



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 22 | Number 1

Article 8

2010

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Robert Boylan

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BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Boylan, Robert (2010) "On Not Understanding the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 22 : No. 1 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol22/iss1/8>

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FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title On Not Understanding the Book of Mormon

Author(s) Robert Boylan

Reference *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 181-89.

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

Abstract Review of *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Quick Christian Guide to the Mormon Holy Book* (2009), by Ross Anderson.

ON NOT UNDERSTANDING THE BOOK OF MORMON

Robert Boylan

Review of Ross Anderson. *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Quick Christian Guide to the Mormon Holy Book*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009. 176 pp., incl. subject and scripture indexes. \$14.99.

The Reverend Ross Anderson presents for an evangelical Protestant audience what he considers an introduction to the Book of Mormon, a volume of scripture that most, if not all, of his target audience probably has not read. An introduction to any subject should be fair and honest and should present all sides of the relevant issues in a sound manner. Unfortunately, in this instance Anderson has only a superficial acquaintance with Latter-day Saint scholarship on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.¹ This brief review will outline some of the deficiencies of Anderson's criticisms leveled against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

No Evidence from Archaeology?

Anderson, repeating the mantras of previous critics of the Book of Mormon, claims that "archaeology has failed to unearth any concrete evidence for the Book of Mormon" (p. 68). This assertion and

1. For those desiring to become better acquainted with recent Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon, see Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2007).

others like it reflect the confusion that permeates his entire book, confusion apparently caused by a weak grasp of, or a refusal to acknowledge or engage, Book of Mormon scholarship. For example, in the past few decades Latter-day Saint scholars have gathered enough data to fashion a plausible picture of Lehi's route through Arabia as recounted in 1 Nephi.² One result is that "the place which was called Nahom" (1 Nephi 16:34) has been more securely linked to southern Arabia since the discovery of limestone altars near Sana'a, Yemen. These altars carry inscriptions containing the Arabian name *NHM*, referring to the Nihm tribe.³ This discovery from the right time period (independently dated to the seventh and sixth centuries BC) and in the right location (south-southeast of Jerusalem; compare 1 Nephi 16:13) is impressive archaeological evidence in support of the historicity of the Book of Mormon.⁴ Furthermore, an eastward turn from the Nihm tribal area (a direction of travel matching what is described in 1 Nephi 17:1) leads one to the Arabian coast and the vicinity of Wadi Sayq, which some Latter-day Saint researchers see as a strong candidate for Nephi's Bountiful (1 Nephi 17:5). Wadi

2. For a sampling of such literature, see S. Kent Brown, "New Light from Arabia on Lehi's Trail," in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, ed. Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002), 55–125; Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey across Arabia to Bountiful* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994); George Potter and Richard Wellington, *Lehi in the Wilderness: 81 New, Documented Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2003); and Noel B. Reynolds, "Lehi's Arabian Journey Revisited," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 379–89.

3. Brown, "New Light from Arabia," 81–82; S. Kent Brown, "The Place That Was Called Nahom: New Light from Ancient Yemen," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66–68; and Warren P. Aston, "Newly Found Altars from Nahom," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 57, 59. For a treatment of eighteenth-century and later maps that identify the Nehem region (spelled "Nehhem" in Carsten Neibuhr's 1771 map but "Nehem" in D'Anville's 1751 map as well as in later maps), see James Gee, "The Nahom Maps," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 17/1–2 (2008): 40–57. In its consonantal structure, the Book of Mormon place-name *Nahom* may correspond to *NHM*, whose letters come from the Old South Arabian alphabet (the alphabet used for the altar inscriptions).

4. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 120.

Sayq and other rare, fertile locales in the Dhofar region of Oman match Nephi's description of Bountiful rather well. And evidence for a valley fitting the description of the river Laman and the Valley of Lemuel (1 Nephi 2:5–8) has also come to light.⁵ However, a reader relying on Anderson's text would not be aware of these corroborating evidences of the Book of Mormon.⁶

Dan Vogel, in a biography of the Prophet Joseph Smith, asked five questions about the evidence that Latter-day Saint scholars have advanced for Nahom.⁷ I respond to these questions as a means of further illustrating the kind of information that goes unmentioned in Anderson's book.

