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Title A Reader's Library

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Abstract Two critics evaluate the book *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. Raish opines that Givens's book effectively explains why a person might accept the Book of Mormon and facilitates a reader's desire to better understand the Book of Mormon. Bennett adds that Givens approaches his discussion of the Book of Mormon as a scholar, resulting in a more accepting readership. Givens also studies the Book of Mormon with respect to its role in promoting the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as a worldwide religion.



A READER'S LIBRARY

In this department the *Journal* normally features a review of one or another category of books that might interest and assist readers in their quests for broader and clearer understanding about scriptural matters. The following two reviews, both invited by the *Journal*, depart from this customary approach because each focuses on the same book, Terryl L. Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Why the concentration on one book? Because the appearance of a book on the Book of Mormon through the most recognized academic publisher in the English-speaking world is a major publishing event. In fact, that Givens's book is published through Oxford University Press constitutes the most significant Latter-day Saint publication since the appearance of the five-volume *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, published by Macmillan in 1992. While Givens's work has drawn a fair amount of

attention in other review publications, the *Journal* has chosen to print two reviews not only to probe the book from different points of view but also to lend emphasis to the importance of the book's appearance. Givens's book also raises to view the possibility of writing for a broad audience since, even though it concentrates on a Latter-day Saint scripture, it enjoys a place on the world stage because of the publisher.

Review by Martin Raish

Reading and pondering *By the Hand of Mormon* is time well spent, for this book brilliantly exemplifies the label "difficult to put down." Yet while it is fascinating and inspiring, it is also very challenging. It is not the author's writing style, choice of words (with some interesting exceptions), or organization of ideas that are demanding, but simply the fact that he covers so much ground. To gain the most from his book, readers should take the time to consult its 800 or so endnotes, where countless hidden treasures may be found. Taking notes along the way is a good idea as well.

Serendipity intervened as I searched for an effective way to

illustrate how densely packed this book is. The day that I began writing this review, the latest issue of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (vol. 10, no. 2, 2001) arrived. In it Givens adapted a chapter from his book as an article. "The Book of Mormon as Dialogic Revelation" is about one-third as long as chapter 8, "Plain and Precious Truths': The Book of Mormon as New Theology, Part 2—Dialogic Revelation." The article contains the essence of the chapter in 11 rather than 30 pages (and 45 rather than 99 endnotes) and makes a portion of his book more accessible.

For example, in his book Givens contends that the Book of Mormon presents divine revela-

tions "as the province of everyman" (p. 221) rather than "pre-eminently the privilege of the prophets" (p. 220), which is the understanding of prominent Christian thinkers concerning the Bible. In making this point, he offers a detailed analysis of ideas from about a dozen writers (supported by no fewer than 42 endnotes!) and then introduces the Book of Mormon. In contrast, his *Journal* article covers the same topics without all the supporting materials and by simplifying some language. Consider this sentence from the book: "Particularized manifestations or communications are either redundant or illogical in a universe that is itself coextensive with God" (p. 212). In his

shorter essay he expresses the same idea using more words but with a sentence structure that more clearly accentuates his point: “Particularized manifestations and communications are illogical if God is utterly transcendent and therefore entirely outside the physical realm. And they are redundant if God is perfectly immanent and therefore already present within the human spirit and all creation.” Similarly, a few lines later in the *Journal* article, he argues that “the reality of God and his great acts . . . must be personally experienced to be operative in human life,” rather than speaking of revelations as being “intersubjectively” experienced, as in the book. In neither of these examples is anything lost by using the simpler wording or structure.

Readers should not let such difficulties dissuade them from tackling this book. Givens’s writing style is by and large succinct and elegantly sufficient. But his book is intended for an audience much larger than only Latter-day Saints. He writes for educated individuals of all faiths who may already have ideas about concepts such as the nature of revelation or the power of mystical intuition, and he does so in their language, which may be somewhat foreign to many LDS readers. We should accept his efforts to reach well-informed non-LDS readers as an invitation to lift ourselves and broaden our understanding. *By the Hand of Mormon* is well worth a second (or even third or fourth) reading.

