
REVIEWS

Terryl Givens and the Shape of Mormon Studies

Terryl L. Givens. *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 140 pp. Appendix (“Manuscripts, editions, and timelines”), Book of Mormon Timeline, references, further readings, index. Paper: \$11.95. ISBN 978-0-19-536931-1

Reviewed by Marc Alain Bohn and James C. Olsen

In response to a review by Jan Shippo of Richard Lyman Bushman’s *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, Bushman remarked: “As more and more historians work to situate Mormonism in American history, Mormons like me want to join the discussion. We will write better if we are less defensive, more open to criticism, more exploratory and venturesome, but even with our inhibitions and parochialisms, we should come to the table with our Mormonism intact.”¹

Bushman here and throughout his career outlines an approach to Mormon studies that largely defines the attitude of at least two generations of Church members who take intellectual engagement with Mormonism—and not just Mormon history—seriously. However, the most successful scholar to embrace this approach is perhaps not Bushman himself, but Terryl L. Givens, a professor of literature and religion, who currently holds the James A. Bostwick Chair of English at the University of Richmond. While Givens’s writings currently help to define the space of Mormon studies, his appeal transcends academia, extending to everyday Latter-day Saints. If Bushman is a sort of Mormon studies Moses, with potent insights into how Mormonism can profitably and honestly reflect on itself in a greater context of religious and American studies, Givens is something of an Aaron, a dynamic and highly articulate spokesperson bringing this insight to the masses—both the academically initiated and uninitiated.

Like Bushman, Givens takes Mormonism seriously and implicitly demands that his audience follow suit. He is committed to understanding the poignant questions that lie at the core of the Mormon tradition, but his work seems wholly uninterested in the

outcomes of the apologetic debates that rage over Mormon origins, heresy, and truth claims. Instead Givens is passionate about honestly exploring the richness and complexity of this “new world religion.” He brings a scholar’s candor to the discussion without feeling obliged to defend, qualify, or bracket his religion’s claims and eccentricities. As he comments:

I have never set out self-consciously to push the envelope or challenge the orthodox boundaries of Mormon studies or historiography. I don’t think I have engaged in particularly controversial questions, but neither have I deliberately avoided them. It’s just that I find myself fully occupied trying to address questions that I find personally urgent: Was there more to Mormonism’s contentious relations with the mainstream than traditional historical accounts tell us? How does one explain the potent capacity of the Book of Mormon to draw millions into its orbit, while simultaneously outraging other millions? Is there really such a thing as Mormon culture? What kind of philosophical and theological depth do we find when we examine Joseph Smith’s thought? Generally, I find much more to celebrate than to deplore when I attack these questions.²

While Givens speaks the language of academia fluently enough to repeatedly court Oxford University Press, his articulate prose is nevertheless accessible to and hailed as familiar by everyday Mormons. One is tempted to accredit Givens with an uncanny bilingualism in pulling off such a feat, but this would be misleading. Givens does not translate between audiences; he closes the gap by crafting a message that speaks directly and convincingly to both Mormons and non-Mormons, to academics and to those who do not take (and are occasionally quite skeptical of) an intellectual approach to Mormonism. This ability is particularly true of *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, which has the same definite impact no matter where you stand with regard to Mormonism’s (or any religion’s) claims—a demand to recognize the depth and significance of the Mormon venture.

Quite as conspicuous as the fact that a Mormon academic like Givens repeatedly publishes substantive examinations of Mormon doctrine and history with Oxford is that fact that these same works have largely remained unavailable at Deseret Book, the main LDS publishing and distribution company. Rather than embracing with excitement what was unquestionably the shattering of a publication glass ceiling, Deseret Book turned a cold shoul-

der on Givens's first Oxford publication, *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), which explored the popular and unfair ostracizing of Mormons in American culture.

Released before internet booksellers such as Amazon gained a significant market share, the book struggled to reach an LDS audience and quickly went out of print. Skepticism about Oxford University Press itself and the type of book it would be willing to publish on anti-Mormonism—as well as a lack of familiarity with Givens, a relative stranger to Mormon studies at the time—all may have played a role in Deseret Book's decision not to carry *Viper*. For reasons that are not entirely clear, however, the book chain has continued to ignore Givens's subsequent Oxford publications. (Currently, only *A Very Short Introduction* is listed in its online inventory—and this itself is a new development, as no Givens titles were available when we called Deseret Book earlier this year.) We highlight this point simply to illustrate the magnitude of what Givens has succeeded in accomplishing. Oxford was impressed enough with Givens and the quality of his scholarship that, *Viper's* weak sales notwithstanding, it has published four more books from Givens over the last ten years—three of which deal exclusively with Mormonism—and is rumored to have more projects in the works.