1. "What need was there for a compass if Lehi followed a well-known route?"

Vogel's argument here works under the presumption that the Liahona's sole function was to show the direction the small party was to go.⁸ However, this was clearly not the case:

And it came to pass that the voice of the Lord said unto him: Look upon the ball, and behold the things which are written. . . . And there was also written upon them a new writing, which was plain to be read, which did give us understanding concerning the ways of the Lord; and it was written and changed from time to time, according to the faith and diligence which we gave unto it. And thus we see that by small means the Lord can bring about great things. (1 Nephi 16:26, 29)

5. See Richard Wellington and George Potter, "Lehi's Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi's Harbor," and related articles by other researchers in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006).

6. See, for example, Eugene England, "Through the Arabian Desert to a Bountiful Land: Could Joseph Smith Have Known the Way?" in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 143–56.

7. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 609 n. 17.

8. Also note that the Liahona was not a *magnetic* compass, as many critics claim it to be, for it pointed in directions other than magnetic north, such as south-southeast and east.

Moreover, it is not even clear that Lehi's party followed the regular caravan route. Indeed, a case can be made that they avoided the well-traveled routes, preferring to keep to the arid lowland region of the Arabian Peninsula's western coast (see 1 Nephi 2:5; 16:38; Jacob 7:26).

2. "The Book of Mormon does not mention contact with outsiders, but rather implies that contact was avoided."

With regard to the journey of Lehi's party through Arabia, the first statement is correct, and the latter statement is correct as well if it refers to one's general impression of the narrative. Indeed, neither the presence of others nor contact with them is directly mentioned in Nephi's narrative. The real question, however, is whether or not the text, upon close analysis, can be said to imply contact with resident populations. Though currently under discussion,⁹ this question as it relates to Nahom specifically is not an issue for me: the use of the passive voice to describe Nahom ("the place which was called Nahom," 1 Nephi 16:34) implies the presence of others in the area before Lehi's colony arrived to bury Ishmael.

3. "It is unlikely that migrant Jews would be anxious to bury their dead in a heathen cemetery."

Vogel does not provide any evidence to substantiate this assertion. There is no reason to believe that the Israelites of Lehi's time held the same beliefs about burial that the Jews of late antiquity did. Further, in the case of a traveling party with a member just deceased, what are they to do? The biblical text allows for rule bending if such is of necessity.¹⁰ Moreover, it is not unreasonable to suppose that Ishmael was buried a short distance away from the pagan cemetery, just as Jewish graves are often found at a little remove from Christian graves.

4. "There is no evidence dating the Arabian NHM before A.D. 600, let alone 600 B.C."

9. The party's possible encounters with other people during their wilderness trek is discussed in Brown, "New Light from Arabia," 67, 84, 91–92, and "Refining the Spotlight on Lehi and Sariah," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 50–53; also Richard Wellington and George Potter, "Lehi's Trail: From the Valley of Lemuel to Nephi's Harbor," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 32–33, 37, 39–42.

10. Note in 1 Samuel 21:6 David's consumption of shewbread, which was typically consecrated for only the high priests.

Ancient altars donated by a Nihmite to the Barʿan Temple near Marib in northwestern Yemen indicate the location of NHM. Important dating information on the inscriptions links the altars to the reign of one of two kings, Yadaʿ-*il* Dharih II (about 630 BC) or Yadaʿ-*il* Bayyin II (about 580 BC). Either date virtually confirms that there was a tribe called NHM in this area at the time Lehi and his family passed through. The inscriptions also refer to the man’s grandfather of the same tribe, indicating that the tribe was known for two generations before.¹¹

5. “The pronunciation of NHM is unknown and may not relate to Nahom after all.”

It is true that we simply do not know how *NHM* was pronounced in ancient South Arabic. And while it is true that the glottal *h* of *NHM* is not the same as the pharyngeal medial *h* of the Hebrew term, in Hebrew and related languages within the Afro-Asiatic language family, consonants carry the meaning of terms while vowels follow a variety of patterns.

