

A Gentile Recommends the Book of Mormon

Peter A. Huff

God . . . at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets . . .” (Heb. 1:1, KJV)

One of the most rewarding aspects of interfaith dialogue is open and honest engagement with the scriptures of traditions other than our own. Many of us will testify to the fact that drinking from other peoples’ wells can be a dramatically life-changing and life-enhancing experience. As a lifelong Bible reader, I would now consider my life profoundly incomplete without the wisdom and beauty of the Upanishads, the Bhagavad-Gita, the Dhammapada, the Qur’an, the Tao Te Ching, and the other classics that form our world’s vast spiritual library.

For just about a century and a half, the comparative and respectful study of humanity’s sacred literature has become a commonplace of American higher education and a standard feature of parish religious education. Emerson’s generation had to depend on the dynamics of nineteenth-century maritime commerce and the vagaries of British imperial ambition to make the holy books of “non-Christian” Asia available to readers west of Boston Harbor’s India Wharf. Today, thanks to the mass market paperback and the internet, virtually the entire world bible is at our fingertips, ready to expand and enrich our worldview and, as Thoreau once suggested, challenge our “puny and trivial” modern minds.¹

One text from the global sacred canon, however, tends to be ignored in this enterprise of inter-scriptural exchange, and liberals and conservatives seem to be about equally guilty of the oversight. It’s fairly easy to find college courses on the sacred writings of the

East and church study groups investigating the “lost books” of the Bible. Dig up a copy of Hinduism’s Rig Veda, Buddhism’s Lotus Sutra, the writings of Baha’u’llah, or the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and you’re bound to come across an interest group not too far away, primed for spirited, and perhaps spiritual, discussion.

Of course, no one in these circles will demand strict endorsement of the claims found in the text or formal affiliation with the institution tied to the text as a condition for appreciation of the text. We know how to read disputable history as moving myth and putative prophecy as inspiring, if not inspired, poetry. We value these works precisely because they’re classics, masterpieces that bear an uncontrollably universal significance transcending creed, cult, culture, and century.

What seems to be missing from all of these admittedly commendable venues, however, is a sacred text known by name and reputation (and even by sight and probably even by touch) to almost every literate American. Ask any one of these otherwise educated and tolerant students of world scriptures why he or she has overlooked this particular volume and you’ll be met with either the blank stare of ignorance or the curled lip of impenitent bias: “Why would I want to read that?”

I’m well acquainted with this response, because I, too, resisted reading this book for a number of years. Even after my doctoral training in theology, I had somehow convinced myself that I could serve my profession without actually reading this holy text in a serious and comprehensive way. For the last ten years or so, I’ve tried to make up for this indefensible attitude by incorporating this piece of sacred literature not only into my routine of critical study but even into my private practice of spiritual reading. I’m happy to report that my evolving experience with this text has been effectively the same as my on-going experiences with other great works from the world’s treasury of spiritual wisdom.

The scripture I have in mind, of course, is the Book of Mormon. What follows is a Gentile’s appreciation—even recommendation—of this well-known but largely unread example of world-class scripture.

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Before I go further, I should make it clear that I am not now,

nor have I ever been, a Mormon. I'm not affiliated with the 13-million-strong, Utah-based Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—popularly known simply as the Mormon or LDS Church. Nor do I belong to the smaller Missouri-based Community of Christ (formerly Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) or any of the scores of sects that have branched off from the original Mormon movement.

I'm what Latter-day Saints call a Gentile: a non-Mormon. As a Gentile, though, I should also dissociate myself from what amounts to a community of anti-Mormons in our society. Many Americans pick up a strain of anti-Mormonism in the same way that some of our fellow citizens catch a bit of anti-Semitism or Islamophobia. Some anti-Mormons publish books and tracts, internet screeds and YouTube propaganda, warning all who care to read or view of the grave errors in Mormon doctrine and the near-criminal nature of Mormon practice. Some anti-Mormons even go “pro,” taking their message—complete with costumes and props—to the centers of Mormon population and pilgrimage. In my visits to Mormon sacred sites across the country, I've had direct contact with more than a few of these zealots.

