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E. Douglas Clark and Robert S. Clark, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon*

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Review of Books on the Book of Mormon

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Reviewed by Clark V. Johnson

In the epigraph of their book, the Clarks set the stage for what promised to be one of the most exciting books written concerning the Book of Mormon. They quote from President Ezra Taft Benson, who said,

The Book of Mormon was meant for us. It was written for our day. Its scriptures are to be likened unto ourselves. With that understanding, let us consider from the Book of Mormon the responsibility fathers have to teach their sons, and the responsibility sons have to take direction from their fathers. This counsel also applies to all parents and their children. (p. iii)

In the introduction the authors quote two statements from former Church presidents that lead directly to their purpose in writing their book, *Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon*. They note that President Harold B. Lee said, “The most important of the Lord’s work that you will ever do will be the work you do within the walls of your own home,” and that President David O. McKay said, “Nothing can take the place of home in rearing and teaching children, and no other success can compensate for failure in the home” (p. xii). Following these quotes the authors state their thesis clearly when they write,

These two superlatives regarding the Book of Mormon and parental duty have been accepted and valued independently, but the connection between the two is often missed. Could we not expect that the book that is most correct in leading us to God would have something important to say about the highest duty God has entrusted to mortals, that of parenthood? . . . In other words, the father-son portraits in the Book of Mormon—which almost totally predominate the presentation of parent-child relationships—are intended to provide guidance for all parent-child relationships, whether of a mother with her daughter
or son, or of a father with his son or daughter.” (pp. xii-xiii)

They state that, because of the structure of the Book of Mormon,

Nowhere does the Book of Mormon stop and devote space exclusively to a model parent-child relationship per se [but rather] all timeless truths . . . [are] skillfully interwoven with the historical narrative. And because the principal characters appearing on that very limited stage happened mostly to be men, talk of mothers is rare. (pp. xiii)

I was excited when I read these words, which I felt represented their thesis statement, as I expected to read about those qualities that I, as a father, should be teaching my children and grandchildren. From this point the authors spend the next ten chapters detailing relationships between fathers and sons in the Book of Mormon. Certainly in this area the authors did their research. In their book, they identified each of the significant father-and-son relationships, i.e., Lehi and Nephi; Jacob and Enos; Mosiah, Benjamin, Mosiah, and the sons of Mosiah; Zeniff, Noah, and Limhi; Alma, Alma the Younger, and his sons, Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton; Moroni and Moronihah; Helaman, Helaman, Nephi, Nephi, and Jonas; Mormon and Moroni; and the genealogical line of the Jaredites. They conclude with an analysis of the relationship of “the Eternal Father and Jesus.”

While the authors identify the fathers and sons in the Book of Mormon, their analysis of these relationships leaves much to be desired. They never get beyond a superficial understanding of what the Book of Mormon says about the teachings of the fathers to their sons. Just as they approach what appears to be something significant, they suddenly back away, justifying from a Near Eastern bibliography the father-son relationships found in the Book of Mormon, and the reader never gets to the heart of the teachings of the fathers to their sons promised him in the introduction. Two or three examples will suffice.

The authors quickly establish the point that Lehi’s record became the pattern for Nephi’s record, just as Joseph of Egypt’s record had become the pattern for Lehi’s record in the first place (p. 5). The authors carefully point out that “Nephi’s tenacious following of his father’s example also reflects the principle that a
modern expert on childhood education tells parents, ‘what tiny children want is to be you’” (p. 8). Thus, they maintain that “the pattern of Nephi following Lehi’s example seems aptly symbolized in the vision that Lehi had of the tree of life” (p. 8). Finally, they conclude that it is because of Lehi’s personal example to Nephi in work, worship, and teaching that Nephi saw the visions of his father Lehi and indeed became a prophet in his own right.

