REVIEWS

A Maturing View of the Book of Mormon

Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), xiii + 281 pp.

Reviewed by David P. Wright, associate professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East, Brandeis University

This book is something of a watershed in the study of Mormon history and Mormon scripture. It is the first significant popularization of evidence by a writer within the Church indicating that Joseph Smith's ancient scriptures are in fact not ancient and that some of Smith's founding visionary experiences are to be understood differently from how they are taught in traditional contexts. While this volume lacks the depth to be the definitive introduction to these matters, it is a good starting place for the unfamiliar and even provides experts with observations of substance.

The focus of the book is the Book of Mormon (39–213, chaps. 2–6). The first chapter (1–38) discusses the issue of the translation of other presumed ancient works as it relates to the Book of Mormon. The last two chapters (215–58; chaps. 8–9) discuss Smith's visionary experiences in connection with the priesthood restoration and the first vision. These chapters relate to visionary experiences connected with the Book of Mormon treated in previous chapters. There is thus a thematic logic to the work. The preface and conclusion (vii–xiii; 259–63) stress the need for honesty in confronting the evidence and outline a positive theological response to the disconcerting evidence discussed in the body of *An Insider's View.*

The main question for me is how complete and convincing Palmer has been in presenting evidence for the Book of Mormon's nineteenth-century origin. In my view, at least twelve categories of evidence demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient work. I will summarize Palmer's strengths and deficiencies in regard to each of these categories in what follows.

Palmer is most complete in presenting evidence having to do with (1) the background for the production of the Book of Mormon, (2) the technique used to produce the Book of Mormon, (3) anachronisms in the Book of Mormon (textual, ideational, and prophetic), (4) features of narrative content indicating that the Book of Mormon is fiction, (5) problems with the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses, (6) the nineteenth-century matrix of Smith's other "ancient" scriptural works, and (7) the problematic evidential value of spiritual witness.

As for the background, Palmer summarizes the work of B. H. Roberts and adds other observations showing that Smith could have been the book's author

(39-67). In regard to technique, he notes that the book was produced by looking at a seer stone in a hat, a procedure connected with Smith's earlier treasure hunting (1-10; cf. 139-44). He notes that the plates did not need to be present for "transla-tion." This unverifiable and magical procedure throws doubt on the veracity of the product. Palmer provides several examples where the Book of Mormon anachronis-tically borrows from the later New Testament and Apocrypha, especially the King James Version (10, 48-56, 69-93, 114-16), and where the Book of Mormon re-flects common nineteenth-century religious ideas (56-67, 70-74, 93-133). He also notes the suspicious precision of some of the Book of Mormon prophecies, evi-dence that they are written after the fact (78-81).

As for narrative content, he observes that the text displays homogeneity, espe-cially in the widely distributed stories about religious questioners (125-30). Too, many of the stories are laden with unhistorical hyperbole (40-41, 90-93). The wit-ness statements in the Book of Mormon furthermore hide the complexity of their experiences (175-213). From other accounts and evidence, it appears that their ex-periences were more subjective and that they did not actually see physical plates.

Other works produced by Smith, such as the Book of Abraham and his "translation" of the (King James English) Bible are in fact not ancient (11-30, 37-38). Smith misjudged the antiquity of other texts as well, including the fraud-ulent Kinderhook Plates and a Greek psalter (30-36). Palmer notes, in addition, that spiritual experience does not constitute evidence of the text's antiquity since the results from spiritual experience are imprecise, vague, and common in vari-ous religious traditions and that they differ from person to person (130-33).[1]

Within these first seven categories, I would like to have seen more discussion of prophetic anachronism. Modern academic scholars have come to realize that prophets do not clearly see the future.[2] That the Book of Mormon knows the names of Jesus, Mary, John the apostle, Joseph [Smith Jr.] and his father, the dis-covery of America (implicitly by Columbus), the course of Jewish history even af-ter the appearance of Jesus, and the persecution of Native Americans reveals the compositional horizon of the Book of Mormon. This horizon is even clearer now almost 200 years after the Book of Mormon's publication. It does not contain any prophecies of events since its appearance that display the same degree of de-tail or precision. Palmer's treatment of Smith's other "ancient" works should

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1. See also David Wright, "Historical Criticism," *Sunstone* 16, no. 3 (Sep-tember 1992): 35-36 note 4.