Ironically, the Oxford University Press imprimatur that may underlie Deseret Book's rejection of Givens has likely made non-Mormon scholars more willing to read and even require their students to read the works of a Mormon scholar on Mormonism—in many instances for the first time. One interesting consequence of this development is that exclusively Mormon-related outlets such as the Maxwell Institute (formerly the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies or FARMS), which have produced a rich reservoir of high-caliber research and scholarship that Givens frequently uses, are reaching a much broader audience than they have been able to previously.³

Fortunately for Givens, the rapid growth of internet retailers has made his books easily available at modest prices to the broader Mormon audience. Combined with the positive response his works have received from diverse readers, such accessibility has made Givens prominent among Latter-day Saints interested in

supplementing devotional studies of their religion. His *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) won the Mormon History Association's 2008 "Best Book Award," and his landmark *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), has become standard reading for those interested in Mormon studies.

Helen Whitney's 2007 PBS documentary *The Mormons* further fueled Givens's popularity among Latter-day Saints, introducing his thoughtful insights and historical assessments to a broader audience within the Church. While the documentary as a whole received mixed reviews from Mormons, Givens's contributions regarding Mormon life and beliefs resonated deeply with mainstream Latter-day Saints, at the same time striking a chord among non-Mormon viewers. Even years later, viewers are likely to remember Givens's vivid description of dancing and the centrality of the physical body in Mormon belief. In a documentary sequence that Whitney claims is her favorite,⁴ Givens's response to a question about the "dancing God" is set against a blended montage of pioneers dancing on the trek westward and images of the Brigham Young University ballroom dance team:

I think that there's a connection with the place of dancing in Mormon history and the concept of an embodied God, because we believe that God the Father as well as Jesus Christ are physical, embodied beings; that elevates the body to a heavenly status. . . . Brigham Young once said that he supported and endorsed any activity that tended to happyfy, and I think that there's a kind of exuberance and celebration that is in many ways a result of that same collapse of sacred distance that was so central to Joseph Smith's thinking. Instead of denigrating the things of the body in order to elevate the things of the spirit, Joseph always argued that it was the successful incorporation of both that culminated in a fullness of joy. So dancing is, I think, in many ways just an emblem or a symbol of a kind of righteous reveling in the physical tabernacle that we believe is a stage on our way to godliness itself.⁵

Givens's 2005 forum address at Brigham Young University, "Lightning Out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community,"⁶ has also been widely read and further evidences his appeal among mainstream Latter-day Saints. In this speech, Givens touched on ideas of community and relationships, the conception

of a “weeping” God, personal revelation, human nature, and faith. The address, appropriate for Sunday School quotation, is not an example of Givens’s ease in switching between academic and devotional settings as much as it is emblematic of the ease with which Mormons of all stripes digest Givens’s eloquent perspective.

“Lightning Out of Heaven” showcases Givens’s ability to zero in on themes of particular consequence to everyday Mormons. This trait is particularly true of his discussion about the necessary interplay between faith and doubt. Often seen as at odds with one another, Givens reassesses faith and doubt—and their critical interdependence—through the lens of Alma’s banner sermon on faith (Alma 32) and various statements from Joseph Smith. Maintaining unassailable faith throughout one’s life, in Givens’s experience, is quite rare. Rather than condemning doubt as normatively inferior to faith, however, Givens states:

There must be grounds for doubt as well as belief in order to render the choice more truly a choice—and, therefore, the more deliberate and laden with personal vulnerability and investment. The option to believe must appear on our personal horizon like the fruit of paradise, perched precariously between sets of demands held in dynamic tension. One is, it would seem, always provided with sufficient materials out of which to fashion a life of credible conviction or dismissive denial. We are acted upon, in other words, by appeals to our personal values, our yearnings, our fears, our appetites, and our egos. What we choose to embrace, to be responsive to, is the purest reflection of who we are and what we love. That is why faith, the choice to believe, is, in the final analysis, an action that is positively laden with moral significance.⁷

Within contemporary Mormonism, reframing faith and doubt in this way refines our understanding of the core doctrinal concept of agency and has the potential to affect how we understand the very purpose of life. It is this sort of insight, which speaks to pressing issues facing most Latter-day Saints, that has resulted in the expanding circulation of Givens’s works and has made him something of a household name among many Mormons.

The breadth of Givens’s appeal is particularly evident in *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, an eminently accessible book intended to reach a broad audience. In his opening paragraph, Givens writes, “Any attempt to distill into a plot summary a

religious text as multilayered as the Book of Mormon would necessarily misrepresent its meaning and significance" (3). This description appears to be Givens's main message to all readers of the Book of Mormon. *A Very Short Introduction* acquaints its readers with a tantalizingly brief taste of these multiple layers. The book's greatest drawback is likewise its strength—that it is, in fact, a *very* short introduction; it succeeds in part because it makes abundantly clear to its reader that its discussion barely scratches the surface. Despite the brevity, however, this insightful look at the Book of Mormon's structure, themes, narrative, genre, teachings, and historical reception succeeds by convincing the reader that the book's depth and complexity go well beyond whatever the reader—Mormon or not—may have thought coming in.