So complete was Nephi’s vision that when he saw the eventual “destruction of my people” (1 Nephi 15:5) by Laman and Lemuel’s posterity he, like his father Lehi, was distraught (p. 15). At this point, rather than dealing further with Lehi’s family, the authors treat “the larger context of Nephi’s preoccupation” and seem to back off by quoting an “eminent modern scholar” (Claus Westermann) who has observed about that covenant, “Its core is the blessing and promise of posterity; this is linked with a promise of victory, and the effect of the blessing on the nations.” Specifically, because Abraham had not withheld his son Isaac, the Lord had sworn to him, “In blessing I will bless thee.” (This slavishly literal translation in the King James tends to obscure the meaning; in Hebrew the juxtaposition of the different forms of the same verb acts as an intensifier, so that the meaning is, as more modern translations express it, “I will indeed bless you” or “surely bless you” or “greatly bless you” or “bless you abundantly” or “shower blessings on you.”) Furthermore, the Lord promised, “In multiplying I will multiply thy seed” (again the verbal intensifier) “as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies” (a promise of victory), “and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (but as one eminent scholar says, the form of the verb translated there “can be reflexive or reciprocal, but not passive,” so that the meaning is more accurately conveyed in the translation, “bless themselves”—a meaning which, as Martin Luther noted, “should be carefully noted and pondered” as pointing to the voluntary nature of receiving such a blessing through Abraham’s descendant—Christ). (pp. 15-16)
Trying to tie all this together, they state, “Against such a background Nephi’s grief becomes as profound as was his ‘delight’ in the Lord’s covenant to Abraham” (p. 16). This quote adds little to the meaning of the Lehi-Nephi relationship or to the counsel and doctrines they taught their families.

This is followed by a continuous flow of the Book of Mormon narrative—Nephi’s faithfulness in spite of his brothers’ persecution, Nephi’s honoring of his father even when Lehi faltered, Nephi’s shocking of his brothers by the power of God, and so forth. Their major point in the story of Lehi and Nephi is “The story comes full circle as Nephi becomes as much of a reference point for Lehi in directing his posterity as Lehi had earlier been a reference point for Nephi in directing his own life” (p. 26). Once again they use a long digression into the relationship of Jacob (Israel) and Joseph, who was sold into Egypt, which simply emphasizes the point the authors are making, that Lehi and Nephi were children of the covenant of Abraham (pp. 26-27).

Little is said of Lehi’s agony concerning his unrighteous sons, Laman and Lemuel. And at this point in the book nothing is mentioned of Lehi’s teachings to his children as he tried to persuade them to be faithful. Even though they refer to Lehi’s vision of the tree of life, they barely mention it other than to refer to it as the bonding of Nephi to his father. At one point, though, Lehi used his dream to teach his family (1 Nephi 8:35-38). And the writers could have strengthened their presentation of the relationship between Lehi and his sons by showing Lehi’s unconditional love for his children.

In the final days of his life, Lehi testified to his children and grandchildren of the truthfulness of God’s plan. He explained the eternal plan of our Father in Heaven to them. He discussed the Fall of Adam and Eve and the Atonement of Jesus Christ. He spoke of the law of opposition in all things, reasoning with his children from the strength of one who knew God personally, and ultimately testified to them of the Christ. His final efforts demonstrate his love, when he gave each of them a father’s blessing. Knowing that his eldest sons, Laman and Lemuel, had rejected God, he blessed their children, his grandchildren (2 Nephi 2-4). While Lehi was successful with Nephi, Sam, Jacob, and Joseph, and their families, he never once quit trying to influence his unrighteous sons and their families, as well. Lehi’s example of never giving up serves as a strength to parents today who have wayward children.
This, in my opinion, constitutes a major weakness in the book. The authors’ constant reference to Near Eastern sources to elucidate Book of Mormon father-son relationships distracts from the thesis they stated in their introduction that the teaching of fathers to their sons in the Book of Mormon is the major emphasis of the book (pp. xii-xiii).

Another example used by the authors is the relationship between Zeniff and Noah. After establishing a colony among the Lamanites, Zeniff finds himself surrounded by a large Lamanite army that threatens to annihilate his people. This small Nephite colony survives only by yielding itself to the commandments of God. Zeniff went to battle “in the strength of the Lord, . . . for I and my people did cry mightily to the Lord that he would deliver us out of the hands of our enemies, for we were awakened to a remembrance of the deliverance of our fathers” (Mosiah 9:17).

