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Title Feasting upon the Works: A Tribute to John L. Sorenson

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Reference *FARMS Review of Books* 12/2 (2000): 181–84.

ISSN 1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

Abstract Review of *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson* (1998), edited by Davis Bitton.

Feasting upon the Works: A Tribute to John L. Sorenson

Cynthia L. Hallen

In the 1998 FARMS volume *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World,* Davis Bitton edits a smorgasbord of studies honoring LDS scholar John L. Sorenson. For the festschrift introduction, Bitton gives readers a straightforward portrait of Dr. Sorenson: son, sibling, student, soldier, husband, father, friend, missionary, graduate student, anthropologist, professor, colleague, author, bishop, gentleman, and advocate for the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. The tribute is neither hyperbolic nor understated; readers can sense the real value of Sorenson's contributions in many areas.

The feast begins with a healthy soup-or-salad section entitled "Mormon History and Culture." In addition to Bitton's chapter on nineteenth-century LDS funeral language, section 1 includes Steven L. Olsen's treatise on LDS covenant foundations, David J. Whittaker's history of publishing in Parley P. Pratt's Pacific mission, James B. Allen's description of the LDS Indian Placement Program, and R. Lanier Britsch's account of LDS passport problems in Tonga.

The feast continues with hearty entrées in a section entitled "Elucidating the Book of Mormon." Contributions include a discussion of Nephite kings by Noel B. Reynolds, a comparative study of

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Asherah worship and Nephi's vision by Daniel C. Peterson, a look at the Māori response to the Book of Mormon by Louis Midgley, and an analysis of Isaiah commentaries by Garold N. Davis.

Delicious desserts bring the feast to a close in a section entitled "The Ancient World." Selections include Stephen C. Jett's documentation of transatlantic resemblances in textile techniques, Carl L. Johannessen's argument for pre-Columbian contact between India and the Americas, John W. Welch's research on sealed documents in ancient cultures, and Joel C. Janetski's investigation of Great Basin indigenous festivals.

The greatest strength of this anthology is its eye-opening offering of very interesting facts about lesser-known topics in Mormon studies. For example, the Whittaker chapter on "Parley P. Pratt and the Pacific Mission" documents how President Pratt set up a printing business to publish church materials and how Elder George Q. Cannon became his successor (see pp. 51–84). Readers learn that Deseret Book and other modern LDS publishing entities emerged from the printing enterprises of these early church leaders (see pp. 59, 71).

Readers of the "Rise and Decline of the LDS Indian Student Placement Program, 1947–1996" (see pp. 85–119) will discover that today's LDS Family Services, or LDS Social Services, originated with the church's placement program for Native American students (see p. 96). Allen provides statistics that demonstrate the overall success of the placement program: although two-thirds of Native American placement students dropped out of the program before graduation, 82 percent of Indian student placement service (ISPS) students eventually graduated as compared to 45 percent in a non-ISPS control group; 52 percent attended at least one year of college compared to 21 percent in the other group (see pp. 102–3).

New morsels of knowledge, as well as confirmations of old truths, are available in abundance in the scripture section. In "A Singular Reading: The Māori and the Book of Mormon" (see pp. 245–76), Midgley shows how and why early Māori converts could so readily identify with Book of Mormon peoples, cultures, and doctrines. When Māori people encountered Christianity, they already believed they were somehow linked to ancient Israel, perhaps as part of the

lost tribes (see p. 251). Māori Latter-day Saints identify themselves as Nephite descendants, not Lamanites (see p. 252), and the Māori relate to power struggles and tribal factions in Book of Mormon narratives because of similarities to their own traditional worldviews (see p. 260). Perhaps most striking is the account of how Māori wise men *(tohunga)* had prophesied that none of the Christian sects was right and that the true gospel would come to their people by way of "young men from the east who would travel in pairs, [and] raise their right hands" (p. 249). Many Māori people believed that the LDS missionaries sent to New Zealand were a fulfillment of such prophecies.

Equally engaging, but slightly more controversial, is Peterson's comparison of "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23" (pp. 191–243). Peterson hypothesizes that when Nephi was privileged to see Lehi's vision, a correspondence between the tree of life and the virgin mother of the Son of God would have seemed quite normal because of common early Semitic religious beliefs with regard to a female deity named Asherah, meaning "happy" or "blessed" (see pp. 205, 212). Asherah, the traditional female consort of El and later of Jehovah, was often portrayed with, or symbolically represented as, a beautiful tree bearing delicious fruit (see pp. 194–96). Peterson's presentation of Asherah as an ameliorated Heavenly Mother or Queen of Heaven may seem jarring in light of pejorative accounts of idolatrous Asherah "grove" worship in the Old Testament (see Exodus 34:13; Deuteronomy 7:5; Jeremiah 17:2). In a long endnote, Peterson is careful to state an orthodox apologia about any potentially unorthodox interpretations of his findings (see pp. 218–19). Such a lengthy disclaimer might not have been necessary if the title of the article had not so directly aligned Nephi and "his" Asherah. Nevertheless, the overall tone of the chapter was informative and enlightening.

Because I have seen the wonders of South American textile arts, Jett's chapter on "Resist-Dyeing as a Possible Ancient Transoceanic Transfer" particularly intrigued me (see pp. 307–50). Recent articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*[1] and *Newsweek*[2] on ancient cross-oceanic contact between the Old World and the Americas complement Jett's account of tie-dye, ikat, and batik techniques in Maya and Andean

textiles. Jett argues that such methods are so complex and so unique that independent invention is not likely; rather, cultural contact between the Americas and southwestern Asia is a better explanation for the similarities (see pp. 307–9). Linguistic borrowing may have accompanied such a transfer of technology, as in the Quechua word *watado* for ikat resist-dying and a similar lexeme from India, *patolu* (see pp. 317, 321).

Because I teach comparative historical linguistics, I was also enthralled by the chapter on "Pre-Columbian American Sunflower and Maize Images in Indian Temples: Evidence of Contact between Civilizations in India and America" (see pp. 351–89). Johannessen's discussion of ancient Himalayan and ancient American sun temples, maize motifs, and stone-block construction techniques is illustrated with nineteen photographs that admirably support his diffusionist position. Johannessen concludes by saluting John L. Sorenson's monumental two-volume annotated bibliography, coauthored with Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans*.[3] The works of authors such as Jett, Johannessen, Raish, and Sorenson bring FARMS to the cutting edge of some of the most exciting research being conducted today in anthropology, ethnobiology, history, and linguistics.

As a whole, the anthology *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World* is a successful tribute to Sorenson, who continues to mentor young students and scholars in the LDS academic community. His works and the writings of those who have benefited from his influence demonstrate that faithful rigorous scholarship is more than an ideal; it is a pleasant reality.

1. See Marc K. Stengel, "The Diffusionists Have Landed," *Atlantic Monthly*, January 2000, 35–48 (available as a FARMS reprint).

2. See Sharon Begley and Andrew Murr, "The First Americans," *Newsweek*, 26 April 1999, 50–57.

3. See John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1996).