



## Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

---

Volume 15 | Number 1

Article 4

---

1-1-2003

### The Book of Mormon Today

Noel B. Reynolds  
nbr@byu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Reynolds, Noel B. (2003) "The Book of Mormon Today," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 15 : No. 1 , Article 4.  
Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol15/iss1/4>

This Book of Mormon is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** The Book of Mormon Today

**Author(s)** Noel B. Reynolds

**Reference** *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 5-14.

**ISSN** 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (2002), by Terryl L. Givens.

## THE BOOK OF MORMON TODAY

Noel B. Reynolds

I am minded to propose a whole-hearted community “thank-you” to Terryl Givens for giving us this most recent book, *By the Hand of Mormon*. The closing chapters were even better than the first, confirming my early suspicion that it would be one of the most informative and stimulating books I had read in some time. In a single stroke, Terryl Givens has produced the first full-length account of the Book of Mormon and its changing roles in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as well as in American religion, has shown faithful Latter-day Saints how to speak intelligently to the educated public at large about their unique scriptural tradition and the widespread attacks on that tradition, and has broken through the publishing barrier that has prevented other related manuscripts from being brought out by leading academic presses. The magnitude of this achievement will be most evident to the scores of faithful LDS scholars who have been writing on these topics for the last few decades and on whose work Givens builds.

Review of Terryl L. Givens. *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ix + 320 pp., with notes and index. \$30.00.

The comprehensiveness of the book's treatment of the Book of Mormon is clearly signaled by the topics covered in its nine chapters. While the chapters are carefully designed to work together into a thorough treatment of Book of Mormon issues, they are also written in such a way that they can stand alone and provide profitable reading on specific questions. The first two chapters report in detail the circumstances and personal background of Joseph Smith during the years that he received heavenly visions and translated and published the Book of Mormon, and they also relate the story of the Book of Mormon to the background of the Bible. The third chapter shows how the divine origins of the book led early generations of Latter-day Saints to treat it more as a sign of the restoration of all things through Joseph Smith than as a source of divinely inspired teachings. As the final chapter shows, this latter function did not come into full prominence among Latter-day Saints until the last quarter of the twentieth century, when it emerged as the "touchstone" of LDS culture. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the wide variety of efforts to locate Nephite homelands and to criticize or defend the text's form or content. Chapter 6 carefully reviews and then rejects the thesis advanced both by a few Latter-day Saints and many more non-Latter-day Saint writers that the Book of Mormon could still have some religious value even if Joseph Smith were its author. Chapters 7 and 8 go on to assess the theological or doctrinal implications of the book for biblical Christianity. In what some readers see as his most original contribution, Givens finds in the Book of Mormon a guide to personal or "dialogic revelation" (p. 209), which he rates as one of its key contributions to the restoration.

Givens opens with a thorough recapitulation of the events surrounding the revelation and translation of the golden plates. Suspicious Book of Mormon critics will be reassured by Givens's straightforward inclusion of all the activities of those years, many of which are frequently used to ground criticism, but are sometimes omitted from merely pious versions of this history. While some faithful Latter-day Saints might be concerned with this open and nondefensive approach, they will also be reassured as the picture that gradually

emerges is one in which the people in Joseph Smith's family and neighborhood, who knew him best and saw the artifacts for themselves, were unanimous throughout their lives in affirming the veracity of his extraordinary claims to have received ancient records from an angel, which he subsequently translated by the gift and power of God. As Givens rehearses the conflicting accounts of the Anthon transcript, the appearance and use of the interpreters and seer stone (both of which were later called Urim and Thummim by the early Saints), the nature of the translation process, and the oft-alleged use of the Bible, he is always fully informed, balanced, and matter-of-fact in his presentations. And in the process, he establishes the axiom that because of these origins, all critical discussion of the Book of Mormon must focus on "the realm of the concrete, historical, and empirical" (p. 42).