After spending most of his life in war, Zeniff confers his kingdom upon his son Noah. The authors conclude that, since Zeniff’s sons “had his conspicuously righteous example” before them, Noah must have been taught righteousness. In reality, though, the only thing that we learn about Zeniff from the Book of Mormon is that he was righteous in times of war.

The Book of Mormon teaches that Zeniff was part of a colonizing effort that went from Zarahemla to the land of Nephi to reestablish Nephite settlement in that land. Apparently, the original group sought to regain their former home through warfare, by destroying the Lamanites, for Zeniff was sent by their leader to spy among the Lamanites. However, when he “saw that which was good among them [he] was desirous that they should not be destroyed” (Mosiah 9:1). Returning to his commander, he caused so much contention among the would-be colonizers that they fought among themselves, which resulted in the deaths of all but fifty. The survivors were forced to return to Zarahemla (Mosiah 9:1-2). At this point, Zeniff said of himself, “I being over-zealous to inherit the land of our fathers, collected as many as were desirous to go up to possess the land, and started again on our journey into the wilderness” (Mosiah 9:3). After making a covenant with the Lamanite king, they rebuilt the city of Lehi-Nephi. But they lived in constant fear and threat of war and spent most of their efforts preparing for war and contending against the Lamanites, whom they described as a “wild and ferocious, and a blood-thirsty people” (Mosiah 10:12). Zeniff’s life style is hardly demonstrative of a “con-
spicuously righteous example” as asserted by the authors (p. 93). Certainly his character is not comparable to Captain Moroni’s (Alma 48:11, 16). The authors further conclude that

a king who would take his people from a state of spiritual laxity (when they “were slow to remember the Lord [their] God”) to righteousness (such that they could repeatedly at a moment’s notice march to battle “in the strength of the Lord”) would not neglect to teach his own sons the same principles of righteousness. This may also be hinted at in the name that Zeniff gave to the son who would succeed him—Noah. (p. 94)

Once again, after making their point, the authors state that

Following a custom found among the ancient Israelites and other peoples of the ancient Near East, sons in the Book of Mormon were often given names that memorialized the circumstances of their birth, recalled their spiritual heritage, or expressed hope for the course of their lives. (p. 94)

The authors conclude their argument with the assertion that

The story of the ancient Noah would have been preserved on the brass plates, and his memory was very much alive in Nephite society, as seen in the preaching of Amulek, whose passing and unintro­duced reference to the ancient Noah shows that his story was familiar to Amulek’s listeners. (pp. 94-95)

This conclusion has really nothing to do with the teachings of Nephite fathers to their children, and especially does not refer to anything that Zeniff may have taught his children. Even Zeniff does not refer to himself as a “conspicuously righteous man,” but rather as being “over-zealous” (Mosiah 9:3).

One of the strengths of Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon is the authors’ treatment of Benjamin and his sons. They note that this warrior-king loved his sons and taught them from the records. This father saw that his sons received a complete education. They were taught the language of their fathers and were taught about the covenants and commandments of God from the brass plates and other Nephite records. The writers include in their observations about Benjamin’s teachings
his witness and sermon to the people in which this king prophesied of the eventual coming of Christ. They point to the covenant made by the people, who had fallen to the earth, so overwhelmed were they by the power of the Spirit, “having received a remission of their sins and having peace of conscience, because of the exceeding faith which they had in Jesus Christ who should come, according to the words which King Benjamin had spoken unto them” (p. 59). However, one final point needs to be made. The reason they had received a remission of their sins is that they were not only converted, but had made a covenant with God. The authors fail to point out the significance of the covenant. Indeed Benjamin taught his people that they had become the children of Christ through the covenant (Mosiah 5:7; see also 5-6, 8-10). He explained further that this covenant was so powerful that “the Lord God Omnipotent [Christ] may seal you his” (Mosiah 5:15), thus referring to the greatest of God’s gifts to his children, eternal life (D&C 14:7). Hence the people bound themselves to Christ’s atonement although his earthly ministry and suffering was still more than a hundred years in the future.

