First and Second Nephi and Jacob through Mosiah, volumes 1 and 2 of Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millett

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Mormons have traditionally viewed theology and theologians with suspicion. Without a tradition of continuing revelation, other churches must rely on theologians to interpret scripture and chart doctrinal direction. But in the Mormon tradition, which proclaims that living prophets resolve doctrinal issues—and even supplement the canon—of what use are theologians? Allowing a place for theology seems to suggest either that the prophets have been insufficiently clear or that there is something worth knowing that they have not told us. Mormonism’s practical bias also militates against theology: isn’t our time better spent *doing* the word rather than merely *studying* it?

This is the dilemma facing Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet as they undertake their *Doctrinal Commentary*
on the Book of Mormon. On one hand, they are adamantine in their conviction that “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints . . . is led by prophets and Apostles, men with seers’ vision” (2:169). For them, the corollary to this truth is that all essential and relevant questions have been answered. But if that is true, what need is there of mere scriptural explicators like themselves? The authors’ response to this dilemma is bold: “In writing a commentary on the Book of Mormon it is not the authors’ intent to suggest that a proper understanding of this marvelous book of scripture requires the interpretive helps of trained scholars. Further, we make no pretense to being such” (2:xiii, emphasis added). I emphasize the last sentence because I find it remarkable that professors of ancient scripture, writing about ancient scripture, would not at least make a pretense to being trained scholars. Nevertheless, their point is clear: you don’t need a scholarly commentary to properly understand the Book of Mormon.

Then why write one? Why comment on the scriptures at all? The authors respond: “Were we to take such a suggestion literally, we would no longer have discourses on the scriptures at general and stake conferences or in sacrament and other meetings, and we would not have Sunday School and other classes” (1:xv). In other words, the proper role of a commentary is not to provide superfluous scholarly helps but to discourse upon selected verses much as a Sunday School teacher might, or a General Authority might in general conference.

It is therefore no surprise that Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon reads like a general conference address. Indeed, it reads like a conference address by Elder Bruce R. McConkie. If Elder McConkie had written a Book of Mormon commentary, this would be it. In fact, he did write much of it: the authors quote often and at length from Elder McConkie’s books and public addresses. In one seven-page stretch (1:170-76), he is quoted or cited no less than nine times. Considering that a good share of most pages is consumed by the subject verses, that’s a lot.

But aside from actual quotations, the entire work is suffused with the McConkie style: grandiose, rhetorical, and cast in the cadences of finality. For example, volume 1 opens with this fanfare: “Let the message be sounded in every ear with an angelic trump; let it roll round the earth in resounding claps of never-ending thunder; let the Holy Spirit whisper it in the heart of every honest man: The heavens have been opened and God has spoken!” (1:1). The following passage, though not the words of Bruce R. McConkie, could surely pass for them:
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Those who choose to reject the prophets and thereby spurn living oracles sleep on, long after the glorious dawn of heaven-sent revelation has brought an end to the night of apostate darkness and the vapor of ignorance and sin. In their pitiable plight they have become comatose as to the things of righteousness. (1:314)

Note that, in keeping with the authors’ view of the proper role of a scriptural commentary, neither of these passages communicates any new content about the Book of Mormon; they are in that respect typical of the entire work. The authors don’t speculate, they don’t explicate, they don’t ramify: they preach.

You could do much worse for a pair of preachers. The authors’ frequent attempts to turn the stirring and pointed phrase often succeed: “It is in the flames of difficulty that the tempered steel of faith is forged. Ease does not call forth greatness” (1:154). “To seek others as mediators between ourselves and God is to deny Christ’s role as Redeemer and Savior” (1:195). “Many have had experiences . . . which are the result of a coalescence of circumstances divinely contrived” (2:305). And, though the tag line here is not original, the thought is well expressed: “Satan’s first article of faithlessness has been repeated with creedal clarity since the beginning: One can buy anything in this world for money” (1:302).

But in driving home scriptural truths, McConkie and Millet often try too hard to turn the intensity of a verse up a notch. Consider the passage, “they do err because they are taught by the precepts of men” (2 Ne. 28:14), a favorite theme of the authors. Their commentary begins, “The warning is most sober!” (1:336). Neither this sentence nor the balance of the comment adds anything to the original except weight. In commenting on the verse, “And the blood of the saints shall cry from the ground against them” (2 Ne. 28:10), the authors emphasize, “God will not be mocked, nor will his plan for the salvation of men and the celestialization of the earth be foiled by those with carnal cares and diabolical desires. Truth will prevail. Righteousness will reign” (1:333). This approach may be valuable for those who find scriptural truths too quietly expressed. But the contemplative reader may, after several pages at this volume, begin to feel that Brothers McConkie and Millet have produced a commentary for the spiritually deaf.