2. Anthony Hutchinson, "Prophetic Foreknowledge: Hope and Fulfill-ment in an Inspired Community," *Sunstone* 11, no. 4 (July 1987): 13-20; re-printed in *The Word of God*, edited by Dan Vogel (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1990), 29-42.

have included a discussion of the nineteenth-century origins of the temple endowment.[3]

There are five other categories of evidence that Palmer leaves untouched or treats only in passing. Not all are grave deficiencies, but some are. Least serious is his omitting a discussion of objectionable ethical perspectives. For the Bible, problems in ethics (e.g., the advocacy of slavery; capital punishment for adultery, Sabbath breaking, or child rebellion; Jacob's use of deceit to obtain a blessing; etc.) do not impair judgments about its antiquity, since these are simply the views of the human authors in antiquity.

In contrast, the supernatural method of production claimed for the Book of Mormon becomes a guarantor of the validity of its ethical (as well as historical) perspectives. Therefore the Book of Mormon's explanation of Native American skin color as being the result of sin, the stereotypical description of Lamanites as being indolent and savage, the negative characterization of traditional Christianity and Jews, and the story of a divine command to kill Laban to get a record impair traditional claims. (For ethical issues in critical study, see Wright, "Historical Criticism," 35).

A useful addition to Palmer's argument would be a discussion of ninth category of evidence, the evolution of ideas in the Book of Mormon narrative corresponding to its unusual dictation order. Because of the loss of the first 116 pages of the Book of Mormon manuscript, the Book of Mosiah is the earliest portion of the work that we have. Only after Smith finished the rest of the book through Moroni did he produce the text beginning with 1 Nephi and ending with Words of Mormon.[4]

Scholars have observed an evolution of concepts from Mosiah through Moroni, then continuing on into 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon.[5] This evolution fits a nineteenth-century origin for the book. While Palmer does not deal with this issue, he does discuss the problem of Smith's explanation in the

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3. Michael W. Homer, "Similarity of Priesthood in Masonry," *Dialogue* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 1–13; Edward P. Ashment, "The Temple," *Dialogue* 27, no. 3 (Fall 1994): 289–98; David John Buerger, *The Mysteries of Godliness* (San Francisco: Smith Research Associates, 1994).

4. Brent L. Metcalfe, "The Priority of Mosiah," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, edited by Brent L. Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1994), 395–444.

5. Edwin Firmage Jr., "Historical Criticism and the Book of Mormon: A Personal Encounter," *Sunstone* 16 (July 1993): 58–64, reprinted in *American Apocrypha*, edited by Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 1–16; and esp. now Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

Doctrine and Covenants of the lost 116 pages (6–7). According to Palmer, altering the text to trap Smith would be exactly the thing adversaries would *not* do, especially since their alteration would be clear. But Palmer does not state the obvious conclusion forcefully enough: the Small Plates of Nephi were an after-the-fact fiction to solve the problem of Smith's not being able to reproduce the 116 pages.

More visible to a general historian and even lay reader is a tenth category of evidence, the Book of Mormon's omission of the weighty foundational doctrines that Smith would later teach, such as eternal marriage and temple sealing, the endowment, a distinct tritheistic view of the Godhead, three degrees of glory, clear teaching about the preexistence, the possibility of accepting the gospel after death, and a complex system of priesthood offices. Palmer addresses this sort of evidence only briefly, noting that the Book of Mormon's theology is more like nineteenth-century Christian ideas and distinct from Smith's later speculative theology (121–25) and also that changes in various editions of the Book of Mormon reflect Smith's developing theology (9–10). He also observes that early descriptions of how Smith obtained priesthood authority follow the Book of Mormon model (authorization by God's spirit), while later descriptions include the conferral of priesthood by angelic beings (220–32).

Further, Palmer does not deal sufficiently with an eleventh category: the lack of corroborating New World archaeological and anthropological evidence. He briefly mentions the recent hot issue of DNA and linguistic evidence that fails to support a Middle Eastern origin for Native Americans (56–57).[6] But Palmer could have also noted that even scholars writing in conservative organs have cast doubt on some of the popular connections between New World evidence and the Book of Mormon.[7] He could also have discussed Thomas Stewart Ferguson's futile search for archaeological evidence.[8]

The most notable omission in Palmer's book is not dealing in a significant way with a twelfth category of evidence: the weaknesses of apologetic scholarship. While here and there he makes brief mention of apologists' views which he then refutes (e.g., 16, 83–84) and several of his discussions imply a response to apolo-

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6. Thomas Murphy, "Simply Implausible: DNA and a Mesoamerican Setting for the Book of Mormon," *Dialogue* 36, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 109–31; Brent Metcalfe, "Reinventing Lamanite Identity," *Sunstone* No. 131 (March 2004): 20–25.

7. See, for example, John Clark, "A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 23–33.

8. Stan Larson, *Quest for the Gold Plates* (Salt Lake City: Freethinker Press, 1996).

getic arguments (e.g., 39–48, 175–213), he should have discussed this sizeable body of literature and given his estimate of its evidential force.