In his introduction Givens sets out what he intends to cover in his book. He explains that he will attempt to answer the question of why any intelligent person would

ever accept the Book of Mormon as true and will examine “the initial shape and subsequent transformations of the Book of Mormon, how it has been understood, positioned, packaged, utilized, exploited, presented and represented, by its detractors and by its proponents” (p. 6). The first goal is met in numerous, subtle ways. The second he approaches more head-on.

Chapter 1 reads like a fast-paced novel as Givens recounts the story of Joseph Smith’s life, his first vision, the recovery of the plates, the translation, and other events of the early years of the church. He provides valuable insights into who Joseph was and how he likely felt or thought about himself. Chapter 2 summarizes the structure of the Book of Mormon, its events and writers, its teachings with respect to the Old Testament, and its publication and circulation.

Chapter 3 introduces an idea that many readers may not have previously encountered: that the enormous significance of the Book of Mormon is to be found as much in the manner of its origin as in the religious teachings it contains. Givens cites the testimonies of several early converts to substantiate his contention that the book “has exerted influence within the church and reaction outside the church not primarily by virtue of its substance, but rather its manner of appearing, not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*” (p. 64). Many Saints can vouch for the veracity of this statement. Countless conversions rest on the conviction that its “manner of appearing” was of God, which made the acceptance of its teachings easier and more efficacious.

“Book of Mormon archaeology” (whatever that might mean, as Givens so correctly points out) is the focus of Chapter 4, “The Search for a Mesoamerican Troy.” He provides an excellent summary of the major (non-LDS) writers of the early 19th century whose discoveries in Central and South America were seized upon by church leaders as substantiating evidence for the reality of Nephite culture. He then leaps over the second half of the century, when Mormonism was focused on migration and colonization and thus minimally concerned with where the Book of Mormon lands might have been, and closes with a pithy discussion of the efforts and impact of B. H. Roberts and, at mid-century, the New World Archaeological Foundation.

Chapter 5, “The Search for a Rational Belief,” shows how rational argument, in the words of Austin Farrer, “does not create belief, but [does maintain] a climate in which belief may flourish” (p. 118). He reviews the ideas of Hugh W. Nibley, the research efforts of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), and the writings of John L. Sorenson. He delineates the state of the debate of several questions, such as the language and form of the Book of Mormon and Book of Mormon names. He concludes with overviews of the evangelical, scholarly, and LDS responses to these issues.

Chapter 6 offers a series of mini-reviews of theories by Fawn Brodie, Dan Vogel, Michael Quinn, John Brooke, and other writers who have attempted to explain the Book of Mormon from various alternative theoretical perspectives. He outlines the strengths

and weaknesses of their views, sometimes in prose that is complex but with clear summaries to help readers stay on the path. For example, after a detailed examination of how the Book of Mormon is both like and unlike the Bible, he brings the point home by “putting it differently”:

Helaman’s miraculous story of the Stripling Warriors, like the Book of Job to many Christians, could be considered fanciful but inspiring mythology to Mormons and the Book of Mormon still be scripture. But the story of the gold plates could not be fanciful mythology and the Book of Mormon still be scripture. And this relationship of Joseph Smith—and his story—to the Book of Mormon simply has no counterpart in the history of the Bible. And any

attempt to find middle ground by analogizing the Book of Mormon and the Bible that does not take cognizance of this fundamental and irreducible difference between those two sacred texts may be an exercise in futility. (p. 178)

Chapter 7, “‘Plain and Precious Truths’: The Book of Mormon as New Theology, Part 1—The Encounter with Biblical Christianity,” is another difficult one, but judiciously placed summaries provide the necessary respite to understand the chapter’s message—that “as regards its religious teachings . . . the Book of Mormon has been valued by the faithful for teaching the ‘plain and precious truths’ of the gospel while testifying to a historically enlarged role for the embodied Christ and his church” (pp. 207–8).

