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Title Finally!

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Abstract Review of *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament: An Illustrated Reference for Latter-day Saints* (2006), by Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Eric D. Hunstman, and Thomas A. Wayment.

Finally!

Kevin L. Barney

Review of Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, Eric D. Hunstman, and Thomas A. Wayment. *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament: An Illustrated Reference for Latter-day Saints.* Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006. viii + 327 pp., with bibliography and index. $39.95.

I well remember when the BYU Religious Studies Center published *The Words of Joseph Smith*.[1] This was a landmark development in publishing as it relates to Mormon studies. The Nauvoo discourses of the Prophet Joseph were portrayed in this volume using modern documentary editing standards so as to re-create as closely as possible the actual manuscript records of the discourses without the kind of prettifying (and often misleading, whether or not intentionally) editing that had been imposed on these sources in some previous publications. When this book was first published, a reporter asked Hugh Nibley for his reaction, and I well recall his trenchant one-word response: "Finally!" I took it from this reaction that Nibley felt that there had long been a need for such a resource and that Andrew Ehat and Lyndon Cook had done a good job in preparing and making available that collection of texts.

I have adopted as my title for this review Nibley's single-word response, for it represents my own reaction to *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament* (hereafter *World*): Finally! At last we have

1. Andrew F. Ehat and Lyndon W. Cook, eds., *The Words of Joseph Smith: The Contemporary Accounts of the Nauvoo Discourses of the Prophet Joseph* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1980).

a one-volume general introduction to the study of the New Testament that is geared to Latter-day Saint students of scripture—a resource of high quality and impeccable scholarship that an average Saint might crack open and actually *read*. This is no small accomplishment. *World* fills a need that I have long felt existed, and I despaired that such a book would ever actually appear. The authors and Deseret Book are to be congratulated for filling such a long unmet need so well. I give this volume my highest recommendation.

World succeeds for three fundamental reasons. First, it is graphically rich. It is a large, beautiful book, suitable for display in the home, brimming with images of vistas, maps, coins, artifacts, artwork, manuscripts, inscriptions, photos, and more on almost every page. They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and the extensive use of such illustrations adds great value to this book. I believe we all appreciate being taught visually as well as by the printed word. I have strong scholarly interests, which often means that I read lengthy works of nothing but text, so I very much appreciated the generous use of illustrations in *World*. They made distant history come alive. Occasionally the images may seem of only tangential relevance to the actual study of the New Testament, but I certainly support the authors' commitment to keep the reader visually engaged. The editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* made a similar commitment to the importance of visual images when they changed from a strictly print format to today's visually rich format (modeled after such popular magazines as *Biblical Archaeology Review*). As much as I loved the old print-only volumes of the *Journal*, the visual richness of the newer style is an improvement that makes the scholarship more accessible to a wider array of readers. The authors of *World* obviously understand this concept well and have applied it to excellent effect in their introduction to the New Testament.

Second, this book is very readable. Part of this has to do with the writing itself. The authors understand that not all of their readers will be university-level students of scripture, so they have written in a clear and straightforward manner; but they also credit the reader with basic intelligence and do not skimp on necessary detail. I thought the tone

and level of their writing were just about perfect. Perhaps of equal importance was the decision to make frequent use of sidebars to convey additional, more detailed information on particular individuals, concepts, and issues. Further, the sidebars (with various captions, such as "Detail," "Portrait," and "Legend") provide visual relief that makes reading easier, much as paragraph breaks improve the readability of long prose texts. Trying to incorporate this more detailed material directly into the text or omitting it altogether would have been a mistake. Nevertheless, a detailed table of contents listing all of these sidebars would have been helpful. As an appendix to this review, I have endeavored to present such a listing, partly as a resource for readers of the book, but mostly to give the reader of this review some indication of the fascinating breadth of subjects the authors treat in this way.

Third, this book reflects strong contemporary scholarship. I recently had lunch with a friend who told me it was his understanding that the authors, in preparing to write this book, took older Mormon secondary literature and noted items that needed clarification in light of more modern scripture scholarship. The results of their study were used to help select topics to address. I do not in fact know whether this was a part of their methodology, but if so, the results are excellent. Past Latter-day Saint writers on the Bible have tended to rely too much on prior Mormon secondary literature. Although there is much of value in such sources, they are often dated and must be used with care. A fresh approach is preferable, taking into account the findings of the best contemporary non–Latter-day Saint scholarship but reading and applying it through the lens of faith. Latter-day Saints have nothing to fear from such scholarship, and those who neglect to consult it often miss out on insights of great importance to the gospel generally and the restoration specifically. The authors have modeled how to bring to bear strong scholarship on topics of interest to Latter-day Saint students of the New Testament, a lesson that may be profitably applied to other areas of scripture study as well.