Even though I have alluded to the discussion of Benjamin’s teaching of his sons as a strong point in their book, still I must point out that this strength is weakened in at least two ways: First, the writers distract from Benjamin’s message by alluding to a parallel between Benjamin and Melchizedek and then by including two pages of information that does not illuminate the central theme of their book, which is fathers’ teachings to their sons (pp. 52-53). Second, instead of quoting almost two pages of Benjamin’s sermon, this section could have been strengthened by a careful analysis of the Benjamin sermon to help the reader arrive at that special relationship with God which resulted from it among his Nephite hearers (pp. 58-59).

The authors’ use of Alma the Younger’s teachings to his sons—Helaman, Shiblon, and Corianton—is beautifully portrayed. They list many of the specific doctrines Alma taught his sons, as well as the charges he gave each to keep the commandments. Summarizing Alma’s patience with Corianton, the writers conclude,

But if Corianton could not mistake the message, neither could he have failed to be touched by his father’s manner. These were no pompous pro-

but rather heartfelt insights and observations lovingly shared by a man who, despite his immense spiritual knowledge, freely and frequently admitted to the limits of that knowledge, even as he shared precious divine mysteries that he had learned through much prayer. (p. 143)

Using Alma's teachings as an example the authors present one point that offers great strength to fathers today. They demonstrate from the Book of Mormon that the fathers, time and time again, used their scriptures and records to cause their children to "remember the fathers" so that they might learn of the Son of God. The effect of this teaching by Alma, notes President Benson, was to perpetuate one of the "great family legacies ... in the Book of Mormon" (p. 136).

However, the impact of the authors' message is once again weakened when they back away from their book's thesis by quoting from the Midrash, which gives the commentary of "an eminent modern Jewish scholar" concerning two governing principles:

One is that what the patriarchs and matriarchs of the book of Genesis did in their day gives the signal to the generation to come of what Israel is to do. The other is that the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs foretell the sacred history of Israel. So the deeds of the founders teach lessons on how the children should live. (p. 139)

What Alma taught is so much clearer in principle and language that it is a shame to use an "eminent ... scholar," no matter who it is.

The final two chapters are the strongest in the book. Chapter 10, "God and His Beloved Son," details the special relationship the Savior had with his Father. While this chapter gives some good information about their relationship, much of it comes from the New Testament rather than the Book of Mormon. In this chapter the authors detail information from Nephite prophets concerning the revelations they received. They quote from Nephi's explanation of the doctrine of Christ and show how the witnesses of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost testify in unity of one another. But again, the authors lose sight of their book's purpose and detract from it by endless quotations or references from other sources.
For example, while discussing the appearance of Christ to the Nephites and the Father’s witness of his Only Begotten Son, the writers’ emphasis on the parallels from the gospel of John overshadows the special information in 3 Nephi (pp. 266-67). In fact there is more information from the New Testament than from the Book of Mormon.

Why there is a section in this chapter entitled “Parallels between the Nephite Record and the Writings of John” is a mystery. First, it is not relevant to the chapter’s topic, and second, there are as many parallels outside of this section as there are within. Thus, while this chapter is informative, it is poorly organized. Information from other sections in this chapter should be inserted in “Parallels between the Nephite Record and the Writings of John” (see pp. 253, 264-65, part of 266, 267, all of 268).

Their final chapter, “Patterns and Reflections,” is the best in the book. There are fewer distractions, and the authors attempt in an abbreviated way to make up for much that they left out in the orderly sequence in which the book seems to be organized. In this chapter such sections as “Why the Book of Mormon Focuses on Fathers and Sons,” “Setting an Example,” “Teaching Plainly the Plan of Salvation Centered in Christ,” “Teaching from and about the Scriptures,” “Teaching by Personal Experience and Testimony,” “Leading in Worship, Ordinances, and Blessings,” “Praying for Their Sons,” “Teaching Sons from Their Youth,” “Teaching about Eternal Rewards,” “Joy and Praise for Obedient Sons,” “Wayward Sons, Wise Fathers,” “Worthy Sons with Unworthy Fathers,” and the final section “The Book of Mormon Fathers and Us” contain the doctrines the fathers taught their sons. If the authors had presented these doctrines in context it would have strengthened the book. If these teachings and examples had been presented in proper order it would have enlarged the reader’s understanding of the special father-son relationships in the Book of Mormon. This chapter, with the possible exceptions of two sections—“Ancient Patterns for Modern Times” and “The Significance of the Book of Mormon’s Emphasis on Following the Fathers”—zeroes in on the father-and-son relationships in the Book of Mormon and returns the authors to their original thesis.

