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Kurt Van Gorden, *Mormonism*

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Title

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Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

Some months ago, in a telephone conversation, an Atlanta-based Christian radio talk-show personality and anti-“cult” writer by the name of Robert Bowman readily conceded to me that much anti-Mormon writing is of a remarkably low quality. Then he called my attention to Kurt Van Gorden’s *Mormonism* as a splendid exception to that rule. It is, he said, a first-rate piece of work.

Intrigued, I immediately ordered a copy. And I can now report that this brief volume is indeed visually attractive, clear, and well organized. It presents a great deal of material in concise outline form. Unfortunately, crucial portions of that material are wrong. Despite the claim of the editor of the series in which it appears that “the authors in this series are highly qualified, well-respected professional Christian apologists with considerable expertise on their topics,”*Mormonism* is deeply disappointing. In the final analysis, Kurt Van Gorden has merely produced yet another stale anti-Mormon tract.

In this review, I shall very briefly examine only Mr. Van Gorden’s treatment of the Book of Mormon. The quality of his approach to this subject, alas, serves well to represent the quality of the remainder of his little book.

Of course, some of what Mr. Van Gorden has to say is entirely unobjectionable. The Book of Mormon *was* published in 1830 (p. 10). It is true that Joseph Smith (who *was* born on 23 December 1805) claimed to have encountered a former inhabitant of the New World, now an angel, named Moroni (p. 8). It is indisputable that “the current text [of the Book of Mormon] is the revised 1981 edition” (p. 23). There *were* eleven official witnesses to the Book of Mormon (pp. 9–10).

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1 Alan Gomes, in introduction, “How to Use This Book,” 6.
But we hardly need Kurt Van Gorden to tell us such things. Let us examine, instead, a few of the places where he sets out to offer a more critical and controversial view of Mormonism. Does his work pass scrutiny?

- “Recent attempts,” declares Mr. Van Gorden, “to authenticate the Book of Mormon through archaeology have failed miserably. Most notable is the work of Thomas Steward [sic] Ferguson, founder of the Archaeology Department at Brigham Young University. His revealing manuscript at the close of his career shows that no coins, cities, people, plants, animals, or languages of the Book of Mormon have ever been discovered” (p. 9, n. 9).

It is revealing that Mr. Van Gorden chooses the late Thomas Stewart Ferguson as his star archaeological witness against the Book of Mormon. And, furthermore, that he inflates Mr. Ferguson’s credentials in the process. (Mr. Ferguson was a lawyer, not an archaeologist. He never taught at Brigham Young University, let alone founded the University’s department of archaeology.)

Why does Mr. Van Gorden focus on him? Why does he avert his gaze from, say, Professor John L. Sorenson’s work on the geography and archaeology of the Book of Mormon? Isn’t his

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behavior a bit reminiscent of the wolf, seizing the stragglers of the flock, taking on the weakest of Latter-day Saint arguments while avoiding the strongest ones?

And, by the way, for the umpteenth time, the Book of Mormon never claims that there were “coins” in the ancient New World. The text of the Book of Mormon mentions neither the word coin nor any variant thereof. The reference to “Nephite coinage” in the chapter heading to Alma 11 is not part of the original text and is mistaken. Alma 11 is almost certainly talking about standardized weights of metal—a historical step toward coinage, true, but not yet the real thing.4 (I wonder how many more times we will have to point this out.)

- Mr. Van Gorden informs his readers that “The nonexistence of the Reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics is a problem for Mormon scholars. Yet [sic] they lack any evidence that the Reformed Egyptian ever even existed outside of the mind of Joseph Smith” (p. 8, n. 7).

But Mr. Van Gorden is wrong. “Reformed Egyptian” is not a problem at all for Latter-day Saint scholars. Of course, there is no reason to expect that anything called “reformed Egyptian” would necessarily show up anywhere else in the ancient world, nor that the name “reformed Egyptian” would itself be familiar to non-Mormon scholars, because the Book of Mormon clearly explains that “reformed Egyptian” was the Nephites’ own term for a complex of script and language that, at least at the end of nearly a millennium of independent linguistic evolution, was unique to them. On the other hand, we now know something that Joseph Smith could not have known in the 1820s, namely, that ancient Jews did on occasion write their sacred texts in a way that seems to match the Book of Mormon’s description of “reformed

Egyptian.” And such common varieties of Egyptian script as hieratic and demotic could easily and accurately be described as “reformed Egyptian,” if somebody ever cared to do so. The term holds no mystical significance.

