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Abstract Review of *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (1997), edited by Noel B. Reynolds.

BOOK OF MORMON SCHOLAR'S DIGEST

Terry Szink

The first volume on *Book of Mormon Authorship* was published in 1982 (reprinted in 1996) and served as a kind of Book of Mormon research digest. It gathered some of the best articles dealing with Book of Mormon authorship from a variety of fields. The current volume repeats this effort, in some cases updating the topics treated in the first volume and in others presenting new areas of research that have been developed since 1982.

Who wrote the Book of Mormon? This might very well be the most significant question asked about Mormonism.¹ Joseph Smith said that the Book of Mormon was the keystone of our religion. Countless missionaries have used the Book of Mormon as a tool, trusting in the logic that if the Book of Mormon is true, then Joseph Smith must have been a prophet of God, and if he was a prophet, then the church he established must be true. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon comes with a divine promise that God will reveal the

1. Recently Mark D. Thomas has written, "I believe that the origin of the Book of Mormon is not the most important question that it compels us to ask. The real question is: 'Is the Book of Mormon worth reading?'" *Digging in Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 1-2. I suggest that if the answer to the question of authorship is that

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truthfulness of the book to the sincere reader who asks in faith (see Moroni 10:3–5). Certainly, a testimony of the Book of Mormon can best be obtained by means of the Spirit. The editor and authors of this book understand this issue. Noel B. Reynolds writes: “The contributors to this volume are not trying to ‘prove’ the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. We understand from personal experience that knowledge of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is a spiritual and personal matter” (p. 3). Melvin J. Thorne adds:

I believe that the Lord does not intend the Book of Mormon to be provable intellectually, and I think that most scholars who work in this field would agree. . . . These scholars assume that the book is what it says it is, and the purpose of their research is not primarily to support that assumption but to gain greater understanding of the meaning and nature of the book. While the scholarly evidence for the authenticity of the book is also valuable to the honest inquirer, it functions chiefly as an invitation to take the book seriously and to seek primary, personal evidence—the witness of the Spirit. (pp. 192–93)

That being the case, is there a need to examine the Book of Mormon’s authorship in the cold light of scholarship? The editor presents three reasons for the publication of this book: (1) to refute false information regarding the Book of Mormon presented by its critics, (2) to summarize recent findings about the authorship of the Book of Mormon for those who already believe it, and perhaps most

it was written anciently, then it is certainly worth reading. In fact, if the book was produced in the way Joseph Smith claimed, then it is not just “worth reading” but should lead to a change in belief and behavior—something more than a simple intellectual acknowledgment of the book. Louis Midgley explains why, in the view of most believing Latter-day Saints, the issue of authorship is not subject to compromise (see below). Thomas also states that because of the authorship debate the message of the book has been ignored. He has apparently ignored the myriad of books that deal with the book’s message (inviting readers to come unto Christ) exclusively, perhaps because they have been written by people who have already answered the authorship question for themselves and have reached a conclusion different than his.

important, (3) to assure those seeking to discover the truth about the Book of Mormon that reputable scholars take its content seriously and affirm evidence for its origins as explained by Joseph Smith. To these reasons I would like to add a fourth—because study of the Book of Mormon is both interesting and fun.

The editor has gathered articles that address the question of authorship from a number of disciplines and organized them into four sections, each with an introduction. Part 1 deals with the evidence, both eyewitness and textual, of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Richard L. Bushman's "The Recovery of the Book of Mormon" reviews the first-person accounts of the recovery of the plates and their translation recorded by those who were close to Joseph Smith. He notes that critics who argue exclusively for nineteenth-century sources for the origin of the Book of Mormon fail to examine seriously the testimonies of those who witnessed its coming forth. When the accounts of Joseph Smith's contemporaries are examined, the reports add a wealth of detail that fleshes out and corroborates his story.

In "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," Richard L. Anderson notes that the first- and secondhand reports of the testimonies of the eleven witnesses of the gold plates "are so numerous that they could fill volumes" (p. 40). He gives a brief history of six of these witnesses and includes selections of their first-person testimonies. In my opinion, the testimonies of the eleven witnesses cause serious problems for Book of Mormon critics. I have never seen any successful response to these problems.

Royal Skousen examines the eyewitness accounts of the translation of the Book of Mormon in his chapter, "Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Transcript." I found this chapter particularly interesting. Skousen demonstrates that the types of errors and corrections in these manuscripts support, among other concepts, the ideas that Joseph Smith used the interpreters to translate the Book of Mormon, that there was tight although not ironclad control over the text, and that Joseph worked with passages of at least twenty to thirty words at a time.

Part 2 examines the logical structure of the authorship issues. I enjoyed Noel Reynolds's introduction to this section—he points out that critics often mistakenly assume that the methodological rule that science is limited to the observation of natural phenomena means that supernatural events do not exist.

