Editor's Introduction: By What Measure Shall We Mete?

Daniel C. Peterson

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Editor's Introduction:

By What Measure Shall We Mete?

Daniel C. Peterson

Hodgson's Test

"What serious and intelligent persons over many generations, and in preference to many available alternatives, have held to be significant," Marshall G. S. Hodgson noted some years ago, "rarely turns out, on close investigation, to be trivial."1 Speaking specifically of Islam, Thomas Carlyle put what was essentially the same point in another way: "Are we to suppose that it was a miserable piece of legerdemain, this which so many creatures of the Almighty have lived by and died by? I, for my part, cannot form any such supposition. I will believe most things sooner than that."2 Islam has, of course, long since met Hodgson's test, and it should grow clearer with each passing year that Mormonism, too, is a legitimate and serious religious option. Yet this fact, to me incontrovertible, is evidently not clear to many people. In his important book Faith and Reason, for instance, faced with the great number of religions claiming to embody divine truth and with our desire to choose between them, the noted British philosopher Richard Swinburne argues that "what a man thinks worth giving his life to serve deserves at least a passing inspection from us, if he assures us that it is of deep significance for us." So far, so good. This agrees nicely with Hodgson and Carlyle, as well as with common sense. But Swinburne's qualification of that proposition is somewhat surprising. "The Mormon . . . who knocks so unwelcome at our door," he continues, "is entitled to a small initial amount of serious attention. But I suggest that for most of us there is not nearly so much point in investigating the credal claims of religions which have not spread throughout the

globe and into which we do not bump, as in investigating the other religions. The failure of the former to spread among those who do come into contact with them is some evidence that they are not worth more serious attention.”

Now, it is possible that Prof. Swinburne is talking about a different group than the Mormons I know. For it seems clear to me that Mormonism is spreading among those who come into contact with it. And, indeed, spreading very rapidly. “It is possible today,” writes the eminent non-Mormon sociologist of religion Rodney Stark, “to study that incredibly rare event: the rise of a new world religion.” (He sees Mormonism as the first new “world religion” since the call of the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century A.D.) “The Mormons,” Stark argues, will soon achieve a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the other dominant world faiths.” To be specific, he predicts a membership of between 60 and 265 million Latter-day Saints by the year 2080.

Scholarly Indifference

Such a phenomenon as this should attract study and attention from the outside world. Has it? On the whole, no. At the recent annual joint meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, papers were given on topics including “Ecofeminism, Food and Pets,” “Howard Thurman and the Civil Rights Movement: Interpreter and Enabler from the Underside of History,” and “Over the Rainbow: Utopian Configurations in Hollywood Fantasy Films”—to choose entirely at random from the more than one thousand titles—but nothing, nothing whatsoever, dealt with Mormonism. Not a single session, not one paper, was devoted to the fastest growing major religion in America.


5 Ibid., 26: “The ‘miracle’ of Mormon success makes them the single most important case on the agenda of the social scientific study of religion.”
However, the problem is not merely one of indifference. In the introduction to last year's edition of the present Review, I alluded to W. D. Davies's 1986 article in the *Harvard Theological Review*, "Reflections on the Mormon Canon," as one hopeful sign of growing scholarly interest in Mormonism. I now suspect that my rejoicing may have been premature. Apparently Professor Davies, a distinguished Protestant scholar of the New Testament, has received considerable criticism for having wasted his time and talents on so unworthy a subject. "The rapid growth of the Mormons," writes Professor Stark, "has gone amazingly un remarked by outsiders. There are probably many reasons for this, including the persistence of considerable prejudice against Mormons and the seeming inability of the mass media to cover adequately much of anything that happens West of Chicago."

I would be willing to wager that many of those who make such criticisms as Professor Davies has allegedly received know nothing or next to nothing about Mormonism. And they probably do not care to know anything. Or, rather, they know just enough about Mormonism to know that they do not want to know any more. "Indeed, 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." Little can be done with, or for, such people. But my concern in the present essay is with those who do read the Book of Mormon—and it is receiving some increased attention, both from believers and skeptics—but who do not, frankly, think much of it. Some, at least, of the detractors of W. D. Davies probably fall into this group, and there are many others. Why do they react so negatively? Is their reaction justified? Is there any way to judge the Book of Mormon's literary and conceptual merit objectively?