- Mr. Van Gorden claims that the Book of Mormon errs and contradicts the Bible in predicting (at Alma 7:10) that Jesus Christ “shall be born of Mary at Jerusalem, which is the land of our forefathers” (p. 25, n. 52).

Once again, though, he is wrong. The Book of Mormon does not say that Jesus would be born in the city of Jerusalem, but, rather, in the land belonging to that city. Thus, there is no contradiction. For, in doing so, the Book of Mormon matches ancient usage in a way that Joseph Smith could almost certainly not have known. Ancient documents do indeed speak of Bethlehem as a town within the confines of “the land of Jerusalem.” Far from being a liability or a defect in the Book of Mormon, Alma 7:10 is striking evidence for the book’s antiquity.6

Okay. So Mr. Van Gorden’s knowledge of ancient history and archaeology proves defective. Well, both archaeology and ancient history are difficult and specialized subjects. Ideally, those who pronounce judgments on issues relating to them should have extensive knowledge of a number of ancient languages, or experience with field excavations, or both. At the least, they should have read a great deal. So perhaps we shouldn’t judge Mr. Van Gorden on matters in which very few people would be able to pass the test. Maybe he will fare better on early American Mormon history. It was written (and enacted) in English, and in a culture virtually identical to the one in which he lives. Let’s take a look:

- Mr. Van Gorden cites Professor Charles Anthon’s account—or, more accurately, one of his accounts—of his meeting with Martin Harris (p. 9, n. 11), intending to cast doubt on the story of that meeting that has been canonized in Joseph Smith—

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5 For a good, brief summary of the evidence, with references, see William J. Hamblin, “Reformed Egyptian” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1995).
History 1:63–65. But Mr. Van Gorden doesn’t let his readers know that Anthon’s remarks are highly problematic. He doesn’t tell them that, in fact, scholarly investigations into the situation have shown that Anthon (who, unlike Martin Harris, had considerable reason to adjust the truth) had a difficult time telling the story the same way twice.7

- Mr. Van Gorden implies that David Whitmer admitted, shortly before his death, that his encounter with the plates and the angel (and, presumably, that of his fellow witnesses) was hallucinatory, and informs his readers that Oliver Cowdery denied his testimony of the Book of Mormon (p. 9, n. 12).

But, as is typical of anti-Mormon literature, Mr. Van Gorden ignores a large body of serious scholarly work on the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. He seems to know nothing about the publications of Eldin Ricks (1961), Milton Backman (1983), Rhett James (1983), and especially Richard Lloyd Anderson (1981) and Lyndon Cook (1991).8 There is simply no substantial evidence that Oliver Cowdery ever denied his testimony, nor any reason to believe that David Whitmer, notwithstanding his long, permanent, and rather bitter disaffection from the Church, thought his experience with the angel and the plates to be a hallucination. Consider a few of David Whitmer’s own late statements on the matter:

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I saw [the plates and other artifacts] just as plain as I see
this bed (striking his hand upon the bed beside him),
and I heard the voice of the Lord, as distinctly as I ever
heard anything in my life, declaring that the records of
the plates of the Book of Mormon were translated by
the gift and power of God. 9

Of course we were in the spirit when we had the view,
for no man can behold the face of an angel, except in a
spiritual view. But we were in the body also, and every­
thing was as natural to us, as it is at any time. 10

After talking as he did, so fully and freely[,] he said
"I have been asked if we saw those things with our
natural eyes. Of course they were our natural eyes.
There is no doubt that our eyes were prepared for the
sight, but they were our natural eyes nevertheless." 11

Rather suggestively [Colonel Giles] asked if it might
not have been possible that he, Mr. Whitmer, had been
mistaken and had simply been moved upon by some
mental disturbance, or hallucination [sic], which had
deceived them into thinking he saw the Personage, the
Angel, the plates, the Urim and Thummim, and the
sword of Laban.

How well and distinctly I remember the manner in
which Elder Whitmer arose and drew himself up to his

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9 Interview with Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith (Richmond, Missouri, 7–8 September 1878), reported in a letter to President John Taylor and the Council of the Twelve, dated 17 September 1878. Originally published in the Deseret News, 16 November 1878, and reprinted in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 40.


full height—a little over six feet—and said, in solemn
and impressive tones:

“No, sir! I was not under any hallucination, nor was
I deceived! I saw with these eyes and I heard with these
ears! I know whereof I speak!”

