
Book Reviews

A Mormon Perspective — Cockeyed

The Old Testament: A Mormon Perspective, by Glenn L. Pearson, Salt Lake City, Bookcraft, 1980, 232 pp., \$6.95.

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Glenn Pearson begins his book by defining good LDS scholars as “scholars in the best priesthood sense” (p. 1). Because he doesn’t explain this term, I’m not certain what he means, but because I am female I think he disqualifies me from reviewing his book. Now that the reader has been warned of my inadequacies, let the reviewer warn the reader of Pearson’s. Though he has read much, he has not read widely. While he is somewhat inventive, he is neither perceptive nor analytical and has limited skill in conveying a thought completely, clearly, and pleasantly. He does not understand the Old Testament people, their culture, or their religion. He is unconcerned with accuracy in reporting facts which no one, Mormon or otherwise, disputes. If he is a “scholar,” I am happy not to be considered among such scholars.

He thoroughly misunderstands the composition of the Old Testament. When he explains that the Jehovah’s Witnesses Translation “alters the King James text so much in some places as almost to be a commentary instead of a translation” (p. 5), he seems to think that the King James Version was the original text from which the Jehovah’s Witnesses translators worked. (He doesn’t say which J. W. translation he used but the one I’m aware of, *New World*

Translation of the Holy Scriptures [1961], is translated from the “original languages, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.”) He warns his readers about secular scholars whose credentials the reader does not know and who pretend “to be able to deal with the languages without the profound knowledge required in this work” (p. 17). Yet without demonstrating or claiming such knowledge himself, he expects to be believed when he tells us that translations newer than the King James Version “are not as true to the texts” (p. 165).

Had he used even the most elementary sources he could have eliminated some of the false or contradictory material which he dispenses as facts. In explaining that *Pentateuch* is “a Greek title that, roughly translated, means ‘five books of law’” (p. 21), he merits the denunciation he directs at others — “this is not translation; it is interpretation” (p. 6). Yet Pearson counsels the Latter-day Saint against accepting “interpretation” when secular scholars do it (p. 6). Pearson dates Ezra (whom, for some unspecified reason, he credits with writing the books of Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra, Ruth, and Proverbs) in the sixth century B.C. (p. 20). The book of Ezra makes Ezra a contemporary of either Artaxerxes I (465–425 B.C.) or II (404–439 B.C.), dating him in the fifth century at the earliest. On page 131 he puts Daniel in Babylon at about 604 B.C., then on page 133, Daniel is one of those people who “were placed in high state positions” in the Persian Empire. Had he checked he could have found out that the Maccabean revolt occurred from 175–164 B.C. rather than in the third century B.C. as he claims (p. 133).

Pearson’s basic premise is that almost all Old Testament scholars are attempting

to undermine the faith of the faithful. While "some of the higher critics are, themselves, quite devout . . . apostasy and infidelity follow them wherever they go" (p. 13). He further generalizes that "neither the Jews nor the Christians believe the Bible as literally or completely as do the Latter-day Saints. Besides this, those who criticize our position are hopelessly inconsistent because they have all been involved in translation and research to increase knowledge of what the original texts may have said" (p. 3). His criteria for reliability are that the scholar be "fundamental (a strong believer and a devout respecter of the Bible)" and that he "does not pretend to be going beyond his own language and the prophets" (pp. 16–17). Apparently he thinks that believers are more trustworthy than those who have worked hard to become familiar with the subject and who use their skill to discover the most accurate biblical texts.

While he probably would not rely on a physics or chemistry text from the early nineteenth century to understand those sciences, he seems quite willing to ignore most biblical research done since that time, for he recommends the commentaries of Adam Clark and John Smith, both written over 150 years ago. Secular Old Testament scholarship which does not agree with Mormonism is dismissed with the epithets, "so-called" and "pseudo-scientific." In contrast, when a scholar happens to agree with Pearson's view, Pearson insists that the scholar has "conceded" the point. Pearson implies that any Mormon armed with a testimony, a Pearl of Great Price, and a Book of Mormon can understand the Old Testament better than any secular scholar can. His self-righteous attitude of superiority is embarrassing in the light of the book he produced with his Mormon tools.

Equally embarrassing is his presumption that he knows what others think and feel. He generalizes about amazingly large groups of people and passes his generalizations off as fact. He claims that biblical translators "for hundreds of years, have as-

sumed that God is a single, formless spirit that fills the immensity of space" (p. 6), that Christians and Jews in general "believe that the Old Testament started as myth and gradually evolved" (p. 19), and that Bible readers "have well-developed world pictures" (p. 196). Without disclosing the source of his information, he tells the reader that although one rarely finds in the books in the Bible the idea that they would be joined, "God intended this [the union of the books into one volume] to be the case" (p. 20).