Compare the opinions about the Book of Mormon of two quite intelligent writers. First, the late Edmund Wilson, a distinguished literary critic: "The 'translation,'" writes Wilson, "is a

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7 Stark, "The Rise of a New World Faith," 22. On p. 27, Professor Stark says, "I continue to be astonished at the extent to which colleagues who would never utter anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, or even anti-Moslem remarks, unself-consciously and self-righteously condemn Mormons."

farrago of balderdash of which the only passages that possess any dignity are borrowings from the King James Bible." Now, I don’t really know whether Wilson ever actually studied the Book of Mormon, or if he even skimmed a page of it. But his view could not possibly contrast more sharply with the evaluation of Bruce Hafen, a prominent Latter-day Saint legal scholar and educator: “The Book of Mormon,” Hafen declares, “contains without question the most profound theological treatment of the Atonement found in any book now available on any shelf anywhere in the world.”

Are these two men talking about the same book?

Presuppositions

The clear difference between the two approaches, it seems to me, rests in the presuppositions that the two writers bring to their subject. Edmund Wilson found belief in the supernatural virtually incomprehensible, and in fact almost contemptible. His attitude toward Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is not fundamentally unlike his attitude toward Jesus Christ and the New Testament. But how can Wilson’s dismissal of the Book of Mormon possibly allow for the fact that hundreds of thousands of people—lawyers, scientists, farmers, bereaved parents, confused adolescents—have found guidance and comfort and deep wisdom in its pages? How can Wilson account for the testimonies included in Eugene England’s _Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon_, reviewed in this volume?

The power of presuppositions was illustrated very clearly for me by an experience I had while a missionary in Switzerland. I was working in a deeply traditionalist Catholic area which was notoriously resistant to proselyting—my companion and I were reputedly the first missionaries there since

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10 Bruce C. Hafen, _The Broken Heart: Applying the Atonement to Life’s Experiences_ (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 3. This is rather contrary to DeVoto’s estimate of its theological worth: He termed the Book of Mormon “at once a parody of all American religious thought and something more than a parody, a disintegration.” See Bernard DeVoto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” _American Mercury_ 19 (1930): 5.
an earlier pair of elders had been run out of town at gunpoint seven years before—and even to the immigration of Swiss Protestants. We found ourselves speaking with a woman who had first mistaken us for a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses, and was relieved to find we were not. She had been visited some weeks before by two of their representatives, and had received from them a book which was, she said, full of the most bizarre things. We agreed with her that their theology was implausible, but I at least began to feel more and more uneasy as she proceeded to describe the book in greater detail. It was, she recalled, dreadfully dull despite all its silly stories and its outlandish names. When she offered me the book, which she no longer wanted, I eagerly accepted it. And I was not entirely surprised when what she gave me turned out to be the Bible (in the Watchtower version). What had so amused this woman, in a region not given to the reading or even the owning of Bibles, was nothing peculiar to the Jehovah's Witnesses, but the Bible itself. It was unfamiliar to her, foreign to her world and concerns, and she viewed it as a worthless farrago of nonsense.

Her reaction was not so very different from that of St. Jerome (subsequently the translator of the Latin Vulgate Bible), who admitted that, at first, when he "began to read the prophets, their style seemed rude and repellant. I failed," he said, "to see the light with my blinded eyes; but I attributed the fault not to them, but to the sun."11 Jerome's contemporary, St. Augustine, also acknowledged that his appreciation of the Bible had only come after deeper understanding supplanted an earlier disdain. "I decided," he later recalled in his Confessions, "to turn my mind to the Holy Scriptures and to see what they were like. And behold, I see something within them that was neither revealed to the proud nor made plain to children, that was lowly on one's entrance but lofty on further advance, and that was veiled over in mysteries. None such as I was at that time could enter into it, nor could I bend my neck for its passageways. When I first turned to that Scripture, I did not feel towards it as I am speaking now, but it seemed to me unworthy of comparison with the nobility of Cicero's writings. My swelling pride turned away from its humble style, and my sharp gaze did not penetrate into its inner meaning. But in truth it was of its nature that its

meaning would increase together with your little ones, whereas I disdained to be a little child and, puffed up with pride, I considered myself to be a great fellow."\(^{12}\)