Alleged Anachronisms

Anderson lists a number of alleged anachronisms in the Book of Mormon without mentioning Latter-day Saint responses. For example, he dredges up the antiquated claim that metallurgy was not practiced in Mesoamerica until AD 900 (p. 69), notwithstanding linguistic evidence and other indications to the contrary that significantly predate that time period.¹² He notes the improbability of steel swords in Book of Mormon times (p. 69), notwithstanding the fact that the record does not explicitly mention steel swords in general use but instead implies the use of wooden swords with edges studded with obsidian after the manner

11. Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 60.

12. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985) and “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” review of “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” by Deanne G. Matheny, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 324–31, for a discussion of the Book of Mormon in light of the culture, material culture, and geography of Pre-Classical Mesoamerica.

of the Mesoamerican *macanas*.¹³ Anderson seems to be unaware of the concept of “loanshifting” (naming something by analogy to something similar)¹⁴ by both ancients and moderns in claiming that the Book of Mormon’s mention of certain animals and synagogues is anachronistic (p. 70). Because the other criticisms have been repeatedly addressed by Latter-day Saint researchers, I will focus on Anderson’s claim that, in reference to Alma 16:13, “synagogues had not been developed by the Jews until four hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem. How could the writer have known how the Jews built their synagogues?” (p. 70).

Synagogues in the Book of Mormon

It has been a long-standing criticism of the Book of Mormon that its mention of “synagogues” represents an impossibility in the text. But Webster’s 1828 dictionary defined the term in a rather generic manner as a place of assembly for Jews, so its appearance in the Book of Mormon as an English translation is not problematic.

The original scholarly consensus was that synagogues did not exist until after the destruction of the second temple in AD 70, notwithstanding the mention of synagogues in the Gospels. With the discovery of synagogues in Egypt dating to the first and second centuries BC, the date was extended to the postexilic era. And further evidence indicates an even earlier date for the origin of the synagogue.

13. Alma 24:12 speaks of swords stained with blood, a description that comports well with the Mesoamerican *macana* (or *macuahuitl*) since the wood fibers of its shaft would absorb blood and be virtually impossible to wipe clean. For discussion, see William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 342. On the mention of metal swords in the Book of Mormon, see Hamblin and Merrill, “Swords in the Book of Mormon,” 344–47. More generally, see “Eyewitness Descriptions of Mesoamerican Swords,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 169–76; and Matthew Roper, “Swords and ‘Cimeters’ in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 35–43.

14. On the practice of “loanshifting,” see Robert R. Bennett, “Horses in the Book of Mormon,” research report, August 2000, maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/transcripts/?id=129 (accessed 8 July 2010). See also Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 288–99. Both sources discuss other theories that may account for the presence of horses in pre-Columbian America.

In 621 BC, with the discovery of the Book of the Law (probably Deuteronomy), the Deuteronomic reformation occurred with Josiah at its head (see 2 Kings 22–24). At this time blood sacrifices and temple worship were centralized in Jerusalem, resulting in local congregations of Israelites who met for worship, prayer, and instruction.¹⁵ According to some scholars, such gatherings that took place in the chambers of city gates were the original synagogues. Furthermore, the use of certain terms such as *bet ha'am* (Jeremiah 39:8), *miqdash-me 'at* (Ezekiel 11:16), and *mo'ade 'el* (Psalm 74:8) have been invoked to substantiate a preexilic date for synagogue origins.¹⁶

Literary Evidence

The Reverend Anderson argues as follows:

The first type of internal evidence for the Book of Mormon has to do with its language and style. If the Book of Mormon peoples came from Jerusalem, the root language behind the book would be Hebrew. Thus LDS scholars believe that the presence of Hebrew literary and grammatical patterns, called Hebraisms, give evidence of its ancient origins. The most fundamental problem with this approach is that the Book of Mormon is only available to us in translated form. Without an original document to compare, we simply cannot know whether the Hebraisms we observe are rooted in some Hebrew original or result from factors in the English text. (p. 73)

