



1-1-2015

Why the Book of Mormon Deserves More Twenty-First-Century Readers: A Question of Complexity

J.B. Haws

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

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Haws, J.B. (2015) "Why the Book of Mormon Deserves More Twenty-First-Century Readers: A Question of Complexity," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 24 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol24/iss1/8>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

Review Essays

Why the Book of Mormon Deserves More Twenty-First-Century Readers: A Question of Complexity

J.B. Haws

Review of Alan D. Tyree. *Millions Call It Scripture: The Book of Mormon in the 21st Century*. Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.

ALAN TYREE'S *MILLIONS CALL IT SCRIPTURE* is a short book that will leave readers thinking for a long time.

Readers, almost reflexively, might begin to make some assumptions as to what type of book they hold in their hands when they start into a book on the Book of Mormon that does not use the words *angel* or *plates* until well into the second chapter—and Alan Tyree's *Millions Call It Scripture* is just such a book. From the opening pages it is apparent that Tyree wants to move conversations about the Book of Mormon away from Joseph Smith's personal testimony, away from questions about the historicity of the gold plates, and more toward pragmatism. That is, Tyree wants to make the case that if the Book of Mormon functions as scripture in your life, then that is good enough for him. What this book does, perhaps as well as anything, is that it forces readers to ask themselves, "Is that good enough for me?"

Some books lend themselves better than others to interrogation based on clues about intended audience. Again, *Millions Call It Scripture* is such a book. Beyond publication hints (the book is published by Community of Christ Seminary Press) and the author's biography (he is a retired Community of Christ apostle), the direction that the text takes repeatedly reminds readers (1) that Tyree is speaking to his own church community first; (2) that he is always aware of Latter-day Saints who might be listening in; and (3) that he wants other Christians (and more readers generally) to give the Book of Mormon a chance. That is part of what makes this book such a fascinating read. It offers a glimpse into the soul and psyche of many contemporary Community of Christ members and their wrestling with the Book of Mormon.

Readers with even a general awareness of some of the ways that the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (RLDS, now Community of Christ) has fractured in the past generation over a number of issues—certainly not the least of which is the place of the Book of Mormon in church life—will see that history as the subtext of Tyree's book.¹ He introduces his book as an attempt “to assist in developing a center ground of understanding for those who accept the Book of Mormon, as to what kind of scriptural values it holds for us and for our witness” (p. viii).

Importantly, the book settles persistent rumors about Community of Christ's disavowal of the Book of Mormon. Tyree cites repeated official church statements (most recently from 2006) that affirm that “the Community of Christ uses the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants as scripture” (p. 134). In his introduction Tyree himself “personally affirm[s]” “the book as scripture and uphold[s] it as useful to the faith of those who believe, or who are open to belief, that Jesus is Christ, the Son of the living God” (p. viii). But at the same time, Tyree acknowledges that not everyone, even among his active coreligionists,

1. For a recent book that examines the trajectories and denominational developments (including attitudes toward the Book of Mormon) of different Latter Day Saint movements through the lens of their shared interest in the Kirtland Temple, see David J. Howlett, *Kirtland Temple: The Biography of Shared Mormon Sacred Space* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014).

might—or needs to—feel the same way: “If it is useful to people, they will make that decision for themselves. But let us not make that decision for them, by making it a test of faith and fellowship that they must believe in the book” (p. 136).

Inescapable throughout *Millions Call It Scripture* is the proverbial tightrope that Tyree must have negotiated as he imagined his church audience. On the one hand, it is clear that Tyree wants the Book of Mormon to be part of the devotional life of his church. Reading between the lines, one detects subtle discontent—and subtlety characterizes the whole book—with the common Community of Christ approach of benign neglect of the Book of Mormon in its (especially overseas) evangelizing work; instead, Tyree recommends against “depriving [others] of the privilege to make their own decision [about the Book of Mormon] by neglecting to share it with them, and thereby depriving them of an important scriptural legacy” (p. 136). “The Book of Mormon as scripture is a resource for teaching the gospel,” he asserts, “and therefore can be useful as a missionary tool” (p. 134). He even offers vignettes where he has personally seen that missionary usefulness in places like Zaire (now Democratic Republic of the Congo), Haiti, and Jamaica.