I first learned of this book from a positive review I read on the Mormon blogosphere that began as follows: "It looks like a coffee table

book but it reads like top-notch scholarship. Much to my surprise, an LDS publisher has brought forth a book on the New Testament that is well worth owning."[2] This observer, Julie Smith, is a fine Latter-day Saint New Testament scholar in her own right, so I was certainly predisposed by her favorable review to like this book, and I was delighted to find when I actually read the book that my own opinion matched hers.

The book begins with a forty-three-page introduction divided into three parts: first a lucid introduction to the New Testament itself, and then surveys of both the Jewish world and the Greek and Roman worlds at the time of Jesus. To the novice some of this material may seem rather far afield from the New Testament, but it provides an essential context and background for understanding the New Testament. Skimping on this context would have been a mistake, one that our authors fortunately do not make.

I was heartened by the authors' approach to the Joseph Smith Translation (pp. 14–15), which was appropriately nuanced and made no claim that *all* JST variants reflect restorations of original text, an assumption I have found to be frustratingly common among Latter-day Saints. The authors allude to ongoing research into the textual nature of the JST, an effort I applaud. My own (very preliminary) study[3] suggested that there are indeed more possible parallels with ancient texts than previously realized and that some of these may indeed parallel the original text, but we cannot simply assume as much, for other parallels may involve nonoriginal variants. This all requires study and argument in each specific case and cannot be handled with global assumptions across the board. As with all good textual study, this project needs to be eclectic in its approach, and I get the impression

2. Julie M. Smith, "Book Review: *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*," Times and Seasons, http://www.timesandseasons.org/?p=3501 (accessed 29 November 2007).

3. "The Joseph Smith Translation and Ancient Texts of the Bible," *Dialogue* 19/3 (1986): 85–102. I wrote this article long before the publication of the critical text of the Joseph Smith Translation (Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith's New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* [Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2004]), and I made no attempt at a systematic approach to the variants, simply picking some of the low-hanging fruit. The study that the authors allude to should rectify these limitations in my own early work.

from the authors' brief description that those undertaking this study understand that.

I had to smile at the explanations (p. 31) of such terms as *barbarians*, from the Greek *barbaros* (onomatopoetic for the Greeks' perception of the unintelligible speech of foreigners: ba-ba-bar), and *pagans*, a word originating as a description of the more religiously conservative country dwellers, or *pagani* (the *pagi* being countryside districts whose inhabitants tended to hold more closely to the old religions of Greece and Rome), in contrast to the more sophisticated city dwellers, or *urbani*. I first learned about these things as a young student at Brigham Young University, and for me it was this type of knowledge that began to make the text come alive.

Some of the correctives to common misunderstandings broached in this introductory section include an explanation of Herod's role as a client-king (and how he astutely managed to protect Jewish interests vis-à-vis Rome), historical problems with the census of Luke 2:1, the relative benevolence of Rome toward other peoples and their religions, and the need for a critical eye when using ancient historians such as Josephus.

Like Caesar's Gaul, the bulk of the book is divided into three parts: "The World of Jesus' Ministry" (focused on the Gospels), "The World of the Apostles' Early Ministry" (focused on Acts and Paul's letters), and "The World of the Apostles' Later Ministry" (focused on the general letters, the book of Revelation, and the world immediately following the New Testament).

Along the way are numerous traps, which our authors carefully avoided. A few random illustrations: The Gospels were composed in Greek and not translated from Aramaic (even if the latter position is a popular speculation) (p. 53). The Aramaic word *Abba* is best represented as meaning *Father*, not *Daddy*, contra a popular folk etymology that gets wide circulation.[4] The "inn" of Luke 2 (*katalyma*) may have been the guest room of a house as opposed to any sort of a public inn,[5]

4. See Kevin L. Barney, "Who's Your Daddy?" By Common Consent, http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2007/02/whos-your-daddy (accessed 30 November 2007).