One of the most accurate tests of the seriousness and quality
of any piece of anti-Mormon literature can be carried out simply
by examining its treatment, if it deals with them at all, of the wit-
tnesses to the Book of Mormon. By this standard, though, Mr. Van
Gorden’s book fails badly. Perhaps, therefore, one final passage
from David Whitmer might profitably be cited here. It was origi-
nally written in response to a nineteenth-century Missourian who
had misrepresented the elderly witness’s position. But it could just
as easily be addressed, today, to Kurt Van Gorden and his associ-
ates:

Unto all Nations, Kindred, Tongues and People,
utto whom these presents shall come: It having been
represented by one John Murphy, of Polo, Caldwell
county, Missouri, that I, in a conversation with him last
summer, denied my testimony as one of the three wit-
tnesses to the “Book of Mormon.”

To the end, therefore, that he may understand me
now, if he did not then, and that the world may know
the truth, I wish now, standing, as it were, in the very
sunset of life, and in the fear of God once for all, to
make this public statement:

That I have never at any time denied that testimony,
or any part thereof, which has so long since been pub-
lished with that Book, as one of the three witnesses.
Those who know me best, well know that I have always
adhered to that testimony. And that no man may be
misled or doubt my present views in regard to the same,
I do again affirm the truth of all my statements, as then
made and published.

12 Interview with Joseph Smith III et al. (Richmond, Missouri, July
1884), originally published in The Saints’ Herald, 28 January 1936, and
reprinted in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 134–35 (emphasis in the origi-
nal).
“He that hath an ear to hear, let him hear,” it was no delusion! What is written is written—and he that readeth let him understand.\(^{13}\)

Obviously, Mr. Van Gorden does no better in the American history category than he does in that of ancient history and archaeology. But we must guard against over-hasty judgments. Perhaps he will do better in an area that requires no extensive scholarship, no exhausting research. Surely, living as he does in southern California, surrounded by many tens of thousands of Latter-day Saints, and specializing as he does in approaches to Mormons and Mormonism, he should have an accurate idea of the modern Church and its practices.

- Sadly, it isn’t so. Mr. Van Gorden incorrectly informs his readers that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints barred American Indians from its priesthood until June 1978 (pp. 13, 16).

It is difficult to know where Mr. Van Gorden came up with this mistaken idea, since even so early a text as the Book of Mormon itself clearly portrays the exercise of priesthood functions among peoples included by Latter-day Saints among the ancestors of the modern American Indian. The very title page of the Book of Mormon terms the Lamanites “a remnant of the house of Israel.” As such, they are heirs to all of the promised blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, emphatically including the blessings of priesthood (Abraham 1:2; 2:9–11). Accordingly, missions to the Indians began in the very first year of the modern existence of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. And the success of those missions has been considerable. Hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children of American Indian background have joined the Church in North, Central, and South America. People of American Indian descent have served at every level of Church leadership, and this was just as true before 1978 as it has been since.\(^{14}\) There has never been a time since the found-

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\(^{13}\) “A Proclamation,” appended to an interview with a correspondent of the Chicago Times (Richmond, Missouri, 14 October 1881), originally published in Chicago Times, 17 October 1881, and reprinted in Cook, David Whitmer Interviews, 79.

\(^{14}\) At several points in Mr. Van Gorden’s book, informed readers will ask
ing of the Church that American Indians have been barred from its priesthood.

Regrettably, Kurt Van Gordon’s *Mormonism* fails in its application of ancient history and archaeology to the Book of Mormon. It fails in its analysis of early Latter-day Saint history and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. And it fails even in its understanding of modern Mormonism and of the place of Book of Mormon peoples within it. This last fact is especially puzzling, since a quest for accuracy in this area would have entailed no wearisome field work, no difficult study of foreign languages, no troublesome research in books and academic journals, no lengthy travel. California is dotted with hundreds of Latter-day Saint chapels, and with thousands of members and missionaries who (much to the disgust of people like Mr. Van Gordon) are more than willing to explain their beliefs to anybody even slightly inclined to listen.

That Kurt Van Gordon’s *Mormonism* has been acclaimed as an exemplary specimen of anti-Mormon writing says a great deal about the generally dismal quality of its competition. Until conservative Protestant critics of the Church come to grips with the real evidence and arguments for the truth of the Restoration and the prophetic claims of Joseph Smith, they will deserve no more than the summary dismissal that almost all Latter-day Saints instinctively—and quite correctly—give to them.

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themselves how much he really knows about contemporary Mormonism. His repeated references to “the Melchizedekian [sic] priesthood,” for instance, suggest, at the least, a tin ear when it comes to Latter-day Saint terminology (see p. 10). And on p. 20, he thinks there is still a “First Council of the Seventy,” although it was abolished in October 1976.