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Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins Noel B. Reynolds

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NOEL B. REYNOLDS, ed. *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*. Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1997. 574 pp. Index. \$19.95.

Reviewed by Dow R. Wilson, General Manager of General Electric Plastics' Structured Products Division in Bergen-op-Zoom, The Netherlands.

Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited is a sequel to *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, published in 1982 by BYU's Religious Studies Center and also edited by Noel Reynolds. In light of the growing body of significant insights into the antiquity of the Book of Mormon, this volume refreshes, updates, and extends the discussion begun sixteen years ago. Contributors present sixteen essays from a broad range of perspectives to address directly those questions that relate to Book of Mormon origins and authorship. In the contributors' view, one cannot prove scientifically that ancient prophets wrote the Book of Mormon. One can, however, definitively refute false claims as well as give evidence in support of the divine theory. *Revisited* does an outstanding job of presenting insightful and interesting evidence to support the Book of Mormon as an ancient text. The analysis below will highlight some of the noteworthy points in the four sections of the anthology.

Part one, "The Nineteenth-Century Origin of the Book of Mormon," focuses on the historical background, the witnesses, and the translation process. The underlying theme is that, in their haste to show that the Book of Mormon is a product of early-nineteenth-century culture, critics gloss over the historical details. The issue is "matching": do purported theories about the origin of the book match the nineteenth-century historical evidence? Richard Bushman uses primary sources to lay out the historical context that any theory on Book of Mormon origins must address. His essay points out the matter-of-factness of the translation process and the consistency of the source material to the details. Royal Skousen's analysis of the original manuscript strengthens Bushman's evidence. Skousen shows how the original manuscript indicates that the work was written from a translation and dictation process. These essays, along with Richard Anderson's update of

the accounts of the eyewitnesses to the golden plates, form a solid case that the scenario that best matches the historical details is the explanation given by Joseph Smith.

The articles in part two, “The Logical Structure of the Authorship Debate,” discuss the nature of the authorship debate and address the most fundamental assumptions and arguments of critics from the time of the appearance of the Book of Mormon to the present day. Louis Midgley’s “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon?” is one of the best researched and certainly the most passionate (without being defensive) work in the entire collection. He traces the evolution of alternative explanations to the authorship question, connecting early alternatives posed by Alexander Campbell, Philastus Hurlbut, and E. D. Howe with the more recent theories of Fawn Brodie, David Wright, and Anthony Hutchinson. Midgley’s analysis suggests that there has been a gradual shift over time in the critical response regarding Book of Mormon authorship. While his claim that this shift resulted from well-researched, data-driven works produced by faithful Latter-day Saints is not necessarily established by the evidence he gives for the history of the debate, there is not a better analysis in or out of the Church.

Part three, “Letting the Text Speak for Itself,” is the “beef” of the book. It includes works on wordprinting (statistical analysis of texts designed to contrast authorship), chiasmus, demographics, and textual content. Up to this point, *Revisited* focuses on answering the critics in a stroke-for-stroke battle. Here, the level of the debate is seriously augmented as the contributors switch from defense to offense. If, for example, the critics are going to claim that the Book of Mormon is a product of a dissociative or manic-depressive Joseph Smith, they are going to have to bring statistical control studies to the party as has John Hilton in his wordprint analysis of Book of Mormon authors. Can a manic depressive effect a wordprint different from his own? Can a religious genius differentiate his wordprint consistently across different authors and various forms of writing in his text? While Hilton’s essay does not contain some of the results of his more recent studies, it nevertheless remains unanswered by any reasonable scholastic effort.

Also in this section, John Welch extends his impressive string of successes on the contribution of chiasmus to the Book of Mormon.