**Opinions Vary**

What, then, are we to say of the intrinsic quality of the Bible, or of the Book of Mormon, or, indeed, of any book? Is this issue merely a matter of arbitrariness, of choosing between two attitudes, neither one of which can be rationally demonstrated to be superior to the other? The history of literature certainly offers plausible evidence for such a conclusion. "There are," Hugh Nibley has pointed out, "people who loathe Bach and can't stand Beethoven; it was once as popular among clever and educated people to disdain Homer and Shakespeare as barbaric as it is now proper to rhapsodize about them in great-book clubs."\(^{13}\) "It is said that John Stuart Mill, the man with the fabulous I.Q., read the New Testament with relish until he got to the Gospel of John, when he tossed the book aside before reaching the sixth chapter with the crushing and final verdict, 'This is poor stuff!'"\(^{14}\) "M. de Balzac's place in French literature," Eugene Poitou wrote in 1856, "will be neither considerable nor high." An editor at the *San Francisco Examiner*, rejecting a submission in 1889, implied that the author did not have much of a future in *belles lettres*: "I'm sorry, Mr. Kipling, but you just don't know how to use the English language." "Do you not know," exclaimed Samuel Taylor Coleridge in disgust, "that there is not perhaps one page in Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which he has not borrowed his imagery [sic] from the scriptures?" For partisans of the Book of Mormon, there is a certain satisfaction—the Germans call this *Schadenfreude*—in seeing its detractors themselves reap the wrath of the critics: Surveying the works of Mark Twain, one authority predicted in 1901 that "a hundred years from now it is very likely that 'The Jumping Frog' alone will be remembered." And if the Book of Mormon is "dull," Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is "tedious." As one critic said of Ibsen's great

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14 Ibid., 221.
play A Doll's House, "it was as though someone had dramatized the cooking of a Sunday dinner." ¹⁵

Fashions and tastes are notoriously variable. Enthusiasts for the music of Johann Sebastian Bach will scarcely need reminding that his wide popularity today is of relatively recent date; Albert Schweitzer played an important role in the Bach revival early in this very century. Virtually any good book on Beethoven will testify to the derision his Seventh Symphony received from contemporary critics. It was T. S. Eliot who helped to restore John Donne and the metaphysical poets to an important place in the history of English literature. Rudyard Kipling—he who did not "know how to use the English language"—won the Nobel Prize for Literature and then suffered a long decline in (literary) reputation as his (political) views went out of fashion; now, he seems to be enjoying a resurgence of critical esteem.

An entire book could be devoted to the ebb and flow of critical opinion on Shakespeare. Leo Tolstoy's disdain for the great playwright is well known.¹⁶ But he was not alone. Of Hamlet, Voltaire said that "it is a vulgar and barbarous drama, which would not be tolerated by the vilest populace of France, or Italy. . . . One would imagine this piece to be the work of a drunken savage." "Pure melodrama," wrote George Bernard Shaw of Othello. "There is not a touch of characterization that goes below the skin." And Shaw's opinion of Antony and


¹⁶ Tolstoy himself was the object of strange critical misperceptions. He lived through the awarding of the first ten Nobel Prizes in Literature, and was passed over every time. Those who won instead are, in order: René F.A. Sully-Prudhomme (1901), Theodor Mommsen (1902), Björnstjerne Björnson (1903), Frédéric Mistral and José Echegaray (1904; shared), Henryk Sienkiewicz (1905), Giosuè Carducci (1906; chosen unanimously over Tolstoy, Mark Twain, Rainer Maria Rilke, George Meredith, and Henry James), Rudyard Kipling (1907), Rudolf C. Eucken (1908), Selma Lagerlöf (1909; beating out Tolstoy and Strindberg), and Paul J. L. Heyse (1910). Of the last-named winner, one of the judges remarked that "Germany has not had a greater literary genius since Goethe." See David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, The People's Almanac (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 1098-1100.
Cleopatra was no higher: “To say that there is plenty of bogus characterization in it . . . is merely to say that it is by Shakespeare.” After seeing a performance of A Midsummer Night’s Dream in 1662 London, Samuel Pepys confided to his diary that it was “the most insipid, ridiculous play that I ever saw in my life.” “Shakespeare’s name, you may depend on it,” Lord Byron assured James Hogg in 1814, “stands absurdly too high and will go down. He had no invention as to stories, none whatever. He took all his plots from old novels.” Shakespeare, like Milton and like the Book of Mormon, fails the originality test.

