The Role of Amateurs in Book of Mormon Studies

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Review of

The Bible and the Book of Mormon: Connecting Links (1997), by John E. Enslen; and Book of Mormon Insights: Points to Ponder from Every Chapter (1996), by William N. Partridge.
Reviewed by Melvin J. Thorne

The Role of Amateurs in Book of Mormon Studies

These two slim paperback books embody many of the strengths and weaknesses of books written about the scriptures by amateurs. The strengths are primarily the enthusiasm, personal insights, and personal witnesses of the authors, which make both books worthwhile reading for certain audiences. The weaknesses, however, limit the usefulness of the books for most readers, as will be discussed below.

But first, a summary of these books. Book of Mormon Insights provides a page or two of William N. Partridge’s ideas about each chapter of the Book of Mormon. Partridge explains in his preface that this book stems from his attempt to follow President Benson’s encouragement to make the study of the Book of Mormon a lifetime pursuit and his desire to share with others the insights he has gained over the last few years of this study, in the hopes that his insights will stimulate readers to find their own. He wants to help readers understand that there are many lessons in each chapter of the Book of Mormon that can benefit our lives.

Partridge usually begins his discussion of the individual chapters in the Book of Mormon by summarizing what he sees as the most important events in that chapter. He then typically comments on the significance of these events and concludes by trying to help readers apply the insights to their own lives. For example, for Alma 14 (discussed on page 124) Partridge mentions the
pleadings of Zeezrom on behalf of Alma and Amulek and summarizes the ordeal of Alma and Amulek as they watched their converts burned. After quoting Alma’s statement that the Lord suffers such actions so that his judgments on the wicked will be just, Partridge urges his readers to “try to consider what type of judgment a wrathful God will impose upon such sinners.”

Partridge then points out that while Amulek worried that he and Alma might also be burned, Alma knew they would be protected, from which he concludes that Alma was spiritually more mature than Amulek, who “was still growing in spirit.” Partridge then ends this discussion of Alma 14 by trying to get the reader to envision what this experience must have been like; he asks readers to try to put themselves in Alma’s position by imagining themselves in similar circumstances, and he asks the readers questions such as “How would you feel to observe wicked men round up your converts who had been baptized and burn them?” If you have never tried to read the scriptures in this way—if you have never paused to wonder why the individuals in the scriptures do the things they do or to consider how you might act or react in similar situations—you may find Partridge’s insights both instructive and inspirational.

The Bible and the Book of Mormon, by John E. Enslen, is intended to help readers see connecting links between the Bible and the Book of Mormon, as the subtitle indicates. It seems to have been written primarily for a non-LDS audience and perhaps for members of the LDS Church who are troubled by anti-Mormon attacks on the Book of Mormon (in contrast to Book of Mormon Insights, which seems primarily aimed at members of the LDS Church). The first two-thirds of the book reprints twenty-six newspaper articles written by Enslen, originally published in the Wetumpka Herald (in Wetumpka, Alabama); nine of those twenty-six articles deal with chapter 29 from Isaiah and its connections with the Book of Mormon. The last third of the book consists mostly of Enslen’s responses to letters to the editor that were written about Enslen’s articles.

Enslen’s ultimate purpose appears to be to persuade readers that the Book of Mormon is worth reading, so that they will not dismiss the book without a fair hearing. He wants to show that the Bible supports some of what the Book of Mormon says and to
create an interest in reading the Book of Mormon. If you are looking for an enthusiastic personal testimony of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, backed by some fairly simple evidences of its antiquity and its connections to the Bible, you may find Enslen’s book useful.

Unfortunately, both books are much less valuable than they could have been. They are weakened by characteristics that seem to be common in works by amateurs. For one thing, both books are written as if in an intellectual vacuum—a vacuum of knowledge about what has been written by others. Both books could have been much stronger if their authors had drawn on the large body of research that has been published on the topics they address. Furthermore, neither book is well balanced in its treatment of evidence; very speculative ideas are given the same weight as concepts that have been quite well documented by other people, as if both kinds of “evidence” (and many levels in between) were equally valuable and persuasive.

What is the place of amateurs in the field of Book of Mormon studies? While this subject deserves more systematic treatment than can be given in a review like this, may I conclude with a few suggestions based on my experience as an editor in this field, in the hopes that they may stimulate a more complete consideration of this topic by others in a more appropriate venue.

The case of one very sincere student of the scriptures seems particularly instructive. He is a medical professional. He has devoted considerable time and energy to a study of a certain aspect of Book of Mormon studies and has published books on the subject. He and I have had several discussions about his books. When the FARMS Review of Books published a review criticizing one of his books for the same kind of weaknesses I have pointed out in this review, he came to me to discuss the criticisms made by the reviewer. We talked about the need to understand the body of knowledge in the area of his interest and how it applies to his ideas, to evaluate arguments and evidence (his own and those of others), to make his own assumptions clear, to reason logically, and so on. He asked how he could obtain the knowledge and tools that the reviewer criticized him for not using. When I suggested that he take a portion of the large amounts of time and energy he was currently spending on his studies and invest them in pursuing
a good graduate degree from a reputable university, he didn’t see the point.