5. On page 109 the authors note that the JST renders a plural *inns*, thus interpreting the concept as one involving public accommodations.

and 1 BC is too late for the birth year of Jesus (p. 68). In the expression "an high mountain apart," found in the King James Version of Matthew 17:1, the word *apart* is an archaic idiom meaning *privately* and has nothing to do with a lack of proximity to other mountains (p. 73). The Syriac version of a New Testament text should not be equated with an original Aramaic version (p. 89). The saying about a camel going through the eye of a needle has nothing to do with a city gate or a rope (p. 92). The short ending of Mark was most likely intentional (p. 103). Jesus was not born on Christmas day (p. 112). Wine in the New Testament does not mean unfermented grape juice (p. 124). Mary had other children after Jesus (p. 165). We have no way to be sure whether Paul was married (p. 243). Textual variants make it likely that at least some scribes perceived the number 666 as Hebrew-based gematria for Caesar Nero; whether that was the author's original intention is a separate question (p. 288).

I found precious little to disagree with in this book, and even when I did disagree, it was more a matter of what I perceived to be a slightly misplaced emphasis than out-and-out disagreement. Here I will mention two examples. First is the discussion of the authorship of Hebrews (pp. 254–57). While the authors give a fine overview of the evidence, to my taste they seemed to try too hard to keep off the table the option that Paul was *in no sense* the author of Hebrews. Since in my view that is in fact the most likely conclusion, I would have liked to see the authors gently prepare the reader for such a possibility. It is fine to discuss the broader ancient conception of authorship inherent in the *auctor* (Latin for "author," deriving from *auctoritas* "authority") of a work, but I would have liked to see the authors go a little bit further with the possibilities here than they did.

Second is the discussion of John the Baptist on the Mount of Transfiguration (pp. 73–74). The authors quote JST Mark 9:3 as follows: "And there appeared unto them Elias with Moses, or in other words, John the Baptist and Moses." This text clearly portrays John the Baptist as being on the mount *in lieu of* and not *in addition to* Elijah. But on the next page, without explanation, the authors represent John the Baptist being on the mount in addition to both Moses and

Elijah. (I certainly agree with their impulse not to kick Elijah off the mount, which I believe is ultimately the right call.) The authors appear to be following the conclusory opinion of the Latter-day Saint Bible Dictionary: "The curious wording of Joseph Smith Translation Mark 9:3 does not imply that the Elias of the Transfiguration was John the Baptist, but that in addition to Elijah the prophet, John the Baptist was present" (s.v. "Elias"). Now, I think that there is a way to get to where the authors wish to go—to place John the Baptist on the mount without simultaneously kicking Elijah off—but it is not by simply misreading the JST emendation as the Bible Dictionary appears to do. Rather, it is by comparing the episode on the mount with the visionary experience of Doctrine and Covenants 110, which appears to be directly parallel with the Mount of Transfiguration. In that passage, both Moses and Elijah appear, as well as another unidentified "Elias." I have speculatively argued that this Elias may have been John the Baptist, based largely on the parallel with the Mount of Transfiguration.[6] But this material is all rather too difficult and speculative for an introductory text such as *World*.

Julie Smith, in the course of her otherwise very favorable review, mentioned four errors or issues with the book that I would like to comment on. First: "They do seem to have confused red-letter editions of the Bible with the color-coding system of the Jesus Seminar (see page 87), an error that I find (please forgive me) delightful."[7] I am not sure that they actually confused the color coding; I think, rather, that they simply made a little too much of what is intended by the colored font of a red-letter edition, which is simply trying to highlight for the reader the text that is spoken by Jesus *as portrayed in the given translation*, as opposed to making some sort of affirmative conclusion about the original form of such sayings. The red-letter edition simply reflects a harmless and possibly helpful editorial device, and nothing more.

Second: "Later, they propose that 'most conservative specialists accept Pauline authorship' (p235) of all the epistles—including

6. See Kevin L. Barney, "Who was the Elias of D&C 110?" By Common Consent http://www.bycommonconsent.com/2006/03/who-was-the-elias-of-dc-110 (accessed 16 June 2007).

7. Smith, "Book Review: *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*."

Hebrews. This is simply not true. (This issue doesn't even pose problems for that most conservative group of conservatives, the inerrantists, since there is no internal attestation of Pauline authorship—but there *is* internal evidence that the writer was converted in a manner very different from Paul.)"[8] Actually, I do not think the authors intended to include Hebrews in this assertion. They write: "Generally, however, most Latter-day Saint and conservative specialists accept Pauline authorship of these epistles" (p. 235). I would read the antecedent to "these epistles" as being the six epistles immediately spoken of (Ephesians, Colossians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, and Titus), and not inclusive of Hebrews, which had been mentioned earlier in the paragraph (although the intended scope of the antecedent is somewhat ambiguous). If we remove Hebrews from consideration, then I do not think the statement is off base. My lodestar for good, conservative Christian scholarship on the New Testament is the Dallas Theological Seminary—what some participants on the B-Greek list (online mailing list for those interested in biblical Greek) dismissively allude to as "those fundamentalists down in Dallas"—and while their material is open to the possibility of other authors for these letters, it does tend to push for Pauline authorship.