A Friendly Critic

In the Autumn 1988 issue of Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought, a non-Mormon doctoral candidate at the Claremont Graduate School published an article entitled “Mormon Christianity: A Critical Appreciation by a Christian Pluralist.” Missionary-minded Latter-day Saints should, I think, welcome the serious attention that John Quiring has evidently given to Mormonism. There is always much to be learned from the observations made about us, personally and as a group, by sympathetic critics. Quiring’s criticisms, along with those of a number of other friendly outsiders, offer a means of gaining a better perspective on ourselves, on the Church, and on its attendant culture. Several of his comments are precisely on the mark. (Although I suspect that it was not people like Mr. Quiring that Pres. Hinckley had in mind when he remarked that “we don’t need critics standing on the sidelines.”) His perspective as a “pluralist”—and perhaps (I am guessing) as a student of John Hick—is extremely interesting. Nevertheless, I take strong exception to some of his observations. Particularly, I take exception to his evaluation of the Mormon canon—an evaluation directly relevant to the concerns of this Review of Books on the Book of Mormon, and one which, I think, rests clearly upon the liberal theological presuppositions he brings to that canon.

To Quiring, the “narrative material” of the Book of Mormon “seems flat, monotonous, imitative of the King James Version

17 Henderson, Rotten Reviews, 72-74.
of the Bible, and lacking in vitality in contrast to the Bible itself and other scriptures of Penguin Classics stature.” In his Penguin canon, Quiring includes such works as the Bhagavad Gita, the Analects of Confucius, the Tao Te Ching, and the Qur’an.\(^2\) I could comment upon my experience with several of these world scriptures, but it is the Qur’an, with which I have been seriously involved in a fairly continuous way over the past decade or so, to which I wish mostly to address myself. Quiring is simply mistaken if he thinks that reader reactions to his Penguin canon have been uniformly awestruck or reverential, and the case of the Qur’an provides abundant illustration of that fact:

**The Qur’an as a Case Study**

“The Alcoran of the Turks (I speak without prejudice) is an ill composed Piece, containing in it vain and ridiculous Errors in Philosophy, impossibilities, fictions, and vanities beyond laughter, maintained by evident and open Sophisms.” So wrote Sir Thomas Browne in his little seventeenth-century classic, *Religio Medici*.\(^2\) He was not alone in his view of the Qur’an, for “the opinion almost unanimously held by European readers [is] that it is obscure, tiresome, uninteresting; a farrago of long-winded narratives and prosaic exhortations, quite unworthy to be named in the same breath with the Prophetical Books of the Old Testament.”\(^2\) Indeed, the preface to the English translation of the Qur’an that appeared in 1649 described the book as “so rude, and incongruous a composure, so farced with contradictions, blasphemies, obscene speeches, and ridiculous fables” that “I present it to thee . . . not doubting, though it hath been a poysen, that hath infected a very great, but most unsound part of the Universe, it may prove to be an Antidote, to confirm in thee the health of Christianity.”\(^2\) A century later, George

\(^2\) Quiring, “Mormon Christianity,” 154, and 154 n. 4.