Anti-Mormon bigotry is by no means limited to the uneducated and misguided. Before JFK, anti-Catholicism was described as the anti-Semitism of the liberal elite. Today, anti-Mormonism plays a comparable role. Recent political events have demonstrated that anti-Mormonism is alive and well in our republic. It's largely unspoken and usually well behaved, but its presence can be felt—especially if you have the right kind of theological or sociological radar. In the academic world, specialization in Mormon studies can wreck a promising career. Suggest that the LDS worldview deserves serious philosophical consideration and may actually correspond to at least a portion of reality, and you could easily find yourself classed with Holocaust deniers and flat-earth kooks. Anti-Mormonism seems to be one of our nation's last acceptable prejudices.

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As neither Mormon nor anti-Mormon, I find myself strategically—maybe even providentially—positioned to recommend a reading of the Book of Mormon that is free and candid, yet empa-

thetic. Intellectually responsible believers and skeptics can profit especially from a multi-faceted approach to the Book of Mormon that views the text through a variety of lenses. We can consider the Book of Mormon as literature, as ancient history, as divine revelation, and as universal wisdom.

Whatever else it might be, the Book of Mormon is an extraordinary piece of literature. A queer one, too. Ever since it was first published in 1830, it has sparked intense controversy—a remarkable achievement for a book that has attracted so few diligent readers. Critics have mocked its imitation of King James Bible English, its preposterous proper nouns, its apparent anachronisms, its convoluted plot lines. One wag claimed it would be nearly half its size if a single oft-repeated phrase were systematically deleted: “And it came to pass.” Doomed to enter American letters in the age of Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, the Book of Mormon was dismissed by Mark Twain as “chloroform in print.”²

Twain was funny but not completely right. (No religious group, by the way, reveres *Life on the Mississippi* as holy writ.) Approached on its own terms, the Book of Mormon can, in fact, be riveting reading. Its fifteen documents, named supposedly after ancient American prophets and kings, introduce us to a fascinating cast of characters: the patriarch-writer Nephi, the prophet-martyr Abinadi, the stripling warriors of Helaman, the war-renouncing tribe of Anti-Nephi-Lehies, and a memorable class of villains, including bad King Ammoron, the “bold Lamanite.” The documents also rehearse unforgettable accounts of adventure on the high seas, the rise and fall of civilizations, the agony of collective heroic sacrifice, and the ecstasy of individual moral transformation. (Romance, it seems, is the only major theme without a significant presence in the book—curious, given Joseph Smith’s folk status as over-sexed charlatan.) The dramatic climax of the Book of Mormon, unmatched in all literature sacred and profane, is the New World appearance of the resurrected Christ.

Reject claims of supernatural origin, and we’re still stuck with homespun creativity that defies comprehension. Call Smith a plagiarist, and the prodigious nature of his backwoods intellectual theft registers higher on the miraculous scale than his own tales of angelic visitation. At the very least, the Book of Mormon deserves a special place in the American canon, on a par with *Moby-Dick*, *The*

Wonderful Wizard of Oz, *Roots*, and, yes, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. What's more, I think we can make a case for ranking it among near-sacred texts of the Western heritage such as *The Divine Comedy*, *Paradise Lost*, *Narnia*, and *Lord of the Rings*.

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Latter-day Saints, of course, see the Book of Mormon as far more than a neglected literary classic. For them, it is nothing less than sacred scripture. They also accept it as an accurate, but not infallible, record of at least a portion of ancient American history.

Here's where we come face to face with the audacity of Mormon belief. Some religions speak of heavenly messengers sent to earth. Some speak of divine books delivered supernaturally to select human agents. Some speak of living prophets loaded with divine mandate. Some speak of holy objects handled by the chosen few during a golden age of faith. Some speak of lost empires.

Mormonism does it all. The real scandal of the Mormon worldview for the outsider may be its metaphysical greediness. It believes too much!

Regarding what some would call the outlandish historical claim embedded in the Book of Mormon narrative, let me just say this. Imagine that we were somehow convinced that the *Mayflower* expedition truly represented Europe's first contact with the Americas. If that were the case, we would greet the idea of a Spain-sponsored fifteenth-century trans-Atlantic voyage with profound skepticism. As a matter of fact, ancient Egyptians, Minoans, Phoenicians, Carthaginians, and Greeks all performed tremendous feats of oceanic exploration—often without navigational instruments or anchors. The only reason to reject the hypothesis of a Jewish journey across the Pacific around the time of the Babylonian Exile is credible historical evidence to the contrary—not dogmatic attachment to an Italian mariner or a Viking pirate or anybody else as the true “discoverer” of America.

For Latter-day Saints, this set of historical claims can never be separated from the supernatural aura surrounding the Book of Mormon itself. When Muhammad's detractors asked why he didn't perform any miracles, he consistently pointed to the Qur'an as the real miracle for his generation. Joseph Smith and his followers have similarly envisioned the Book of Mormon as a miracle in print.

Any missionary can tell you the miraculous story. The teen-aged Joseph Smith has a vision of God the Father and Jesus Christ and is instructed to avoid all existing churches. A second vision—this time of an angel named Moroni—informs him of an ancient record engraved on golden plates buried in a hill not far from his home. A few years later, Smith uncovers the record and begins to translate a portion of it—through supernatural means—from “reformed Egyptian” into English. While still completing the manuscript of what will become the Book of Mormon, he receives additional heavenly visitations and revelations, all of which direct him to restore the rites and doctrines of the authentic church of Christ and reestablish the “ancient order of things.” All before his thirtieth birthday!

Given the highly charged character of this narrative, you might say that no one but a true believer could acknowledge the Book of Mormon as scripture. It’s easy to get paralyzed in an insider/outsider dichotomy when it comes to Mormonism and its unapologetic supernaturalism. Iron Rod Mormons warn against any kind of middle position. I think, though, that we can argue for a legitimate third option—an option available to anyone even tentatively open to what William James called “‘piecemeal’ supernaturalism.”³ Such a demythologized approach invites us to transpose the symphony of Mormon wisdom into a key more accessible to Gentile ears.

Today, signs of that emerging third option can be seen in the academy. A few non-Mormon scholars are beginning to enroll Joseph Smith into the communion of the world’s “great souls.” That storied fellowship of spiritual pioneers who have witnessed the “sundry times” and “divers manners” of divine penetration into human experience will never be complete without the founder of America’s premier world religion. This thawing of prejudice is long overdue. For many years, I’ve embraced Smith as a type of vernacular visionary, who in another time and place would have simply been accorded the title of mystic.

Honoring Smith as an interfaith saint, ironically, may be just another attempt to tame an original and unruly spirit. We’ve seen it happen to Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi, King, and too many others. The book Joseph produced, however, defies domestication. It calls into question virtually every assumption that undergirds our

overly secular lives. Thoreau had this experience when he read the newly translated Hindu and Chinese scriptures during his excursions on the Concord and the Merrimack and his sojourn at Walden Pond. The Vedas, the Upanishads, the Gita, Confucius, and Mencius forced him to confess just how “puny and trivial” his modern mind really was. “I would give all the wealth of the world,” he said, “and all the deeds of the heroes, for one true vision. But how can I communicate with the gods, who am a pencil-maker on the earth, and not be insane?”⁴

The Book of Mormon fuels this desperately modern drive for a single true vision. Like all great sacred classics, it confronts us with the truth about ourselves and our ultimate purpose on this planet. Excavated from the bedrock of upstate New York or harvested from the fertile soil of a farm boy’s frontier imagination, it reminds us that the ground upon which we stand is enchanted and that the age of miracles is nowhere near its final chapter. The so-called “burning in the bosom,” well known to missionaries and Mormon-phobes alike, may, after all, be a remarkably accurate way to describe the book’s uncanny effect on the heart of the earnest reader—even latter-day Gentiles like me.

The New Testament book of Hebrews concludes with sage advice: “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (Heb. 13:2). Today, this apostolic counsel is a basic axiom of the interfaith imperative. I encourage you to apply it to the least-read volume in the world’s family of bibles. If we listen to the strange voice of this New World scripture, we may begin to hear again the long-forgotten tongues of angels.

Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 346.

2. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 127.

3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, edited by Martin E. Marty (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 520.

4. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, edited by Carl F. Hovde (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 140.

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