On the other hand, one senses Tyree’s awareness that many of his ecclesiastical colleagues do not share his enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon because of a litany of problems (which Tyree details throughout his book) with Book of Mormon historicity. It is likewise apparent that Tyree himself feels a degree of frustration with Book of Mormon believers who are fixated on evidence of its historical authenticity or reliability; indeed, most of Tyree’s book is really an exercise in arguing against historicity. He begins his book with the Community of Christ motto: “all truth” (p. 1). Near the end of the book, he strongly suggests that those who “cling tenaciously” to arguments about Book of Mormon proofs might be “less than honest with [themselves]” (p. 124). It is as if Tyree is saying to the opposing camps in his church that if Book of Mormon enthusiasts would stop naively arguing over historicity then there might be more space for Book of Mormon reconsideration by those who are currently indifferent or even hostile to it. “Our credibility is at stake,” he reminds his audience (p. 126).

This denominational lens is one aspect of the book that readers outside the Community of Christ should find repeatedly intriguing. Because, Tyree says on his opening page, “detractors still persist in making various charges against [the Book of Mormon’s] authenticity as scripture,” and because “a uniformly sound, thorough, and even-handed approach to resolving these issues has never been undertaken,” those “who embrace the Book of Mormon as scripture [are] open to the old attacks” (p. vii). Tyree offers his book as a take at that even-handed approach.

In a number of ways, that aim at even-handedness offers new possibilities for fractured religious communities. For one thing, it is obvious that Tyree is a gifted teacher. The discussion questions at the end of each chapter are worth the price of admission, and one can almost picture lively Community of Christ Sunday School classes working their way through the book. The questions are thoughtful enough and provocative enough to work against polarizing dogmatism from either camp—and they are questions about the role of scripture generally, and the Book of Mormon specifically, that every serious reader should consider.

Those questions—and the book itself—mostly revolve around four theories “about the provenance of the Book of Mormon”: (1) plenary revelation, (2) conceptual revelation, (3) human authorship, and (4) Joseph’s extrasensory gifts as a seer or mystic (p. 22). Tyree reminds readers, again in what feels like a nod to even-handedness and a middle way, that “there is no majority opinion within the membership or leadership of Community of Christ that would hold any one of these options as the sole means of revelation involved in producing the Book of Mormon” (p. 28). Tyree succeeds in creating a sense of openness in terms of Community of Christ official positions, so much so that this book is likely, I would think, to draw in from that community new Book of Mormon readers who are more comfortable with diversity than with perceived conformity. As the book progresses, Tyree offers himself as a sympathetic fellow traveler to would-be skeptics. His intent seems to be to persuade Community of Christ members (and other Christians) that the Book of Mormon can still be considered scripture, even if that means giving up claims of the book’s ancient origins.

In other words, Tyree plants himself squarely on that middle road. He presents himself as someone who thinks that DNA evidence convincingly shows that the inhabitants of the Americas have no ancestral connections to the Middle East; that wordprint statistics confirm that Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon (but disprove Solomon Spaulding's involvement); and that anachronisms like "Bible" or "church" fit a nineteenth-century Christian worldview rather than an ancient Israelite one. Still, Tyree unequivocally asserts that for him, "the Book of Mormon is a resource provided by divine intervention through a process we do not clearly understand" (p. 136).

