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Book Reviews

Avi Steinberg, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri*. New York: Talese/Doubleday, 2014.

Reviewed by Michael Austin

AVI STEINBERG'S NEW BOOK is the second-best travel narrative I have ever read in which a young American intellectual becomes fascinated with another culture's sacred text, reads the text obsessively, and undertakes a journey—part pilgrimage and part anthropological tourism—to the locations identified therein.

The best such book that I know, Jonah Blank's *Arrow of the Blue-Skinned God* (1992), weaves a fascinating tour of modern India together with a brilliant retelling of *The Ramayana*, the great epic poem at the center of Hindu culture. Blank's book is excellent—deeply learned, engaged with the text, and aware that many of the most difficult issues facing the modern nation were anticipated by a great poet 2,500 years ago. It is one of the best books I have ever read about anything. If you have never read it, you probably should.

Avi Steinberg's new book, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Journey through the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri*, does not quite rise to this level. For one thing, it gets some fairly basic stuff wrong. Joseph Smith was not lynched in the Carthage Jail, as Steinberg reports (p. 8); he was shot. Lehi is not depicted as "a Jerusalem prophet 580 years before the birth of Jesus" (p. 16). Steinberg is twenty years off. Lehi and his family left Jerusalem 600 years before the birth

of Jesus, and the whole city was destroyed in 587 BC—an event of some importance to the Book of Mormon narrative. And finally, Christ’s visit to the American continent does not occur “at the center of the book, almost exactly halfway into the story” (p. 243), but about 80 percent into the book, in chapter 11 of 3 Nephi.

These gaffes are annoying, but they do not disqualify *The Lost Book of Mormon* from serious attention. More problematic, perhaps, is the book’s lack of narrative cohesion. It is not quite the journey that it bills itself as. Rather, it is three confessional set pieces united by a common fascination with the Book of Mormon. In the first piece, Steinberg recalls living in Jerusalem and trying to find a copy of the Book of Mormon. In the second, he describes a two-week trip through Guatemala and Mexico with a Mormon tour group investigating Book of Mormon sites. And in the final section, he recounts the four days he spent rehearsing, under an assumed name, in the cast of the Hill Cumorah Pageant before officials discovered his duplicity and sent him packing. These three set pieces are sandwiched between an introduction and a conclusion that frame the book, not entirely convincingly, as a long meditation on the Book of Mormon.

And it is supposed to be a humorous meditation. The book’s cartoon cover and its incongruous subtitle (. . . *the Mythic Lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Kansas City, Missouri*) make it clear that we are supposed to find the book funny. Some of this is found humor, like calling Kansas City a “mythic land.” But Steinberg also tries to be funny by crafting a kind of folksy-neurotic-urban-sophisticate persona that is two parts David Sedaris and one part Woody Allen. And like most people who try to be funny when writing about serious things, he often pushes too hard and ends up sounding silly instead.

So now, having described all of its warts and rough edges, I can finally say that I liked the book. In fact, I liked it a lot. I didn’t want to like it, and I was fully prepared to be entirely nonplussed and, if necessary, deeply offended. I can think of all kinds of reasons why the book shouldn’t have worked. But in spite of all the errors and the forced humor, it did work, at least for me. I enjoyed it immensely and found it full of insights about my own religious tradition that I have never seen anywhere else. And

this has nothing to do with the travel narrative that supposedly constitutes the plot. The various destinations simply provide platforms for the author's stream-of-consciousness musings on Joseph Smith, the Book of Mormon, writing, religion, literature, and faith. I would have enjoyed *The Lost Book of Mormon* just as much if it had told the story of Steinberg lying in his bed at home and thinking about all of these things for a few weeks. The journey through the author's mind makes the book work; the trips to Jerusalem and Mesoamerica merely provide the wallpaper.