Welch steps back to evaluate the “so what” of the occurrence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon. This is a brilliant essay that goes beyond the analysis of form and function he has entertained so well in previous publications. Welch shows that form not only adds to the meaning of a text, but that it serves many purposes, such as in comparing different authors, reflecting different cultural and societal influences, indicating Israelite characteristics present, and scrutinizing the nature of translation. Welch demonstrates the far-ranging impact that the evidence of chiasmus should have in defining the nature of the text. Perhaps, in the view of some critics, the mere presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon might be a fluke of some psychological anomaly, but, as Welch shows, the evidence of chiasmus goes far beyond a discussion of form, for the usage of this structural tool in the Book of Mormon brings to light many fascinating across-author analyses that are consistent with what the book says about itself. Certainly the frequent presence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon creates a problem for critics. Rather than dismissing chiasmus out of hand (already very difficult) or simply attributing it to the genius of Joseph Smith, critics will now have to generate a case demonstrating how Joseph could have created such high quality chiasmus that preserve across-author cultural and poetical differences as well as poignant historical consistencies. Welch’s contribution strengthens significantly the already strong evidence of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon.

Part four, “Locating the Book of Mormon Geographically and Culturally,” concludes the book with three essays addressing the geographical and cultural location of the Book of Mormon. In my view, the most interesting of these is by Book of Mormon geography expert John Sorenson. In the longest and most difficult article in the book, Sorenson explores the Book of Mormon as an ancient Mesoamerican text. While difficult, this article is perhaps also the most rewarding. Sorenson explores sixty different ways in which the Book of Mormon corresponds with life and culture in Mesoamerica. Any one of these points on its own may seem insignificant—“proof-texting” in reverse—but together they make a resoundingly complete database—a sort of yellow pages of evidence for the Mesoamerican antiquity of the Book of Mormon. The reader who has the patience to plow through these passages will be well rewarded.

Who is the reader for this anthology? As a collection of the arguments relative to the origins of the Book of Mormon, this is an outstanding resource for those who have been observing or participating in the battle—academic or amateur. For these, the book will serve as a superb study tool, a fascinating straight-through read, or outstanding material for desultory essay-at-a-time reading that is more and more common in our time-constrained world. As a weakness, *Revisited* perhaps assumes a level of familiarity with the critical arguments on Book of Mormon authorship that may be frustrating to newcomers.

For those who have read the earlier work, *Revisited* is an excellent complement. The contributions concerning the recovery of the Book of Mormon (Bushman), the original manuscript (Skousen), the critical theories on who wrote the Book of Mormon (Midgley), direct responses to typical Book of Mormon authorship issues (Daniel Peterson), Nephite demographics (James Smith), and the comparative study of the Zosimus text and accounts from the tree of life vision by Lehi and Nephi (John Welch) are significant and worth the purchase price by themselves. Other articles are significantly updated from the 1982 book or earlier publications elsewhere. Usually they do not replace what was written previously but expand it meaningfully.

The most impressive achievement of *Revisited* is how well it works as a collection. As an armchair historian, I am frequently dismayed at the narrowness of some critical approaches to the Book of Mormon or Mormon history. It is disappointing when a critic takes a particular, limited approach (be it textual, critical, historical, psychological, or otherwise) to Book of Mormon origins and makes sweeping, all-encompassing conclusions as a result. Such critics fall far short of what Samuel Johnson, a great English critic, said was essential for the critical eye—that the critic must be able to focus on the whole as well as on the parts.¹

The accomplishment of *Revisited* is that it addresses the parts and the whole extremely well. The contributions are well researched in primary-source data, using scholarly critical tools. These studies have been peer reviewed, in several cases by scholars outside the Mormon community. Perhaps most satisfying is the intellectual honesty in all the essays that recognizes the limitations

of the various approaches. As such, the contributors address the part and generalize to the whole only so far as appropriate. Given this rigor, the collection puts forth a critical defense as well as a documented offense for the divine, ancient origins of the Book of Mormon. These tight presentations create a view of the whole that critics must deal with part by part and in totality from now on.

NOTE

¹See Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abyssinia*, quoted in Walter Jackson Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts*, enl. ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1970), 206-7. See also R. D. Stock, ed., *Samuel Johnson's Literary Criticism*, Regents Critics Series (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1974), 14-15.