephants, horses, the King James language. Quite understandably, believers in the Book of Mormon looked for answers to such questions. Neither the problems nor the answers represent "new" approaches. What is new, perhaps, is the level of sophistication with which the individual issues are sometimes discussed.

How telling are the criticisms? How adequate are the answers or explanations? In actuality neither is conclusive, so irresistible as to carry the field. There are intelligent persons who consider the Book of Mormon to be laughable, not so much refuted as unthinkable. One individual, a member of the Reorganized Church, did not even read this work of scripture until he was an adult, when to his surprise he found passages from the King James Bible in the text, including the Isaiah passages and the preaching of Jesus in Third Nephi. Embarrassed by such patent fraud, he quickly rejected the Book of Mormon. For him, like Stan Larson, no other explanation would do than to say it was plagiarism.

Most people, certainly most intellectuals, fall into this camp. If our authors choose to join them, they are not so much standing courageously against the world as they are joining the world. But it is also a simple fact that intelligent persons exist who find the so-called problems less than disabling, who have their own reading, their own explanations, and are able to accept the Book of Mormon as what it claims to be, namely, a translation of an ancient record about ancient peoples.

My own introduction to the Isaiah problem was in the works of Sidney B. Sperry. Rather carefully, he spelled out the extensive quotations in the Book of Mormon from Isaiah and the so called Second (or deutero-) Isaiah. Joining the conservative minority who rejected the division of Isaiah, he gave his own explanation, including the probability that Joseph Smith, when he came to such biblical passages, simply used his King James

version unless it differed from the engravings before him. In a similar manner Sperry analyzed the use of Matthew (King James version) in Third Nephi, leaving the door open to future discussion.

The recognition of problems, in other words, is nothing new, but within the Church the pattern has been to provide, where possible, an answer consistent with the authenticity of the scripture. This should not be surprising. Readers coming to these issues for the first time should be assured that, although textual problems and the like are not considered appropriate for missionary lessons or Sunday School, they have been addressed in institute classes, in religion classes at BYU, and in books and articles in Church magazines available to any interested member. We should not allow the impression to stand that here, for the first time, Metcalfe and his contributors are calling attention to problems in the Book of Mormon.

Personally, I take exception to Stan Larson's use of the word *plagiarism* to describe the sermon at the temple in Third Nephi, which, as everyone knows, is virtually identical to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew. As so often, simple dictionary definitions need to be expanded upon if we are going to understand historical usage and overtones. Using another's work without acknowledgment and presenting it as your own is the general meaning of plagiarism. In a sense it is theft; it is certainly dishonest. Senator Joseph Biden was guilty of this misdeed when he was a student in law school and has lived to regret it. Martin Luther King was guilty of plagiarism in preparing his doctoral dissertation. A former student of mine who fancies himself intellectually and morally superior to his mentors was guilty of plagiarism when he lifted entire sentences and even paragraphs from an article by Hugh Nibley.

But is that what is going on when the Book of Mormon quotes biblical passages? Was Joseph Smith indeed trying to claim that he, not Jesus, was the author of the Beatitudes? Was he trying to pretend that the beautiful prose of the Authorized Version was for the first time being produced by him? How foolish, then, to draw his quotations from the single work most familiar to the public in his lifetime! What intelligent reader of the Bible would fail to notice? If footnotes had been part of the apparatus of the original 1830 publication, most certainly he would have noted at the appropriate places: "Here I am using the most widely accepted English translation, the King James ver-

sion, changing it only when I notice that it varies from the engravings before me." Far from making an effort to conceal this relationship, as notes were added they called attention to the biblical passages that are quoted in the Book of Mormon. Wishing to tar the character of Joseph Smith, Larson cannot resist using a word that, considering its extended range of suggestions and implications, is not a fair description.

As for the use of Bible passages and phrases throughout the Book of Mormon—beyond the obvious extensive quotations that have long been recognized—we do, as Sperry and others would say, have a problem. Since Joseph Smith did not choose to explain his methods, we can only lay out the possibilities. They would seem to include the following. (1) He was a skimmer, racing through the Bible, or skimming some of its pages, and then, having picked up some terms or expressions, using them in the manuscript he was dictating. (2) He had a phenomenal memory. Having stored away many biblical passages and terms, he used them when they served his purposes in the new work. (3) God, knowing all things past, present, and future, having all power, put into his prophet's mind the words to use and felt free to employ language that had proved satisfactory. My own inclination at the present stage is to favor the second explanation above, but it may combine to some degree with numbers 1 and 3. Although many would find this explanation unconvincing, it is, if unprovable, certainly adequate. Even to discuss the matter, of course, we need specific cross-referencing. Leadership in all such analysis has come, not from the critics, but from the believers in the Book of Mormon at the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies.