One thing that makes the book work is Steinberg's attitude toward the Book of Mormon. Let's acknowledge up front that he does not consider it a genuine historical record of early inhabitants of the Americas. He is not a believer. But he never mocks the book or those who do believe in it, and he consistently ranks it with the greatest productions of any human mind. To pull this off in a humor book requires a delicate dance, since it is really hard to be funny about something without making fun of it. Here, at least, the book is pitch perfect. Steinberg may delight in telling readers that the name Abinadi rhymes with "a big hog pie" (p. 217), and he certainly gets as much mileage as he can from describing Moroni as a good-looking Jewish-Mayan ghost. But these are not malicious jokes (though, as I suggest above, they are not particularly funny ones). Steinberg makes it clear that, while he does not accept the Book of Mormon as history, he respects it deeply as literature. And in his view, great literature is all that any sacred text ever can or need be.

It is no small trick to praise the Book of Mormon in unqualified superlatives while rejecting its historical claims. It is possible, of course; most people today have no problem praising the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* while rejecting the historicity of Troy and the divinity of Poseidon. But the current rhetorical climate leaves very little space for such views of the Book of Mormon. Nearly everybody who thinks that the Book of Mormon is great also believes it to be historical; and nearly everybody who denies its historicity also denies its greatness. One of the few major scholars who agrees with Steinberg—Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Daniel Walker Howe—sums it up nicely. The Book of Mormon, he writes, "should rank among the great achievements of American literature, but

has never been accorded the status it deserves, since Mormons deny Joseph Smith's authorship, and non-Mormons, dismissing the work as a fraud, have been more likely to ridicule than read it."¹ Steinberg, too, considers the Book of Mormon one of the greatest achievements of American literature:

As far as I was concerned, American literature got serious at Hill Cumorah. The discovery of the gold plates at the hill in 1823 can be seen as a founding myth for American letters: Joseph, a frontier peasant boy—a restless Puritan—unearths a book from deep in the soil of the country, the promised land, and discovers a story written in the language of the Old World but shaped by the landscape of the New, an American epic about Indians who came from Jerusalem. If Joseph, or his protagonist, Nephi, was a picaresque hero, an American Don Quixote, he was one of the earliest—a generation or two before Melville's Ishmael or Twain's Huckleberry Finn. Joseph was one of the first, and arguably the most successful American, to take up Emerson's challenge to renew the ancient literary tradition in the New World. (pp. 8-9)

This is a pretty big claim. If the Book of Mormon is the founding document of the American literary tradition, then six generations of scholars and critics have completely missed the boat. Non-Mormon critics have published thousands of books and articles on American Romanticism, Puritan Literature, American epics, Native American literature, Emerson, Melville, Hawthorne, and Thoreau without as much as a footnote acknowledging the existence of Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. If Steinberg is correct, then the entire field of American literature is party to a fraud.

In defense of my colleagues in American literature, Steinberg's evidence is nowhere near sufficient to prove his thesis. He does not make a case as much as he simply suggests that a case could be made. He vaguely identifies elements of the Book of Mormon that may (or may

1. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

not) anticipate *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, but he does not connect these dots. Nor should he. That sort of scholarly project requires a different kind of book—one with lots of footnotes and very little humor. Steinberg's job is to go to strange places and use them as jumping-off points for his own observations about the Book of Mormon from the perspective of somebody reading it for cultural, but not religious reasons.

I should mention here that, for Steinberg, the Book of Mormon is a narrative that includes both the record of the ancient inhabitants of the Americas *and* the narrative of Joseph Smith translating that record and bringing it to publication. He presents this as one great epic story that began in Jerusalem before the Babylonian captivity and concluded in a Palmyra, New York, print shop in 1830. And the main theme of the book—indeed, the only thing that holds the various parts of the book together—is the narrative of how all these stories came to be part of a single book:

In a narrative with scores of characters and plots and subplots, the one constant is the story of how this book became a book. Its narrative arc follows the real-world physical process of creating manuscripts, of how the book was written, preserved, edited, and archived and passed along through history, usually under the worst of conditions. . . . The one steady character throughout the story is the record itself, the book, the various manuscripts that Mormon edited down into the gold plates, which Joseph eventually excavated and translated. (p. 6)

This is a formidable insight, at once deeply material (because it focuses on the production of a tangible item) and dizzyingly abstract (because it suggests the possibility of a book being primarily about its own creation). And it supports a fertile reading of the text. In Steinberg's narrative, the book of the Book of Mormon begins when Nephi kills Laban to get the original brass plates, thereby letting readers know that they are about to read a book that was important enough to kill for (p. 20). All of the book's authors comment on the book they are making, and some of them do little else (I'm talking to *you*, Chemish). In fact, the only thing that the

various authors and editors of the Book of Mormon have in common is that they are authors and editors of the Book of Mormon—and this binds them narratologically to the final editor and translator, Joseph Smith.

Steinberg's definition of the Book of Mormon suffers from some definitional creep as the narrative progresses. Along with being the story of the Nephites combined with the story of its own coming forth, the Book of Mormon eventually includes nearly everything that Joseph ever said about the American continent—including his statements that the Garden of Eden was, and the New Jerusalem would be, in Jackson County, Missouri. The fact that Mormons attach great theological significance to a Kansas City suburb is a long-running joke. In 2007, Mitt Romney became the first presidential candidate in history to be asked where he thought the Garden of Eden was—with the clear implication that “Missouri” was weird and “Northern Iraq” was perfectly acceptable. But the construction of the American frontier as a sacred space attracted many early converts to the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith broke the Old World's monopoly on biblical sites. He told people that their lives and their country could be part of the most important narrative in their culture. This, more than anything else, causes Steinberg to elevate the Book of Mormon to the level of great art:

Joseph spent his life digging into the soil and finding artifacts, footnotes to his Book of Mormon. He was one of the first ravished souls to take on the big American literary project, the call to writers of the New World to venture deep into the interior, to blaze a trail, to describe the land, its rivers, its political and natural histories and myths, its tribes and wars and tragedies, and to collect all of it, the whole of this giant continent, and synthesize it into a single, bulging narrative filtered through the energetically deluded first person, to create America in words and deliver it to the people in a book as big and shameless and unruly and haunted and deeply problematic as the country itself. (p. 9)

For Steinberg, the fact that the Book of Mormon occurs in America is one of the things that makes it great. By expanding the biblical narrative to the American continent, Joseph used the raw materials of his

own culture to create a new mythos capable of effecting a cultural shift. This is the sort of thing that world-historical writers forge in the smithies of their souls—Homer, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Joseph Smith. Books that shake the world almost always do so by reworking major cultural narratives for new generations. If such a work makes a claim to divine revelation that we accept, we call it “scripture.” Everything else we call “literature.” Steinberg does not try to place the Book of Mormon into one of these categories; rather, he tries to collapse the distinction until it no longer matters. Most writers claim some kind of inspiration for their work. And all writers, at some level, want to shake the world. “From the day he burst onto the literary scene with his debut bible,” Steinberg muses, “Joseph was condemned for fostering a cult around his book. But isn’t that what literature has always done? . . . Is Joseph’s crime that he succeeded?” (p. 80).

From this observation, Steinberg proceeds to frame Joseph Smith as a stand-in for all writers and the Book of Mormon as a symbol for every book. In this conceit, the gold plates become that hidden nugget of truth or experience that writers always try to recover in pure form but which can only ever be understood in imperfect translation. Writing is the act of digging into one’s native soil in search of these golden stories and translating them into a common tongue. “All stories begin as gold plates,” he insists, and “all gold plates are lost forever. . . . The stories we tell about ourselves are always some kind of translation, a flawed rendering” (p. 192). As readers, he suggests, we must recognize that “every book we read is really a translation, an imperfect copy, of those unseen and ultimately untouchable gold plates. All stories are approximations of some lost story” (p. 166).

