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New Book a Milestone in Mormon Studies

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 22 | 2002

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New Book a Milestone in Mormon Studies

Latter-day Saint scholar Terryl L. Givens has recently made two extraordinary contributions to Mormon studies. The first, *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*, was published by the prestigious Oxford University Press in 1997 and received virtually uniformly glowing reviews. If one wishes to understand the complex of interests and motivations—pecuniary, personal, and ideological—that fuel both sectarian and secular anti-Mormonism, *Viper* is the book to consult. The editors at Oxford appreciated the merits of this well-written, informative book and invited Givens to publish again with them. The result is *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*, published this year.

In this latest book, Givens examines the roles the Book of Mormon has played for both believers and detractors. He discusses its coming forth, its contents, and the debate over its historical authenticity. To have Oxford publish such a detailed, highly favorable, and competent study of the Book of Mormon is an extraordinary accomplishment that may signal an end to the outright hostility or at least studied indifference to the Book of Mormon common among those with scholarly interests in religion. Those interested in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whether believers or not, will benefit from giving this remarkable book close attention.

With considerable sensitivity to various audiences and with subtle understatement and exceptional skill in analysis and argumentation, Givens examines how the Book of Mormon has served for some as a kind of barometer of gullibility and for others as solid evidence of blasphemy, while for the faithful it has served primarily as a sacred sign that the heavens

are once again open, that Joseph Smith is God's prophet, that the "end time" is approaching, and that the world is again pulsing with divine powers. The most original and insightful chapter comes near the end of the book, where Givens describes what he calls "dialogic revelation"—the divine special revelations in the Book of Mormon that result from a kind of dialogue with God and that are radically different from traditional concepts of revelation. This revelatory process was exemplified in the recovery of the Book of Mormon, and the Joseph Smith story and the Book of Mormon itself invite people to experience it for themselves.

Givens shows exactly why it has been impossible to understand Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon by finding some "new middle ground" between or beyond the polarities of authentic ancient history or fraudulent composition—and hence also between Joseph Smith as seer or charlatan, prophet or blasphemer, kingdom builder or disturber of the peace. Givens demonstrates that both the book and the story of its recovery work together to force those who receive it to choose between these radically different alternatives. And both invite those who encounter the book to enter into a world not unlike that

described within its pages, a world in which the heavens are open and God communicates with his children in ways entirely unlike the vagaries and obfuscation found in mystical intuition or in endlessly subtle theological speculation. Givens ably explains why such a strange, controversial book has been such a successful conversion tool even though

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in this issue

- Update: Nephi's Vision
- Nibley Fellowships
- Brown Bag Report

Special Report on Critical Text Project

In lieu of this year's first issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, a special report of the 20 October 2001 FARMS symposium on the Book of Mormon Critical Text Project will be mailed to FARMS subscribers with the next issue of the *Insights* newsletter.

Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project features informative reports on the multi-pronged effort to determine as far as possible the original English translation of the Book of Mormon. Royal Skousen, the editor and principal investigator of the project, details the project's history and some

of the more significant findings. Robert Espinosa reviews his team's painstaking work of preserving and identifying remaining fragments of the original manuscript. Ron Romig narrates the investigation into the printer's manuscript, and Larry Draper explains how the press sheets for the 1830 edition reveal overlooked details of the printing process. In an insightful response, Daniel C. Peterson interpolates evidence from Skousen's research to show the divine manner in which the Book of Mormon came forth.

The issuance of this special report will give the new editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* needed time to effectively plan the next issue of the *Journal*. It is hoped that, in the meantime, FARMS subscribers will enjoy reading about the groundbreaking developments in the Critical Text Project. 📖

Brown Bag Report

On 10 April 2002 S. Kent Brown and Steve DeVore gave a brown bag presentation highlighting their work on two documentary films. Brown, a professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, traveled with DeVore, the films' producer, to Yemen in September of 2001 to shoot footage of the ancient Incense Trail. The Incense Trail, which ran down the west side of the Arabian Peninsula, was used to transport spices and other

goods from the Far East to the great empires of Egypt, Babylon, and Assyria. Brown believes that Lehi and his family shadowed this route as they moved deeper into Arabia prior to their arrival in Bountiful, from where they crossed the ocean to the promised land.

Brown and DeVore will use the footage shot last year, combined with future footage, to produce two films, one a documentary on the Incense Trail and the other an exploration of the proposed routes for Lehi's journey through the wilderness.

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its contents have been virtually ignored for long periods.

He examines how, in his words, this “most religiously influential, hotly contested, and, in the secular press at least, intellectually underinvestigated book in America” has been variously “understood, positioned, packaged, utilized, exploited, presented and represented by its detractors and by its proponents” (p. 6). This effort, he explains, is necessary

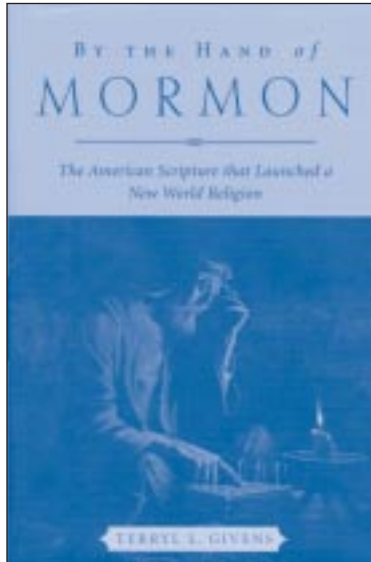
precisely because, “in spite of the book's unparalleled position in American religion and its changing meaning for apologists, critics, and theologians, no full-length study has attempted to present to the wider public a study of this book and its changing role in Mormonism and in American religion generally” (p. 6).