I cannot resist engaging in a bit of translation myself. The one thing all ten articles have in common is a negative stance towards the Book of Mormon. Not a single one of them is an appreciation in the sense of praising. Studies by believers are apparently disqualified. They can be chronologically just as "new," intellectually just as sophisticated, as anything here, but if they come down on the wrong side of the ledger by finding merit or antiquity in the Book of Mormon, they are not included in this collection. Yet Metcalfe and his associates do not wish to come across as a group of bitter apostates, dedicated to overthrowing that which they had previously believed. They do not want to be perceived as attacking the Book of Mormon. So the work is presented as part of a trend that "promises to refine

perceptions of Mormon scripture as history and theology" (p. ix). They will merely "expand appreciation of Mormon scripture through critical analysis." What could be more benign?

Rejecting the Book of Mormon as an ancient record translated by the gift and power of God, Metcalfe describes his view as "tolerance for nontraditional views of Mormon scripture and pluralistic expressions of faith" (p. x). Such a stance, he says, is "increasingly common." He doesn't tell us how common. Have surveys been conducted? Are we talking about forty percent of the membership? Ten? Five? One? Or one hundred persons? And do these nontraditional pluralists include members of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which, as we all know, has for many years been distancing itself from the Prophet Joseph Smith?

Sensing the need for support, our editor lines up the following Latter-day Saints as on his side: Leonard J. Arrington, Henry Eyring, Lowell L. Bennion, Raymond T. Matheny, and R. Jan Stout. Question time. Do or did all these really endorse the rejection of the historicity of the Book of Mormon? Are they being fairly quoted? Two I have talked to do not appreciate being so used. In any case, Metcalfe's intention is stated up front: the Book of Mormon is "something other than literal history" (p. x) —not, in other words, what it claims to be. This is the main point, the principle of selection informing the compilation of this book.

One would think that the same care which dictated Metcalfe's avoidance of confrontational language in his preface—we are simply "enhancing appreciation," folks—would have led to the avoidance of insulting Mormon readers. It soon becomes obvious, however, that those who have read and believed the Book of Mormon are regarded as simpletons. For Anthony Hutchinson, if a "person of simple faith and unreflective mentality" accepts the Book of Mormon as history, it is "because he or she has been told it is" (p. 15). As he continues his discussion, clearly what we should all aspire to is his own intellectualized understanding, which would enable us to avoid the "anti-gospel effects" of such simple belief as "evidence-despising stubborn support of Book of Mormon antiquity."

After he has vented himself of various specific objections, scornfully sweeping aside the work of believers who have devoted a lifetime to the study of the Book of Mormon, Hutchinson warns his people against idolatry. Idolatry, the worship of

anything other than God, is always a great danger to all of us. But is our primary threat from a book whose stated intent is to bring people to Christ? Our author admits that the simple can hear the voice of God "through the medium of such a belief" (p. 15), but those who move beyond need to simplify their faith, "by pulling out the fallen dead limbs and tumbled down rocks," so that the Book of Mormon "can once again become with the Holy Bible a spring of water welling up into eternal life" (p. 16). This sounds inspiring, but I wonder how well it describes accepting the Book of Mormon as only fiction.

Trying to insist on the respectability of what he calls rhetorical and historical criticism, Dan Vogel quotes Burton L. Mack to the effect that "it is not clear" whether such "will or should support traditional Christian views about the message of the New Testament and its relevance for instruction, faith, and piety" (p. 48). For some reason I do not find this comforting.

What to do about this onslaught, this multi-barreled discharge against a beloved book of scripture? Should we lie down and die, hang our heads in shame, or issue a formal apology: "We are sorry that we were so gullible as to be taken in and wish to thank our rescuers"? None of these responses is very likely. Those who already love the Book of Mormon, who credit it with enlivening their spiritual lives and strengthening their faith in Christ, will be unwilling to give up such a treasure. The potential damage is among investigators and those new to the faith, which is why this book will very quickly enter the anti-Mormon arsenal.

Metcalfe knows that readers will react differently to his compilation. Some, he says, will regard his collection as "too secular," while others will find it "too religious"—both of these are "partisan." As for his own clique of collaborators, they simply want to encourage readers to think for themselves (p. xi). How pure! In his own article Metcalfe again imagines responses. There are "antagonists" who "typically condemn Smith as a slavish plagiarist" and "apologists" who "exonerate him as an inspired marionette" (p. 434). Translation: both of these unattractive alternatives are Bad Things. For Metcalfe, the question is not whether Smith "influenced the content of the Book of Mormon, but how much" (p. 434). We are ready, thanks to such reinterpretation, to see "a charismatic seer who was more than a mere copier or puppet but an imaginative prophetic author." What a relief! "Charismatic seer." "Prophetic."

But hold. Judging from the thrust of this whole book and the explicit conclusions of several of its chapters, the emphasis should be on "imaginative."

There are different kinds of idolatry. To his credit, Anthony Hutchinson recognizes this: "Even the liberal, neo-orthodox, or radical theologies I prefer over fundamentalism have their own threats of idolatry. Secular thought is probably most fraught with idolatry of self" (pp. 16-17). Amen.