Tyree's position is most clearly stated in several related passages in the middle of the book: "I believe that such anachronisms do not invalidate the Book of Mormon, but illustrate the degree and nature of Joseph Smith Jr.'s inspiration as he produced the book "by the gift and power of God" (p. 76). "I believe this discovery [of the multiple authorship of Isaiah] does not invalidate either Isaiah or the Book of Mormon as part of our valuable scriptural heritage. It only causes us to rethink how the Book of Mormon came to us, and the relevance of the various theories as to how it was revealed by God through the prophet Joseph Smith" (p. 78). And finally, "I think we can explain [anachronisms] logically if we suppose that the author of the Book of Mormon introduced concepts of his time [nineteenth-century America] into a narrative about people of another time and place. This does not diminish the scriptural quality of the Book of Mormon, but it does impinge on its historicity, its historical character. It suggests a narrative that is fictional, though it could have some elements of history interwoven into it as most novels do" (p. 81).

Thus it seems that Tyree is trying to help his denominational fellows reconsider ways that the Book of Mormon could—and in Tyree's view, should—function as scripture, even divinely inspired scripture, at the same time that it is (probably) fictional. On that basis, *Millions Call It Scripture* aims to create more space for readers from various religious traditions to maneuver as they, Tyree hopes, give the Book of Mormon serious reconsideration.

And yet, in the end, *Millions Call It Scripture* seems to fall short in successfully creating that space, because it falls short in making the case

for *why* readers should give the Book of Mormon that consideration. For all that it does well in inviting readers to rethink their assumptions, the book will likely leave readers of various stripes vaguely dissatisfied—and not just more-committed believers in the Book of Mormon either. To be sure, believers will have their own sets of concerns, and those concerns will probably be different based on denominational points of view. It seems safe to assume, of course, that many Latter-day Saint readers would take issue with Tyree’s insistence that the Book of Mormon does *not* imply “proof of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, nor the rightness of the denominations that resulted from his founding efforts” (p. 134). In arguing against this thesis of Book of Mormon-as-signifier, Tyree implicitly seems to discount the way that the Book of Mormon has functioned as “sacred sign,” to use Terryl Givens’s words, for believers from its earliest appearance.² Even more important, this point of view does not seem to do justice to the internal logic of the Book of Mormon itself. Take, for example, Moroni’s words: “Blessed is he that shall bring this [record] to light; . . . and it shall be done by the power of God” (Mormon 8:16). Or even more pointedly, Lehi’s words about the future “seer” who will “bring forth my word”—that “the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by [the seer’s] hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation” (2 Nephi 3:11, 15). To be fair, those passages could be read other ways, and Tyree does assert that “both the church’s value and Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling can and do stand on their own quite well” (p. 134). Still, it is difficult to escape the challenge that the Book of Mormon presents for those who want to separate too starkly the product from the producer. Tyree himself admits that his decision to “choose a bias in favor of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon rather than against them” has, “to a great degree,” been “influenced by my having received the ministry afforded by the Book of Mormon as scripture” (p. 95).

But there is an undercurrent in *Millions Call It Scripture* that wants to move the Book of Mormon away from its almost-trademark connection

2. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62–88.

with Salt Lake City Mormonism and its place in the LDS Church's proselytizing. Tyree, for example, mentions that when he introduced the Book of Mormon to Community of Christ investigators in Haiti, "they thought we were in fact Mormons, and therefore racists, and all the rest," since in those pre-1978 days "general knowledge in Haiti was that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . was racist" (p. 108). Frustrations over mistaken identity are detectable in the book—and certainly understandable; again, these perspectives offer telling insights into current Community of Christ thinking about its distant LDS relatives.

Yet I suspect that Latter-day Saint readers will not be the only ones who, in the end, will be left wanting with Tyree's book. His "eye of the beholder" analogy about scripture immediately locates the book at a flash point where conversations about conservative and liberal views of scripture (specifically the Bible) always get heated (pp. 5–6). Tyree's repeated turns to William James and a scripture-as-pragmatically-valuable paradigm are helpful in their phenomenological inclusiveness, but such will likely leave many readers wishing for something more on which to evaluate the question "What is scripture?" The book seems to lack conversations about Book of Mormon Christological truth claims, about soteriology, about divine endorsement—especially in Tyree's almost offhand observation that "most [but by implication, not all] who believe [the Book of Mormon] to be scripture also believe it was given by God, to serve humankind as divine guidance for their spiritual good" (p. 6). At the same time, however, the way Tyree's book challenges easy assumptions about what is scripture and how one decides what is scripture is one of the key contributions of the book. We as scripture readers *need* to be challenged to think about these things, and Tyree's analogous discussions about the persistent value of *biblical* books with dubious historicity (Job or Jonah, for example) should call for serious reflection from readers who have dismissed the Book of Mormon out of hand for similar perceived historical problems.