Sale, introducing his own hugely influential version of 1734, remarked that, "They must have a mean opinion of the Christian religion, or be but ill grounded therein, who can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery. . . . It is absolutely necessary to undeceive those who, from the ignorant or unfair translations which have appeared, have entertained too favourable an opinion of the original."24 Having read Sale’s competent translation, which continues in print to the present day, Edward Gibbon was able to speak of the Qur’an’s “endless incoherent rhapsody of fable, and precept, and declamation, which seldom excites a sentiment or an idea, which sometimes crawls in the dust, and is sometimes lost in the clouds.”25 Thomas Carlyle, who shared with Gibbon not only Sale’s English version but also a liberal attitude toward Islam which was quite remarkable for their age, joined in Gibbon’s denigration of the Qur’an: “I must say, it is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook. A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite; endless iterations, long-windedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite;—insupportable stupidity, in short! Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran. . . . One feels it difficult to see how any mortal ever could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the earth; as a well-written book, or indeed as a book at all; and not a bewildered rhapsody; written, so far as writing goes, as badly as almost any book ever was!”26 (Has the Book of Mormon received any harsher literary judgment than that?)

Not all European readers have reacted so negatively, of course, although it must be admitted that few positive voices, if any, could be heard until just a few decades ago. While not himself wholly positive—one might think of him as something of a transitional figure—Alfred Guillaume well expresses the more appreciative stance of modern Islamicists when he notes that “the Qur’an is one of the world’s classics which cannot be translated without grave loss. It has a rhythm of peculiar beauty

24 Cited in Arberry, The Koran Interpreted, 1:10-11. In the edition of Sale’s translation in my personal library, the original introduction has wisely been replaced by one written by Sir Edward Denison Ross. See George Sale, The Koran Translated into English from the Original Arabic (London: Frederick Warne, n.d.).
and a cadence that charms the ear. Many Christian Arabs speak of its style with warm admiration, and most Arabists acknowledge its excellence. When it is read aloud or recited it has an almost hypnotic effect that makes the listener indifferent to its sometimes strange syntax and its sometimes, to us, repellent content. It is this quality it possesses of silencing criticism by the sweet music of its language that has given birth to the dogma of its inimitability; indeed it may be affirmed that within the literature of the Arabs, wide and fecund as it is both in poetry and in elevated prose, there is nothing to compare with it. More positive still is the English Muslim convert, Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, who lamented that even after his best efforts at translation, "the result is not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy." Perhaps the greatest of all translators of the Qur'an into English, the late A. J. Arberry, could speak of "those rhetorical and rhythmical patterns which are the glory and sublimity of the Koran"—"thrilling," he called them—and of "the glittering splendour" and "radiant beauty of the original," which is "mysterious and compelling." Each chapter, Arberry contended, "is a rhapsody." "Those notorious incongruities and irrelevancies," he wrote, "even those 'wearisome repetitions', which have proved such stumbling-blocks in the way of our Western appreciation will vanish in the light of a clearer understanding of the nature of the Muslim scriptures."

In coming to such evaluations of the scripture of Islam, these Western orientalists have simply begun to approach a bit more closely to the attitude which has always characterized believers. For Muslims, the Qur'an is peerless, beyond compare, beyond the capacity of mere humans to duplicate. This belief, formalized in the doctrine of i'jāz, or "inimitability," extends not merely to the content of the book but, and perhaps especially, to its style—the very style so ridiculed by many Western readers. To Muslims, each verse of the Qur'an is a miracle. Indeed, the verses of the Qur'an are actually called, in Arabic, ayāt ("signs," "miracles")—reminiscent of the sēmeia, 27

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the “signs” or “miracles” performed by Jesus in the Greek New Testament.  

Still, it would be wrong to suppose that a knowledge of Arabic, coupled with a freedom from the hostility of earlier generations of Western Christian scholarship, leads necessarily to appreciation of the Qur’an as literature. Many highly competent Arabists privately admit—as the eminent Italian scholar Francesco Gabrieli has done publicly—that they can scarcely bear to read the book. And Arberry was obliged by his own views to condemn Reynold Nicholson, the great Edwardian translator of Arabic poetry, as rhythmically “deaf”—rather an absurd charge, really—because Nicholson thought only the final chapters of the Qur’an to have much poetic or literary merit. “One may, indeed,” Nicholson had written, “peruse the greater part of the volume, beginning with the first chapter, and find but a few passages of genuine enthusiasm to relieve the prevailing dullness.”