Givens shows that the story of the Book of Mormon's recovery and the fact of the book's existence fixed for the Latter-day Saints the prophetic authority of Joseph Smith and his successors. It is the book's role as a sacred sign—more than its teachings—that fuels the hostility of its critics as it

continues to shape the identity of the Latter-day Saints and distinguish them from their sectarian neighbors. Givens also shows why and how the Book of Mormon has been read as a factual account of pre-Columbian peoples who came from the Old World in the age of Jeremiah and, further, why the book's detractors see it as the mere product of Joseph Smith's 19th-century environment and not as an authentic ancient text and divine revelation.

The increasingly sophisticated efforts of the book's defenders to draw upon literary, historical, and anthropological support for the ancient origin of the Book of Mormon has forced its better-informed detractors to abandon earlier crude explanations and to search for subtler arguments and new sources from which the book might have been composed.

Givens examines virtually all of the arguments that have been directed against the Book of Mormon. This feature of *By the Hand of Mormon* will interest and inform those who appreciate the efforts of FARMS to understand the Book of Mormon as an authentic ancient text. In fact, Givens gives considerable favorable attention to the essays published by FARMS. He shows that the serious study of the Book of Mormon began with Hugh W. Nibley and continues with the scholarship being published by FARMS. Shifting somewhat from popular earlier speculation, current LDS scholarship assumes that the events depicted in the Book of Mormon took place in a limited area of Mesoamerica and that the book does not tell the story of every people in the Americas. For Givens, the most recent and sophisticated efforts to understand the real-world geography of the Book of Mormon tend to try to find Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon (not vice versa), which is a much more fruitful way of dealing with the text than trying to discover dramatic archaeological evidence that would "prove" the truth of the Book of Mormon.



Givens draws special attention to what he labels the "artifactual reality" surrounding the Book of Mormon, that is, the gold plates and the relics found with them. LDS belief on this point diverges from the interiority and subjectivity of much religious discourse and hence away from the nebulous stuff of myth, magic, and mysticism. But

having the church grounded on a historical record such as the Book of Mormon is a double-edged sword because it subjects the founding text to the exacting scrutiny of scholarship, which has both advantages and disadvantages. Givens writes,


Why, one can fairly ask, should it be necessary to spiritualize what are, in essence, presented as archaeological artifacts? Dream-visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such facile psychologizing. They were, in the angel's words, buried in a nearby hillside, not in Joseph's psy-

che or religious unconscious, and they chronicle a history of *this* hemisphere, not a heavenly city to come. As such, the claims and experiences of the prophet are thrust irretrievably into the public sphere, no longer subject to his private acts of interpretation alone. It is this fact, the intrusion of Joseph's message into the realm of the concrete, historical, and empirical, that dramatically alters the terms by which the public will engage this new religious phenomenon. (p. 42)

The driving force behind much sectarian theological discourse has been to emphasize the otherness of God and to stress the inability of language to describe divine things with any concreteness or in any detail. Those steeped in traditional theological perspectives are offended because the text Joseph Smith gave us, the story of its recovery, and the relics are difficult to explain away as allegorical, mythical, or merely highly symbolic ways of talking about what is ultimately ineffable and entirely

mysterious. Among such hostile professors of religion, either sectarian or secular, is the dogma that angels simply do not bring books of new scripture.

Givens describes in some detail the Cold War taking place along the Wasatch Front over the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. He argues that the claims made by the Book of Mormon are, as Nibley has shown, open to critical inspection by scholars using whatever means they have at their disposal. The Book of Mormon does not ask to be shielded from such inspection. Of course, the faith of the Saints does not depend on the apparent results of such debate. This frustrates those who want a final proof one way or another right now. So the debate continues.

Fueled by a massive production of scholarly works, specialization in Book of Mormon studies has proceeded at such a pace that now no one trained in any one discipline seems to have leverage on the question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon. As a consequence, meaningful discussion of the Book of Mormon goes on in more and more complex and subtle ways. *By the Hand of Mormon* makes a solid contribution to Book of Mormon studies because it deftly surveys the twists and turns of this debate with insight, care, and comprehensiveness. One wonders why it has taken so long for a book like this to appear. This seminal book is available from FARMS at the usual subscriber discount (see the enclosed order form). 

By Louis C. Midgley

FORTHCOMING PUBLICATION

The Hor Book of Breathings: A Translation and Commentary, by Michael D. Rhodes, treats the fragments of the Joseph Smith Papyri associated with Facsimiles 1 and 3 of the Book of Abraham. The book features hieroglyphs that were custom designed for this project. Available in June 2002.

Susanna: Texts, Translations, and Technical Notes, edited by Mark A. Sedwick, includes the Greek, Latin, and English texts of the apocryphal book of Susanna. This publication is the third monograph in the Ancient Texts and Mormon Studies series. Available in June 2002.

Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project publishes the proceedings of the 20 October 2001 FARMS symposium “The Original Text of the Book of Mormon: Findings from the Critical Text Project.” This special report in lieu of *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 11/1 (2002) will be mailed to FARMS subscribers in July along with the next *Insights* newsletter.

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FARMS is part of Brigham Young University's Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts. As such, it encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. Under the FARMS imprint, the Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at FARMS include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

FARMS makes interim and final reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications. As a service to teachers and students of the scriptures, research results are distributed in both scholarly and popular formats.

It is hoped that this information will help all interested people to “come unto Christ” (Jacob 1:7) and to understand and appreciate more fully the scriptural witnesses of the divine mission of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

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