He seemed to want to acquire, quickly and easily, the knowledge and skills that others have invested years in obtaining and maintaining. He wanted the fruits of that training, but he didn’t want to sacrifice for it. Yet as a medical professional he certainly would not expect others to succeed in his profession without the proper training. The same is true in many fields of human endeavor; we don’t expect people to succeed (and in some cases we don’t even let them try) unless they are qualified by training and experience. So why should anyone expect things to be entirely different in the field of scripture scholarship?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the most important and most valuable type of scripture study—obtaining a personal witness of the truthfulness of the scriptures and an understanding of how to live one’s life in accordance with the teachings of the scriptures—requires no scholarly training. Perhaps because no training is needed for that type of scripture study, some assume none is needed for any type of scripture study.

But scripture scholarship is another matter. While the most important questions about the scriptures—are they true and what do they mean to me?—can be answered without any special training, there are some questions that can best or only be answered by applying the knowledge and skills developed by academic training: such as questions about context, both cultural and physical; or questions about forms, whether literary or social, political or legal; and questions about what things like context and forms may tell us about meaning. It is questions like these that are the focus of what I mean by scripture scholarship.

Amateurs who try to address these kinds of questions (like Enslen and Partridge) without obtaining and employing the knowledge and skills of scholarship are at a distinct disadvantage. They publish books (frequently self-published, like both Enslen’s and Partridge’s books) and expect them to receive the same serious attention as books published by scholars who have prepared themselves to address such questions effectively. While formal academic training is not the only way to acquire the knowledge and skills of scholarship, it is the best way I know, and I know of few
people who have acquired them in any other way to the level of doing effective scholarship on these kinds of questions.

Some people whose scholarship I admire remind us that professional scholars cannot be relied upon without question and that inspired amateurs have made indispensable contributions to scholarship. Hugh W. Nibley has been particularly tough on professionals who hide behind their credentials, although he has no reservations about those who truly deserve their credentials.1 Much more recently, John W. Welch has offered excellent guidelines to individuals who wish to become more serious about their studies of the scriptures.2 He is more optimistic than I that an amateur (novice is the term he uses) can “move toward becoming a gospel-scholar” without formal training, although he too warns against thinking that such a goal can be obtained easily: “If anyone is looking for a quick fix in becoming a gospel-scholar, think again. How does one become a great musician? How does one become a scratch golfer? Doing anything well in life requires lots of love, work, dedication, and consistent attention to the task.”3

Are there great musicians and scratch golfers who have not benefited from training from those already accomplished in the field? There are clearly many well-trained but mediocre musicians and golfers, but very few who are really accomplished in those fields who have not taken great pains to learn from masters, mentors, and even peers. I think that the analogy holds for accomplished scripture scholars; it certainly does for these two very productive scholars who inspire amateurs to stretch themselves toward becoming scholars—they themselves took advantage of the

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2 See John W. Welch, “Toward Becoming a Gospel-Scholar,” This People 19/3 (1998): 42–56. Although Welch discusses becoming a gospel-scholar, I don’t think he is talking about the same level of scholarship that I am addressing here. He does, however, offer very helpful ideas to those he describes as novice gospel-scholars, and he includes a discussion of the spiritual dimension that I have not addressed, since the books I am reviewing (and other books like them) are not lacking in spiritual understanding but in the scholarly component that I believe must accompany the spiritual for the pursuit of the kinds of questions I have mentioned.
3 Ibid., 56, 44.
opportunities presented to them to receive formal academic training and devoted great effort to making the most of that training, and they have used it to great effect in combination with their spiritual understanding.

Sometimes lucky or persistent amateurs make significant contributions to scripture scholarship. Sometimes they have unique access to important materials or places; occasionally they achieve new insights because they are free of the received opinions that at times blind even well-trained scholars to new ways of looking at things. But even these contributions usually need the careful scrutiny and comparative analysis of scholars before their value can be relied upon or developed further.

A good case in point is the work that Warren Aston has done in the Arabian Peninsula in search of Nephi’s Bountiful. His career in the travel and airline industries in Australia has facilitated his travel to Arabia and has given him contacts that have helped him gain entry to Yemen and especially Oman at times when such entry was difficult. His persistence in examining likely candidate areas has been matched by his care to learn what others have done on the subject (for example, he contacted FARMS to learn what had been published on the subject before beginning any personal explorations and he has kept FARMS apprised of his progress so that others who might be interested in doing research on the subject could learn what he had so far discovered). And when he thought that he had identified the best candidate, he asked FARMS to help him enlist professional scholars who could verify and extend his work.

Such amateur successes are rare in scriptural scholarship. Scripture scholarship is less important than personal study of the scriptures, but if it is going to be done, it should be done right. And so far, experience shows that it is done best by individuals who have acquired scholarly tools and knowledge through professional training and experience.

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4 For more on this concept, see Thomas S. Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
5 See Aston’s article and another article by a group of scholars who have recently returned from Oman, in the next issue of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies.