

to document his sometimes controversial assertions. In places, sentences and paragraphs are awkward. Grammatical errors and misspellings also appear.

The Rise of Mormonism fails to probe certain topics important in the life of Joseph Smith and in the early Church. The all-important issues of race, gender, and ethnicity are not even mentioned. More fundamentally, Marquardt does not adequately consider Joseph Smith and Mormonism in the larger context of Jacksonian American society, a major contribution of Bushman's biography.

Yet despite these shortcomings, Marquardt's *The Rise of Mormonism: 1816-1844* is a valuable work, based on the careful and extensive use of important primary sources. It provides illuminating insights not found in other studies, including Bushman's. But Bushman's *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* is the more important work, in that it will stand as an essential benchmark. It will undoubtedly influence the form and content of all future studies of Joseph Smith, in a manner comparable to that of Fawn McKay Brodie's earlier, highly controversial 1945 biography, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, ironically published by Bushman's publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, exactly sixty years earlier.

Re-imagining Nephi

Michael D. Allred and Laura Allred. *The Golden Plates: Volumes 1-3* (Lakeside, Ore.: AAA POP, 2004-05), 192 pp.

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Growing up as an avid comic reader, I was always disappointed with illustrated stories of the Book of Mormon. The figures were usually static, the action canned, and the flat progression of dialogue was easy to discard for the latest edition of "Ghost Rider." That is why I, along with other LDS comic fans across the country, sat up with attention when *The Golden Plates*, by Michael and Laura Allred, began hitting comic book stores. Michael Allred is a legitimate and recognized comic book writer and artist (Batman, Spiderman, The Fantastic Four, etc.) and Laura is an exceptional colorist. Here at last were masters of the medium who would do justice to the incredible tales of the Book of Mormon!

The Golden Plates is planned as a twelve-part series that visually retells the stories and prophecies of the Book of Mormon. Volumes 1–3, all that are currently available, present the history of Nephi and his experiences both in the Old World and the New. But *The Golden Plates* is more than a satisfying comic book—it makes possible a fresh reading of the Book of Mormon.

But why comics? What is it about this particular literary and artistic form that can enliven such a well-known and holy text as the Book of Mormon? Part of the answer lies in the perception that comics are for young readers and amusement. It seems okay to take some liberties with the original source if the medium is not considered serious. Unlike novels, drama, or even movies, comics do not pose direct competition with the Book of Mormon. Lifelong comic aficionados might challenge this perspective, but in this case the slighting of the genre is like a free pass for the imagination.

With good comics, new possibilities emerge once the reader is inside. The visuals and action move the plot quickly toward meaning. In other words, comics get to the point although the journey is constructed and embellished in the mind. The reader is able to linger or move on as desired. The result is like a personal tour that lets you add your own ideas. This is why people rarely throw out comics. They like to read them again and again because each time through is a different experience. And building yourself into the story is fun.

As Scott McCloud explains in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (Northampton, Mass.: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993), moving through connected panels of words and pictures makes the mind of the reader work overtime. Most of the images in comics are iconic and recognizable. When these concepts are skillfully arranged in a sequence, a reader fills in the gaps between the frames. In this way, the mind can take picture fragments and develop entire scenes. What is unique to the comic book form is the powerful way in which the reader generates detail and sensory perception. According to McCloud, “Comics panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (67).

The Golden Plates begins with the journey of Lehi’s family. Although the plot is well ingrained in those who grew up with the Book of Mormon, the Allreds encourage new ways of envisioning the story. Angels are de-

picted, not as soft and fuzzy messengers, but as somewhat unnerving extraterrestrial beings, more like the Silver Surfer than a kindly uncle unwrapped in a comforting glow. The landscape itself emerges in the desert colors of rock and dust. The illustration of the tree of life is an amazing combination of form and texture—a gigantic, winding olive tree hung with luminous globes. All of these images help to open up a creative reader response.

Another enjoyable experience of *The Golden Plates* is that you actually see women in the story: women working, women thinking, women worshipping, pregnant women walking through the desert heat—the female presence that is implicit in the Book of Mormon but often lost behind the text. Particularly moving is the introduction to Nephi's wife—as if we were meeting her for the first time. Throughout the pages she is by Nephi's side, comforting, counseling, and sharing the joys and burdens.

The Golden Plates also provides a provocative take on the vexing issue of skin color. Instead of presenting the Nephites and Lamanites as cowboys and “redskins,” the Allreds portray the curse of dark skin as disease-like blotches (114). Skin tone itself is not differentiated. While this interpretation is purely speculative, the idea and possibility of a new perspective is refreshing.

Moving across time through visual representations also allows for Nephi's aging. Seeing Nephi graying, wizened, and ultimately feeble deepens the reader's compassion for the character. The illustrations also heighten the symbolic transfer of the mantle of leadership to Jacob. The final picture of Nephi laid in his tomb (140) drives home his importance and primacy in the Book of Mormon.

Still, the Allreds do not stray too far from popular portrayals of the key characters, particularly the paintings of Arnold Friberg. Nephi is clean-shaven. The architecture is Mayan-like. At times the visions of the prophets take shape as a pastiche of other Mormon art. But the Allreds' Lehites are not muscle-bound weight-lifters. In general, the people are more plainly dressed than Friberg's, with fewer flashy metal accessories and weapons. The protagonists are familiar but different—more human and more realistic.

Thanks to the skills of Laura Allred, the comics are also simply beautiful to look at. Careful use of color sets moods and atmosphere. Much of the action takes place in a kind of twilight darkness until Nephi's ship arrives in the Americas and the characters step onto land in an Oz-like mo-

ment of Technicolor rain forests and macaws. The Allreds also employ an innovative blurring technique to depict motion (Nephi falling down a mountain and breaking his bow [73]) and to focus the eye on a figure or speaker (King Benjamin [191]).

Publication of *The Golden Plates* is clearly a labor of love. Michael Allred includes his own testimony on the inside cover of each book. As a part of this testimony, Allred states "Most importantly, let me make clear that this is in no way a substitute for the Book of Mormon itself, which is a sacred book. This project is a primer at best. It is a visual guide, flaws and all, that will hopefully make the events of the actual scriptures come alive and be more easily understood when they are read in full as they should be." *The Golden Plates* is a gift that will increase Book of Mormon interest and discovery for readers of all ages and religious persuasions.

These books are difficult to find through the usual commercial LDS channels. Amazingly, the best place to get copies is your local comic book shop—right alongside the *Green Lantern*, *Uncle Scrooge*, and the best graphic novels available.