In the second chapter, Givens introduces the actual story set out in the Book of Mormon, situating Lehi and his family in the larger sweep of Old Testament history. This also presents him with the opportunity to explain why a book based in Old Testament times so clearly focuses on Jesus Christ. With the Book of Mormon, the interventions of Jesus in the time and space of human history are multiplied, challenging the traditional Christian account of "the supreme miracle" (p. 49) as unique and providing basis for the common complaint of critics that the book's claims are blasphemous. Givens shows his readers what most Book of Mormon readers tend to ignore or underrate—the extraordinary complexity of sources used by Mormon and the other contributors to the text. The multiplicity of source materials, themselves written by different people with different perspectives and motivations, embeds a level of complexity into the text that is almost never taken seriously by critics, who simply assume that Joseph Smith or one of his contemporaries was its author. Finally, the account of the publication process shows how the manuscript provided the principal justification for the founding and growth of a restored church of Christ, even though the published version could hardly find buyers.

In chapter 3 Givens develops the insight that the principal role served by the new scripture in its early decades was not so much as

a transmitter of new doctrines,<sup>1</sup> but as a sign or proof to the world that the Lord had opened the long-promised final dispensation complete with a new prophet and a new church to prepare the world for his own second coming. It was this message, more than any new theology, that attracted converts from a frontier population prepared by the teachings of the millenarians.<sup>2</sup> And the new dispensation had arrived with a new prophet. Unlike recent examples of mystics with their idiosyncratic visions, Joseph was a prophet from the Old Testament mold.<sup>3</sup> He was visited by angels and by God himself. He spoke for God in calling all men to repent and engage themselves in the great task of building the kingdom of God. And, of particular importance for Givens's project, Joseph received the English text of the Book of Mormon by direct revelation, mediated only by the Urim and Thummim or the seer stone—but not from his own imagination or through any human project of translation. Its words were divinely given without interpretation or modification by the human “translator.” As Givens emphasizes, “the ‘message’ of the Book of Mormon *was* its manner of origin” (p. 84). And it was precisely the claimed origins that confirmed the early critics' conviction that it could not possibly be what it claimed to be. A contemporary newspaper proclaimed without any sense of irony that even though “we have never seen a copy of the book of Mormon,” readers should be assured that it “is a bungling and stupid production. . . . We have no hesitation in saying the whole system is erroneous” (p. 86). Or, in the words of mid-twentieth-century sociologist/historian Thomas O'Dea, “the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by

---

1. Richard L. Bushman set out similar arguments in *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 142.

2. This point was made earlier in brief remarks by Hugh Nibley in “The Mormon View of the Book of Mormon,” in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 259–64. This essay originally appeared under the same title in *Concilium: An International Review of Theology* 10 (December 1967): 82–83, and elsewhere.

3. A point also made by Hugh Nibley in his “Prophets and Mystics,” in *The World and the Prophets* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987), 98–107.

its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.”<sup>4</sup>

Without explicitly reminding his readers of this attitude, Givens somehow induces us to remember it time and again as he reviews treatments of the Book of Mormon by prominent scholars who nonetheless are so confident of their own paradigms and assumptions that they fail to take the complexities of the book seriously—complexities that challenge and sometimes refute the assumptions of modern authorship.

The fourth chapter sets forth a highly informative and up-to-date summary history of how the first Latter-day Saint generation seized on new and dramatic evidence of ancient civilization in Mesoamerica as corroboration of the Book of Mormon’s veracity as a history of an ancient American people. Readers will discover that the contemporary flowering of imaginative attempts to match the Nephite narrative to different features of the geography of the Western Hemisphere is only the continuation of this early Latter-day Saint pastime. Further, it will become clear that Joseph Smith and his closest associates were intrigued by this same possibility when the publication of discoveries of stupendous Mesoamerican ruins first made the American public aware of this lost civilization in the jungles of Mexico and Guatemala. Claims that these early leaders had staked out definitive or inspired geographical theories lose their force in the face of clear evidence of the enthusiastic speculation and experimentation with multiple possibilities that occupied their attention. Behind it all, we see the driving force of the recognition that the Book of Mormon was understood by Latter-day Saints to be a narrative composed by real people who lived somewhere. Evidences of their long history must necessarily surface sometime in the future, and may have already, if we only knew for sure what we are seeking or seeing. In the process, Givens explains the ongoing efforts of the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of Natural History to disengage itself from rumors that it had once used the Book of Mormon as an explorers’ guide. What is remarkable

---

4. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

about the recent withdrawal of the earlier disavowals is how many of the old certainties of scientific opinion marking differences with Book of Mormon claims are now less certain or even rejected.

