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## A Reader's Library

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**Title** A Reader's Library

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**Abstract** This author requests help in compiling a list of useful reference books that readers can use when studying the Book of Mormon. Such a list would include dictionaries, encyclopedias, and atlases.



## A READER'S LIBRARY

Martin Raish

**W**ith this issue of the *Journal*, we continue an ongoing project to encourage and assist our readers in building a personal library of publications that shed valuable light on the Book of Mormon. Our recommendations will fall broadly into two categories: (1) reference materials that provide background information about the historical, cultural, and artistic settings of the scriptures, and (2) stimulating analyses or commentaries on the Book of Mormon that can benefit all who wish to understand it better.

Ultimately we at the *Journal* hope (with your help—we'll talk below about how this can happen) to assemble a “top twenty” (or so) list of books that could make study of the Book of Mormon more powerful, more enjoyable, and less susceptible to misunderstanding.

Having served many years as a reference librarian in large academic libraries, I can attest to the value of having at hand a good set of “ready reference” books. Dictionaries, encyclopedias, and the like are invaluable for looking up quick facts, checking definitions, and locating background information on subjects that are of interest but with which I am not entirely familiar. I will focus on these types of tools in my first two discussions.

In this opening review I will consider Bible dictionaries and atlases,

since the Book of Mormon peoples originated in Bible lands, and background on the history and civilizations of that area can be beneficial. In the next issue I will look at similar resources for the New World, the scene for most Book of Mormon events. After that, having established criteria for selection and recommendation (from my point of view, from those readers who have responded, and from collaborating specialists who possess expertise on specific topics), we can turn together to building an effective collection of the “best books” on the Book of Mormon.

Ready reference books are a unique breed. They must contain myriad facts yet at the same time be more than “just” facts. Experience leads me to depend upon three criteria for selecting the titles below, and they will serve us well in subsequent reviews. These are *readability*, *trustworthiness*, and *serendipity*.

A reference book that is readable is, first of all, well organized; the information is easily accessible. Although reference books, by definition, are usually arranged in alphabetical, chronological, or other handy fashion, it is surprising how many are weakened by failing to include additional entry points—a table of contents, an index, or appendices—that can help readers to get to the material quickly and conveniently. Then there is the language

used; even a well-ordered book must be written so that its readers feel comfortable and rewarded. The language should be concise and precise, yet flow smoothly.

A “trustworthy” text should be accurate, evenhanded, and current. In the world of biblical (and Book of Mormon) studies many books fail in one or more of these qualities. Too often, in an attempt to appeal to a wide audience, they come up short on precision while being long on popular notions. Some, in trying to reach a smaller readership, reflect biases held by the authors or publishers. This may mean that they prove oblivious to the relentless pace of research and discovery. A good reference volume will provide footnotes or bibliographies that are sufficiently full and up-to-date to serve as guides toward further exploration of a topic.

Finally, I use “serendipity” to describe a reference book that is so interesting that it is difficult to put down, one that encourages me to look up a cross-reference, to peruse the adjoining pages, or to move from text to illustration, footnote, or appendix for added enlightenment.

Few ready reference books satisfy all these demands, and many fail even to approach them. But the best books do, and I have selected what I consider the best to review here. Yet a reference book is like a pair of

shoes: if it doesn't fit you, somebody else's recommendation will not help. So you may disagree with my choices. You may consider that my including (or excluding) a title deserves correction. Or you may disagree on how I describe a book. I will be happy to learn what others have found useful, so if you have suggestions for other books, comments about what I say, or ideas for topics you would like to see this department explore, please contact me. I can be reached through e-mail at [jbms@byu.edu](mailto:jbms@byu.edu) or by regular mail to the *Journal*.

Trying to select the "best" Bible dictionary from among the dozens available is surely asking for dissent, as there are many worthy candidates. But if I could buy just one, it would be the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Revised Edition, Paul J. Achtemeier, General Editor (Harper: San Francisco, 1996).

One strength of this dictionary is that it is authoritative while not being elitist. *Biblical Archaeology Review* described it as "a mine of information for the beginning Biblical student, the seasoned scholar, and the layperson." It contains some 3,700 entries (written by nearly 200 highly qualified contributors) along with illustrations, photographs, pronunciation keys, and more. These define, describe, and explain people, places, events, and ideas from Aaron to Zurishaddai, from the age of the patriarchs through the years of the early Christian church. More than 25 percent of the entries were revised or newly written for this edition.

Most entries are brief, but a few, such as "Archaeology, History, and the Bible," "The Bible in Western Art," and "Music" are lengthy essays complete with sizable bibliographies. For a term that is unusual or based

on an ancient language, the article includes a guide to pronunciation, derivation, and meaning in its original tongue, if known. It is almost impossible to open to a page that does not have an illustration of some sort, and a 16-page section of color photographs is bound in the middle of the book. The dictionary also includes an outstanding collection of maps, the same as those in the LDS edition of the Bible.

The writing style is pleasingly lively, lucid, and easy on the ears. The entries, written by Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic scholars, are thorough and insightful, yet non-sectarian in interpretation.

There are as many Bible atlases as there are dictionaries, but the best (for all but the specialist) is probably *The Macmillan Bible Atlas* by Yohanan Aharoni and Michael Avi-Yonah, completely revised 3<sup>rd</sup> edition by Anson F. Rainey and Ze'ev Safrai (Macmillan: New York, 1993).

This atlas covers the years 3000 B.C. through A.D. 200 by way of 271 two-color maps, arranged chronologically, accompanied by explanatory text, scriptural references, and drawings of artifacts related to the discussion. It also includes chronological tables (unfortunately with tiny print that makes them somewhat difficult to read), a key to the maps according to the books of the Bible, and an index of all geographic names that appear on the maps.

Christ and the early church (through the 2<sup>nd</sup> century) receive ample coverage, especially considering how comparatively short a period of biblical time they occupied. The tone of the entries is balanced and acceptable to Christians and Jews alike.

The strengths of this atlas are its sweep and its accuracy. No important event is ignored, while all are

described with high regard to precision and completeness (within the space of a short entry). The combination of maps, text, and illustrations make this an especially useful volume. A modest defect is that some illustrations appear to be photocopies of photographs and are not as informative as they could be.

This is an extensive reworking of the previous edition of 1977. That older edition is still of value but should be used with the understanding that much of the research that went into it is now rather out of date. A great deal of new information about the Holy Land has come to light in the past quarter century and the authors of the new edition have incorporated it well.

For a different approach, the *Atlas of the Bible* by John Rogerson (Facts on File: New York, 1985) is a good choice. This author arranges the entries geographically rather than chronologically. Each map is accompanied by a list of scriptural references for each site, and an index and gazetteer make it an easy matter to find specific sites on the maps.

All the maps and plans are in color (or at least duotone), and the publisher makes extensive use of color photographs of sites, ruins, and artifacts. The author also includes several special features such as "The Bible in Art," "Everyday Life in New Testament Times," and "The Topography of the Passion."

The publisher is well-known for producing quality atlases, and, while this one is somewhat less scholarly in tone than the *Macmillan Bible Atlas*, it is an excellent choice for your reference shelf. Because of its different approach to the material, it would be good to have both, if possible. □