

In an unfortunate attempt to discredit the Book of Mormon, detractors stooped to dishonesty by removing Roberts's cover letter to his "Book of Mormon Study," which explained that this work represented possible objections to the historicity of the Book of Mormon but not his own views. There is a general consensus, even among the most vitriolic detractors, that Roberts wrote the most effective challenge to date of the Book of Mormon's historicity in search of answers to his own objections and questions. Unfortunately, the same care with justified objections has not been taken in *Book of Mormon Authorship*. Perhaps a more critical approach was avoided because the claims of the Book of Mormon are infrequently taken seriously by scholars and the authors wanted to state their case before it was diluted by criticism. Their case may ultimately be much weaker, however, precisely because they failed to confront criticism.

Nonetheless, *Book of Mormon Authorship* includes well-conceived studies by

competent scholars that a serious student must deal with in confronting the Book of Mormon. Almost without exception, critics of the Book of Mormon know very little about nineteenth-century America, even less about the ancient world in general and virtually nothing about sixth-century Israel. The authors of *Book of Mormon Authorship* represent a refreshing departure from unqualified conclusions by unqualified crusaders both pro and con. With the exception of Eugene England, the authors have applied the tools of their specialized fields of study and expertise. However, the tone of *Book of Mormon Authorship* is apologetic and not objective. Such responsible apologetics serve the valuable function of legitimizing religious claims and making such faith claims more responsive to reason, criticism, and historical fact. At the very least, *Book of Mormon Authorship* establishes that nothing short of genius must be imputed to Joseph Smith if he is to be considered the book's author and nothing short of inspiration if not.

More Extraterrestrials

Strategie der Götter, Das Achte Weltwunder by Erich von Däniken (Dusseldorf: Econ, 1982), 320 pp., 32 Deutsche Mark.

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WHEN I SAW THIS BOOK for the first time I ignored it as I have done with all of the other books by the popular nonfiction Swiss author and world traveler, Erich von Däniken. He is known as the leading proponent of the "Gods were astronauts" theory, and I could not make up my mind about him. Nevertheless, many Church members find some of his observations interesting and worthy of discussion.

My attention was first drawn to his recent book when an elderly member of my ward told me that von Däniken was writing a series about the golden plates for one of West Germany's popular TV journals. In previous European books dealing with pre-Columbian archeology, he briefly mentioned the Book of Mormon, but only to deny its claim as a historical record. It was discussed mainly in connection with the common theory of the lost tribes.

Von Däniken's books, which are widely read, mostly deal with archeological topics for which a scientific explanation remains uncertain and controversial. He is not fond of modern sciences which he claims have turned "dogmatic and intolerant" (p. 221). Since von Däniken searches rather indiscriminately for any kind of unclassified artifact to promote his observations of

extraterrestrial life, he believes in the “freedom of [his own] fantasy.” This is one reason for his reputation as an outsider on the fringes of credibility. Therefore he is eager to find any source which can support his observations and theories.

I was curious to see what von Däniken had to say about the Book of Mormon. *Strategy of the Gods* deals explicitly but not exclusively with the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon connection is clearest on the dust jacket:

About . . . 2500 years ago a spaceship flew above our shocked ancestors. The commander of the extraterrestrials instructed a group of people in shipbuilding, gave them a compass, and decoyed them by sea from the Jerusalem area to South America. When the temple construction was completed, the commander flew back to Babylon and brought back the Prophet Ezekiel to show him the new temple in South America . . .”

This scenario, though untenable to Mormons, is not completely unfamiliar. The Nephites may have built some of the ruins in South America. In 1980, LDS missionaries posed such a question to Däniken (p. 50), and he thought of Chavin de Huantar in Peru, a temple that fits some but not all of the description of Ezekiel. This was a clue that also became a link, a suggestion.

This book is the first one I know of that positively supports the Book of Mormon. The book's first chapter retells the story of Moroni's visit to Joseph Smith without mentioning the First Vision. The author doesn't explain the role of the Prophet Joseph Smith but is convinced that he actually possessed the golden plates or “treasure” as he calls them. The testimonies of the eleven Book of Mormon witnesses is not the only proof of the plates, he contends. The contents themselves constitute proof. This is alluring bait for the LDS reader. He treats Mormonism positively and respectfully. He also quotes some historical sources linked to the Book

of Mormon, like the Popul Vuh or Atrahasis mythologies.

Thereafter, however, the reader will be confused. Von Däniken does not intend to prove exactly which part of the Book of Mormon might be true. Rather than claiming total falsification of the translation, von Däniken is sure of “partial” falsification, by whom he does not say. He says, for example, that 1 and 2 Nephi and Ether are “adventurously exciting, informative, and without falsification, but it's regrettable that some ‘plump’ prophesies about Jesus were added to continue biblical history” (pp. 49–50).

Some contemplations in *Strategy of the Gods* are surely based on von Däniken's “freedom of fantasy.” For example, the Jaredites and Nephites had to build ships, he says, because spacecraft of this time weren't advanced enough to give so many passengers a lift. In another case, the Nephites “diligently” practiced plural marriage (for the author a link to the nineteenth-century practice) to get enough offspring to build the temple modeled after Solomon's (p. 47).

The book includes a second work, *The Eighth Wonder of the World*, which reports an excavation site in Columbia, called Buritaca 200, which von Däniken was allowed to visit. The whole book itself is a mixture of his travel experiences in South America and his own lively observations and comments. I enjoyed the author's involving narratives and his eloquently expressed fear of the limitations of modern science. The book is fully illustrated, mainly with the author's own photographs.

Some feel this bestseller will help missionary work in Germany, but I fail to contemplate this prospect with equanimity. Some of our elders and missionaries don't seem to be particular about their sources either. We want to prove the divinity of the Book of Mormon as we understand it, but von Däniken's purpose is not the same. Instead he is looking for more extraterrestrials. The purposes are not, I think, compatible.