The point of all of this is certainly not to attack the Qur’an, but rather to suggest that appreciation of the literary merits of scripture tends to be very much a subjective thing. Thousands upon thousands of Jews over many centuries have found great significance and spiritual nourishment in the very regulations of Leviticus that I find almost unreadable. (Quiring places the Bible above the peculiarly Latter-day Saint canon—but surely he is only referring to certain parts. Is Exodus 37, say, demonstrably superior to Doctrine and Covenants 88, or to Moses 7, or to 2 Nephi 4?) And although I read the Qur’an in the original Arabic, and although I find it endlessly intriguing as an object of study, and even despite some passages which have great impact upon me, I find the Book of Mormon and other Latter-day Saint scriptures vastly more appealing. Bernard DeVoto’s dismissal of the Book of Mormon as “a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd” would strike me, for instance, as quite unfair if reapplied to the Qur’an, but it is downright ludicrous when applied as he

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30 The Iranian Shi’ite title “Ayatollah”—or, more accurately, ayatullah—means “sign [of] God” in Arabic.

31 Gabrieli’s response to the Qur’an was related to me by my former teacher, Seeger A. Bonebakker, a leading authority on classical Arabic poetry who, I suspect, shares his opinion.

INTRODUCTION

intended it. Furthermore, I am convinced, just as was Arberry with reference to the Islamic scripture, that a “clearer understanding” of the nature of the revelations received by and through Joseph Smith—an understanding based on such things as the recognition of complex and meaningful chiasms, for example—will lead to a yet greater appreciation of their strengths as literature. (This despite the restricted working vocabulary of their translator and receiver, which can hardly compete with that of King James’s Oxbridge scholars, who frequently managed to improve upon the koiné Greek of the New Testament.)

Originality Is Not the Test

Perhaps somewhat less subjective is an estimate of the originality of scripture. Alas, though, John Quiring and I disagree here too. The texts of the Doctrine and Covenants, says Quiring, “are not sufficiently fresh to be taken as new revelations but are derivative.” However, he implicitly believes the Qurʾān to possess originality of a level to merit its recognition as legitimate “revelation” (in whatever sense he would define that word). I myself am somewhat less convinced. The Qurʾān certainly does not claim to be original, and Muhammad would probably have been upset to be identified as an innovator. He saw himself rather as restoring the pristine religion of the earlier prophets. As Marshall Hodgson observed of one aspect of the book, “The specific moral ideals were in no case unprecedented and rarely departed from moral norms upheld, in principle, in the older Bedouin society. (The Qurʾān made no attempt to lay down a comprehensive moral system; the very word for moral behaviour, al-maʿrūf, means ‘the known’.)” And, I might add, the usual Arabic word for “heresy” is bidʿa, which means, literally, “innovation.”

Quiring’s allegation of a “derivativeness” in Joseph Smith’s revelations reminds me somewhat of Fawn Brodie’s complaint that Mormonism offered “no new Sermon on the Mount, no new

33 For the phrase, see DeVoto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” 5.

34 For one thing, the rhymed prose style of the Qurʾān, known in Arabic as saj, was simply the vehicle used by contemporary Arabian soothsayers, or kāhins.

35 Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, 163.
saga of redemption."36 I had thought the old ones good enough! Quite seriously, though, I believe that both Mr. Quiring and Mrs. Brodie underestimate the presence of original elements within Mormonism and its scriptures, and that Quiring overestimates the originality of the Qur'\text{an}.

**Literary Merit Is Largely Irrelevant**

There is, of course, a sense in which the literary merit of the Book of Mormon, or the lack thereof, is wholly irrelevant. "Its literary or artistic qualities," Hugh Nibley has remarked, "do not enter into the discussion: it was written to be believed. Its one and only merit is truth. Without that merit, it is all that nonbelievers say it is. With that merit, it is all that believers say it is. And we must insist on this truism."37 It would be foolish, would it not, to disregard a warning that your home was on fire simply because that warning had not been couched in iambic pentameter? In a very real sense, our house is on fire, and the prophets are warning us. If they can do so in literarily appealing ways, well, so much the better. But the message itself is the important thing.38 And that message does seem to be getting across to some extent, as Rodney Stark's numbers would seem to imply. (It is partially for this reason, but also for many others, that I see no cause now to retreat from traditional claims for the historical and revelatory character of the Book of Mormon. I am far less sanguine than John Quiring and some of my acquaintances within the Church that Mormonism would remain just as vital—or, indeed, grow yet stronger—if we were to "devaluate the Book of Mormon to the status of edifying, amateur fiction."39 I see little glory or dynamism in the path taken by liberal Protestantism. At this point in the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the suggestion that we might begin to flourish by imitating, say, progressive Episcopalianism, is every bit as convincing as the notion that the

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37 Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 86.


