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*By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a World Religion* by Terry L. Givens

Daniel C. Peterson

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Terryl L. Givens. *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a World Religion.*

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

The publication of Terryl Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon* by Oxford University Press represents a breakthrough in the history of Mormon scholarship. Like its impressive predecessor, *The Viper on the Hearth*, it offers a sympathetic approach to Mormonism that—with the distinct exception of the books on Mormon history issued by such presses as the University of Illinois, Alfred A. Knopf, and the University of Chicago—has had few precedents, if any, at so rarified a level of academic publishing.<sup>1</sup> This time, though, the sympathetic focus is on the primary Mormon scriptural text itself.<sup>2</sup>

It is one thing to treat the *history* of the Latter-day Saints with sympathy and with regret for their persecutions and sufferings in the nineteenth century. It is quite another for so elite a publisher as Oxford to treat Mormon *beliefs* respectfully, as worthy of serious intellectual engagement.<sup>3</sup> (Oxford *requested* this manuscript from Terryl Givens, having been pleased with *The Viper on the Hearth*.) Open virtually any textbook on the history of the United States or, even more strikingly, on the history of American religion, and you will almost unfailingly find a brief synopsis of the life of Joseph Smith and a cursory summation of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. You will then read a very concise but also more or less admiring account of the heroic pioneer trek to the Great Basin. But you will typically not find, even in books on the religious history of the American people, much curiosity about the actual ideas and claims that have motivated and provided life-structuring meaning for millions of Latter-day Saints over the better part of two centuries. At the annual joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, the premier and by far the largest gathering of scholars focused

on religious history and religious ideas, Mormonism seldom receives any attention at all while whole sessions are devoted to such topics as the religious significance of Madonna's music videos and to small eco-feminist religious communes.

That's why the publication of this book—a book friendly to Latter-day Saint belief—by Oxford University Press is so exciting. And the icing on the cake is that *By the Hand of Mormon* is very, very good.

The late Roman Catholic sociologist of religion Thomas F. O'Dea famously (and accurately) quipped, "The Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."<sup>4</sup> Terryl Givens, who teaches English, comparative literature, and religious studies at the University of Richmond, in Virginia, has plainly read the Book of Mormon with great care and intelligence. Though a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (he recently served as a bishop), he offers a reading of the Book of Mormon and the controversies surrounding it that will challenge and offer fresh insight to his fellow Latter-day Saints, to say nothing of those who have seen no value to be gained from consideration of Mormon texts and Mormon ideas.<sup>5</sup>

*By the Hand of Mormon* is divided into nine chapters. The first two cover the story of the coming forth of the book and survey its contents, in Givens's characteristically reflective manner. The third chapter explains the role that the Book of Mormon plays in the Latter-day Saint community as a sign and symbol of God's modern communication with humankind and of the calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith. The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters offer a balanced survey of arguments for and against the antiquity of the Book of Mormon and of the attempt to determine a possible ancient setting for its narrative. Along the way, readers are briefly introduced to pivotal figures such as Hugh Nibley and John Sorenson as well as to the New World Archaeological Foundation and the more recent Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS). Chapters seven and eight address the question of what, if any, doctrinal contributions the Book of Mormon makes. And, finally, the last chapter concisely summarizes the role of the Book of Mormon as a "cultural touchstone."

But a mere listing of chapters does little to exhibit the richness of *By the Hand of Mormon*. A necessarily brief review also cannot do justice to the book, but perhaps a few highlights might be helpful.

Givens argues that the Book of Mormon has been neglected by the Latter-day Saints, at least in a certain sense, virtually since its publication (240–41). And that neglect began with Joseph Smith himself. "It is remarkable but true," Givens observes, "that almost from the instant of its publication,

the Book of Mormon ceased to be the focus of Joseph's attention" (61). The Prophet seldom cited it in his sermons (193).<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Givens insists on its crucial role in grounding "Mormon" identity. Despite the "shifting fortunes" of the book and its followers, whether it be "the gathering remarked as a curiosity by Dickens, the polygamy pilloried by preachers and politicians," or a host of other persecutions or triumphs, "from the start, the record bearing Mormon's name has served to identify and unify the Mormon people. Even those members who feel more cultural than doctrinal affinity to the church, even those Mormons who are oblivious to the sacred record's origins and teachings, cannot escape its power to name them and to shape the language of their religious culture" (242-43).

