

greatest weakness. Indeed, after reading *Nauvoo: A Place of Peace, A People of Promise*, it is difficult to think of a more persecuted, more misunderstood, but ultimately more honest and well-meaning people in all of American history than the city's Mormon population. Of course, this is debatable, and I believe Leonard would be the first to admit that most nontraditional religions would describe themselves using similar terms. I realize that Leonard's interpretations occasionally

differ from mine, even when we're both reading the same sources. What I most appreciate is his ability to make the hopes and aspirations of Nauvoo's Saints comprehensible. Leonard has helped me to feel what it was like to have walked the same muddy streets as Joseph Smith, Hyrum Smith, and Brigham Young, John C. Bennett, William Law, and Wilson Law, Emma Smith, Eliza R. Snow, and Lucy Mack Smith. And I am grateful for the experience.

Book of Mormon Stories

Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives, by Mark D. Thomas (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2000), 236 pp.

By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion, by Terryl L. Givens (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 320 pp.

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AFTER DECADES OF NEGLECT BY SCHOLARS, theologians, and even rank-and-file Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon may be finally getting its due. Recently, several books have underscored the importance of this controversial work of scripture, including a flawed but potentially pioneering study by Mark Thomas and a graceful synthesis by *Viper on the Hearth* author Terryl Givens.

If there is a central thesis in Givens's *apologia*, it is that "the message of the Book of Mormon was and continues to be inseparable from the

story of its origins—a story involving angels, seer stones, and golden plates" (37). What follows is a sort of rescue operation, an erudite argument for the intellectual respectability of faith in the Book of Mormon as an ancient and divinely inspired text. If, as Givens claims, the Book of Mormon's message is in fact "its manner of origin" (84), then the burden lies with Latter-day Saints to demonstrate that its origins are credible.

Givens opens with several fine chapters that set the stage for understanding the Book of Mormon, its significance, and its organization and content. He addresses what we know about the translation of the plates and argues that there is evidence that the Book of Mormon was indeed dictated orally and not copied from written sources. He also shadow-boxes with Dan Vogel and others who claim that declarations about the Book of Mormon's divine origins can be dismissed because the three witnesses may have been victims of group hallucination. Givens points out that "Dream-visions may be in the mind of the beholder, but gold plates are not subject to such

facile psychologizing. They were, in the angel's words, buried in a nearby hillside, not in Joseph's psyche or religious unconscious, and they chronicle a history of *this* hemisphere, not a heavenly city to come" (42). Score one for Givens.

One of the most curious aspects of the Book of Mormon's history is its relative neglect by Latter-day Saints until very recently. Givens writes, "looking at the Book of Mormon in terms of its early uses and reception, it becomes clear that this American scripture has exerted influence within the church and reaction outside the church not primarily by virtue of its substance, but rather its manner of appearing, not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*" (63-64). It was "an ensign to the nations," but was not often quoted in sacrament meetings or conferences. Its appearance was a sign of the fulfillment of prophecy, yet Latter-day Saints composed few hymns about its message and stories and seem to have ignored it in their private devotions. Reference to the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth century was "surprisingly uncommon," suggests Givens; when Saints did invoke the book it was to trumpet "the doctrine of gathering and an imminent second coming" (67). Jan Shipps has shown, for example, that in six years of the journals of missionary apostle William McLellin, that "avid record-keeper" cited the Book of Mormon only three times as a subject of sermons (70).

The body of Givens's book presents, in prose that is both elegant and eloquent, a balanced and gentle apologia for the Book of Mormon as an ancient document. In chapters four and five, he addresses "the search for a Mesoamerican Troy" (89), revisiting archaeological debates about the Book of Mormon. He nimbly explains that the

Book of Mormon spoke of Native Americans as having "highly developed civilizations with 'mighty cities'" several years before the 1833 discovery of ancient temple ruins in Central America (97-8). Joseph Smith, he says, moved from a position of wanting to corroborate the text with external evidence to one of presenting the Book of Mormon "as *itself* the evidence the scholars needed to solve *their* mysteries" (103).

This chapter also offers a very sensitive treatment of B. H. Roberts's complicated role as an apologist for the Book of Mormon. Some paint him as a stalwart whose faith in the Book of Mormon was never so much as tested by the difficulties he encountered in the text while others portray him as a charlatan who maintained a public façade as an apostle although he had privately dismissed the Book of Mormon as a fallacy. Neither extreme is accurate, and Givens's nuanced treatment goes a long way toward helping readers understand Roberts as a person of strong faith tempered by real doubt. (In contrast, Givens expends considerable ink discussing the leadership that Thomas Ferguson showed in pioneering attempts at Book of Mormon archaeology in the mid-twentieth century, but then glosses over Ferguson's subsequent exodus from the faith in just one sentence on p. 147.)

Chapter five draws heavily upon the apologetic works of Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, and the teams of researchers at FARMS to demonstrate "the search for a rational belief" (117) in the Book of Mormon. One surprise that emerges from this chapter is that the "limited geography" theory is hardly new: a 1938 church study guide clarified that "the Book of Mormon deals only with the history and expansion of three small colonies which came to America" (127). In this chap-

ter, Givens takes on the Smithsonian Institution's infamous 1979 statement challenging the historical claims of the Book of Mormon. On the subject of ancient metallurgy, for example, Givens says that the Smithsonian "has chosen to disregard both linguistic and archaeological evidence that would support the Book of Mormon's plausible use of terms such as "bow of steel" (131). In this chapter Givens also argues persuasively for the existence of complex chiasmic structures in the Book of Mormon, as in the Bible, but then inadequately addresses legitimate questions about the exceptionally rapid growth of the Nephite population as recounted in the Book of Mormon. (Such growth "would only require that the people of the Book of Mormon were as exceptional in their fecundity as the Mormon people are today in their longevity!" he writes on p. 139. The humor is much appreciated, but this is not a persuasive, specific solution to the problem.)

