



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

---

Volume 14 | Number 1

Article 3

---

2002

### Bassett's *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon*

Ronald W. Asay

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

---

#### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Asay, Ronald W. (2002) "Bassett's *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 14 : No. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol14/iss1/3>

This Book of Mormon is brought to you for free and open access by the 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** Bassett's *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon*

**Author(s)** Ronald W. Asay

**Reference** *FARMS Review of Books* 14/1-2 (2002): 1-7.

**ISSN** 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

**Abstract** Review of *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Insights from Prophets, Church Leaders, and Scholars* (1999), by K. Douglas Bassett.

## BASSETT'S *LATTER-DAY COMMENTARY* ON THE *BOOK OF MORMON*

Ronald W. Asay

It is important that readers of K. Douglas Bassett's commentary on the Book of Mormon pay attention to his introduction. Here he explains that his book came about "more by accident than by design" (p. iii). Over a period of years, as he taught Book of Mormon classes in seminary and at Brigham Young University, he collected supplementary materials and distributed them to his classes. Ultimately his materials became so large and popular that he was encouraged to publish them, which he did as the *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon*. Most of his quotations are from General Authorities, but some are from other credible sources such as presidents of the United States, prominent Latter-day Saint authors and educators, and some scholars outside our community, such as C. S. Lewis. The compiler presents virtually no commentary of his own. However, he never intended to be original, only to provide inspiring and uncontroversial illumination to the text.

Because it evolved somewhat randomly, the book is distinctly different from the typical commentary, which is crafted over a relatively short period of time and in a directed, organized fashion. Strictly speaking, this is not in fact a commentary on the Book of Mormon

Review of K. Douglas Bassett, comp. *Latter-day Commentary on the Book of Mormon: Insights from Prophets, Church Leaders, and Scholars*. American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1999. ii + 539 pp. \$25.95.

at all but rather a collection of modern references and quotations attached to key words and ideas of the Book of Mormon. However, with few exceptions, these modern authors were not discussing the verses of scripture to which Bassett attaches these quotations. Thus they are not truly in context and are only indirectly a commentary. This unique approach has inherent strengths and weaknesses. One problem is that church leaders have not commented directly on a majority of the Book of Mormon. Granted, many authorities discuss the fulness of the gospel contained in this scripture, but gaps are created by the absence of direct commentary on many segments of the Book of Mormon itself.

For example, the book of Alma contains many notable stories and events. However, the following all pass without direct commentary: Alma's encounter with Nehor; his many missionary excursions to the apostate Nephite groups; the conversions and teachings of Amulek and Zeezrom, along with their miraculous healings and rescues; the missionary experiences of the sons of Mosiah and the conversion of the Lamanites; Ammon's discussion of the natural man; Alma's instructions to his sons Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton; and Moroni's battles and dealings with his people and with Pahoran. It is almost possible to read this entire section of the commentary without realizing that it has anything to do with the book of Alma.

A few more of many possible examples may serve to illustrate these observations. In 2 Nephi 1:4, after Lehi's party arrives in the promised land, Lehi makes the remarkable statement: "I have seen a vision, in which I know that Jerusalem is destroyed; and had we remained in Jerusalem we should also have perished." Bassett presents no material about the historical fact of Jerusalem's destruction nor about Lehi's vision or leadership in this context.

Likewise, for this verse, "And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things" (2 Nephi 5:16), Bassett makes not even the slightest comment about temples and temple building. Later, Abinadi emerges from two years of hiding to finish

his ministry among the people of Noah. This entire chapter (Mosiah 12), containing many quotations from the prophet as well as the rationalizations and questions from Noah's priests, is omitted from the commentary. Similarly, Abinadi's compelling sermon on the mission of Christ in Mosiah 16—which resulted in the conversion of Alma—goes without notice.