However, what many readers will likely wish for from Tyree is more attention to *why* he considers the Book of Mormon spiritually valuable—more attention to his answers and not just his questions. With the

exception of a brief, but poignant, testimonial about a spiritual confirmation of a biblical truth that came from his reading the Book of Mormon (and significantly, that story focused on a transcendent spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon's scriptural value), Tyree does not offer enough of his reasoning as to what exactly makes the Book of Mormon valuable as "guidance for . . . spiritual good"—at least not enough of his reasoning, it seems, to entice outside readers to pick up the Book of Mormon.

And that, ultimately, is at the heart of this review. Granted, Tyree is speaking to his church audience first, and so he has a specific group of readers in mind that are likely already coming to the Book of Mormon with some base knowledge. But his invitation for other Christians—as well as his own fellow congregants—to give the Book of Mormon an honest chance would be better served, simply, by *more* Book of Mormon. In Tyree's attempt to push his coreligionists out of an obsession with Book of Mormon historicity, he seems to protest too much against the book's remarkable complexity. Tyree sees apologetics and polemics as obscuring the role that the Book of Mormon-as-scripture can play in the life of a believer, and his perspective on this would likely resonate with many who want the Book of Mormon to have a wider readership. Yet in Tyree's almost-impatience with what he sees as the overemphasis on historicity, and with advocates who refuse to look at "all truth," he himself seems to pick and choose his evidence to undermine the positions of these imagined interlocutors.

For example, in his discussion of chiasmus, he observes that "there are many instances of chiasmus in both of these books of scripture [the Bible and the Book of Mormon]. But are they the only places where it is found? Of course not, since it is a form that has been used in various ages and is in contemporary use as well" (pp. 61–62). The complaint here is not that Tyree discounts the significance of Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon as evidence of its ancient origins; in some ways, that is beside the point. The complaint here is that the examples of chiasmus from the Book of Mormon that Tyree chooses are so simplistic as to make it seem that he is stacking the deck against the Book of Mormon as even worthy of study, be that study devotional or literary. Of all the

rich, poetic, intricate passages he could have chosen, this is his sole illustrative example from the Book of Mormon: “The soul shall be restored to the body, and the body to the soul” (Alma 40:23). Tyree then spends two pages breaking down, into chiasmic notation, a prayer that was offered by a Community of Christ mission center president in 2002. Tyree uses the prayer to argue that for religious people, Hebraic poetic forms become as natural as breathing; they are integral to the native language of Christian worship. However, the prayer as an example of chiasmus is not persuasive—especially if it were to be set up next to a well-known example from the Book of Mormon like Alma 36.

A useful comparison at this point might be to juxtapose *Millions Call it Scripture* with Grant Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide*. The scope and aim of the two books are of course different, yet one can see a resonance in both. Both seek to broaden appreciation of the Book of Mormon, and to do so while setting aside or downplaying longstanding pro/con arguments about the Book of Mormon’s miraculous origins. Both authors offer approaches that believers and skeptics might find palatable.

