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Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources

Gerrit van Dyk

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Foundational Texts of Mormonism: Examining Major Early Sources, edited by Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018)

At first glance, the title of this work may imply it is a documentary history project, but in fact, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Robin Scott Jensen, and Sharalyn D. Howcroft have not compiled a collection of documents, but rather a series of essays by other scholars (with the exception of Howcroft who includes her own entry in the volume) *about* these foundational documents. The editors lay out the purpose of the book, which “insists on the importance of taking a closer look at the essential texts that historians use to reconstruct the founding era of the Church” (1). They further state that since these major sources have been used and will continue to be used extensively by writers, these texts need to be understood and viewed with a more critical eye.

The editors begin their introduction crediting Dean C. Jessee’s landmark work in the 1970s as the start of the present compilation. Jessee (to whom the volume itself is dedicated) discovered that the *History of Joseph Smith, the Prophet, by Himself*, was actually largely compiled by scribes and assistants and was not, in fact, written by Joseph at all, though the project was certainly under his direction. Ashurst-McGee, Jensen, and Howcroft then appropriately recognize that “while the complex production of Joseph Smith’s history may make it the archetypical example of the need to understand how and when and by whom a document was created, there are several other foundational sources, used frequently by those researching and writing in early Mormon history, that are not what they appear to be on their face” (4). Their volume reviews

these “other foundational sources” and offers greater context to their creation and subsequent publication and reception (4).

After the introduction, the book includes twelve essays by various scholars in the field. The shortest two essays are twenty-three pages long, and the longest is an impressive forty pages. Additionally, there are illustrations, maps, and facsimiles of some of the documents discussed. Beginning with Richard Lyman Bushman’s “The Gold Plates as Foundational Text,” these essays proceed more or less in chronological order. Bushman reminds his readers that the entire project of the Book of Mormon, like the project of the early Saints, was a human one. Though the Book of Mormon prophets claimed divine inspiration, ultimately it was their imperfect fingers that inscribed the text, just as it was the determined but flawed hands and hearts of the early Saints who carried the fledgling faith past the martyrdom and into the twentieth century.

Next in line, Grant Hardy builds on Royal Skousen’s textual work of the Book of Mormon in “Textual Criticism and the Book of Mormon,” followed by Thomas A. Wayment’s “Intertextuality and the Purpose of Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible,” in which Wayment posits the possibility that the Book of Moses was the catalyst for the New Testament translation, which led to Smith’s Christianization of the Old Testament and a comprehensive harmonization of the Bible with his developing theology. Grant Underwood then moves away from translation to oral tradition in his “The Dictation, Compilation, and Canonization of Joseph Smith’s Revelations.” Underwood focuses his essay on Joseph Smith’s dictation of revelations that were later canonized as sections in the Doctrine and Covenants. Underwood demonstrates that Joseph considered these

revelations to be works in progress, based on the imperfect nature of dictation and the work of mortal scribes, which necessitated corrections. “The texts of his [Joseph’s] revelations,” Underwood notes, “were not understood as infallible texts written in stone by the finger of God; they came instead through a finite and fallible prophet who, along with his associates, was not shorn of his humanity in exercising his prophetic office” (122). David W. Grua, Jennifer Reeder, and William V. Smith then each have a piece reviewing Joseph’s letters from Liberty Jail, the Female Relief Society minute book, and the difficulties documenting Joseph’s sermons, respectively. Alex D. Smith and Andrew H. Hedges include a section, “Joseph Smith’s Nauvoo Journals,” further exploring the challenges of reading a work of history not written by the subject.

The final four essays begin with Laurel Thatcher Ulrich’s “The Early Diaries of Wilford Woodruff, 1835–1839,” in which she discusses the earliest entries of Woodruff’s journal and how they reflected not only his sensibilities but also the diarist conventions widely employed by his contemporaries. Howcroft maintains in her chapter, “A Textual and Archival Reexamination of Lucy Mack Smith’s History,” that the same careful examination of Joseph Smith’s published history (as demonstrated by Jessee) should be applied to Lucy Mack Smith’s history of Joseph Smith. The creation and production of Lucy’s history is just as complex and varied and her son’s. Jeffrey G. Cannon then offers a discussion on an understudied format in Latter-day Saint textual criticism: the image. Cannon specifically shows how Latter-day Saint leaders used images to support their succession claims in opposition to the RLDS movement. Ronald O. Barney concludes the collection with a portrait of Joseph Smith

himself and his personality, which may have influenced why he recorded so little of his own thoughts and speeches.

Foundational Texts of Mormonism presents for the scholar and the casual reader added context and understanding to the various receptions of these texts over time. The individual essays are valuable to any study of the texts they examine while also being fine examples of several different types of textual criticism in their own right.

—Gerrit van Dyk

Abinadi: He Came among Them in Disguise, edited by Shon D. Hopkin (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2018)

This volume, which examines the Book of Mormon story of Abinadi, is the first volume generated by the Book of Mormon Academy, “an academic think tank and research group begun . . . to promote scholarship and teaching on the Book of Mormon” (vi). Scholars in this group “primarily pursue their own research agendas,” but sometimes they produce studies “that can be combined into one volume” such as this one (vi).

The chapters are organized into four groups, each bringing different “lenses” to bear on the text. The first group applies “literary lenses” to the Abinadi story. Jared W. Ludlow, Daniel L. Belnap, and Frank F. Judd Jr., in their respective chapters, analyze narrative features of the text that bring to light subtle ideological tensions over Nephite identity and the interpretation of Isaiah. These papers largely build on previous works about the Abinadi account by scholars such as Dana M. Pike, John W. Welch, and Joseph M. Spencer.

The second group utilizes “inter-textual and intratextual lenses” to add