But the Book of Mormon emphatically did not form the identity of the Latter-day Saints by endowing them with a host of new and unprecedented doctrines. Rather, long-standing Mormon focus on the story of its coming forth and on the angelic manifestations connected with it suggests that "what it signifies as an event may be more important than what it actually says" (63; compare 187, 196). It has historically been more prominent as *signifier* rather than as *signified*. "The Book of Mormon is preeminently a concrete manifestation of sacred utterance, and thus an evidence of divine presence, before it is a repository of theological claims" (64; compare 235). Drawing helpfully upon the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin, Givens distinguishes between *authoritative discourse* and *internally persuasive discourse* and locates the Book of Mormon squarely in the former category. Unlike internally persuasive discourse, which exercises influence upon those who encounter it by its logical, rhetorical, or emotional power, authoritative discourse carries such authority with it from the start that the question of its internal merit is, at most, of secondary importance. Moreover, it must either be accepted or rejected in its totality, because it commands our assent and allows no picking and choosing. (See the discussion on pages 80-82.) This is plainly how Joseph Smith understood it, since, while he rarely commented on the contents of the Book of Mormon, he commonly told the story of its origin (85).

On those relatively rare occasions when it was cited in the nineteenth century, it was most commonly used to teach the doctrine of the gathering of Israel and of the imminence of the Second Coming (67). But even then it served as a sign of the gathering and as a sign of the Last Days at least as much as it taught *about* them.

Because of the Book of Mormon's perceived role as a symbol and illustration of divine involvement with the claims and history of Mormonism, establishing the truth about the origins of the Book of Mormon has long been deemed vital by both advocates and critics of the Restoration. And

the tale of the book's coming forth has presented its audience with a clear decision. Givens rightly emphasizes the roots of the Book of Mormon in what he repeatedly terms *artifactual reality*: "Referring to a book actually 'deposited' in the earth, and consisting of a physical, tangible medium—actual gold plates—lifts the revelatory experience beyond the nebulous stuff of visions and alters the whole dynamic of the religious claims Smith would be making" (12; compare 37).

The reports from various eyewitnesses of having seen and "hefted" golden plates, "directors," ancient breastplates, and "interpreters" force the issue of truth or falsity in a way that, say, the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad does not and leave no comfortable middle ground upon which to compromise (83). "Together they constitute perhaps the most extensive and yet contentious body of evidence in support of the tactile reality of supernaturally conveyed artifacts that we have in the modern age" (22). "The sacred relics are heralded by and connected with manifestations of a heavenly order," writes Givens. "But that cannot diminish the plain truth that the plates are material artifacts, as real, tangible, and rooted in history as any shards of pottery, and they are seen with 'natural vision'" (104). The plates were "buried in a nearby hillside, not in Joseph's psyche or religious unconscious" (42). "Joseph Smith and his revelations . . . simply do not cooperate" in anybody's project to metaphorize or spiritualize his claims. The manner of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon makes it "highly resistant to interpretive negotiation." Givens points out that other "visionary" writings, such as those of Jakob Boehme and Emanuel Swedenborg, could be "selectively appreciated" by ignoring the most problematic passages. The Book of Mormon, however, is "highly resistant to interpretive negotiation."

Those who want to salvage Joseph Smith's prophetic role . . . by avoiding what they see as the embarrassing ramifications of his naked prose or the fragility of the book's historical claims are hard-pressed to devise nonliteral readings of his discourse in order to recapture a little mystery and terror. The problem, of course, is that Joseph's prophetic writings were grounded in artifactual reality, not the world of psychic meanderings. It is hard to allegorize—and profoundly presumptuous to edit down—a sacred record that purports to be a transcription of tangible records hand-delivered by an angel. (79–80; compare 177–78)

The Book of Mormon must be accepted or rejected on its own terms. "When you get at the hard core of the situation, the Book of Mormon as an objective fact," wrote the atheist Utah historian Dale Morgan in a letter to Juanita Brooks, "there isn't any middle ground; it becomes as simple a matter as the Mormons and anti-Mormons originally said it was. Either

Joseph was all he claimed to be, or during the period at least of the writing of the Book of Mormon he was a ‘conscious fraud and imposter’” (155).

Of course, while the fundamental issue may be clear in principle, in practice the available evidence has been decidedly less clear, and the battle lines on this issue have shifted back and forth with the passage of time. Referring to the heady and triumphalist days of early Mormon arguments for the Book of Mormon as an explanation of the prehistory of the American Indian, “developments in professional archaeology outstripped Mormon efforts to muster the resources of science to Book of Mormon apologetics.” Though traditional Mormon beliefs about the indigenous people of the Americas seemed less plausible as time went on, a growing sophistication and plausibility in interpretation began to form (142).

