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Lynn Matthews Anderson, *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon: A Learning Companion*

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Abstract Review of *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon: A Learning Companion* (1995), by Lynn Matthews Anderson.

Lynn Matthews Anderson. *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon: A Learning Companion*. Apple Valley, MN: Estes Book, 1995. 398 pp., with glossary. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Marvin Folsom

Beginning at least as early as 1939, attempts have been made to help the unsophisticated reader understand the Book of Mormon. Genet Bingham Dee's *A Voice from the Dust* (1939)¹ contained the original text, except for the phrase *and it came to pass* and the Isaiah passages, but the text was arranged in chronological order, had single, page-wide columns without verse numbers, and had added enrichment material. The RLDS edition of the Book of Mormon (1966), in addition to chapters and versification according to the 1837 edition and added punctuation, basically kept the original text except for modernizing most *thou*-forms and omitting the word *yea* and the phrase *it came to pass*. The series *Illustrated Stories from the Book of Mormon* (1967–72)² tells the story of the Book of Mormon with some additions (besides the illustrations) and some omissions. It is not a verse-by-verse rendition, but archaisms have been modernized. The complete original text of the Book of Mormon is in the appendix. Max Skousen (1991)³ provided parallel columns with the original and modern language texts of his own translation side by side, but he abridged some sections and omitted Isaiah and other material. In 1991, the New

¹ Genet Bingham Dee, ed., *A Voice from the Dust: A Sacred History of Ancient Americans* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1939).

² Raymond H. Jacobs, Clinton F. Larson, Joseph N. Revill, et al., *Illustrated Stories from the Book of Mormon*, 16 vols. (Salt Lake City: Promised Land, 1967–72).

³ Max Skousen, *The Book of Mormon . . . Condensed and Modernized Version* (privately published), 721 pp.

World Press of Midland, Texas, published *The Bible II*.⁴ Of course, the name has changed, the title page and testimonies of the witnesses are absent, and there is no mention of the translator. The text is the 1981 Latter-day Saint edition of the Book of Mormon (corrected 1983) except that some of the King James language has been replaced with modern equivalents (*yea, thou, thee, thy, thine*, and *thou*-forms of the verbs).⁵ With the private publication of *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon*, there is now available for the first time a *complete* text of the Book of Mormon in the same verse-by-verse order as the current Latter-day Saint edition, in easy-to-read language throughout. And the book is offered at a reasonable price. The modernization of the language is not superficial or cosmetic as with the editions mentioned above, but, except as noted below, is thoroughgoing.

For example, when we examine the language in EBOM (=Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon) with a text-retrieval program (WordCruncher),⁶ we find none of the following (remember that a text-retrieval program accounts for *every individual word*): *and it came to pass, verily, thou, thee, thy, thine, ye, yea*, verb forms ending in *-eth, brethren, somewhat, whatsoever, testify, bear record, treasure, abominable, rejoic-, Lord Omnipotent, Lamb of God, life eternal, numberless, ceas-, wrath, sore* (adverb), *slay, smite, doctrine, disputations, suppose, exceeding(ly), whore, strait, disputations, frightened*.

On the other hand, EBOM uses the following words not found in the traditional text of the Book of Mormon: *sadness, overcoat, scared, countless, bully, canal, divorce papers, (un)educated, false gods, fortune-tellers, rape, scar, sexual sins, slave-drivers, symbol, thresh, someday, whales, money room, orchard*.

The absence of archaic and hebraizing language is the feature in EBOM most likely to be criticized and is one of the two men-

⁴ *Bible II* (Midland, TX: New World Press, 1991).

⁵ See Royal Skousen, review of *Bible II*, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, 6/2 (1994): 1–2, for a more complete review.

⁶ I made my own WordCruncher version. There was an earlier electronic version available, but changes have been made since that version. Electronic and audio versions are being considered but are not yet available.

tioned in the statement issued by the Church.⁷ Out of necessity or possibly out of our insecurity, we Mormons have, over the years, been inordinately preoccupied with proving the authenticity of the Book of Mormon by going on at great length about textual, linguistic, historical, cultural, and geographical matters (“evidence of its ancient origin”), rather than concentrating on the spiritual message of the book. We would rather burden ourselves with archaic language in order to retain some linguistic proofs than make the message understandable but lacking some external proofs. We confuse the text with the message. We do not differentiate between man’s language and God’s word. We fail to recognize that God’s word can be expressed even in modern English. The nature of God’s message to people on the earth is such that the essentials of salvation can be learned from any translation that is read prayerfully so that the reader can be influenced by the spirit. Nevertheless, those essentials are more easily grasped in some translations than in others, at least by some people. Translations with an extensive overlay of linguistic and other baggage make it very difficult for the unsophisticated reader to penetrate the encrustation and get to the more important message. Even though King James language is a related but archaic form of English, there are many who do not understand it and need a more modern text if they are to grasp the meaning of the Bible.

