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Abstract Review of *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures* (2001), edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson.

Holding Fast to the Word: A Review of *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*

Keith H. Lane

It was probably inevitable that a need for a book like this would arise. It is a valuable book and meets the challenges at hand. Let me explain. For the Christian world in general, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not kind to traditional belief in the historicity of the events recounted in scripture. Miraculous events from turning the water to wine, walking on water, feeding the multitudes, and raising the dead, to Christ's resurrection have been dismissed or argued away by those who have brought a completely naturalized worldview to the Bible. Though the majority of Christians probably believe such events actually occurred, the same cannot be said for many scholars, historians, or theologians of Christianity. Those who sought to judge the teachings and practices of Christianity by the standards and values of the Enlightenment clearly diminished the strength of Christian belief and the role it plays in the lives of individuals.

It can only be expected, then, that such secularized scholarship would find its way into studies of Latter-day Saint scripture, belief, and practice. A recent trend among a minority of writers has been to give an alternative reading to Latter-day scripture, seeing, for example, the

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Book of Mormon as an elaborate parable or as a book containing a meaningful ethics or theology, but whose characters and events have no basis in history and whose origin is not what Joseph Smith claimed it was.

Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures responds to the assertion that Latter-day Saint scripture could be in some sense meaningful even if the events and people mentioned in it were not actually real. The resounding response from those whose essays appear in this collection is that it is crucial for Latter-day Saints to hold to the historicity—historical authenticity—of scripture, while at the same time insisting that scripture is more than mere history. And the clear warning is that blindly following naturalism and the Enlightenment when it comes to thinking about Latter-day Saint scripture will lead to a diminished faith for Latter-day Saints.

Edited by Paul Y. Hoskisson, this book contains articles by Elder Alexander B. Morrison, James E. Faulconer, John Gee and Stephen D. Ricks, Paul Y. Hoskisson, Kent P. Jackson, Robert J. Matthews, Louis Midgley, Robert L. Millet, Daniel C. Peterson, John S. Tanner, and Elder Dallin H. Oaks. With the exception of the articles by Elder Oaks and Faulconer, the presentations were part of a symposium held at BYU in 1996. It will not be my aim here to comment on every article, but to give an overview of many of the articles and to help the reader to see the direction and the spirit of this volume.

Three of the articles (those by Jackson, Midgley, and Oaks) deal directly with the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon—that is, whether the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be and was received as Joseph claimed it was or, if its historicity is in doubt, whether instead it could still be "true" in some moral or theological sense if its historical contents were rejected or explained away. Perhaps the assertion by these three contributors could be exemplified by Elder Dallin H. Oaks's statement in "The Historicity of the Book of Mormon":

> There is something strange about accepting the moral or religious content of a book while rejecting the truthfulness

> of its authors' declarations, predictions, and statements. This approach not only rejects the concepts of faith and revelation that the Book of Mormon explains and advocates, but it is also not even good scholarship. (p. 241)

With characteristic insight, Elder Oaks points out what is at stake here—the foundation of faith for Latter-day Saints. "The argument that it makes no difference whether the Book of Mormon is fact or fable is surely a sibling to the argument that it makes no difference whether Jesus Christ ever lived" (p. 244). The other authors who deal exclusively with the Book of Mormon offer similar perspectives.

In his article "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," Kent P. Jackson reviews carefully the witnesses to the historicity of the Book of Mormon. For instance, turning to Joseph Smith's account of the reception and translation of the Book of Mormon, Jackson lays out the logical options: (1) Joseph deliberately deceived others; (2) Joseph was deluded; (3) an angel appeared, but there were no plates; (4) Joseph really received and translated plates, but what the plates say regarding historicity is false; or (5) the account of the Book of Mormon as traditionally held by believing Latter-day Saints is true. Jackson similarly sets before his readers the logical options with regard to what the Doctrine and Covenants says about the Book of Mormon and to what the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon claim to have seen and experienced.