Already in Joseph Smith’s own day (and probably in his own mind), notions about the original setting of the Book of Mormon were in flux. For one thing, the culture depicted in the Book of Mormon seemed to bear little or no comparison to that of the familiar Indians of North America (101). Givens shows, in passing, how Joseph’s own thinking may have moved from a hemispheric view of the Book of Mormon to one more focused on what is today known as Mesoamerica (90–91, 99, 101–4). Thus, the limited-geography hypothesis (associated most prominently with John Sorenson and FARMS), which situates the narrative of the Book of Mormon in a small area of Mexico and Guatemala, is no mere artifact of modern apologists and their scholarship.

That Givens has been influenced by some of this scholarship shows up, nevertheless, in his adoption of Sorenson’s important insight into the Book of Mormon as a “lineage history” of limited geographical and ethnic scope (52–53), with its corollary view of the Book of Mormon peoples as relatively small groups surrounded by others in their New World environment (127–28). Such influence also shows in Givens’s manifest sympathy—admirably disinterested for a native New Yorker, as Givens is (17)—for the argument that the Cumorah of the final Nephite battle is not the hill in which Moroni ultimately buried the plates (55).

Givens acknowledges the lack of clear New World archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon but does not regard this lack as fatal to Latter-day Saint truth-claims. In this connection, he cites the Assyriologist André Parrot, who once noted with understated irony that “one hundred years ago in Mesopotamia, it was discovered that history lies behind the Old Testament” (89). The situation of having a text first and only much later finding material remains to support its historical assertions is scarcely unprecedented. As Israeli archaeologist Trude Dothan commented in a 1994 interview, “We didn’t even know there were Philistines



until we read about them in the Old Testament” (90). Moreover, as Givens notes, the secular argument for the narrative in 1 Nephi received a giant boost with the discovery in the 1990s of a pair of altars bearing inscribed references to the ancient Arabian tribe of NHM in the region of Book of Mormon *Nahom* (1 Ne. 16:34) and dating to the very time of Lehi—perhaps “the first actual archaeological evidence for the historicity of the Book of Mormon” (120).

But Givens, by training and profession a scholar of literature, may be most impressed by the qualities of the Book of Mormon text itself:

The naked implausibility of gold plates, seer stones, and warrior-angels finds little by way of scientific corroboration, but attributing to a young farmboy the 90-day dictated and unrevised production of a 500-page narrative that incorporates sophisticated literary structures, remarkable Old World parallels, and some 300 references to chronology and 700 to geography with virtually perfect self-consistency is problematic as well. (156)

“Only,” he writes, “in blithe disregard for the actual particulars of the Book of Mormon, its epic sweep, its narrative complexities, its etymological richness and substantial echoes of Middle Eastern literary structures and patterns were the simplistic and dismissive nineteenth-century countertheories of origin possible” (142–43).

Givens has read the Book of Mormon with careful attention to precisely those “actual particulars,” and *By the Hand of Mormon* sparkles with stimulating insights. To choose one example, Givens contrasts the relative optimism and hopefulness of the small plates with the pessimism of Mormon’s position in the balance of the record and with Mormon’s occasionally (but, given his own biography, perhaps understandably) rather grim emphasis on justice more than mercy (53–54). This is an important contribution to ongoing discussions of whether the Book of Mormon is the work of one modern author or of multiple, and distinguishable, ancient personalities.

Givens notes and, to a certain extent, grants the claim most commonly advanced by critics of the Restoration that the Book of Mormon contains few if any explicit references to many of the doctrines uniquely characteristic of Mormonism. There is, for instance, no express discussion of human deification (even though, in my opinion, 3 Nephi 28:10 offers a broad hint of it) nor of the various degrees of glory, tithing, the Word of Wisdom, baptism for the dead, the antemortal existence of human spirits, or eternal marriage. The Book of Mormon seemed familiar to those who first read it. “In fact, the accounts of early converts to Mormonism confirm that it was the congruence of Book of Mormon teachings with the New

Testament that dampened their objections to a new scripture and allowed it to affect their conversion for reasons other than doctrinal novelty or innovation" (186; compare 197).