The second objection in the statement by the Church relates to correctness of doctrine. The statement notes that the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith “by the gift and power of God; . . . it is the most correct of any book on earth, and . . . it contains the fulness of the gospel.” There is no reason, however, why these attributes cannot be expressed in different words and in different languages. The Church feels there are “substantial risks that this process may introduce doctrinal errors.” The translators of the LXX, the Vulgate, and the KJV all took that risk because being able to read and understand the text in their own language was paramount. Church translators must do the same each time the

⁷ “Rewriting Book of Mormon into Modern English Not Authorized,” *Church News*, 20 February 1993, 3; cf. also the First Presidency statement, “Modern-Language Editions of the Book of Mormon Discouraged,” *Ensign* 73 (April 1993): 74.

Book of Mormon is translated into a foreign language.⁸ In our day, we not only have technology to assist in controlling the accuracy of the text, but more importantly we have the advantage of living prophets who can insure that no doctrinal errors are introduced. The ideal but more expensive format (side-by-side parallel columns: what a literacy project tool!) would point up any doctrinal errors and would also clarify some more difficult passages as well.

More and more, the publication and distribution of the text will be beyond the control of the Church. Others will publish it in various forms either to make money or facilitate understanding or both. (For \$13, you can get a CD with "all popular New and Old Testament versions, Book of Mormon, Talmud portions . . .")⁹

For the next edition of *The Easy-to-Read Book of Mormon*, I recommend the following improvements:

1. Render not only verse for verse, but within each verse, render phrase for phrase without deleting text if that text can be rendered in modern language. At the end of this section I have made some suggestions for some of the omitted portions [in brackets] in the left-hand column.

Example:

1 Nephi 2:11–13 [Now] this he spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; [for behold] they did murmur [in many things] against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of the land of Jerusalem, to leave [the land of their inheritance], and their gold,

EBOM: He said this to Laman and Lemuel because they were stubborn. They complained about their father. They said he had taken them away from Jerusalem and left behind their gold and silver and riches, and that they would die in the desert

⁸ Close supervision did not prevent a blatant error from occurring in the German Book of Mormon. The English original of Mosiah 2:17 states, "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God." However, the German 1980 translation reads: "Wenn ihr euren Mitmenschen dient, allein dann dient ihr eurem Gott," which, when retranslated into English, means, "It is only when you are serving your fellowmen, that you are serving your God."

⁹ #326 Bibles and Religion (DOS) in CD catalog from Most Significant Bits, Inc. (MSB).

and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done [because of the foolish imaginations of his heart].

because their father said he saw visions.

[And thus] Laman and Lemuel, being the eldest, did murmur against their father. [And they did murmur] because they knew not [the dealings of that] God who had created them.

Laman and Lemuel, the two oldest sons, complained about their father because they did not know about the God who had made them.

[Neither] did they believe that Jerusalem, [that great city] could be destroyed according to the word of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem, who sought to take away the life of my father.

They did not believe Jerusalem would be destroyed as the prophets said. They were just like the Jews at Jerusalem who wanted to kill my father.

Suggestions for dealing with some of the omissions above:
 in many things = a lot
 the land of their inheritance = their land
 because of the foolish imaginations of his heart = because of his stupid and senseless notions
 and they did murmur = they did this
 the dealings of that God = how God treats those he has created
 neither = . . . also
 Jerusalem, that great city = the great city of Jerusalem

2. The title *Lamb of God* of the original should be retained and not rendered as *Son of God*. The word *gentile* has been retained because there is no useful equivalent. The word *harlot* is also used (five times), although other modern Bible translations use *immoral woman*. It seems to me that the connection to the symbolism of the Old Testament and the infinite, atoning sacrifice would require that the word *lamb* be used in an easy-to-read Book of Mormon. The use of the word is widespread (Mary had a little one, though not the kind sold in the meat department). It should

not require too much on the part of even an unsophisticated reader to learn the symbolism of sacrifice connected with this very important title.

3. Find one or more useful equivalents for the phrase *verily* (*verily*) *I say unto you*, such as: *I solemnly assure you, I can guarantee [this truth], I promise you, I tell you in all earnestness, believe me, I tell you most solemnly, I tell you for certain, remember this*. Without it, the text lacks an important affective attribute.

4. Replace *the things* (*that*) with *what*: 1 Nephi 1:19 EBOM He also told them about *the things* (=what) he saw and heard and about *the things* (=what) he read in the book.

The editor has very carefully thought through and discussed at length the advantages and disadvantages of a Book of Mormon in simple English.¹⁰ Those interested in these issues will find it interesting reading and come to appreciate some of the decisions that have to be made and the tremendous amount of work that goes into a project of this kind.

The editor and the publisher are to be commended for the long, concerted effort required to publish an easy-to-read version of the Book of Mormon, especially amid recent controversy. I readily think of the adolescent, the second-language learner, those in literacy programs, and those with unsophisticated reading skills, who are likely to benefit most from an easy-to-read Book of Mormon, but anyone who deals at all extensively with this text will gain insight and understanding because it is fresh and expresses the message directly and clearly.

¹⁰ Lynn Matthews Anderson, "Delighting in Plainness: Issues surrounding a Simple Modern English Book of Mormon," *Sunstone* (March 1993): 20–29.