Toward the end of the book, Givens offers a powerful chapter on the Book of Mormon's oft-ambiguous relation to the Bible, which it simultaneously confirms and impugns (189). This chapter is the most reflective and theological of the book, and also, potentially, its most innovative. Givens shows the mark of a complex theologian as he considers questions of agency and justice, trinitarian and unitarian ideals, canon and the role of revelation. The next chapter picks up on the revelatory theme as he considers "dialogic revelation," which he says is one of the Book of Mormon's most distinctive features. The scripture issues a "radical challenge" to traditional Christianity (218) because it heralds the notion that personal, not just prophetic or national revelation, is possible and desirable.

It's difficult to convey here how well and engagingly Givens can write; he leads the reader through a careful yet absorbing study that is both evocative and provocative. The chapters are fluidly organized and seem to move from strength to strength. Scattered throughout are the welcome reminders of Givens's "day job" as a professor of English: an epigraph from G. K. Chesterton, a reference to Homer, a discussion of the "Miltonic" fall of humanity, a vision of Dante's hell. Such allusions are a welcome invigoration of a Mormon literature that is too often insular and fraught with internecine trivialities.

Givens's thesis about the Book of Mormon's foundation in historical fact becomes more strident as the book wears on and is reiterated in various ways on pp. 80, 103, and 176. On p. 182 it reaches a fever pitch when Givens goes so far as to say that "naturalizing the origins of the Book of Mormon is to emasculate its efficacy as Mormon scripture." Besides that remark's rather troubling gender connotations, it makes it very clear how Givens feels about the other book assigned here for review. Enter Mark Thomas and his revisionist work *Digging in Cumorah*, which by Givens's assessment must be the steel blade that performs the "emasculatation" of Mormonism's key sacred text. Givens and Thomas are agreed on one essential point: that the Book of Mormon has been overlooked for far too long. From that brief vision of shared purpose—the recovery of the Book of Mormon as a text to be taken seriously—the authors' paths diverge sharply.

In the end, it may be Thomas who breaks new ground, however unevenly. In Thomas's case, the "ground-breaking" takes the form of an earthquake ranking at least a seven on the

Richter scale: most Latter-day Saints will be at least temporarily shaken, even dislodged, by it. It is discomfiting; it is hard-hitting; it can be above all surprising—much like the Book of Mormon itself.

Readers will know it's going to be a rigorous examination from Thomas's opening line, which at first glance seems innocuous enough. "The Book of Mormon has been, by almost any measure, one of the most influential books of scripture to appear since the revelations of Muhammad produced Islam nearly 1,400 years ago," he commences (vii). Ah, what a difference a preposition makes. By calling Islam the product of the revelations of Muhammad rather than the revelations to Muhammad, as any orthodox Muslim would, Thomas is subtly casting doubt on the integrity of prophetic revelation.

Thomas's book succeeds best as a long-overdue exegesis of the Book of Mormon. He offers interesting arguments on the text's repetition of threes, for example, and draws from the discipline of Ritual Studies to explore the Book of Mormon's use of "signs" versus "symbols." Thomas knows the Book of Mormon intimately, and can often provide comparisons with relevant biblical texts or parallels within the Book of Mormon itself.

He approaches the Book of Mormon with a keen interpreter's eye, teasing out thematic unity and asking some profound theological questions. He offers especially compelling thoughts on how the book simultaneously presents itself as incomplete and possessing all of the fullness of the gospel. "It is this mythic tension between completed and emerging worlds that is one of the major shaping forces in the Book of Mormon narratives, in the Mormon view of revela-

tion, and in the theological outlook of Mormons," he explains (28-29). Top-ping out the book's strengths is its wise, beautiful, and mature discussion of race and skin color in the Book of Mormon (e.g., 84).

Despite these considerable assets, Thomas's work suffers from both minor and major flaws. The small quibbles relate to the writing style, which can be pedestrian ("This chapter will examine. . ."), and the distressing prevalence of small factual errors throughout the book. The Cane Ridge revival is spelled "Cain Ridge" (52); the scholars of the Jesus Seminar are falsely labeled as being "atheists" (62); the book of 2 Esdras is mistakenly credited as being "in the Bible" instead of in the Apocrypha (101); and the Radical Reformers are supposed to have "rejected the classical Protestant position of salvation by grace alone" (50). (If anything, the radical reformers clung more tenaciously to this doctrine than Luther or even Calvin did. Also, it's certainly worth asking just how "classical" the Protestant position could have been to the Radical Reformers of the mid-sixteenth century, since the Reformation only began in 1517.)

More troubling than these small errata, however, is the overarching tenor of Thomas's agenda. His study begins so boldly, so prophetically, with an introduction that is nothing short of intrepid. He calls for "a new tradition in Book of Mormon studies" and puts his own work forward as that tradition's foundation (ix). He notes that "almost all serious Mormon scholarship on the book attempts to reconstruct its historical origins, making little or no effort at interpretation" (viii). Moreover, Thomas suggests that both critics and apologists "must find a way of talking about what the book actually says" and engaging it as a nar-