Third, Smith observes that

> at one point, they dismiss "speculation" that Phebe was a priesthood holder just because the word *diakonos* is applied to her (p206)—a somewhat tenuous position since they have previously held that the word is sometimes used "in the technical sense" (p10) for a priesthood office. And then in a later reference to Phebe, they state that *diakonos* implies that she "held a recognized ecclesiastical position" (p251).[9] If I were interested in redaction criticism, I might find evidence of multiple authors here, especially since the same paragraph later notes

8. Smith, "Book Review: *Jesus Christ and the World of the New Testament*."

9. At this point Smith gives the following footnote: "I imagine that they would explain this by noting the difference between 'an ecclesiastical position' and 'a priesthood office' and I have no problem with this as long as they acknowledge that it is eisegesis and not exegesis."

> that Prisca and her husband worked together "seemingly equally" while the text previously noted that the fact Prisca's name is usually mentioned before her husband's indicates that she was more prominent than he was (p228).

I agree with Smith that the application of the nontechnical meaning of *diakonos* to Phebe in the first instance seems to be based more on presentist assumption than on any particular analysis of the text. On the other hand, the book appropriately discloses that both nontechnical and technical meanings of the word in any given instance are possible and need to be evaluated, and the authors do seem to portray a more technical understanding of the term in the later passage Smith references. Having worked myself on a long New Testament book with two other authors, I think such differences of perspective are a good thing and are actually a strength of this volume.[10]

Fourth:

> The only section of the work with serious problems was on "the lost gospels." That text states that "a growing number of scholars are advocating that we replace the New Testament Gospels with some recently discovered texts from antiquity" (p310). This seems a stretch—especially since they name the discovery of the Gospel of Judas as one of the events "fueling" this movement. I don't know of any non-crackpot who has suggested that a canonical gospel be replaced by the Gospel of Judas; perhaps it would have been more accurate to say that some scholars question whether the gospels in the canon deserve a status any different from the apocryphal gospels. The inexplicable hostility of this section comes through in other ways as well: Why say that the Gospel of Philip was

10. As I wrote in the preface to *Footnotes to the New Testament for Latter-day Saints* (privately published and available in various formats at http://feastupontheword.org/Site:NTFootnotes), 1:iv: "The reader may also note occasional differences in positions taken by the different contributors [Kevin L. Barney, John H. Jenkins, and John A. Tvedtnes]. To one unaccustomed to the ways of scholarship, this may seem unusual, but it is really quite normal. Even faithful, committed Latter-day Saint scholars sometimes disagree about this or that detail, and the contributors to this volume are no exception."

> "forged" (p311) under his name when the very same process—when it applies to the Epistle to the Hebrews—is described as "translat[ing] it or rework[ing] it" (p256).

I suspect that the introductory sentence to this section was influenced by the overhyped Gospel of Judas, which was much in the news at the time the authors were finishing this book, and perhaps had more to do with the media than with responsible scholars. As Smith is quick to urge, and I of course agree, these kinds of issues are very minor in the context of the book as a whole. As a reviewer I feel an obligation to point them out, but ultimately they are trifles.

I also have reviewed two volumes of presentations derived from Sperry symposia, *Sperry Symposium Classics*[11] and *How the New Testament Came to Be*.[12] I would analogize my overarching reaction to these three recent books on the New Testament to the linguistic degrees of an adjective. *Classics* is the positive: *good*. *Came to Be* is the comparative: *better*. And *World* is the superlative: *best*.

In conclusion, this book is simply a stunning achievement in Mormon publishing, and every Latter-day Saint with an interest in the New Testament, which should indeed be *every* Latter-day Saint, should purchase and read this book.

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11. Frank F. Judd Jr. and Gaye Strathearn, eds., *Sperry Symposium Classics: The New Testament* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

12. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr., eds., *How the New Testament Came to Be: The 35th Annual Brigham Young University Sidney B. Sperry Symposium* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).

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