Having reviewed Joseph's claims and what the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, and the Three and Eight Witnesses say about the book, Jackson asks, "what credibility could any of these sources have if the book is not historical?" (p. 137). All of this comes to a question of what one could trust if there is not a historical grounding for this book. Jackson directs his focus on the crux of the matter:

> Can the Book of Mormon indeed be "true," in *any* sense, if it lies repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately regarding its own historicity? Can Joseph Smith be viewed with *any* level of credibility if he repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately lied

> concerning the historicity of the book? Can we have *any* degree of confidence in what are presented as the words of God in the Doctrine and Covenants if they repeatedly, explicitly, and deliberately lie by asserting the historicity of the Book of Mormon? If the Book of Mormon is not what it claims to be, what possible cause would anyone have to accept *anything* of the work of Joseph Smith and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints given the consistent assertions that the Book of Mormon is an ancient text that describes ancient events? (pp. 137–38)

The strength of Jackson's article is in its careful and detailed reasoning about the issue and why Latter-day Saints must stand by the traditional account of the Book of Mormon.

Similarly, Louis Midgley, in "No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," focuses on the nontraditional belief that there are acceptable alternative explanations for the Book of Mormon. Those advocating a so-called middle ground will argue that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient book but that Joseph Smith was also not a deceiver, that somehow he and the book can still be held to be inspired, though the book is not a true record of the past. Midgley observes that "these critics often do not understand why Latter-day Saints refuse to accept their essentially secular, naturalistic explanations." And while there may be a possible middle ground on many other issues, when it comes to the question of whether Joseph was a prophet or whether the Book of Mormon is an ancient text, "there is simply no possible middle ground . . . as Latter-day Saints understand such matters" (p. 158).

What is significant here is that the effort to find a middle ground evades the central, inevitable question: Yes or no? Do you believe Joseph's account of receiving and translating the plates and that the book is what it claims to be—an ancient record of a fallen people? Stated as such, the question is not a historical or a scientific one; it is no wonder that the disinterested observer does not want to push that question but rather wants

to foster thinking that will help people understand without having to bring to the fore the real question—will you believe or not?

While it is understandable that non–Latter-day Saints might not comprehend why the Saints hold so tenaciously to the traditional understanding, Midgley is rightly impatient with some Mormon philosophers and historians who urge Latter-day Saints to move away from embarrassing claims of visions, appearances, translation of plates, restorations of keys, and so on, toward a respectable theology. Such thinkers want "to make a distinction between [the Book of Mormon's] historicity and its prophetic teachings" (p. 161). The move toward theology, Midgley argues, is not consistent with scripture and revelation, particularly since theology, if it is not merely descriptive, borrows from philosophical categories and is founded on "a philosophical culture that sees only scandal in prophetic charisms" (p. 164).

The efforts of some historians and theologians to find a kind of philosophical or historical certainty fail because of the tentative and inconclusive nature of both philosophy and history. Such "will not—cannot—provide certainty. . . . For me, and I believe for faithful Latter-day Saints generally, the accounts of the prophets and the record of God's mighty acts are sufficient for both the ground and the content of faith. Faith is, after all, not merely believing something but trusting God" (p. 165).

Beyond these three articles that deal specifically with the Book of Mormon, many of the other articles deal with theological issues surrounding the question of historicity and Latter-day Saint understanding of scripture in general.

"Notes on History and Inerrancy" by Daniel C. Peterson confronts those who "want us to believe that the scriptural stories can still be religiously meaningful even if they are purely fictional" (p. 208). Peterson acknowledges that in some instances this can be true and that "people can find life-orientational significance in stories that did not actually occur" (p. 209). The issue, of course, is the difference in meaning something will have if we assume it actually happened or if we believe it is simply a meaning-giving mythology with no basis in history. And with foundational issues, this is all-important. As Peterson says, "it matters

very much whether the story of Christ really happened as the Gospels say it did" (p. 208). Why?—because, for instance "if the purpose of the story of Jesus' resurrection is to illustrate divine love or the triumph of good over evil, but Jesus did not in fact rise from the grave, God actually looks worse or less powerful than if the story had not been told at all" (p. 210). Indeed, it seems that a Christ figure triumphant only symbolically over death—perhaps one whose message of love is resurrected in the hearts of his followers when he dies—is very different from a living Christ truly triumphant over death and hell.