Another danger of their hortatory approach is the resultant tendency to reduce all matters of belief, faith, love, and hope—the inner, mystical questions—to mere prescriptive formulations. For example: “As there is no salvation without truth, so there is no salvation without obedience—without a ‘broken heart and a contrite spirit’” (1:193). The phrase, “a broken heart and a contrite spirit,” speaks of the disciple’s inward condition. It resonates
with overtones of emotion and implication: what does it mean about salvation that in order to receive it one’s heart must break? Who or what breaks the disciple’s heart? What kinds of mortal experiences are most likely to produce a spirit of contrition? But the authors sweep aside all such questions of the heart by equating a broken heart and contrite spirit with “obedience,” generally understood in the Church to mean right action. This equation appears to reverse Jesus’ admonition to “cleanse first that which is within the cup and platter, that the outside of them may be clean also” (Matt. 23:26).

The authors even maintain that grace, generally considered an antidote to an excessive preoccupation with human works, is itself earned by human works: “Indeed, it is only after a person has so performed a lifetime of works and faithfulness—only after he has come to deny himself of all ungodliness and every worldly lust—that the grace of God, that spiritual increment of power, is efficacious” (1:295). While their position is not without scriptural support (see, for example, Moroni 10:32), it has the effect of desiccating the better supported view that grace is granted through the merits, not of the recipient, but of the Giver.

Whether the commentary intends to teach or preach, expound or exhort, some passages leave the reader merely puzzled. For example, the comment on 1 Nephi 1:1 begins with promise: “This passage has evoked many discourses on the value of good parents, though it is not that to which Nephi was making reference.” But that promise quickly melts into confusing sentimentality: “The use of this text for that purpose is nevertheless most appropriate. Few of life’s treasures are of greater value than righteous parents” (1:19). Equally puzzling are the following comments: “The twisting winds associated with the ever-destructive fires of contention will turn upon those igniting them” (1:173). “There is almost no limit to the Lord’s mercy . . .” (1:346, emphasis added). And, “The Lord’s Church is a kingdom without a royal court, traditional nobility, gentry, social rankings, or any sort of caste system” (2:302). Elsewhere, the authors describe as “marvelously instructive and prophetic” blessings of which “we have no account” (1:214), assert that the Ten Commandments are not a part of the Law of Moses (2:216), and quote Elder Bruce R. McConkie to suggest that our eternal salvation depends on our ability to understand the writings of Isaiah as fully and truly as Nephi understood them (“who shall say such is not the case!”) (1:277). They also maintain the seemingly contradictory positions that “people do not earn eternal life” (2:258) and that “there are no unearned blessings” (2:133).
Other passages are more troubling than puzzling. A frequent theme of the work is the foolishness and wickedness of the unrighteous, those who reject the glad tidings of the restored gospel:

Little imagination is necessary to determine the source of that spirit which is offended by the desire of God’s children to become like their eternal Father. (1:197)

It is a simple matter to discern the source of that spirit which protests the announcement that more of the word of the Lord has been restored to us. (1:349)

The unidentified source of these nonmembers’ spirits is evidently the devil. Assigning diabolical motives to all who disagree is the ultimate act of ecclesiastical chauvinism. It is repugnant to the character of Joseph Smith and to the teachings of Jesus. It is false and wrong to imply that God’s love or approval are reserved for Mormons, and that those who reject Mormon doctrine are Satan-inspired. How can it be a “simple matter” to penetrate the heart of a fellow human and judge his or her motivation? Is this the judgment with which we would be judged?

It is uncharitable at best to revile and accuse any who lack or reject the greater knowledge we have been given. But it is worse to issue a condemnation so sweeping that it might well include Christians such as G. K. Chesterton, C. S. Lewis, Malcolm Muggeridge, and many others who have defended the doctrine of Christ’s vicarious sacrifice for human sin. Elder Boyd K. Packer, in a passage quoted in the commentary, calls this teaching “the very root of Christian doctrine.” It is perhaps better to be clear on that root than to be among those who “only know the branches and those branches do not touch that root,” for there will be “no life nor substance nor redemption in them,” according to Elder Packer (2:233-34). The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was restored by the Lord’s hand. It contains the fullness of his gospel and is the sole repository on earth of all revealed priesthood keys. But it is not the only place he can be found.

Doctrinal Commentary of the Book of Mormon will be read and appreciated by many Latter-day Saints, but I would not expect it to be popular among those whose minds and spirits are challenged by the Book of Mormon. If you enjoy novel insights, scriptural exegesis, or attention to implication, skip this one. But if you value categorical assertions of ultimate truths, if you see mostly darkness without the walls of Zion and light within, if you believe grace is for Mormons who keep all the commandments, then this is your set.