

Mormon Scholasticism

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The World of the Book of Mormon. By Paul R. Cheesman. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1978. 102 pp., biblio., index. \$5.95.

As I read Paul Cheesman's book I realized that the struggle between reason and faith is still very much alive in 1978. It seems to me there is as great a need for some Mormon faithful to authenticate their theology through reason, as there was a need for the Scholastics to do the same for Christianity at the end of the Middle Ages. I see Dr. Cheesman as a modern LDS Scholastic. In a similar manner to those believers of old, he does not wish his side of the argument to stand on faith, but on fact—reasonable, scientific fact. He proposes to use archeological and historical evidence to demonstrate what can only be authenticated by faith, but no matter how much he manipulates the evidence and how intricately he structures explanations, the truth is that one must first believe in angels before he can argue as to how many of them can dance on the head of a pin.

The author's basic assumption is that of an LDS believer: the Book of Mormon is history and it reveals historical facts. Now, I cannot say with absolute certainty whether this is a correct assumption or not, any more than I can verify whether angels do or do not exist. Although I read this book skeptically, I was secretly prepared to accept the irrefutable argument. But, just as the Scholastics were never able to convince me through all their manipulations that angels exist, Dr. Cheesman has also failed to convince me that the events of the Book of Mormon coincide in any way with the historical reality understood by experts in the field of pre-Columbian archaeology.

Of course, it is clear that Dr. Cheesman is not writing this book for experts

in the field, but for the general LDS faithful, who will be persuaded through extensive advertising that they are actually being treated to the "true dope" on the history of pre-Columbian America. And no doubt most of the faithful who buy the book will believe Dr. Cheesman's account simply because it reinforces theories that have been taught to them as absolute truths ever since Primary.

As for Mormon intellectuals, they may protest to high heaven that nowhere does it say that the Book of Mormon has to coincide with the geographic and historical reality of pre-Columbian America—a point even Dr. Cheesman admits in a painful contradiction to the stated purpose of his book when he writes: "Because of the interest of the Latter-day Saints in locating ancient sites can cause speculation and disagreement . . . members of the Church do not base their testimonies on archaeological proof . . ." (p. 22) Intellectuals may therefore argue that the Book of Mormon is important for the lessons it teaches and that they do not respect or even believe in such manipulations of history as contained in this book.

I cannot help but feel uneasy and apprehensive about Cheesman's attempt to explain religious mysteries through reason. I think believers will be more secure in their faith if they accept the tenets of their faith through faith itself. The Scholastics found, as will Mormon Scholastics, that introducing reason into faith is a dubious method for keeping the faithful in line. Once one attempts to understand faith through reason, it is usually not reason that gives way, but faith. When some of the more knowledgeable Mormons find out that some of Dr. Cheesman's reasons do not hold water, they might begin to question other assumptions as well.

Cheesman, like the Scholastics, uses logic and reason in a limited way, however. He plays the game to a point and then attempts to change the rules at mid-stream. Just as the Scholastics found they could not explain away the divergence between what evidence and reason told them and what their faith told them, Dr. Cheesman finds that whenever the evidence seems to contradict the Book of Mormon, he must either omit it altogether or ask the reader not to accept it. Yet, he asks the same readers to believe explicitly all that he himself believes. It seems to me that if readers are to be intellectually honest, they must examine evidence on both sides.

Not only is the author content with being inconsistent about his selection of evidence, but he goes even further in suggesting that the evidence only appears to be contradictory to the Book of Mormon at times. The faithful should not worry about these contradictions because at some future time a revelation will make everything clear. He writes: "When disagreements arise, we should keep in mind 'out of the studies of faithful Latter-day Saints may yet come a unity concerning the Book of Mormon, or, the Lord may give a revelation that will end the differences of opinion.'" So why bother searching for the truth?

Dr. Cheesman has obviously spent a great deal of effort researching his subject, yet his use of sources is spotty at best. At one moment he uses a reknowned archaeologist, at another a secondary classroom textbook, even the encyclopedia, or a Mormon authority whose knowledge on the history involved is open to question. I found that from the first page, I began to question assumptions, sources and omissions. In fact, since I could do this on any page, I closed my eyes and randomly opened the book to page 91. It and the next page are ostensibly devoted to proving that horses existed in the Western Hemisphere during Book of Mormon times.

I agree with Dr. Cheesman that archaeological finds have proved that horses existed in the Western Hemisphere at the end of the Pleistocene Age but had disappeared by eleven thousand years ago—about three thousand years before man in the Americas learned to domesticate plants and animals. I expected the author to give me proof of the history of the horse after this time, but

instead he took on the whole theory of evolution, using the horse as an example, with Pliny the Elder cited as proof of this argument. The purpose in this one-sided presentation, despite his own denials, is to discredit the entire scientific community by labeling them traditional and unimaginative (and I would have to agree with him that scientists do not allow themselves the luxury of letting their imaginations run rampant). Throughout, however, one wonders how this proves or disproves the original argument.

He begins his argument in favor of horses after the Pleistocene Age and presumably before 1492 by mentioning an unnamed Catholic priest in Ecuador who collects metal plates dug up by Indians (he does not say what Indians or what part of Ecuador). The implication is that since Indians dug it up it must be old. How old is it? And what proof is there that they do indeed go back to pre-Columbian times? The panels, he says, clearly depict horses. This may be true, but what if they were made between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries? I am reminded of Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods* find, by coincidence also located in Ecuador, that shows Indians doing elaborate heart operations and looking through telescopes long before Columbus, when actually the panels were made by an Indian who got the idea from sketches taken from the Sunday newspaper. Some Ecuadorian Indians must be doing a landslide business telling the white man what he wants to hear.

Dr. Cheesman then proposes to disprove the idea that horses were never used in pre-Columbian America because of lack of roads. He points out that roads existed all over the civilized part of the Western Hemisphere at this time. Here he misinterprets the professional archaeological position. Of course, the Peruvian archaeologists do not deny that the Mohica, Incas, and others developed elaborate road systems. But they were built for runners and llamas and alpacas, not horses. Hundreds of ancient skeletons of these animals have been found along these roads but none of horses.

Dr. Cheesman often reverts to hearsay evidence. For example, he takes a passage from Victor Von Hagan's *The Desert Kingdoms of Peru* in which the noted historian found it worthy to mention a story told by two Spanish chroniclers (a notoriously unreliable source)