In an introductory work, one would like to have seen a critique of the limited geography hypothesis as put forward by John Sorenson (*An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985]). Palmer could have easily developed his own critique (many of its weaknesses are evident even to the casual reader) and drawn on published critiques.[9]

Palmer could have also included a critique of chiasmus as an evidence of Book of Mormon antiquity.[10] Palmer might have also critiqued the method of the venerable apologist Hugh Nibley and questioned apologists' rejection of the scientific method and a fully engaged critical perspective.[11]

Some evidence that Palmer raises is not probative, in my view, at least in the form he presents it, and really belongs to a discussion of the text after one has concluded that the Book of Mormon is in fact a nineteenth-century production. For example, the similarities between the story of Lehi and Nephi and the exodus from Egypt in the Bible (74–78) could conceivably have been developed in antiquity. Problematic also is drawing a connection between E. T. A. Hoffmann's story "The Golden Pot" and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (135–74). Many of the adduced parallels are imprecise and could be discounted. More problematic is comparing a delimited story with events culled from various texts. The net for finding similarities seems to be cast too wide here.[12]

Despite these qualifications, Palmer is on absolutely firm ground for his conclusion that the Book of Mormon is not an ancient work and, with this, accord-

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9. See, for example, Deanne Matheny, "Does the Shoe Fit?" in *New Approaches*, 269–328; Dan Vogel and Brent Metcalfe, "Editors' Introduction," in *American Apocrypha*, vii–xvii; Murphy, "Simply Implausible."

10. Brent Metcalfe, "Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity," *Dialogue* 26, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 162–69; David Wright, "Isaiah in the Book of Mormon," in *American Apocrypha*, 201–2; David Wright, "The Fallacies of Chiasmus: A Critique of Structures Proposed for the Covenant Collection (Exodus 20:22–23:19)," *Zeitschrift für altorientalische une biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 10 (2004).

11. Cf. Kent Jackson, review of Nibley's *Old Testament and Related Studies* [Vol. 1], *BYU Studies* 28, no. 4 [1988]: 114; Murphy, "Simply Implausible," 122–23; Wright, "Historical Criticism," 28–38.

12. For an example of the more precise type of comparative evidence necessary to establish genetic connections, see my "The Laws of Hammurabi as a Source for the Covenant Collection [Exodus 20:23–23:19]," *Maarav* 10 (2003): 11–87.

ing to his last two main chapters, that Smith's visionary experiences were more
subjective than tradition claims. This conclusion leads him to speculate about
the theological content of a post-critical Mormonism. He calls for an emphasis on
following and worshipping Jesus. He is not suggesting giving up all the unique
doctrines of Mormonism. For example, he finds great value in the plan of salva-
tion and eternal marriage (261), believes that the Book of Mormon is valuable in
bringing people to Christ (133), and envisions the continued use of the sacra-
ment prayers (part of the Book of Mormon text) and their value for Christian cov-
enant (262).

    My main concern as a historian is that such a revisioning not involve a retreat
to biblical fundamentalism. A person could write—indeed, scholars have writ-
ten—the same sort of book about the New and Old Testaments that Palmer has
written about Smith's scriptures. Instead of peeling layers off the onion to focus on
the imagined true core of belief, it might be better (at least concomitantly) to adopt
a more humanistic estimate of all religion and religious texts. One may be less cer-
tain about doctrine in this case, but one would be better able to appreciate and cri-
tique the contributions that all humans have made to the understanding of the
world, whether they be mythical, artistic, scholarly, or scientific.[13]

Singing the Differences to Sleep

Heidi Hart, *Grace Notes: The Waking of a Woman's Voice* (Salt Lake City: University
of Utah Press, 2004), 227 pp.

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MFA in Writing Program*

A grace note is a musical term for a miniature note placed before a prominent
note in a musical phrase. If music is the direct line to human emotion, as Heidi
Hart claims in her book, the grace note serves as a light, decorative touch of illu-
mination. It implies interaction with and whispers of grace.

    A quotation from Mechtild of Magdeburg sets the stage for this inquiry into
the waking of a woman's voice: "I have learned to fear more the judgment of God
should I, God's small creature, keep silent" (210).

    The waking of Hart's voice in particular begins with a trip to the Connecti-
cut State Library where she sought a journal of Catharine Seely—a cousin of her
great-great-great-great grandfather. Catharine became a Quaker at nineteen in a

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    13. See Mark Thomas, moderator, "Scripture, History, and Faith: A Round
Table Discussion," *Dialogue* 29, no. 4 (Winter 1996): 89–117.