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from S. Kent Brown

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Abstract A review of *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights* (2004), by S. Kent Brown.

READING BETWEEN THE LINES:
BOOK OF MORMON INSIGHTS
FROM S. KENT BROWN

Ray L. Huntington

Readers interested in gaining new insights about the Book of Mormon (which is certainly the focus of this book) will not be disappointed with Kent Brown's *Voices from the Dust*. There are, of course, other books on the market with similar intentions. None, however, will eclipse what Brown has accomplished in his brief book. There is a good reason for that. The author has limited his focus and discussion to six topic areas—areas in which he appears to be comfortable and extremely competent. His competence flows from a solid academic background in Near Eastern studies and languages, as well as from living and researching in the Middle East. In short, his professional expertise, research, and Middle East savvy enable him to view the Book of Mormon in unique ways.

As mentioned earlier, *Voices from the Dust* focuses on six areas: Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, the wilderness experience of Arabia, King Benjamin's discourse, the missionary experiences of Mosiah's sons, Christ's visit to the New World, and Moroni's world. While the book focuses on events beginning in Lehi's Jerusalem and concludes with Moroni and the collapse and destruction of Nephite society, it

Review of S. Kent Brown. *Voices from the Dust: Book of Mormon Insights*. American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2004. xvi + 219 pp., with chronological chart. \$18.95.

leaves major gaps in the Book of Mormon narrative. Even so, Brown provides detail and depth for those parts of the story on which he has chosen to elaborate.

In the review process, one must ask the following questions: Did the author remain true to his thesis or the intent of his writing? More important, did he provide the reader with new insights and perspectives from the Book of Mormon? Did he seek to enlighten the reader with new ways to view information from the Book of Mormon? Brown believes he did and makes that claim in the book's introduction: "In all, these studies take Book of Mormon students into places where few studies have ventured, probing possibilities that enrich our understanding of people who made a difference, who kept the faith, and who believed that God had orchestrated events in their lives" (p. xv). Through his constant "probing [of] possibilities," Brown provides the reader with a fresh set of lenses through which to view Book of Mormon events and people in unique ways. He also links many of these events to the Old and New Testaments. In sum, the author has been true to the aims of his book.

Brown wastes little time in introducing the reader to new possibilities and insights from the Book of Mormon. For example, in the chapter dealing with Lehi's departure from Jerusalem, he explores four potential routes Lehi and his family may have taken from Jerusalem to the Red Sea. In addition, he also identifies two promising locations for the family's first major encampment: Wadi al-Ifal or Wadi Tayyib al-Ism. Moreover, he explores the probable types of sacrifices Lehi offered (peace and burnt offerings) and, more important, the reason(s) Lehi may have offered them. Brown's insights and commentary make sense and also push the reader to think about issues and ideas that are often not contemplated when reading the Book of Mormon.

Of great interest in the first chapter is Brown's perspective on both Lehi's and Nephi's dreams. He asserts that Lehi's vision of the tree of life is not only a powerful lesson on the atonement, the house of Israel, and the state of Lehi's family, but also provided Lehi with a "glimpse of what lay ahead in his route through southern Arabia": lonely, long stretches of desolate land, deep wadis or canyons "impossible to cross" (reminiscent of the great and terrible gulf mentioned in Lehi's dream),

“seasonal streams [that] would fill with mud and debris” (the filthy water), and verdant areas graced not only by sources of water but also by “lush vegetation represented by the tree full of delicious fruit” (p. 12). This notion is unique and worth considering.

Brown also draws some fascinating conclusions about Nephi’s character when describing his reaction to Laman and Lemuel’s disputations about their father’s dream. In brief, the new insights found in the first chapter are a foreshadowing of what awaits the reader in the following pages.

In his treatment of Lehi’s travels in the Arabian wilderness, the author again reads between the lines and fills in missing gaps of the wilderness narration by using later commentary from the Book of Mormon. For instance, he illuminates the family’s Arabian wilderness experience by citing Alma 9:10, 22 (Lehi’s family encountered enemies, famine, and sickness during their wilderness sojourn), Mosiah 1:17 (they experienced a lack of progress in their journey and were driven back), 2 Nephi 3:1 (Lehi referred to “the days of my greatest sorrow”), and Jacob 7:26 (they were outcasts from Jerusalem). These commentaries involving the wilderness trek are supplemented by Brown’s description of the Liahona and insights into the types of tents, provisions, and pack animals they may have used—including some useful facts about the ships of the desert (camels, pp. 30–31). He also discusses the role of women in the ancient Near East and how this normative behavior played out in their wilderness journey. Perhaps his best work in this chapter is his description of the land Bountiful based on his research in the area of Dhofar. Lastly, the author draws five comparisons between Lehi and Moses (both with extensive experiences in a wilderness setting). These insights are illuminating and serve to “peel back” the text in order to reveal the events in a different light—a much different light indeed.

Chapter 3 (King Benjamin’s address) and chapter 4 (the missionary experiences of Mosiah’s sons) follow the same patterns established in the first two chapters—one insight followed by another. For instance, Brown illuminates King Benjamin’s address by weaving it into the broader fabric of Nephite history—a history that reminds the reader

of two separate groups (the Nephites and the people of Zarahemla) becoming one. He discusses some of the challenges of bringing two separate and diverse groups together. Leadership, language, and religion, according to Brown, would have been a few of the weighty issues facing the newly formed society. Contention would also have been a by-product of their union. Thus, Brown suggests, King Benjamin intended to unify this people, transfer royal authority, and give them a new name (the name of Christ) through his sermon. The watchword of chapter 3, however, is the atonement. And here Brown does a superb job of tying Old Testament temple themes (e.g., sacrifice) into Benjamin's atonement address. This chapter also has excellent insights into individual covenants, national covenants, and coronation rites in the Book of Mormon.

Chapter 4 is alive with wonderful insights, but it is chapter 5, "The Majestic Christ," that may be the author's strongest contribution. Here, Brown examines the resurrected Christ's visit to the land Bountiful. His motives are clear: he strives to set out what the Savior did in the brief span of three days that would infuse a spirit of unity and love that lasted for almost two hundred years. He addresses this issue by contrasting Jehovah's appearance on Mt. Sinai with his appearance at the temple in Bountiful. On both occasions, according to the author, Jehovah referred to himself as "I Am" (see 3 Nephi 11:10). The use of the title, Brown indicates, was to remind the people that he was the "God of the Israelite Exodus, an event which heretofore had stood as the unequalled demonstration of God's love for His people" (p. 132). This fact was certainly not lost on these people who were so familiar with Old Testament history. Brown maintains that the Savior's use of the title "I Am" in his appearance to the Nephites was designed to teach them that the atonement had now eclipsed and supplanted the exodus as the grand proof of God's love.

Brown discusses the issues of ordinances and doctrines taught by the Savior during his brief visit. As if that were not enough, he also talks about the concept of the promised land, the architecture of the temple, sacred space, the role of the Nephite Twelve, and the law of consecration. His best writing, however, is devoted to the Savior's

interaction with little children. Here, more than any other place in the book, are wonderful insights into the character of Jesus and the importance of little children in God's kingdom.

Although the last chapter, devoted to Mormon and Moroni, does not contain as many new insights as previous chapters, it is nicely written and will help the reader appreciate the difficult tasks both Mormon and Moroni faced. *Voices from the Dust* is an excellent book that will provide fresh perspectives and new insights into the world of the Book of Mormon. It is well written and will be engaging to most readers. This book will be extremely useful for anyone wanting to study the Book of Mormon in greater depth or who will be teaching this text in a class setting.

