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Abstract Review of *To Mothers & Fathers from the Book of Mormon* (1991), by Blaine Yorgason and Brenton Yorgason.

Blaine Yorgason and Brenton Yorgason, *To Mothers & Fathers from the Book of Mormon*. Orem, UT: Keepsake Books: Sonos, 1991. 109 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Lynn Nations Johnson

The present booklet makes little, if any, contribution to our understanding of the Book of Mormon and would probably not merit a review at all except for one fact—the authors are probably the most widely read Latter-day Saint writers today. The “About the Authors” note at the back of the book informs us that “With total hard cover sales of well over a million volumes, the Yorgason brothers are easily two of the most popular and widely read authors in Utah publishing history.” Even allowing for the exaggeration typical of dust-jacket hyperbole, there are grounds for discussing this latest issue from the Yorgason phenomenon.

Everything about this book reflects quick packaging for instant profit in the Latter-day Saint book market. Previously published material by the authors (the use of which is acknowledged on the cover) comprises half the book (pp. 50-101), and within the new sections of the book paragraphs and longer passages are duplicated (compare pp. 4 and 36, and pp. 24 and 45). In these last instances slight editorial changes have been introduced to make the duplication less obvious.

The newly published portion of this book, pages 1-49, consists of two parts: Part 1, “To Mothers from the Book of Mormon,” and Part 2, “To Fathers from the Book of Mormon.” This portion of the book consists of a set of fictitious letters written mostly by a father to his adult daughter and son on the occasion of the births of their first children. The second half of the book consists of two short stories in a contemporary setting bearing little connection to the Book of Mormon. Written for new parents, the book will probably be most popular with new grandparents looking for a gift for their children.

The authors have adopted an informal, conversational style of writing appropriate for this kind of book. However, they are often careless in their choice of words, as seen in the terms of address to the son and daughter. The son is regularly greeted as “Son,” the daughter as “Sis.” The term “Son,” a standard English word, does not carry the casual tone of “Sis,” a nickname. Does “sis” have any more positive connotation than

“bro”? Solutions to this disparity include addressing the daughter as “daughter,” or adopting a fictitious first name for the daughter, or for both. As the text stands, the greeting could easily be interpreted as less respectful of the daughter.

Another example of inappropriate word choice is found in a section which focuses on Mary, the mother of Christ, as an example of righteous motherhood (pp. 10-11). The authors use the terms *virginity* and *virtue* synonymously. By narrowing the meaning of words such as “virtue” and “morality” to sexual continence, the authors contribute to the common practice in the Church of allowing much other immoral behavior to seem to fall outside the category of the immoral. The authors need to be more explicit about the nature of virtuous women. Sexual virtue needs to be presented as a part of virtuous behavior, but not the totality.

There are many more examples of the casual choice of words. Because each of us brings different experiences and perspectives to the printed page, it is critical that we carefully weigh the connotations of the words we choose and the social and cultural implications of those choices.

The book is purposely written in an informal narrative style. Even so, it is possible for informal narrative to provide for clarity of expression. There are a number of instances in which the text is either verbose or ungrammatical, written in such a way that the reader follows the reasoning of the author with difficulty (see p. 4, paragraph 2; p. 5, paragraph 1; p. 15, paragraph 3; p. 22, paragraph 2).

The Yorgasons' father/writer of the letters looks only to the examples of mothers from the Book of Mormon for his daughter and only to examples of fathers for his son. Do the attributes of Alma the Younger, King Benjamin, and other prophets not apply to women as well? Do not the virtues of Mary and Sariah provide an example for men to follow? According to this plan, Sariah, Mary (the mother of Christ), and the mothers of the 2,000 stripling warriors, a group portrait, represent the extent of mother figures. The section focusing on fathers considers Lehi, Jacob, King Benjamin, Alma the Elder, King Mosiah, Alma the Younger, Helaman, and Mormon. The difference in the number of maternal examples and paternal examples is great; the authors explain the difference in a brief description of the patriarchal nature of Semitic culture. While they characterize ancient Semitic culture as more male dominant than present-day Latter-day Saint society, they describe women

and the maternal examples found in the Book of Mormon from a similarly male-dominant perspective.

For instance, the introduction to the section on mothers includes a letter from the father to his daughter. He refers to the birth of the daughter's firstborn child and characterizes his daughter's marriage as "eminently successful" because she has given birth. There is the inherent suggestion that giving birth is the mark of success in marriage and in parenting. The daughter is commended for the biological act. The message of this passage is obviously mixed. It lacks a clear vision of motherhood and womanhood.

There follows a section on Sariah, whose strength is measured by her obedience. But her obedience to whom? Her husband? God? The writings of the prophets? Such an important quality surely deserves some discussion, but none is given. Sariah is weak when she murmurs against her husband. She is "not truly converted." The authors assert that she "had not obtained that witness of the Holy Ghost which would have given her sure knowledge and therefore peace" (pp. 7-8). Lehi's murmuring against God (1 Nephi 16:20) is not cited, his conversion never questioned. In fact, Sariah is the only person identified as weak in the book.

The authors describe what they call Sariah's conversion upon the return of her sons. They assume that the spirit Sariah felt was one given solely to convert. The scriptural passage to which they refer reads, "And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full, and my mother was comforted. And she spake, saying: Now I know of a surety that the Lord hath commanded my husband to flee into the wilderness; yea, and I also know of a surety that the Lord hath protected my sons and delivered them out of the hands of Laban, and given them power whereby they could accomplish the thing which the Lord hath commanded them" (1 Nephi 5:7-8). Her sure knowledge is evident as she bears witness of her husband's prophetic calling. However, an alternative reading of the passage sees Sariah not as a bitter woman denying the spirit of God, but rather as a genuinely anguished mother (1 Nephi 5:1) who received a spirit of comfort as a special gift because of her righteousness, faith, and obedience. There is no evidence to suggest that the spirit had been withheld earlier because of Sariah's struggle. There is evidence to suggest that the Lord was with Sariah in her struggle, that he knew her pain, and that he comforted her.

This section on Sariah closes with "Finally, as a couple united at last . . ." as if the relationship between Sariah and Lehi had entered a new phase. The events of 1 Nephi reflect tremendous challenges and sacrifices on the part of the couple, which are conceivable only if, allowing for occasional disagreement, we assume a relationship of general unity. We read about Sariah's struggle, but then we read about her husband's response, as he bears witness of his prophetic calling in order to comfort his wife, "I know that I am a visionary man; for if I had not seen the things of God in a vision I should not have known the goodness of God. . . . And after this manner of language did my father, Lehi, comfort my mother, Sariah. . . . And when we had returned to the tent of my father, behold their joy was full" (1 Nephi 5:4-7). These are not the words of a disaffected husband. They are the words of a husband who knows who he is and at the same time feels compassion and concern for his wife in her struggle. This is not the response of a disunited couple, but a couple who rejoice together upon the safe return of their sons. Their willingness to work together through periods of doubt and struggle attests to their mutual devotion.

I have offered only a few examples of the shortcomings of this book. I have not discussed curious subtitles such as "Normal, Righteous Women" (p. 13), the characterization of Alma the Elder as an embarrassed father (p. 39), nor the description of Mormon as someone who "gave his son quality time" because he sent him two letters and a copy of one of his sermons (pp. 43-44). As devotional literature, the book will appeal, or not, according to personal taste. There is, however, a carelessness in presentation which, it is hoped, a review may discourage in future publications.