In chapter 5 Givens goes on to ask how either the evidence, or lack thereof, for ancient Nephites could prove anything about Mormonism. While some Latter-day Saints continue to trumpet this or that archaeological finding as proof for the truth of the Book of Mormon narrative, the Latter-day Saint scholarly community and the leadership of the church have been much more cautious and careful. While recognizing that faith does not derive from or ultimately rest on philosophical or scientific proofs, there is also a clear acceptance of the fact that the claims of the Book of Mormon apply to the actual or empirical world—it is a story of events that actually happened. Positive connections can corroborate and perhaps even strengthen faith. Negative assessments, likewise, can undermine immature faith, especially that which is not yet solidly grounded in personal spiritual or revelatory experience. Givens reviews the history of scholarly efforts, including those of Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, John Welch and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS, now Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at Brigham Young University), and then goes on to summarize the current state of the debate.

Given the endless repetitions and recyclings of intuitive criticisms mounted in the first decade after the book's publication, many people assume that serious problems have thereby been identified and have not been resolved. To emphasize the fallacy of this assumption, Givens quotes two evangelicals who made a study of the anti-Mormon literature and the contemporary response from Latter-day Saint scholars and concluded that, in fact, the sectarian critics are clearly losing the battle because they are unprepared to engage the debate at the high academic level to which LDS scholars have now taken it.<sup>5</sup>

---

5. See Carl Mosser and Paul Owen, "Mormon Scholarship, Apologetics and Evangelical Neglect: Losing the Battle and Not Knowing It?" *Trinity Journal*, n.s., 19/2 (1998): 179–205.

Givens goes on in chapter 6 to conduct his own review and critique of LDS and non-LDS writers who have advanced a wide variety of alternative theories about the actual origins of the text. The motive in many of these theories has been to find some way to appreciate the “religious value” of the book without having to accept it as a direct translation from an ancient record delivered by an angel to Joseph Smith. The vast majority of Latter-day Saints have not found this literature to be of much interest or value, but those who do track these efforts will be impressed with Givens’s ability to contextualize and analyze virtually all the recognized counterexplanations. Not only does Givens find each of these explanations fundamentally flawed in their respective failures to account for the known facts, but he also finds their basic strategies incoherent. The experiences of Joseph Smith and a large number of his family members and friends during the translation process have to be ignored before theories of alternate authorship can even be considered. And acknowledgment of Joseph Smith’s own limited educational attainments, as attested by his wife and closest associates, seriously weakens attempts to explain the text as his composition deriving from any number of contemporary cultural influences. Notwithstanding the prominent publication of many of these efforts, even in distinguished academic presses, none of them have been able to establish direct connections between the cultural parallels they have researched and Joseph Smith or the process by which the Book of Mormon was produced. This chapter provides a detailed and powerful review of these efforts, and Givens makes it clear that the host of competing explanations of the book’s origins has as yet generated no consensus, nor has any of them met the simplest requirements of dealing with all the known facts in a plausible way. According to Givens:

The naked implausibility of gold plates, seer stones, and warrior-angels finds little by way of scientific corroboration, but attributing to a young farmboy the 90-day dictated and unrevised production of a 500-page narrative that incorporates sophisticated literary structures, remarkable Old World parallels, and some 300 references to chronology and 700 to

geography with virtually perfect self-consistency is problematic as well. (p. 156)

In the next two chapters Givens goes on to a consideration of the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon. After reviewing the ways in which the book has been found to be both supportive of the Bible and different from it, Givens spells out some of its distinctive teachings. The Book of Mormon features a pre-Christian Christianity that identified the messiah (Jesus) with the Old Testament Yahweh. While Givens is correct to note that no Christian sect has taken that view, it is also worth noting that the distinguished Methodist Bible scholar, Margaret Barker, has recently strongly lamented “the Jerusalem Bible’s disastrous decision to use Yahweh in the Old Testament and Lord in the New Testament,” destroying “at a single stroke the unity of Christian Scriptures.”<sup>6</sup> The Book of Mormon’s repeated insistence on the moral freedom of men refutes the claims of many interpreters that its pessimistic accounts of human nature betray Calvinist origins. Further, he finds “one of its greatest theological contributions” in its doctrine of the atonement, which reclaims “the principle of justice from a kind of Platonic abstraction” and situates “it in the context of human agency” (p. 205).