Peterson makes a similar connection with the Book of Mormon: taking this as "an authentic record of a real God's genuine interventions and self-disclosures in literal history is a very different thing from [taking] the Book of Mormon as a fictional expression of a nineteenth-century farm boy's touching faith in such an intervening and self-disclosing God" (p. 211).

Robert L. Millet's "The Historical Jesus: A Latter-day Saint Perspective" traces certain nineteenth- and twentieth-century movements toward a naturalization of the life of Jesus and the efforts to find a scientific and historical understanding of who Jesus was and what he taught. Millet examines briefly the movements' focus on various forms of biblical criticism—historical, textual (both higher and lower), form criticism, and redaction. In one way or another, these approaches to the Bible seek to find out what "really" happened in the events recounted in the Gospels and what Jesus really did or did not say. All of this, Millet shows, leads to these key questions:

> To what degree can we trust the canonical Gospels in regard to what Jesus said and did? Has the Christian Church transformed a lowly Nazarene into a God? Is it possible to tear away the faithful film of believing tradition and get back to the way things really were? Can we excise from the biblical text those theological perspectives that preclude an "accurate" view of Jesus? Indeed, the question of the ages is, "What think ye of Christ?" (Matt 22:42). (pp. 185–86)

Millet goes on to assert that indeed Christ is exactly who both he and the Gospels claim he is: "the literal Son of God, the Only Begotten Son in the flesh of the Eternal Father" (p. 186).

Millet argues that those who have followed the aforementioned modes of biblical criticism have, in most cases, simply denied anything supernatural, not allowing in the Gospel accounts such fundamental things as "prophecy, revelation, and divine intervention" (p. 186). Such a view simply cannot make room for these things, and we ought not to be surprised at the conclusions that biblical criticism alone leaves us.

Millet goes on to show what help the restored gospel offers us in these issues and how the revelations "attest to the person and powers of Jesus of Nazareth and confirm that the Jesus of history is in fact the Christ of faith" (p. 190). He also adds (and this is a crucial addition) that "The final great test is the test of the spirit, the test of individual revelation, with the assurance that all can know" (p. 190).

Addressing many of the same issues as Millet (namely those arising from the Enlightenment and its emphasis on the natural and scientific as well as its virtual dismissal of other ways of knowing), Paul Y. Hoskisson deals with the need for historicity, both in developing faith and in establishing obligation. Hoskisson sets out to show why critics "are wrong when they contend that historicity is not necessary to develop scriptural faith" and why it is right to maintain that "the historicity of certain central, scriptural events is necessary for there to be substance to our faith" (p. 101).

Before turning his attention to the relation of history and historical obligation, Hoskisson clarifies several things with respect to the issue of historicity and faith for the Latter-day Saints. First, "we believe that central scriptural events must be historical, but we do not require historical evidence in order to develop our faith" (p. 101). Second, though Latter-day Saints maintain the historicity of scripture, "we have no need to assert the inerrancy or all-inclusive nature of scripture, and therefore we do not feel the need to defend every tittle, jot, word, or phrase" (p. 103). Third, Latter-day Saints do not need to "accept or reject in its totality the historicity of *all* scripture,"

though it is clear that some parts of scripture "require historicity in order to add content to our faith" (p. 103).

Hoskisson then shows how the Enlightenment and the move to rationality gradually established reason as "a supplement to revelation, [and] began to replace it as the path to knowledge of God" (p. 105). Hoskisson shows how a tenacious holding to the terms and methods of the Enlightenment leads repeatedly to conclusions such as Strauss's—he "denied the miraculous elements in the history of Christ while trying to maintain a belief in the man Jesus" (p. 109). Hoskisson maintains that Latter-day Saints are in a position not to be fooled by the premises of the Enlightenment and to then see why they ought to hold to the historicity of scripture.