In chapter 5, Louis C. Midgley presents a brief history of the arguments against the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon from early critics such as Abner Cole and Alexander Campbell to the so-called “new Mormon historians,” some of whom question the historicity of the book while acknowledging that it may have some spiritual value. He points out that some of the current views in this area are recycled versions of ideas that have been previously discredited and also explains clearly why there can be no compromise or middle ground regarding this issue.

In “Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate,” Daniel C. Peterson answers a number of arguments that critics of the book have raised against it. What I find most interesting in this chapter is that in most cases Latter-day Saint scholars had resolved these issues previously. That the critics continue to raise these arguments even though they have been answered is evidence that they are not so concerned with seeking truth as they are interested in destroying faith.

Melvin J. Thorne restates in chapter 7 the claim often presented by Hugh W. Nibley that Joseph Smith, given his limited education and background, could not have produced the Book of Mormon because of its complexities.

The third section proposes that we let the text speak for itself. Six chapters in this section examine the text from differing points of view.

In chapter 8, “What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?” John W. Welch, the pioneer of the study of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, discusses what the presence of that literary device means. For those like myself who have been enthralled with the structure of chiasmus, this essay not only provides fascinating insight into what chiasmus means but points toward possibilities for further research in this area.

The first *Book of Mormon Authorship* included a chapter on word-print studies of the Book of Mormon, using distributional analysis of noncontextual words to determine authorship. In “On Verifying

Wordprint Studies,” John L. Hilton provides an update of research in this area. He explains what wordprint studies are and how they work and briefly reviews their application to the Book of Mormon. He then applies a number of new techniques to two sections of the Book of Mormon (those authored by Nephi and Alma) and shows that the same person could not have written these two sections.

Responding to charges that the Book of Mormon presents an unrealistic picture of population sizes, James E. Smith presents a well-reasoned examination of the data in “How Many Nephites? The Book of Mormon at the Bar of Demography” and concludes that although the book does not provide enough information to answer all questions about demography, the picture it does present “is a realistic one” (p. 287).

Donald W. Parry points out in “Power through Repetition: The Dynamics of Book of Mormon Parallelism” that chiasmus is not the only literary structure in the Book of Mormon. He illustrates the richness and variety of poetic structure in the text.

In “The Voice of an Angel,” John A. Tvedtnes examines various accounts of Alma’s visions of an angel. He shows that each account adds new layers of meaning in a masterful presentation.

Chapter 13, “The Narrative of Zosimus (History of the Rechabites) and the Book of Mormon,” is an enlargement of an article published by John W. Welch in 1982 that draws comparisons between Lehi’s vision of the tree of life and that of Zosimus, an ancient narrative dealing with the Rechabites, a clan or guild mentioned in Jeremiah. Welch offers several possible explanations for the parallels.

Part 4 places the Book of Mormon in the real world. These studies examine the geographical and cultural evidence in the Book of Mormon and compare it with modern lands generally thought to match the locations where Book of Mormon events took place.

Noel Reynolds summarizes the recent work of various Latter-day Saints on Lehi’s journey through the Arabian Peninsula. He points out that the details presented in the Book of Mormon match the geography in ways that Joseph Smith could not have possibly known.

The longest chapter, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” is also one of the most interesting. In this very detailed chapter, John L. Sorenson presents more than sixty similarities

between the culture portrayed in the Book of Mormon and that of Mesoamerica. I particularly enjoyed the epilogue in which the author presents the story of a Mesoamerican document whose validity was questioned by a number of scholars because of its unusual manner of discovery. Michael Coe defended the document, arguing that before rejecting it, it should be thoroughly examined and all the facts considered. Sorenson points out the irony in Coe's treatment of the Book of Mormon, explaining that he is guilty of dealing with it in the same way he accused the scholars of treating the disputed document.

The final chapter is a reprint of William Hamblin's "The Importance of Warfare in Book of Mormon Studies," which first appeared in the 1990 FARMS publication *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*. Hamblin summarizes the content of that volume.

If there is a criticism of this book, it is that not every article presents new, cutting-edge research. Of the 543 pages, 94 have been previously published. Those looking for the latest work on the Book of Mormon need to understand this. That said, this volume is an excellent overview of a number of different areas of research for those who may not be familiar with them. I believe a need exists for this type of publication periodically, perhaps every ten to fifteen years, to provide an update to the evidence for the Book of Mormon and trends in scholarly thought. I doubt that Book of Mormon critics will respond to the evidence presented. Rather, they will continue to offer the same tired criticisms they have in the past, ignoring the fact that most of them have been answered in publications like this.

As stated above, I believe a testimony of the Book of Mormon is best obtained through prayer. I feel I must add my own testimony regarding the Book of Mormon. I have spent the past twenty years studying ancient languages and culture, history, and archaeology at some of the finest educational institutions. While this has, without a doubt, strengthened my testimony of the Book of Mormon, the foundation of that testimony is still the powerful spiritual feelings that I experienced as a fourteen-year-old after I had read the book and prayed about it.