But Givens offers a valuable warning to those who seek to reduce the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith to mere products of the American environment in which they appeared. "Situating Mormonism in the context of related religious movements and developments of the nineteenth century," he observes, "has become an increasingly popular historical enterprise." But this useful historical approach can, he points out, be carried too far: "When considering the setting of Mormon origins . . . it is important to remember that the quest for cultural consistencies can undermine the very project of historical inquiry that attempts to assess the particularity of a given phenomenon." In support of his contention, he cites John Gager, a historian of early Christianity at Princeton University: "If early Mormonism or early Christianity are merely warmed-over versions of mid-nineteenth or mid-third century culture, then we are at a loss to explain why these particular movements, and not their many contemporary competitors, not only survived but also flourished in such a remarkable fashion" (231).

Givens is manifestly underwhelmed by the environmentalist explanations offered to date. He cites Hugh Nibley's paraphrase of the rule laid down by the great New Testament scholar Friedrich Blass "that whoever presumes to doubt the purported source and authorship of a document cannot possibly escape the obligation of supplying a more plausible account in its stead" (159) and makes it clear that no such account has yet been provided for the Book of Mormon. "In most of these studies, the Book of Mormon itself is considered only in terms of scattered ideas it contains, but not as a text whose very existence as a whole needs to be reckoned with" (167). Few would-be debunkers have been as frank as the late Dale Morgan: "With my point of view on God, I am incapable of accepting the claims of Joseph Smith and the Mormons, be they however so convincing. If God does not exist, how can Joseph Smith's story have any possible validity? I will look everywhere for explanations except to the ONE explanation that is the position of the Church" (162; emphasis in the original).

Referring to a prominent non-Mormon historian at Brown University, Givens suggests a possible way for Latter-day Saints to understand and explain undeniable and broad areas of congruity between formative-period Mormon beliefs and certain religious tendencies observable in its early nineteenth-century environment. Noting the eschatological ardor of the first Mormon converts, considerably muted in the contemporary Church, Givens finds "plausible Gordon Wood's assessment of the timely



fit between the Book of Mormon's publication and its cultural context: "Its timing in 1830 was providential. It appeared at precisely the right moment in American history; much earlier or later and the Church might not have taken hold" (71).

But the Book of Mormon's purported failure to offer innovative doctrinal content can be overstated. Givens cites a summary by B. H. Roberts of what Roberts saw as original contributions from the book. Among them is the definition of truth, the law of opposite existences, the cosmological doctrine that the universe splits into two categories "things to act and things to be acted upon" (2 Nephi 2:14), humankind's place in that division as agents that are to act for themselves, the doctrine that the fall of Adam was instrumental to a higher good, and a "master stroke" explanation of evil being "among the eternal things"—as eternal as goodness, law, or even intelligence itself—thereby offering a solution to the classical question of whether or not God can be held responsible for the rise of evil or the devil.<sup>7</sup>

"But most significant, [Roberts] found in Mormonism a distinctive doctrine of Christ and his atonement, 'derived almost wholly from the teachings of the Book of Mormon' (198). (Givens sets out his own interesting reading of the Book of Mormon teaching on Christ's atonement on pages 205–7.) Givens himself points to "one of the most radical and pervasive themes in the Book of Mormon—pre-Christian knowledge of Christ" (199). "This centeredness on Christ, the Messiah, in a document purporting to have been written by New World Israelites over a period from the six centuries *before* Christ to AD 421 is certainly one of the more remarkable—and daring—features of the Book of Mormon, theologically" (46, emphasis in original). "For sheer number of references to Christ, the Book of Mormon is a scripture without parallel," he writes, citing studies that calculate a reference to Christ every 1.7 verses, perhaps occurring more frequently than even in the New Testament. "The irony of all this is that Mormons find themselves reviled as non-Christians by many fundamentalist Protestants while holding sacred not two testaments of Christ, but three" (199–200).

Possibly the most innovative portion of *By the Hand of Mormon*—as the author himself seems to recognize on page 234—is Givens's discussion of what he terms "dialogic revelation," which, by coincidence, he sees as one of the most significant and innovative contributions of the Book of Mormon and as a "radical challenge" to mainstream Christianity:

One finds in the Book of Mormon that prayer frequently and dramatically evokes an answer that is impossible to mistake as anything other than an individualized, dialogic response to a highly particularized question.