Joseph Smith was a successful writer, not only because he found and translated the gold plates, but also because he wrote himself, and the people and places he knew best, into the story. At some point—and he is not at all clear about when—Steinberg determined to do the same thing and write himself into the ever-evolving text of the Book of Mormon. Perplexingly, though, Steinberg hides the production of his own book from his readers in ways that, according to his own argument, none of

his predecessors did. He asks us to believe, for example, that he signed up for an expensive Book of Mormon archaeology tour and then misrepresented himself to join the cast of the Hill Cumorah Pageant, simply because he was compulsively fascinated by the Joseph Smith story—not because he was gathering material for a new book. This is not unusual or deceptive; very few writers reference the books that they are writing in those books themselves. But one of the most important points that Steinberg makes is that all the writers of the Book of Mormon did reference their book. By keeping the fourth wall firmly in place, when it would have been very easy to give readers glimpses of the book in progress, Steinberg becomes the odd one out in the very narrative tradition he is trying to write himself into.

But almost everything about *The Lost Book of Mormon* is odd, or at least unique, when compared to other books about the Book of Mormon. It does not fit into any of the prefab categories. It is neither pro- nor anti-Mormon. It is not a memoir, a travel narrative, a history book, or a work of literary criticism. Some Latter-day Saints will find it hostile to their religion, while almost everybody genuinely hostile to Mormonism will find it cloying and sentimental. One can think of any number of things that Steinberg could have done to write a different book than he did. But the book that actually got written deserves respect and consideration precisely because it is so unlike any other book on its topic.

The author of nearly every other literary study of the Book of Mormon begins with a religious understanding of the text and moves to a literary one. In *The Lost Book of Mormon*, Avi Steinberg reverses this direction. He offers his experience as a reader who first read and thought seriously about the Book of Mormon as a literary document and then sought ways to experience it in a religious context. *The Lost Book of Mormon* gives Latter-day Saint readers a rare glimpse of something we almost never see: an intelligent, thoughtful reader experiencing our sacred book apart from the theological frames that we usually set it in—the message without the messaging. And we can be pleased that, in the absence of any religious belief, he becomes enthralled by its epic force, its narrative power, and its undeniable significance to the culture that produced it.

Michael Austin is provost, vice president for academic affairs, and professor of English at Newman University in Wichita, Kansas. He is the author or editor of seven books, including *Reading the World: Ideas That Matter* (Norton, 2006) and *Re-reading Job: Understanding the Ancient World's Greatest Poem* (Greg Kofford, 2014). He is currently working on a book on Vardis Fisher, Virginia Sorensen, and the mid-twentieth-century Mormon literary diaspora.

Dale E. Luffman. *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers*. Independence: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013.

Reviewed by Christopher James Blythe

THE BOOK OF MORMON'S WITNESS TO ITS FIRST READERS is a thoughtful devotional volume written by a member of Community of Christ's Council of Twelve Apostles, published by the church's seminary, and designed as much to shape current understandings of the Book of Mormon in that tradition as it is in understanding the past. The handsome 212-page book is divided into fifteen short chapters discussing the purpose and importance of scripture, nineteenth-century historical contextualization, and the content of the text itself. Each chapter is accompanied with somewhere between seven and nine "Questions for Consideration" intended to enhance personal or classroom study.

The purpose of this volume is twofold. First, Luffman is conducting an investigation on how early Mormons would have understood the Book of Mormon text based on the context of their lives. Second, he is exploring how the Book of Mormon could be effectively employed in the twenty-first-century Community of Christ. I think it is important to understand this second facet to truly appreciate the significance of this work. Over the past several decades, as Community of Christ has moved in an increasingly mainline Christian direction, the Book of Mormon has taken a back seat in discourse and devotion. It has not been until more recent times that the church has sought to reclaim its