Yet contrast the way that Grant Hardy deals with the chiasmic structure of Alma 36. Hardy also acknowledges that scholars have debated about just how much stock should be placed in chiasmus as evidence of ancient Hebrew influence in the Book of Mormon. But Hardy sees past that to point out that, regardless of where one stands on the chiasmus count, Alma 36 undeniably represents “a careful, deliberate arrangement of the story. The reversing, balanced halves indicate that Alma had spent some time and effort organizing his memories of an event twenty years earlier into a rhetorically compelling, aesthetically pleasing form.” Hardy’s approach is to analyze the Book of Mormon from the standpoint of the book’s narrators, bracketing for the sake of discussion the question of whether or not those narrators are real or simply the products of Joseph Smith’s mind (or inspiration), so in Hardy’s analysis, “Alma” could be read either way. The real point is that the structure of Alma 36 highlights that “just as [Alma’s] conversion to Christianity marked a major turning point in his life, so also his appeal to Jesus in

verse 18 is, quite literally, the pivotal moment in his narrative.”³ Highlighting the pivotal (in this case, literally so) importance of Jesus in Alma 36 would have only served to bolster Tyree’s central contention, that the Book of Mormon is worthwhile for its Christ-centered message.

Joseph Spencer’s recent book, *An Other Testament*, offers an even more intricate examination of Alma 36. Spencer, too, agrees that some analysts of Alma 36 have made the verse-by-verse chiasm feel artificially forced in places, but at Spencer’s hand the structure of the entire chapter demonstrates a more sophisticated chiastic arrangement: opening and closing verses that are tightly and chiastically parallel (vv. 1–5; 26–30), with a central narrative built on the structured repetition of “thought” and “memory” (vv. 13–22) that is immediately flanked by less structured story-line passages (vv. 6–12; 23–25). Spencer’s exegesis of the chapter also highlights another significant marker of Book of Mormon complexity: its remarkable intertextuality—in this case the ties between Alma 36 and 1 Nephi 1.⁴

In another important contrast, Tyree is fairly dismissive of wordprint statistical analysis as offering any persuasive evidence of multiple authors in the Book of Mormon text. To be fair to wordprint advocates, Tyree’s dismissal is of cited studies that are mostly two and three decades old—Tyree even concedes that one of the studies he refers to (from 1976) is “somewhat dated” (p. 58). Still, many readers would be sympathetic to Tyree’s position that wordprint analysis in the Book of Mormon is simply too problematic to be very reliable because of larger questions about the translation process, what diction is inspired, and so forth. But here again Grant Hardy’s book can add another layer of authorial complexity and variability. Hardy aptly points out that “Nephi’s recurring attention to the overall history of the House of Israel—a story that takes in several thousand years—gives him a distinctive voice; no one else in the Book of Mormon shares his obsession to place the

3. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 141.

4. See the first chapter of Joseph M. Spencer, *An Other Testament: On Typology* (Salem, OR: Salt Press, 2012). I am indebted to Shon Hopkin for suggesting this point.

Nephite experience in a world-historical perspective. . . . Similarly, no one else is so focused on ancient Hebrew texts.” That means that the next generation of Book of Mormon writers—Enos, for one—is “nothing like [Nephi]”; “Enos never quotes or even refers to scripture.”⁵ A turn in Tyree’s book to citing this kind of textured analysis of narrative would only serve, it seems, to strengthen his case that the Book of Mormon is worthy of attention on a number of fronts.

Tyree clearly and concisely identifies the problem of “second Isaiah” in the Book of Mormon, yet, as Hardy again shows, there is so much more to say about the complexity of the way Isaiah appears in the Book of Mormon: Nephi’s commentary on Isaiah, for example, or the way that Nephi seemed almost oblivious to Isaiah passages that New Testament writers later saw as foreshadowing Jesus Christ.⁶ Tyree writes, “I believe that to misrepresent [the Book of Mormon as] such a potentially powerful witness for Christ could only diminish its authority and effectiveness in influencing persons toward the faith in the Lord” (pp. 1–2). What many readers of Tyree’s book might feel, though, is that he himself has misrepresented the Book of Mormon in his attempt to point out weaknesses in the arguments on which he sees traditional Book of Mormon apologetics built.