The conception of revelation as a personalized, dialogic exchange pervades the Book of Mormon—as well as the life of the Prophet Joseph—like an insistent leitmotif. It is firmly rooted in a radically anthropomorphic theology. (217–18)

This is propositional revelation, not merely (as in many forms of mysticism) an ineffable sense of oneness with the universe. “No shadowy spiritual intimations these, no merely intuited guidance or inspiration, but direct divine discourse that frequently rises to the level of genuine dialogic exchange” (219; compare 225, 232, 233). Furthermore, it is portrayed in the Book of Mormon as available not only to great prophets and leaders, but, democratically, to everyman (220–21, 223–24). And it can be received not only on the great issues of existence but, in many cases, for practical decisions in everyday life (225). Indeed, such personal revelation is essential to spiritual survival (227), and, in inviting its readers to settle the question of its own truthfulness through an appeal to precisely such private communication from God himself, the Book of Mormon has created a community that, like those described in its own pages, expects and relies upon direct divine guidance, not only institutionally but individually (228–29, 231, 235–36). “For millions of believers, the Book of Mormon has been the vehicle through which they could find their own sacred grove and reenact on a personal scale the epiphany that ushered in a new dispensation” (239).

In this context, Givens implicitly disputes the accusation leveled by many critics that Latter-day Saint faith, with its insistence on personal revelation and testimony, rests on virtually explicit irrationalism:

Personal revelation in the Book of Mormon’s model had the advantage of following upon, rather than substituting for, thoughtful consideration of the book. Religious experience that validated its truthfulness was not seen by early—or modern—converts as hostile to rationalism . . . . As Steven Harper demonstrates, “one finds the word ‘reasonable’ and its relatives used frequently by writers trying to describe what it was in Mormon theology that caused conversion in them.” (238)

This is a multifaceted book that sheds light on numerous aspects of Latter-day Saint belief and practice as well as upon the Book of Mormon itself. I’ve been strongly tempted to say that Latter-day Saints should purchase *By the Hand of Mormon* (perhaps even in bulk, for gifts) in order to support Oxford University Press and thereby to encourage the Press, through this book’s success, to publish more such volumes. But I’ve resisted that temptation. In any event, the exhortation is unnecessary. Latter-day Saints should purchase *By the Hand of Mormon* for themselves and for others because it is a profound book from which they and others will learn much.

Daniel C. Peterson (daniel\_peterson@byu.edu) is professor of Islamic Studies and Arabic in the Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University and currently serves as editor-in-chief of BYU's Middle Eastern Texts Initiative. He received a BA in Greek and philosophy from BYU and, after several years of study in Jerusalem and Cairo, earned his PhD in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures from the University of California at Los Angeles.

1. See Terryl L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). This study of anti-Mormonism and the construction of a threatening "Other" in (mostly) nineteenth-century literature seems, unfortunately, to have been neglected by both Latter-day Saint readers and Mormon booksellers.

2. Philip Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), could also be seen as an important milestone, but its subject matter is considerably less path-breaking for a publisher like Oxford than is that of *By the Hand of Mormon*. Also noteworthy, though for very different reasons, is John L. Brooke, *The Refiner's Fire: The Making of Mormon Cosmology, 1644-1844* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), a lamentable book that seems, fortunately, to have disappeared without leaving behind much of a trace.

3. We may, perhaps, be pardoned for hoping that at least a small trend is on its way. The conference "God, Humanity, and Revelation: Perspectives from Mormon Philosophy and History," which was held at Yale Divinity School on March 27-29, 2003, seems a hopeful sign, as do the stirrings of interest in Mormon studies at such places as Claremont Graduate School.

4. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

5. Somewhat inexplicably, the fact that Terryl Givens is a communicant Latter-day Saint is nowhere mentioned in *By the Hand of Mormon*. It is possible that this represents a marketing decision by Oxford, but it exposes him to charges of not having been forthright.

6. His relative lack of interest in the Book of Mormon strikes me, incidentally, as a subtle indication that Joseph Smith was not its author. Had it represented his own thoughts and his own laboriously worked-out theology, one could reasonably expect him to have made more use of it. Instead, his behavior seems to be that of someone who has been handed something that he may not fully appreciate. A similar conclusion might be drawn from Joseph's notable failure, extending over roughly a dozen years, to grasp the revolutionary implications of the vision recorded in Doctrine and Covenants 76—a failure that is very difficult to understand if the revelation merely summarized his own views but is much easier to fathom if the content of the revelation was, as Latter-day Saints believe, bestowed upon him from a source external to himself. On the puzzling neglect of Section 76 by Joseph and other early Latter-day Saints, see Grant Underwood, "'Saved or Damned': Tracing a Persistent Protestantism in Early Mormon Thought," *BYU Studies* 25, no. 3 (1985): 85-103.

7. See Jacob 4:13, 5:59; 2 Nephi 2, 10:23; Alma 41:13, 42:16-17, 61:21.