San Francisco Forty Niners would have performed more impressively in the 1989 Superbowl had they only swapped quarterbacks and offensive lines with the Denver Broncos.)

**Intrinsic Merit**

Many have seen the Book of Mormon, as Mark Twain is well known to have done, as “chloroform in print.” Its alleged “dullness”—which recalls the alleged “dullness” of the Qur’ān, a member of Mr. Quiring’s Penguin canon—is a frequent point of criticism. “The small number of people who have tried to read the book declare that it is dreadfully dull,” wrote Hilel Ragaf. “Surely,” remarked Sir Richard Burton, “there never was a book so thoroughly dull and heavy; it is as monotonous as a sage-prairie.” “In nothing,” says M. H. A. Van Der Valk, “does the line, style, invention, conception, content and purpose reveal the hand of a master, let alone of Divine inspiration.” Yet one nineteenth-century British clergyman felt that he had to reject the Book of Mormon in spite of “all its air of sincerity and truth [and] all the striking and often beautiful passages that it contains.” There is admittedly little doubt that many readers do find the book dull. But this admission requires comment: Most ordinary people—my Swiss *Hausfrau* is a case in point—find the Bible “dull,” as well. How many copies of the Bible decorate bookshelves unread in Christian homes around the world? Is Leviticus really more of a page-turner than Alma? Why, if the Nephite scripture is so unreadable, do many members of the Church find its “Isaiah portions”—notoriously close to the King James Version, as we are often reminded by our enemies—the major stumbling block to their attempts at getting through it?

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40 On the context of this much-quoted phrase, see Richard H. Cracroft, “The Gentle Blasphemer: Mark Twain, Holy Scripture, and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 11 (Winter 1971): 119-40. Cracroft argues persuasively that “Twain was obviously one of the multitude who had not read the book. . . . If Twain read the Book of Mormon at all, it was in the same manner that Tom Sawyer won the Sunday School Bible contest—by cheating.”


43 M. H. A. Van Der Valk and George Wooterspoon are cited by Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 189-90.
Of course, it has also been argued that form and content cannot really be neatly separated in any human creation, and that to do so is both artificial and misleading. This seems an implausible proposition to me, but I will not deny that it does contain certain elements of truth. Can anything, then, be said about the form of the Book of Mormon? Or is it really, as Bernard DeVoto said, "formless"? Several scholars have argued in print for a high level of literary sophistication and complexity in the Book of Mormon. Jeffrey R. Holland, referring to Aristotle’s Poetics, has expressed his opinion that "by Aristotle’s standard the Book of Mormon is not only a good book; it is a classic . . . unified, whole, verses fitting with verses, chapters fitting with chapters, books fitting with books, and always that strong beginning." (Richard Dilworth Rust’s article, in this volume, is yet another contribution to the ongoing discussion of the book’s literary quality.)


There Is Hope

Are we left, then, with pure subjectivism? Is there no hope of approaching the question of the stature of the Book of Mormon on the basis of anything beyond personal preference and sheer whimsy? I think there is. Even Fawn Brodie, no friend of Joseph Smith, had to admit that Bernard DeVoto’s evaluation of the Book of Mormon was inadequate: “Dull it is, in truth, but not formless, aimless, or absurd. Its structure shows elaborate design, its narrative is spun coherently, and it demonstrates throughout a unity of purpose.”46 And if her perception of the book’s entertainment value is debatable—I, at least, find it fascinating, although I admit that neither it nor the Bible can or should be read like a Tom Clancy novel—surely Brodie was right about its structural sophistication. And this can be—and increasingly is—demonstrated on quite objective grounds. Up until now, the prime exhibit for this argument has clearly been the phenomenon of chiasmus.47 But there is mounting up a considerable body of analysis demonstrating that at least something of the strangeness of the Book of Mormon is due to the presence in it of other ancient and complex literary forms which Joseph Smith is highly unlikely to have discovered on his own, and showing as well that its contents are rich and subtle beyond the suspicions of even the vast majority of its most devout readers.48