All of this is to say that what might leave students of the Book of Mormon vaguely dissatisfied by *Millions Call It Scripture* is essentially a bibliographic problem. There is no mention of Grant Hardy or Joseph Spencer or Terryl Givens or Brant Gardner or the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*. Thomas O’Dea is quoted about American “anachronisms” in the Book of Mormon but not Richard Bushman on the unanticipated absence of republican themes in the Book of Mormon (nor, even more surprisingly, is Richard Bushman cited as a source for

5. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 61–63. See also Joseph Spencer’s intriguing discussion about what he calls Jesus’s “return to Nephi,” in terms of Nephi’s covenantal focus, in Jesus’s 3 Nephi discourses. See Spencer, *An Other Testament*, 164–69. Again, I’m grateful for Shon Hopkin’s insights on this.

6. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 68–69.

Joseph Smith's biography).⁷ The bibliography seems surprisingly dated, and there is what feels like a conscientious avoidance of Latter-day Saint sources, not wholly unexpected because of the aforementioned concern about the "Book of Mormon-as-sign" of both Joseph Smith's prophetic call and the identity of the "true Church." But when readers consider those sources from the Latter-day Saint tradition that Tyree *does* quote, it is not unlikely that some readers might suspect that Tyree is worried about bringing in the work of scholars whom he sees as claiming too much for the Book of Mormon, in terms of its richness. Giving full recognition to that richness, though, is just what is necessary, it seems, for Tyree's wish to be realized: "Whether we are devotees of the Book of Mormon, or mainstream Christians with an unquestionable loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ, it is our unavoidable stewardship as his disciples and servants to become as knowledgeable as possible about the truth of all aspects of the Book of Mormon. . . . If we conclude that we believe it holds scriptural value for humankind, we will want to represent it well" (p. 2).

Thus Community of Christ readers *should* know about Latter-day Saint approaches, and vice versa, something that seems to be happening with recent conferences and academic exchanges between groups from

7. See, for example, Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17/4 (1976): 3–20, as well as Bushman's commentary on the writing of the article—and the exercise of apologetics generally—in Richard L. Bushman, *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 26–27. It is worth noting that calling the Book of Mormon's Christocentric worldview "anachronistic" (a point made by Thomas O'Dea that Tyree quotes and then expands upon—see pages 74–76 of *Millions Call It Scripture*) again downplays the internal logic and consistency of one of the Book of Mormon's central theses: that knowledge about Jesus Christ among Lehi and his descendants came by special, disruptive, and repeated revelation that put this group of preexilic Israelites on a unique religious path, one they self-consciously recognized as unique. See, for example, 1 Nephi 1:8–11; 11:13–34; 2 Nephi 10:3; Jacob 4:1–15; and Mosiah 3:1–18, among other passages. And, at the very least, staying at the level of "anachronism" feels like an opportunity missed in Tyree's book to highlight the significant theological components of the Book of Mormon surrounding things like agency and atonement; compare Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 198–208.

BYU, for example, and Community of Christ and other Restoration Branch congregations.⁸ In fact, in the spirit and aims of this journal, one would hope that all parties who see the Book of Mormon as worthy of more attention would stay abreast of the variety of works, from a variety of perspectives and venues, that “represent it well.” Because of Tyree’s discussion questions, because of his provocative and open-ended queries about the nature of scripture, and because of his insistence that readers from all sorts of religious backgrounds will benefit from the Book of Mormon, *Millions Call It Scripture* is a book that deserves to be read. In terms of persuading people of the possibility of such benefit, though, the hope of this reviewer is that it is not the only book on the Book of Mormon that people read.

J.B. Haws is assistant professor of church history at Brigham Young University. His PhD from the University of Utah is in American history, with an emphasis on twentieth-century Latter-day Saint history. He is the author of *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (Oxford, 2013).

8. See Howlett, *Kirtland Temple*, 192–93: “As self-described fundamentalists, Restorationists separated from the Community of Christ in the mid-1980s over the ordination of women to priesthood offices. For Restorationists, women’s ordination was simply one of many issues that they protested, including the Community of Christ’s . . . declining use of the Book of Mormon.”