

## Drowning in Excess

*Book of Mormon Critical Text: A Tool for Scholarly Reference*, 3 vols., 2d ed., by Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (Provo, Utah: F.A.R.M.S., 1987), 1331 pp., \$55.00.

Reviewed by Melodie Moench Charles, who helped prepare a translator's guide to the Book of Mormon while working at the LDS Church Translation Division and has a masters degree in Old Testament.

PRaise to the mostly anonymous team from F.A.R.M.S. who produced this massive work. They deserve praise first for dedicating so much time and effort to careful research through manuscripts, computer indexes, and printed material. Second, they deserve praise for their reasonable, non-fundamentalist assumptions about the Book of Mormon. Their introduction asserts, "Naturally, Joseph Smith employed the scriptural idiom of his day . . . i.e., the Elizabethan and Jacobean usage of the KJV translators. His own very strong rural New England/New York grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and spelling is also evident" (1:viii). They agree with earlier scholars who determined that Joseph Smith "certainly utilized a copy of the King James Version of the Bible whenever he came to lengthy portions of the text of the Book of Mormon obviously paralleling biblical passages" (1:ix).

Third, they deserve praise for acknowledging their limitations. They note that textual criticism is highly subjective, depending more on common sense than on abstract rules (1:ix), implying that other people's common sense could lead them to choose different readings as being most correct. Fourth, they deserve praise for largely resisting the attempt to defend Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon. They are not overtly apologetic. For example, they note that "Some parallels would seem to lead to conclusions which other parallels contradict. . . . The Critical Text raises questions, but does not provide easy answers

to them, opening up instead directions for further exploration. It is a foundation for future research rather than a source of proofs or final answers to questions" (3:vi).

The major failing of this work is that the team did not determine their goal and pursue it single-mindedly, ruthlessly rejecting everything that was not directly relevant to the creation of a critical text. They should have saved their additional information, some of it far more interesting than the critical text and some of it deadly dull, for the one-volume commentary they intend to produce (1:ix). While it is extremely hard not to tell all you know, not to share all your wonderful information and insight, restraint is more effective. This group needed a mean editor to make them pare their volume down to what it was intended to be.

A critical text is a text as close to the original intent of the author as is possible. These volumes present a continuous critical text, and catalogue in footnotes the manuscripts and printed editions that agree and disagree with their text. Footnotes also present biblical parallels. Appendices tell the location of all known Book of Mormon manuscripts and list headings and captions added to manuscripts as well as errors and corrections. All this is relevant and appropriate to a critical text.

But with thousands of notes citing biblical translations, manuscripts, versions, and texts, I found no mention of Joseph Smith's inspired translation of the Bible. Surely this would have provided useful information for arriving at the intent of Joseph Smith. A history of Book of Mormon texts would also have been appropriate to help the reader see why this team chose one reading over others. Without this information (the kind that Stan Larson provides so well) the reader is left with no criteria but personal taste to evaluate the F.A.R.M.S. team's choices.

Their much-needed, nonexistent, mean editor should have axed the ever-present

John Sorenson-inspired chronology based on a Mayan year of 360 days, as well as footnotes giving the exact date of the crucifixion (3:1019, n. 167), the date of Moroni's birth (3:1147, n. 27), and the age of Mormon when he resigns his post (3:1153, n. 54). None of this is appropriate to a critical edition. The editor should have fought the mistaken notion that every biblical and extra-biblical parallel is relevant and worth pointing out. The flood of parallels in these volumes numb the mind to the parallels which could be significant. The editor should have saved for the next commentary the references to articles explaining "the Red Sea," ancient Near Eastern metals, and "bind" in journals of biblical scholarship (1:225, n. 784; 2:420, n. 523; 2:560, n. 390).

Discussions of Nephi and Mormon being simultaneously young and large (1:12, n. 105) don't belong here. Empedocles, Alcmaeon, Heraclitus, and Plato's contrasting views to "opposition in all things," and "all things must needs be a compound in one" in 2 Nephi 2:11 (1:149, n. 102) do not belong here. Pointing out the ritual uncleanness of asses does not belong here, nor does it relate to a Book of Mormon text about returning a neighbor's ass (2:397, n. 348). And the comparison between the different types of sons in the Jewish Passover *Hagaddah* and Alma's sons is not only a bad comparison, but it doesn't belong here either (2:743, n. 815).