If this pattern of omissions and gaps is consistent throughout the book, then what does it contain? Bassett's apparent aim, one in which I think he succeeds very well, is to relate material from the Book of Mormon to the conditions of today and to the advice of current leaders. Necessarily, he takes a certain amount of poetic license to insert points and commentary that might not strictly follow from the text. For instance, going back to Alma, while little information is included about the historical material and in fact about most of the doctrines of that great book, Bassett selects topics from the book of Alma—such as adultery (pp. 330–32), the second death (pp. 341–43), military service (pp. 353–56), righteous mothers (pp. 359–64), sustaining church leaders (pp. 366–70), and the plan of happiness (p. 345)—and appends quotations from a variety of sources elaborating on these ideas. This is the pattern throughout the book, and some wonderful citations are included.

Take the following example: “I will go and do the things which the Lord hath commanded, for I know that the Lord giveth no commandments unto the children of men, save he shall prepare a way for them that they may accomplish the thing which he commandeth them” (1 Nephi 3:7). In connection with this familiar scripture, Bassett quotes George Q. Cannon:

There are some people who seem to have the idea that rebellion and disobedience are evidences of independence and of manhood. Well, I am glad to know that, so far as I am concerned, I never took that view. I always felt that I was just as independent in being obedient, and I know I felt much better than I could possibly feel if I were disobedient. It is not necessary to be disobedient to show independence. . . .

I suppose each one of us is fond of having his own way. I know I am. I am willing to confess that I like to have my own way. But I do not like my own way well enough to want it in opposition to [the leaders of the Church]. (pp. 12–13)

What an interesting and appropriate idea—one that I certainly would never have stumbled onto if left to my own devices. Although not typical of the usual commentary on this particular verse, Cannon's words are very applicable and illustrate a strength of Bassett's approach.

Another example is his reference to 2 Nephi 4:5–6 (pp. 98–100). In this scripture, Lehi indicates that parents, in this case Laman and Lemuel, have a responsibility to bring up their children in the Lord's way. Bassett quotes David O. McKay, Gordon B. Hinckley, and Spencer W. Kimball extensively on this issue. The insightful and inspiring selections are from conference reports and the *Ensign*, available to most readers, but also from the Tokyo Area Conference Report, August 1975, and *Treasures of Life*, by President McKay. Several selections are also included from less well-known authors, in this case Merlin R. Lybbert and Anne G. Wirthlin, both authors of *Ensign* articles. From Lybbert comes this insight:

This teaching is to be done before a child reaches the age of accountability, and while innocent and sin-free. This is protected time for parents to teach the principles and ordinances of salvation to their children without interference from Satan. . . . During these formative, innocent years, a child may learn wrong behavior; but such is not the result of Satan's temptations, but comes from the wrong teachings and the bad example of others. (p. 100)

These are a few of many highly successful illustrations of Bassett's novel approach. In other instances I felt that the true message of a verse was sacrificed somewhat in order to draw a lesson that was slightly contrived. For example, when Lehi sent his sons back to Jerusalem, Sariah was unhappy with her husband. Her feelings were later recorded by her son Nephi: "For she had supposed that we had

perished in the wilderness; and she also had complained against my father, telling him that he was a visionary man; saying: Behold thou hast led us forth from the land of our inheritance, and my sons are no more, and we perish in the wilderness” (1 Nephi 5:2). Lehi responded without anger and was able to comfort his wife by reminding her that what he had done was the result of instructions received in a vision from God. Subsequently, both rejoiced in the return of their sons with the brass plates. The Book of Mormon reveals little about the relationship between these great parents, but Bassett spends several pages (pp. 19–23) and quotes counsel from seven different church leaders illustrating the tender relationship that should exist between husband and wife. Certainly this is pertinent to us in this day of spousal abuse and marital contention, and the quotations contain sage and timely advice. However, this is the only commentary given for the entire chapter. The compiler makes no mention of Lehi’s reading of the brass plates and their contents nor of his discovery of his own genealogy contained therein.