It is true that we do not have the gold plates against which we can check the Book of Mormon translation. However, there are many peculiar expressions and constructions in the Book of Mormon that cannot be “factors in the English text” that can be derived from the King James Bible and the brand of English Joseph Smith was accustomed to in upper New York state in the nineteenth century. For instance, Alma

15. For a summary, see “Synagogues in the Book of Mormon,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 194.

16. Lee Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 21–34.

46:19 in the 1830 edition reads, “When Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the *rent* of his garment,” whereas subsequent editions read “rent *part*.” In Hebrew one does not have to add *part* to a verbal substantive like *rent* as English requires.¹⁷

In Helaman 9:6 we read that the Nephite judge had been “stabbed by his brother by a *garb* of secrecy.” In Hebrew *begeḏ* means “garment” or “garb” (compare Genesis 39:12–13) and “treachery.” Further, the preposition *b-* in Hebrew can mean “by means of.” Thus the odd wording of Helaman 9:6 may actually reflect a genuine Hebrew pun underlying the text of the Book of Mormon. Such literary evidence supporting the Book of Mormon is extensive and should not be summarily dismissed, as Anderson has done.¹⁸

Parallelomania, or the Lack of Sound Methodology

The lack of a sound methodology plagues Anderson’s book, depreciating its worth for those who might otherwise be tempted to read it. For example, he compares (1) 2 Nephi 2:18 and Genesis 3:4–5 and (2) the life of Alma with that of Paul, implicitly claiming that Joseph Smith plagiarized from the King James Bible (pp. 64–65). Although there is no question that the Bible influenced the language and meaning of terms in the Book of Mormon, simply noting parallels between texts is an inferior methodology for demonstrating literary dependency. Indeed, such an approach is regarded by literary critics as “parallelomania.” In order to demonstrate *meaningful* parallels, whether as evidence for or against authenticity, one must begin with a sound methodology. Not doing so is nothing new in anti-Mormon literature.¹⁹

17. John A. Tvedtnes, “Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon: A Preliminary Study,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 11/1 (1970): 51.

18. For an introduction, see John A. Tvedtnes, “The Hebrew Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 77–91. Also see David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Hebrew Bible* (Tooele, UT: Heritage Distribution, 2003).

19. For example, the Tanners, in their work *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality*, list parallels between the KJV and other texts predating the Book of Mormon and then, without any discussion of methodology, claim that the Book of Mormon can easily be explained

Richard B. Hays, in *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, models a responsible approach to dealing with possible textual parallels. He sets out a sevenfold test for evaluating the “parallels” between Paul’s letters and texts of the Old Testament. His is a sound methodology that *both* LDS and non-LDS scholars should engage in to determine the strength or weakness of alleged parallels between texts. These are availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation, and satisfaction.²⁰ Moreover, far from Hellenistic epistolary style in the Book of Mormon, the several letters therein nearly always follow more archaic Semitic usage by listing the person of superior rank first and the person of relatively inferior rank second, regardless of who is the sender and who is the recipient.²¹ This is not the case with Hellenistic letters, nor indeed with modern epistolary style.

Conclusion

The Reverend Anderson’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* suffers from the same problems that plague the even more polemical works in the anti-Mormon market—namely, poor knowledge of competent Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon and lack of a sound methodology. For the reasons I have outlined, I cannot recommend Anderson’s book to anyone wanting a fair-minded introduction to the Book of Mormon. Instead, I would strongly recommend Terryl Givens’s *By the Hand of Mormon* or his succinct introduction to the Book of Mormon, also published by Oxford.²²

as a nineteenth-century text. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Mormonism: Shadow or Reality?* 5th ed. (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1987), 63–89.

20. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 29–32.

21. I thank Robert F. Smith for calling my attention to this deferential protocol in letters in the Book of Mormon. There are at least eight letters in the Book of Mormon: Alma 54:5–14, 16–24; 56:2–58:41; 60:1–36; 61:2–21; 3 Nephi 3:2–10; Moroni 8:2–30.

22. Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).