Volume two is full of attempts to tie acts in the Book of Mormon to specific Old Testament observances of holy days and ritual. This kind of hopeful suggestion is even attached to acts that give no hint of ritual observance. For example, in Alma 20:9 when the father of King Lamoni asks his son, "Why did ye not come to the feast on that great day when I made a feast unto my sons and unto my people?" the footnote suggests which ritual feast this might have been (2:650, n. 139). Mosiah 6:7 says that King Mosiah caused his people to farm, and he farmed too so that they would not have to support him. Footnote 373 suggests he

did this "at close of Sabbatical or Jubilee Year in which the land has lain fallow" (2:400). This effort to validate the Book of Mormon by making it seem to fit an ancient Near Eastern context strips away the F.A.R.M.S. team's veneer of objectivity. It has no place in a critical text.

The F.A.R.M.S. team also needed an editor to insist on a uniform, understandable style of presentation. They too often forgot that their purpose was to present a critical text and buried the information on variations in Book of Mormon texts in the extensive cataloguing of variant readings in New Testament manuscripts. The team gave routine information in a variety of ways. Serving no purpose that I could discern, some biblical and extra-biblical parallels were presented all in English except for one word in Hebrew, Greek, or occasionally Egyptian or Syriac transliteration. This transliterated word was not necessarily the key word and sometimes was not in the Book of Mormon text. Only readers of Hebrew would understand their explanation of differences between Old Testament and Book of Mormon passages such as "Heb. *waw*, 'and,' elided from between *beth* and *mem*" (1:182, n. 399). I found many references so cryptic that I could not figure out their meaning.

The team mistakenly assumes that if there is precedent for unusual spelling in the Oxford English Dictionary, then that spelling is what Joseph Smith intended. Sometimes the results of this are merely ridiculous. For example, they decide that since "Egipt" is in the OED Joseph Smith must have meant "Egipt" in 1 Nephi 5:14, even though the next line in the same manuscript refers to "Egypt" (1:27). Similarly, they chose "harts" in 1 Nephi 7:8 when the same manuscript reads "hearts" later in the same verse (1:31). They presume that because the OED lists "adutry" as a variant of "adultry," "adutry" is not just a misspelling but is what Joseph Smith intended (1:624).

At other times confusion results when the variant spelling is also a different word.

The note for 1 Nephi 10:3 indicates that “yea” is meant, but the contributors choose “ye” for the text because the OED lists it as an archaic variant of “yea” (1:43, n. 356). Notes for Mosiah 29:33 and Alma 18:37 indicate that “travails” is meant, but they choose “travels” for the text because the OED lists it as a variant of “travails” (2:513, n. 1230; 2:640, n. 57). They let Mormon 5:23 read “the earth shall be rolled together as a scrawl” because the OED lists “scrawl” as a variant of “scroll” (3:1163, n. 121).

The textual apparatus is particularly unhelpful in the portions of 1 and 2 Nephi paralleling Isaiah and 3 Nephi paralleling Matthew. There are many passages that are *almost* verbatim, but that *almost* is

important. Rather than writing out the Matthean parallel so the reader can see where the differences are, the notes give the chapter and verse numbers for that parallel, then write out the text of other less similar parallels.

Faults aside, this critical text is a truly valuable “Tool for Scholarly Reference.” I used it as the basic text for my most recent Book of Mormon research, and I will probably find that its information can enhance each future Book of Mormon project I do. Scholars who need to be aware of textual changes or scriptural parallels will find it an essential reference. The F.A.R.M.S. team can be proud of their contribution.

## The RLDS Conference

*The Conferring Church* by M. Richard Troeh and Marjorie Troeh (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 1987), 232 pp., \$10.00.

Reviewed by Gary Shepherd, associate professor of sociology at Oakland University, Rochester, Michigan, and co-author (with brother, Gordon) of *A Kingdom Transformed: Themes in the Development of Mormonism* (Salt Lake City, University of Utah Press, 1984).

BY THE 1850s, general conferences of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints had evolved from internal organizational meetings into inspirational gatherings in which General Authorities taught, exhorted, admonished, and defended the Mormon people. This ideological emphasis has characterized conference proceedings ever since. In contrast, general conferences of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints have retained much of the governance and business essence of original Mormon conferences (which in turn were based on a general Protestant model). While the structure and func-

tioning of modern RLDS conferences have become increasingly complex (and do include some “evening preaching” by General Officers), the major official purposes are to design and approve the church’s operating budget, legislate new programs, sustain General Officers, and accept new revelation that may be presented by the president of the church.

In *The Conferring Church*, Richard and Marjorie Troeh present a detailed description of the RLDS conference process. This is not a scholarly analysis; it is a quasi handbook for conference delegates and an explanatory guide for RLDS church members based on a course taught by the authors in their home congregation. The Troehs have organized their clearly written material in a coherent and systematic textbook manner. Given their primary audience and objectives, we might expect the Troehs to present an idealized version of conference proceedings and functioning, which in fact they often do. For instance, they make little mention of contemporary difficulties; most notable is their silence about the controversial 1984 conference which, amid schismatic rumblings from opponents, finally