A similar example is found in 1 Nephi 18:16. En route to the promised land, Nephi was bound by his brothers. While he lay captive and miserable, hungry, bruised, and thirsty, he recalled: “Nevertheless, I did look unto my God, and I did praise him all the day long; and I did not murmur against the Lord because of mine afflictions.” We can derive many lessons from Nephi’s steadfastness and patience. Bassett takes this opportunity to quote several latter-day prophets about the need for sustaining our church leaders without murmuring. For example, he quotes from *Teachings of Spencer W. Kimball*:

Apostasy often begins with criticism of current leaders. Apostasy usually begins with questions and doubt and criticism. . . . They allege love for the gospel and the Church but charge that leaders are a little “off the beam”! He generally wants all the blessings of the Church: membership, its priesthood, its temple privileges, and expects them from the leaders of the Church, though at the same time claiming that those same leaders have departed from the path. (p. 58)

Such counsel is clearly wise and appropriate to our day and time. But does it follow from this verse and context? Probably not, but again, this volume is not strictly a commentary on the Book of Mormon. Rather it is a commentary on living the gospel today, the topics being stimulated by situations in the lives of men and women living long ago and reflecting to some degree Bassett's interests and biases. The success of this approach depends on what readers are looking for in this commentary. If they are searching for the traditional contextual interpretation and some historical analysis, then they will be disappointed. If they are looking for modern-day scriptural commentary that dovetails with many of the daily life lessons of the Book of Mormon, then they will often be delighted.

It is not true, however, that Bassett includes no doctrinal or historical commentary, only that it is inconsistently present. For example, the "Isaiah chapters" of 2 Nephi 11–24 are handled very well. Bassett selects verses from these chapters that are of particular interest to Latter-day Saint readers and then references a wide variety of standard commentaries. These include primarily *Isaiah Plain and Simple*, by Hoyt W. Brewster Jr.; *Isaiah: Prophet, Seer, and Poet*, by Victor L. Ludlow; *Book of Mormon Compendium*, by Sidney B. Sperry; *Book of Mormon Student Manual*; *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, by Robert L. Millet and Joseph Fielding McConkie, along with several conference reports, *Ensign* articles, and selected quotations from other church leaders. Although by no means comprehensive, the twenty-two pages he devotes to these chapters contain excellent discussions of difficult material. In particular, he covers very nicely the prophecies regarding the stem of Jesse, the root of Jesse, and their respective roles in the last days (pp. 144–45).

One problem with the format of the book is that many sections of the Book of Mormon lack direct commentary and list only references. Often these are the longer, more comprehensive citations, and as such are perhaps the very ones that would be most useful. Thus readers are required to go to another source if they wish to find the quotation. Compounding this problem, many of these are from valuable but rarer sources, such as *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, The*



*Doctrinal Foundation: Papers from the Second Annual Book of Mormon Symposium; Behold the Lamb of God*, by J. Reuben Clark Jr.; *Crusader for Righteousness*, by Melvin J. Ballard; and CES symposia, BYU devotionals, and other addresses. For readers with access to *Gospelink* or other similar electronic collations, this is not a serious problem, but for the substantial number of readers without such access, the obscurity of these sources and many like them constitutes a difficult obstacle to their use. Even for those who have these resources, the advantage of having this commentary at hand is that the quotations it does contain are immediately available. Its utility is certainly lessened if one must go to other sources to find information that may or may not prove to be worth the search.

The lack of any index makes this book very difficult to use as a reference. I found it nearly impossible to find quotations I wished to read again or to search for a particular topic or author. In our computer era, such an omission seems to be an oversight that could easily have been corrected.

The majority of the material is aimed at helping the reader change behaviorally. Many pages of insightful counsel regarding the need for forgiveness, love, giving of material things, not judging, serving others, and being a good spouse are presented. Bassett treats some passages eruditely and establishes points of doctrine using references not commonly cited. Other verses that have little doctrinal importance but lend themselves to moral or ethical lessons are referred to exhaustively.

Given its incomplete coverage, perhaps the proper use of this book would be to read it along with the Book of Mormon, not so much to help explain a difficult passage as to add relevance. In this mission the compiler succeeds. In fact, this is a remarkable compilation of bits and pieces of the spoken word that would otherwise escape the notice of most of us. Remarkably, Bassett found enough material over the years to provide commentary on a very large portion of the Book of Mormon. Although some deficiencies characterize his approach, the volume is nonetheless a valuable addition to the study of how this scripture can apply to and modify our lives.