A word about the structure and organization of the book: the authors list 128 bibliographical sources, of which they apparently quote from all but twelve. This is commendable.
However, when one compares the list of abbreviations at the beginning of the book to the bibliography, there seem to be some inconsistencies. First, there are several abbreviations listed that are not part of the bibliography. For example, the book of Abraham in the Pearl of Great Price and the Doctrine and Covenants are listed in the "Abbreviations." However, the Pearl of Great Price is not listed in the bibliography, while the Doctrine and Covenants is. Other sources not listed in the bibliography that appear in the abbreviations include NIV, "New International Version, in the NIV Study Bible," NJB, "The New Jerusalem Bible," and NJPS, "New Jewish Publication Society translation of the Hebrew Bible, in Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures according to the Traditional Hebrew Text." While this may be understandable, it is not consistent with what the authors have included in the bibliography, but have excluded from the "Abbreviations." They include the "Doctrine and Covenants," "The Word Biblical Commentary," "The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica," "The Encyclopedia of Judaism," "The Ante-Nicene Fathers," and the list goes on and on of other encyclopedias, dictionaries, and commentaries. Why some are included in the abbreviations and some not is not explained. Likewise, why some are excluded from the bibliography and others not is also not explained.

However, one of the most difficult problems the reader must contend with is the inconsistency in their abbreviations and the listing of sources in their bibliography and footnotes. An example is the writers' misuse of their abbreviation AB, referring to the Anchor Bible series. The Anchor Bible volumes used in the footnotes are not listed under Anchor Bible in the bibliography, but references to the Anchor Bible series in the bibliography are listed by the author's surname. For example, under "F" is listed "Fitzmeyer, Joseph A. The Gospel According to Luke I-IX: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. The Anchor Bible, vol. 28A . . . ," or "Mann, C. S. Mark: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary. The Anchor Bible, vol. 27 . . . ." Perhaps Clark and Clark should have given the author's name in the footnotes.

Finally, the way the footnotes reference the bibliography also makes it difficult for the reader to find the sources readily. For example, on page 95, footnote 3, one reads, "See Combat of Adam III:V, in Malan 1882:148; and Cave of Treasures, p. 104, in Budge 1927:104." These entries in the bibliography are
not found under “Combat of Adam” or “Cave of Treasures.” These footnotes could have been more clearly written for the reader if the authors had written the footnote in harmony with the bibliographical references which read, “Malan, S. C. The Book of Adam and Eve, Also Called the Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan. London: Williams and Northgate, 1882.” In this case the authors confused the issue even more by using a variation of the subtitle rather than referencing the main part of the title first, which should have read, The Book of Adam and Eve, Also Called the Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan. Likewise their use of Cave of Treasures could have been made more consistent had they used the same footnote format that they used in their bibliography, which is listing the author first. These same inconsistencies occur throughout the footnotes, bibliography, and abbreviations. This could all have been avoided had the authors used a standard style manual, such as The Chicago Manual of Style or the MLA Handbook.

The writers’ conclusion returns the reader to the thesis of their book. They write,

The Nephite destruction . . . was more than the cutting off of beloved posterity; it was also the tragic termination of the unfolding through the Nephite line of the covenants made to their forefathers. . . . The Book of Mormon . . . reminds us of [covenants and] provides us with honorary Nephite forefathers as patterns to help us realize the Abrahamic covenant. . . . [And] by our own labor as we follow the patterns of the Nephite forefathers, we too shall become worthy parents and worthy children and thereby “children of Christ” for whose glorious coming we are privileged to prepare. (pp. 319-20)

While Fathers and Sons in the Book of Mormon includes some good information, the information is unfortunately difficult to find because of the authors’ endless excursions into Near Eastern bibliography, philosophy, and thought. The use of so many outside sources tends to defeat the book’s purpose and to add little if anything to the subject.