He demonstrates how little he understands Old Testament people by claiming that they "were not particularly opposed to the union of church and state" (p. 194). He encourages readers to "think of Isaiah, for example, as a very knowledgeable Latter-day Saint — perhaps as an apostle, or, more likely, as the president and prophet of the Church" (p. 192). This incredibly bad analogy conjures up a vision of Isaiah as an ex-business executive in a three-piece suit, addressing a respectful and appreciative crowd in the Tabernacle rather than someone who, at God's command, "walked naked and barefoot three years" as a sign that Assyria would take the Egyptians and the Ethiopians captive (Isa. 30:3–4). I pity the naive Mormon who takes Pearson's advice and thinks he or she has come closer to understanding Isaiah by comparing him to Heber J. Grant or Joseph F. Smith.

He presumes a commonality with his reader which is unfounded, and therefore, he leaves much that is essential unexplained. I was baffled by his unexplained statement that the Old Testament "becomes a priesthood handbook" (p. 1). No more clear was his reference to "some traditionally correct Hebrew Bibles" (p. 43), again unexplained. When he explained that "the United States Constitution is essentially an Old Testament document" (p. 2), I wondered if he meant that the Constitution took its concepts of freedom of speech, protection against illegal search and seizure, and separation of the national government into executive, legislative, and judicial branches from the Old Testament.

More curious are his uses of *humanism*, *environmentalism*, *radical relativism*, *integration*, *equality*, *segregation*, and *radical libertarianism* (pp. 204–9). From the context I could see that they were all words with negative political overtones, but he left me to guess at the meaning of each. I remain confused about why he ended his book with modern conservative political polemics, some not even marginally tied to the Old Testament. Perhaps this ancient scripture contains an anti-abortion, pro-life stance (pp. 205–6), but I think he is stretching to make the Old Testament “a testimony of the evils of big and powerful government that encroach upon private property rights” (p. 195), and I fail to notice Old Testament denunciations about the evils of public schools (p. 208).

His style is no better than his content. He explains the self-evident, telling us that the Bible of Jesus’ day “was a truly Jewish book . . . speaking in a national and cultural sense” (p. 2) and that the Jews were “affected somewhat by their environment just as we are, only their environment was different” (p. 194), and that the prophets in the Old Testament are hard to understand “because of the prophecies in their writings” (p. 167). He confuses *literal* with *important* or *serious*, advising the reader that “the first lesson in interpreting figurative passages is that figurative passages are meant to be taken just as literally as literal passages. . . . When they are understood, they are just as literal as any other passage” (pp. 170–71).

Pearson must be given some credit for fulfilling the promise of his title and presenting some of the Old Testament interpretations which are purely Mormon, for example, that Elohim is the father of Jehovah, and that Jehovah is Jesus, who acts as the God of the Old Testament, and that all the Old Testament prophets knew about Christ and worshipped him. He also presents many interpretations which are purely Pearson. However, I think few Mormons would agree with his analysis that “after Jesus had come and had been rejected,

the Jews became non-Christian and anti-Christian” (p. 191). For all of this, I can (with difficulty) forgive Pearson. But for his patronizing attitude in considering his fanciful interpretation to be far more profound than “the world’s” interpretation of Job as “a superb poetical essay on the meaning of suffering,” my charity faileth. Here is Pearson at his worst:

Job was . . . a patriarch in one of the lines of Abraham. No doubt he had been endowed, and had had his family sealed to him for eternity, and he knew about the premortal and postmortal worlds. That is why he was so family-oriented and so concerned about not having his wife given to another and his posterity rooted out. It explains why, when everything else was doubled, his second family was the same size as the first — because, of course, he still had the first. Therefore, his family was doubled, too. Many of Job’s most passionate pleas would have no meaning, or a different meaning, if he had not been a king and a priest to the Most High God.

With this approach to Job we begin to see that the Lord was forcing Job to come to him and receive the Second Comforter. With his wealth, his great faith, his satisfaction to be busy helping others, Job was content — busy, yes; but content. He would not have sought the ultimate mortal experience if he had not been pushed to it. His suffering caused him to plead for an audience with the Heavenly King so that he could demand an explanation for what he felt was unjust treatment. When he was sufficiently humbled and refined, he got his audience. But then he no longer wanted to plead his case, saying: “I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (Job 42:5–6). To a Latter-day Saint who accepts Job as a “former-day Saint,” that statement is not the literary style of the world’s greatest poet — for the world concedes that the writer of Job was the world’s greatest poet. But it is the testimony of a prophet who actually saw God as he really is.

Had he not been pushed to it, Job would not have seen God and the book of Job would not have been written. And its value is beyond any human calculation. It was part of the Lord’s