The concluding chapter ties all the topical threads together.

Givens reminds us that “in spite of the Book of Mormon’s shifting fortunes among skeptics, scholars, and even saints, the scripture has remained a constant in anchoring Mormon identity and distinctiveness” (p. 242). He describes how it “is poised to become increasingly central to Mormon worship, identity, and culture” in the years to come (p. 245). With these thoughts in mind, he then looks hopefully toward the time when we all will turn greater attention to the many questions and challenges that the Book of Mormon “imposes on its vast public, willingly or no” (p. 245).

By the Hand of Mormon will reward and enrich every diligent reader with new understandings of, and a deeper appreciation for, the Book of Mormon. I wholeheartedly recommend it to all who are serious about expanding their knowledge of this sacred book. 📖

Review by C. Gary Bennett

In his new work, Terryl L. Givens, professor of English at the University of Richmond, Virginia, and author of *The Viper on the Hearth*, which won the Chapman Award from the Mormon History Association, has featured the Book of Mormon as the sacred scripture that has shaped—and continues to shape—an emerging world religion. He argues that detractors' past facile treatments of the book as the product of a mere deceiver, or the work of a charlatan or cultist, are woefully inadequate explanations of a book with growing importance among both scholars and believers. With over 100 million copies in print in over 100 languages, the Book of Mormon, he argues, must be given a much broader hearing than heretofore. Above all, without arguing for its historical or divine authenticity, Givens demands that it be respected for its content, mission, and position of scriptural authority by its millions of readers from all over the world.

In the first few chapters, Givens presents a thoroughly researched historiographical overview of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, including a discussion of the ancient plates as its source, the witnesses, and the translation process. He postulates that the authenticity of the metal plates, the many eye and ear witnesses, and the meaning and message of the text itself form a substantial basis for a rapidly growing new Christian religion. He has a talent for presenting the

case with care and scholarship, which often causes his readers, Latter-day Saint or otherwise, to reconsider the old questions within the robust and expanding reality of a new religion. Without being a blind apologist, Givens successfully demonstrates intrusive fallacies in the old Solomon Spaulding and Ethan Smith theories of Book of Mormon origins. In his chapter on archaeology and Book of Mormon geography, he shows, quite convincingly in fact, that although evidence remains inconclusive, ongoing research in linguistics, language, and archaeology continues to add plausibility to the book's origins, so much so that even the Smithsonian is no longer willing to claim that discrepancies exist between the Book of Mormon and the current state of American archaeology (p. 132).

Givens also takes up matters of Book of Mormon theology and presents a strong case that its theology does not merely mirror the issues of 19th-century America, as theorized by Alexander Campbell and others. Rather, it exhibits many elucidations, doctrines, and points of view peculiar to itself.

In a later chapter on “dialogical” revelation, Givens shows that the book itself is full of examples of God's speaking to people in interactive revelation and that such revelation is a strong element in the conversion of millions. Givens summarizes:

In the world of the Book of Mormon, concepts like revelation, prayer, inspiration,

mystery find powerful and substantive redefinition.

That may well be the Book of Mormon's most significant and revolutionary, as well as controversial, contribution to religious thinking. The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory experience—those realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine and constitute the record. The “knowability” of all truth, openness of mystery, the reality of personal revelation find vivid illustration within the record and invite reenactment outside it. (p. 221)

The author never claims to prove or disprove the Book of Mormon but concludes that now, more than ever before, it is presented to a wide world as vibrant scripture, seriously claiming its place as another testament of Christ. As significant a contribution as *By the Hand of Mormon* is, it is not without faults. For instance, Givens is somewhat abstruse in his writing, excessively wordy and complicated. He also relies almost exclusively on the so-called Mesoamerican theory of Book of Mormon geography. This being said, this reviewer, who has taught Book of Mormon classes for more than 30 years, considers *By the Hand of Mormon* to be among the most significant works extant on Book of Mormon studies. ❏