The Editor's Notebook

John L. Sorenson

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THE EDITORS’ NOTEBOOK

Do scholars presume too much when they try to “shed more light” on the Book of Mormon or other scripture? Do our writers go too far when they offer alternative or expanded readings of scripture, that is, when they tell readers that a scriptural passage means something beyond what a “common-sense” or “literal” reading seems to offer? This is an important question, because shedding additional light on the scriptures is the prime intent of this journal.

An interesting perspective on the issue was presented almost 400 years ago by the translators of the King James version of the Bible. These were the best scholars of their day in England who were charged by their sovereign with preparing an edition of the Bible that could be used by the common people for study and in their worship. In a lengthy statement at the beginning of the first (1611) edition of their work, entitled “The Translators to the Reader,” they explained their aim. What they say applies to our aim at the JBMS:

How shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknowen tongue? . . . Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtaine, that we may looke into the most Holy place; that remooveth the cover of the well, that weee may come by the water, even as Jacob rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which meanes the flockes of Laban were watered. Indeede without translation into the vulgar [everyday] tongue, the unlearned are but like children at Jacobs well (which was deepe) without a bucket or some-thing to draw with: or as that person mentioned by Esay [Isaiah], to whom when a sealed booke was delivered, with this motion, Reade this, I pray thee, hee was faine to make this answere, I cannot, for it is sealed. (The Holy Bible [1611 edition] King James Version, pp. 3–4)

Teachers of scripture, including our leaders in general conferences, constantly strive to do something similar to what the KJV translators pleaded for. They repeat, emphasize, and rephrase words in the sacred texts in an attempt to render them clearer to the understandings of those who desire to learn. They strive to do what Nephi did, who loved “plainness” so much that he gave us his own explanations and paraphrases of Isaiah in order that we might “eat the kernel” (see 2 Nephi 25:4; 31:3).

The writers in this journal too aim to “break the shell” and “uncover the well” so that those who read may gain maximum benefit from the scriptural texts. Our authors are encouraged to help readers respond to Brigham Young’s counsel: “Do you read the scriptures, my brethren and sisters, as though you were writing them, a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? Do you read them as though you stood in the place of the men who wrote them? If you do not feel thus, it is your privilege to do so” (Discourses, p. 128). Through this journal, we aim to help our patrons reach that goal.

One of the ways this journal tries to “uncover the well” for our readers is by illustrating the articles with appropriate art. In this issue we are pleased to feature perhaps unfamiliar creative works by four active Latter-day Saint artists. Two of Robert Barrett’s paintings appear—Joseph bringing the Plates from Cumorah accompanies Andrew Hedges’s article, and a commissioned work showing B. H. Roberts and the hill Cumorah introduces Davis Bitton’s article. Our cover features a painting by Brent and Kelly Hale, Go East, which is shown a second time in the piece by David and Jo Ann Seely. This painting is based on an earlier work by the artists that hangs in the BYU Jerusalem Center. The Seelys’ article is graced by a work by Nathan Pinnock entitled Father Lehi and Nephi. Finally two parts of C. C. A. Christensen’s Mormon Panorama are used to illustrate Hedges’s article and also Kenneth Godfrey’s treatment of the Zelph discovery.

We will continue to search out old treasures and new gems of art to delight the eyes and unveil the minds of our readers.

Guidelines for Articles for the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies

These are available on the FARMS website (www.farmsresearch.com), by e-mail request to jbms@byu.edu, or by mail from FARMS. In general, completed manuscripts should not be sent in without first submitting a detailed outline or abstract to the editors.