Chapter 8 is another separable and distinctive contribution, which also focuses on the teachings found in the Book of Mormon. Givens finds a key distinguishing characteristic of LDS teaching and practice in its ultimate reliance on personal revelation. And this he locates in both the direct and the indirect teachings of the Book of Mormon. As dangerous as this might appear to other religious traditions, revelation is consistently portrayed as “the province of everyman” (p. 221). Rather than becoming a source of confusion and chaos, it is this general access to personal revelation from the same source that produces both unshakeable faith and unity of outlook in the followers of Christ and redefines concepts such as “revelation, prayer, inspiration, [and] mys-

---

6. Margaret Barker, “Text and Context,” an appendix to her book *The Great High Priest* (New York: Continuum International Publishers, forthcoming), n. 63.

tery.” Givens teaches us something very important about the Book of Mormon when he suggests that this “dialogic revelation” “may well be the Book of Mormon’s most significant and revolutionary—as well as controversial—contribution to religious thinking” (p. 221).

The brief concluding chapter first documents the surprising survival and then flowering of the Book of Mormon as the touchstone of LDS culture by the end of the twentieth century. Both the story and the teachings of the book have become embedded in the personal lives of Latter-day Saints everywhere and in the publications and activities of the church. There is hardly any dimension of LDS thought or practice that is not permeated and inspired by language, teachings, or stories derived from the Book of Mormon. Nor is this development without meaning for the significance of LDS teaching and practice in the religious scene of today’s world. Givens asks suggestively, “Does the brazen integration of things human and divine that it embodies represent a collapse of sacred distance tantamount to heresy or a challenge to Hellenic dualisms that heralds a new and welcome orthodoxy?” (p. 245). He points to such recent challenges to the Hellenistic orthodoxy of western Christianity as that expressed by Nicholas Wolterstorff, who wrote,

Haunting Christian theology and Western philosophy throughout the centuries has been the picture of time as bounded, with the created order on this side of the boundary and God on the other. Or sometimes the metaphor has been that of time as extending up to a horizon, with all creaturely reality on this side of the horizon and God on the other. All such metaphors, and the ways of thinking that they represent, must be discarded. Temporality embraces us along with God.<sup>7</sup>

---

7. Nicholas Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” in *God and the Good: Essays in Honor of Henry Stob*, ed. Clifton Orlebeke and Lewis Smedes (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 202.

Then Givens observes, “The Book of Mormon, with its literal reconceiving of dialogic revelation and its enshrouding tale of divine appearances, angelic visitants, and sacred, material oracles and relics, may be the most dramatic example to date of what Wolterstorff sees as a growing twentieth-century process of ‘the dehellenization of Christian theology’” (p. 245).<sup>8</sup>

Oxford University Press and Terryl Givens have finally given fair-minded readers their first comprehensive treatment of the Book of Mormon. This is a startling claim for what most would recognize as, next to the Bible, the single most significant religious book published in America. But the Book of Mormon is so challenging both to traditional Christian piety and to modern culture that it has proven to be controversial in almost all settings. Givens presents the wide range of studies and interpretations of the Book of Mormon both critically and fairly and concludes that the status and importance of the book are rising for the Saints as well as for some knowledgeable non-Latter-day Saints. If he is correct about this, there is a bright future indeed for serious research efforts to understand the book and its teachings. I hope that those inclined to brush the Book of Mormon aside for any reason whatsoever will examine carefully *By the Hand of Mormon*.

---

8. Referring to Wolterstorff, “God Everlasting,” 183.