Scripture's historicity is bound up, Hoskisson argues, with historical obligation. For instance, if Jesus was not actually baptized, then no requirement can be laid on us. "If, on the other hand, Christ Himself was baptized, then we cannot escape its necessity and must also be baptized" (p. 113). Similar claims can be made about other events from the many acts of Christ, to the covenant made with Abraham and the sacrifice required of him, to the death and resurrection of Christ. Take away their historicity and you take away the obligation that comes with them. At the same time, such a move takes away that which gives "content in our doctrine, substance to our faith, and reason for our hope" (p. 116).

Two of the best articles in helping Latter-day Saints understand what scripture is are those by John S. Tanner and James E. Faulconer. In "The World and the Word: History, Literature, and Scripture," Tanner argues that "scripture has textual as well as historical dimensions, and these twin aspects of scripture are not necessarily in opposition," and that careful reading of scripture "should give due weight to both the historicity and textuality of the word of God" (p. 217). While being cognizant of the historicity and textuality of scripture, Tanner reminds us that the right way to read scripture "is neither as history nor as literature *alone,* but *as scripture*" (p. 218, emphasis added). Scripture has the literary and historical aspects, but its aim and nature are something higher:

> Scripture is best regarded as testament. Testaments are, to be sure, essentially and overwhelmingly historiographic, written by prophets and telling of events which not only can be coordinated with time and space but which often order and give meaning to time and space. At the same time, testaments are also the record of testators or witnesses, whose purpose is not merely to record facts but to bear witness. (p. 222)

If we view scripture as testament, we will neither dismiss its historicity nor deny its textuality but will take all of these into account along with what scripture is bearing witness to and what it is asking us to believe and do.

Tanner goes on to show a number of potential dangers in some literary approaches to scriptures that "regularly downplay or deny its historicity" (p. 225) and in approaches that are too literalistic and may "miss the point by undervaluing the literary" (p. 226). To exemplify a proper reading that does not get weighed down by historical literacy but that is informed by appreciation for the literary, Tanner turns to the allegory of the olive tree. Here he shows how much richer this work becomes when read beyond a mere correlating of incidents in the parable with actual history. As Tanner observes, "We are meant to learn more and to feel more. . . . For if we let the symbols work on our hearts, as well as inform our minds, we will feel truths that apply not only to particular historical moments but to all times, all places, and all people" (pp. 233–34).

In a similar way, Faulconer addresses the historical and the figurative, the real and the symbolic in scripture. His "Scripture as Incarnation" is perhaps the most innovative of the articles in this volume, opening up fertile ground for thought and deeper understanding. The article, though not obtuse, is complex and takes real effort to plumb its depths. But it is worth such effort. Faulconer points to a richer way of understanding and approaching scripture (and ritual) than the general modern worldview allows.

Faulconer argues that the scriptures are indeed historical but that our modern notions of history do not account for what those

who wrote scripture (the premoderns) meant by history. We need, therefore, to be cautious about looking at scripture historically, not because there is no historicity, but because what history was for the premoderns seems to be something different than for moderns. "Thus, difficulties occur when, with the onset of modernism, scripture becomes, like any other book, something that is understood merely referentially, and religion ceases to be thought of as *the* ordering power of the world and becomes one sphere of interest among many" (p. 34). The claim here is not that modern history is bad, but that to view scripture merely in modern historical terms is to miss what scripture should be and the richness it has to offer. Those who wrote scripture had a broader and more religiously meaningful conception of history—a history that included the divine and was given its fundamental meaning by the divine.

For the modern mind, there are the "actual events" and then the words of scripture that refer to those events. For the ancients, scripture had a different purpose rather than simply as a reference. "Instead of referring to the divine as do ordinary signs, the words of scripture are an embodiment of the divine, an incarnation; they embody the divine order of that to which, on a modern view, they seem only to refer" (p. 38).

Faulconer asserts that scripture speaks of "real people and real events" but that "premodern interpreters do not think it sufficient (or possible) to portray the real events of real history without letting us see them in the light of that which gives them their significance—their reality, the enactment of which they are part—as history, namely the symbolic order that they incarnate" (p. 44). For the premodern a "literal history"—a history by the letter—"necessarily incorporates and reveals [a divine] order. Any history that does not incorporate it is incomplete and, therefore, inaccurate" (p. 45). Furthermore, distinguishing between the literal and figurative (though such categories are not totally obliterated) is not as problematic for the premoderns. For them, "reading the story of Moses and Israel typologically, figurally, anagogically, or allegorically is not what one does *instead of* or

in addition to reading literally. Such readings are part and parcel of a literal reading" (p. 48).

