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Abstract Review of *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest: Condensed from the Book of Mormon: A New Witness for Christ. A Monthly Reading Program and Study Guide of the Doctrines of the Book of Mormon* (1997), by Robert H. Moss.

Robert H. Moss. *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest: Condensed from the Book of Mormon: A New Witness for Christ. A Monthly Reading Program and Study Guide of the Doctrines of the Book of Mormon.* Springfield, Utah: Cedar Fort, 1997. vii + 162 pp. \$11.95.

Reviewed by Gary F. Novak

Censoring the Book of Mormon?

No one should confuse *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest* with the popular magazine, *Reader's Digest* (although the title of this volume itself appears in various forms on the spine and within the volume). *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest* is intended to be "an additional way for members and nonmembers alike to read, study, and digest the precious truths of its [the Book of Mormon] doctrine in a shorter time frame" (p. vii). Hence, the author has cut the narrative, "precious history, geography, traditions, and culture" in favor of what he understands to be the doctrinal content (p. vii). Whatever else must be said about this book, it is clearly well intentioned.

A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest is intended to be read in a single month (see pp. vii–viii). Hence, one finds markers in the text to indicate where to start and stop reading. While these are usually placed at chapter or book divisions, they occasionally occur between verses. Thus the reader will find "seventeenth day" sandwiched between Alma 12:18 and Alma 12:20.¹ Although *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest* can be completed in this fashion, this particular break, for example, is awkward since it comes in the middle of Alma's speech to Zeezrom and the chief rulers.

Obviously much of the Book of Mormon is missing in this 162-page book. Many chapters have been omitted, along with the

¹ Alma 12:19 is omitted.

text that gives the Book of Mormon its narrative structure and plot. However, *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest* retains all the chapter headings found in the Book of Mormon, even when the chapter itself is not included. Book of Mormon characters move in and out of the selected verses without the narrative connective tissue that explains who they are, why they are there, or what they stand for. For example, neither Sherem (see Jacob 7) nor Korihor (see Alma 30) are mentioned. Zeezrom (see Alma 11–12) makes an appearance, but no surrounding context in this book indicates his status as a lawyer, the nature of his questions, or his attempt at bribery.

The language of the Book of Mormon has been modernized in some places. For example, Alma 36:1 reads, "If you keep the commandments of God you shall prosper in the land," thus replacing *ye* with *you*. In other places the shortening of a phrase has altered its meaning. For example, Alma 36:2 reads:

Remember the captivity of our fathers. They were in bondage and none could deliver them except the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He surely delivered them in their afflictions.

Contrast that with the full text of Alma 36:2:

I would that ye should do as I have done, in remembering the captivity of our fathers; for they were in bondage, and none could deliver them except it was the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and he surely did deliver them in their afflictions.

Although such changes are subtle, what is lost is the earnest pleading of Alma to his son, the plea to perform the deeds of Alma, and the careful style Alma chose to express that pleading. Alma's action ("ye should *do* as I have *done*") in remembering the captivity of his fathers is at least as important—if not more—than what Moss's book appears to regard as a simple imperative to remember.

In addition to confronting the loss of meaning through the editing process and the modernization of language, careful readers of the Book of Mormon who spend time identifying parallelistic structures—where understanding the form can help reveal the

teaching—will be sorely disappointed. For example, much of the chiasmus in Alma 36 is missing in *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest*,² this chapter being perhaps the most glaring example.

Robert Moss indicates that he has “only retained that which, in [his] judgment, [he] considered as doctrinal” (p. vii). What is of concern to me is that the excised “history, geography, traditions, and culture” may be as important as what North American Saints immersed in a modern Western tradition consider to be doctrinal.³ The Book of Mormon is not always read this way, perhaps especially among non-Westerners. For example, Louis Midgley notes that

The Māori . . . found nothing surprising in how rapidly individuals and communities of Lehi's descendants forgot their duties. This was exactly what they considered the reality of their own lives and the history of their people. They not only believed that they were somehow related to Hagoth and hence to Nephi's tribe, but they also saw themselves as replicating the tragic tale told in the Book of Mormon of the woes that come upon a disobedient covenant people. To me, on the other hand, the ease with which the Nephite faithful fell away . . . was the least believable feature of the book.

...

I had learned to mine the Book of Mormon for discrete bits of information about divine and human things,⁴ and I had little appreciation for the way in which stories and their plots can carry a message. I was not sensitive to aphoristic, highly symbolic, and formalized messages. Instead, I wanted the Māori Saints to read the Book of Mormon for the kinds of things that I

² Compare Donald W. Parry, *The Book of Mormon Text Reformatted according to Parallelistic Patterns* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992). It is clear not only that some parallelistic patterns have been disrupted but also that others have been removed.

³ In many cases, what seems doctrinal to North American Latter-day Saints is not doctrinal to Book of Mormon writers. See Noel B. Reynolds, “The True Points of My Doctrine,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/2 (1996): 26–56.

⁴ This is precisely what *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest* tries to do.

found interesting in it. But the Māori loved the Book of Mormon for different reasons. They had their own way of reading it. First and foremost, they read the Book of Mormon as a tale of a people very much like themselves. The Māori were a tribal people with genealogies and accompanying accounts of noted ancestors, and they were keenly aware of the traditional hostilities between the different tribes, subtribes, and extended families. Much of the Māori lore was directly or indirectly related to tales of family and tribal conflicts. The Māori were known for the ease with which they gave and received insults, and the passion with which they kept alive over many generations real or assumed offenses of others. They saw a dire warning against this sort of thing when they read the Book of Mormon.⁵

John L. Sorenson's suggestion that the Book of Mormon is, or can be read as, lineage history is also of particular importance in this regard.⁶ In excising the narrative portions of the Book of Mormon—that is, what is or may be considered nondoctrinal—what may have been left out are the important elements of the larger message of the book itself.

The regular, complete text of the Book of Mormon is still the best way to read the Book of Mormon. Whatever the difficulties of length and language, Latter-day Saints will still want to read it—indeed should—with the difficult, old-fashioned language, the long quotations from Isaiah (which are, for the most part, curiously retained in *A Reader's Book of Mormon Digest*), the seemingly difficult grammar, and the plot and narrative intact. Such a Book of Mormon is still a voice of warning for our times and a marvelous work and a wonder. Or, as Robert Moss himself says, "I strongly recommend that people read the Book of Mormon in its entirety" (p. vii).

⁵ Louis Midgley, "A Singular Reading: The Māori and the Book of Mormon," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World*, ed. Davis Bitton (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 260–61. Much of this essay can be read as a sort of cautionary tale about mining sacred texts for mere doctrine.

⁶ See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 50–56.