46 Brodie, No Man Knows My History, 69.
As we learn more about the Book of Mormon, our appreciation for it increases. This is not surprising, since it reflects human experience generally. I well remember, as a student in high school, visiting one of the large art museums in Los Angeles in order to attend an exhibit of work by the Norwegian painter and graphic artist Edvard Munch. I walked briskly through the exhibit and came out both bored and uncomprehending. Then a docent outlined for us some of the basic elements of Munch’s life and work, and escorted our school group through the exhibit. Within minutes, I had come to an appreciation of Edvard Munch which has remained with me ever since. When we know more, we see more. Again, an example from my own experience: I was raised in the city; my father was raised on a North Dakota farm and, for a time, studied forestry. When we have driven through rural areas together, I have seen flat spaces of green or brown, with palm
trees or pine-like trees or (the largest category) “other trees.” My father, however, sees alfalfa at various stages of maturity, wheat, oats, corn, elms, oaks, firs, spruce, pines, and much, much more. Because of his greater familiarity with the subject, he sees more richly and appreciates more deeply. Landscapes that to me are terribly dull, he finds interesting and even beautiful.

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, which publishes this Review, is dedicated to the exploration of the Book of Mormon because those associated with the Foundation deeply believe that it contains treasures of insight and wisdom of immense value to both Church and world. We are convinced that the Book of Mormon deserves the closest analysis by every means that heart and mind can summon up, that it will be better appreciated when it is better known. “Students of the Christian scriptures in all faiths,” Bruce Hafen has written, “cry out to grasp the grand secrets of the Atonement, which can unlock the further mysteries of man’s nature and life’s purpose. If only they could know what truths lie buried before their eyes in the plain and precious language of the Book of Mormon. These truths are in some sense inaccessible to those whose tools of language and discourse are limited to the terms of art embodied in the academic and jargon-laden discipline of contemporary Christian theology. Great revelations—literally—await those who will let the Book of Mormon speak for itself about its central message, Christ’s Atonement, ‘according to the plainness which is in the Lamb of God.’” 49 We know that to be true. We have also begun to know, through experience, that, as Lowell Bennion has said of the Book of Mormon, “we can learn from it all our lives without exhausting its resources.” 50

All whose reviews and articles appear in the present volume are believing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, who fully accept the Book of Mormon as what it claims to be and are firmly convinced of its divine significance. I wish to thank them for their willingness to participate in this enterprise. Thanks are also due to Stephen D. Ricks and John W. Welch, who assisted in the editing process; to Melvin J. Thorne and Donald W. Parry, who helped with the production

49 Hafen, The Broken Heart, 26.
of the volume; to Lois Richardson, who helped at many points along the way. And once again, as last year, Shirley S. Ricks was indispensable in working out the mechanics of the volume—in truth, arguably the one indispensable person to the whole project.

Opinions expressed in the *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* are not necessarily those of its editor, nor of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, nor of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. Nor should the individual writers be regarded as speaking for the institutions with which they may be affiliated. The attempt has been made to be comprehensive. Every book published on the Book of Mormon during 1989—so far as known to me—has been taken into account. Books which have not been covered in this volume will, we hope, be treated in the next issue. The one exception is a frivolous volume, utterly devoid of merit, that we finally decided not to dignify with a review. One other book appeared in 1989 that will not be reviewed in this volume (because it is a reprint), but which deserves special mention because it is among the finest and most important things ever published in the field. That is Richard Lloyd Anderson’s *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, first issued in 1981.51 Its reappearance, this time in paperback, is cause for some rejoicing.

The bibliography at the end of this volume represents an effort to record everything published during 1989 that deals primarily or substantially with the Book of Mormon. It also reaches further back into the past for some items which were missed in last year’s edition. My thanks go to Adam Lamoreaux for his work in this regard.