Faulconer ends his paper by suggesting that most Latter-day Saints already read scripture as giving us a symbolic ordering—an incarnation—of the divine, though they may not speak of it in those terms. "Nevertheless, it remains possible not only to continue to read scripture as incarnational rather than merely referential, but to do so more explicitly than we have done" (p. 49).

My overview of these articles should be enough to give readers a sense of the purpose of this book and the strength of the articles in it. It is a timely book and helpful in clarifying why Latter-day Saints hold fast to the historicity of scripture. Of course, what is said here may seem obvious to most Latter-day Saints who believe and have a witness of the Spirit. Nevertheless, this book is helpful in giving us better ways to think and talk about these issues. And it is certainly helpful in showing Latter-day Saints and others that there are intelligent, educated people who believe in Christ and his historicity, and in scripture (ancient and latter-day) and its historicity.

Ultimately, for me, and I think for the authors of this book, the question of the historicity of Latter-day scripture is not solely or primarily historical. That is, it is not a question that can or should be answered with historical evidence alone. To raise the question of historicity of scripture is to ask a question that includes more than the historical. It is an issue for faith, one that is settled—as several of the authors point out—by prayer and revelation. Though one may want to study something out historically, and though one may find historical evidence that confirms, but does not prove, the scriptures, that historical search will not settle the matter. It is first and last a question for faith. I do not find the Book of Mormon to be true because I have found its historicity to be true, but rather I take the historicity to be true because I have received a witness that the Book of Mormon is true—and "true" here includes its historicity.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein saw the issue of scripture and historicity with uncanny insight:

> Christianity is not based on a historical truth; rather, it offers us a (historical) narrative and says: now believe! But not, believe this narrative with the belief appropriate to a historical narrative, rather: believe, through thick and thin, which you can do only as the result of a life. *Here you have a narrative, don't take the same attitude to it as you take to other historical narratives!* Make a *quite different* place in your life for it.—There is nothing *paradoxical* about that![1]

When Wittgenstein says Christianity is not founded on a historical truth, he is not commenting on the historicity of Jesus or the resurrection but rather on the nature of historical truth and the nature of religious truth. Religious truth (Latter-day Saints might say "revealed truth") is in a different category and learned in a different way than historical truth. While the resurrection is historical, as a believer I do not receive my witness of it, nor form my attitudes toward it, through the categories of history. To paraphrase Christ's response to Peter: flesh and blood (history) does not reveal this, but the Father which is in heaven. A proclamation such as "Christ is risen" or a testimony that the Book of Mormon is true or that the keys of the kingdom of God were restored to Joseph Smith is rife with historicity (they really happened), but such statements are different from and more than historical claims. They are, as Tanner notes of scripture, testimonies. The philosopher Søren Kierkegaard called such statements "existence communications"[2]—that is, communications that require the receiver to respond with one's soul: to believe and follow, or to disbelieve and not follow. What such communications do not allow is that one can hedge on what is being communicated and try to change it into something more intellectually or culturally acceptable. In other words, one can-

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value,* trans. Peter Winch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 32e, emphasis in original.

2. See Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* trans. David F. Swenson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941). This is one of the best philosophical treatments of the relation of history and Christianity, and Latter-day Saints would be profited by reading this long, challenging, but tremendously insightful work.

not go about spiritualizing away the resurrection or making the Book of Mormon true only in the sense that it teaches great ideas so as to make one's acceptance of such things easier to bear, relying on human reason and wisdom alone without faith and revelation. Such is a non-religious response to what requires a religious response—that is, a response that requires one's life, a whole-souled response to the divine.

The authors in this important volume see what is at stake here and will not allow for either a diminishing of the claims of latter-day scripture or a lessening of what scripture demands of every individual—faith and obedience, including an already submissive response in our acceptance of scripture and the claims scripture makes.