In *A Very Short Introduction*, Givens insists on a treatment of the Book of Mormon that doesn't get lost in the historical controversy over the book's origins. At the same time, however, he recognizes the significance of this controversy and devotes the final third of the book to exploring it—but only after he has led the reader through the Book of Mormon itself. As Givens writes, "This volume will . . . go against the grain of many Book of Mormon treatments by serving, first and foremost, as an introduction to the Book of Mormon itself, by which I mean the narrative between the covers" (5). Interestingly, this is something that not even Givens himself has done before. *By the Hand of Mormon* focused on the scholarly commentary and criticism of the Book of Mormon over the years, with little examination of the book's actual contents.

A Very Short Introduction opens by stressing the Book of Mormon's intimate, personal nature, a characterization that is hammered home by the heavy emphasis on provenance that pervades the record. Givens then analyzes the six initial visions in the Book of Mormon, thereby outlining five central themes presented consistently throughout the scripture: (1) personal, dialogic revelation, (2) the centrality of Jesus Christ, (3) the varieties of wilderness and Zion, (4) new configurations of scripture, and (5) the centrality of family. He also provides a sampling of characters and stories, giving readers a brief taste of the narrative.

He next considers the Book of Mormon as literature before quickly running through the scripture's basic theology. Despite

the succinct treatment required by a book like *A Very Short Introduction*, Givens manages something remarkable here. Considering the text on its own terms, he has drafted a concise introduction to the Book of Mormon that Latter-day Saints will find nearly as instructive as nonmembers will. The result is the rarest of books: one that average members can comfortably give to curious friends and also one that professors of religious studies will have no compunction about assigning to their students.

The power of *A Very Short Introduction* to play this role—introducing the Book of Mormon to multiple audiences—comes, in part, from the way in which Givens situates the scripture within familiar historical and religious contexts before illustrating how the book morphs the familiar into the new. While readers are left to draw their own conclusions about this transformation—inspired or subversive, innovative or exploitative, revelatory or evolutionary—Givens’s portrayal of the Book of Mormon implicitly demands they recognize it as a rich, multi-layered text worthy of serious consideration.

For example, Givens’s reader is not left with the option of understanding the book’s Christology as a mere fanciful relocation of New Testament Christianity to an ancient American setting. Instead, Givens helps the reader to see the full significance of this relocation, which “explodes [the New Testament’s] sublime historical uniqueness by reenacting Christ’s ministry and ascension,” not merely in the New World, but to “others besides.” In other words, an important theme of traditional New Testament theology is the singular event of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Rather than a singular, unique welding of heaven and earth in the mystery of the incarnation as described by the New Testament, the Book of Mormon describes the appearances of an embodied Jesus at multiple times and in multiple contexts. Again, one can make of this message what one will, but Givens insists on the magnitude and theological significance of this change. In its Christology as well as in other traditional New Testament themes, “the Book of Mormon occupies the unusual position of invoking and affirming Biblical concepts and motifs, even as it rewrites them in fairly dramatic ways” (6; see also 25–31 and, for other revisions, 13–25, 31–47).

By making explicit these common Christian themes and their

Book of Mormon revisions, and by focusing on the theological significance of these revisions in merely descriptive prose, Givens's message is universal. He helps the particular reader—whether he or she views these rewritings of biblical and Christian concepts to be inspired, heretical, or merely curious—to understand why other readers might evaluate the normative significance of the text differently. Specifically, *A Very Short Introduction* helps the non-Mormon understand what may appear to be eccentric Book of Mormon themes against the backdrop of the more familiar landscape of historical Christianity. At the same time, this approach helps Mormons situate some of their most familiar and prized themes within what is often an unfamiliar greater world context. Importantly, however, the universal nature of Givens's style—his facilitation of mutual understanding—never becomes itself an explicit theme. Givens does not moralize to his reader; his straightforward analysis of the Book of Mormon itself is enough.

We are not saying that everyone will agree with Givens's analysis. To the contrary, readers, particularly those already familiar with the text, will surely find themes they think Givens ought to have included or disagree with the analysis of themes he did include. There is plenty of room to challenge Givens on both a literary and theological level. For example, Givens's claim concerning the Book of Mormon's preeminent character as a tribal or familial record, only secondarily aware of its global significance, is provocative, but also a bit of a hard sell given plenty of textual evidence to the contrary. For example, Book of Mormon prophets not only write to "all men" but their theological and historical prophecies are global in scope. Although Givens focuses primarily on Nephi's comments at the very beginning of the record, Nephi himself gives counter-examples, revealing at least a growing understanding of the global significance of his writings (1 Ne. 6:4, 19:19; 2 Ne. 33:10, 13). Now that Givens has staked out the territory, however, highlighting significant themes and making specific claims about features of the text he finds consequential, others are free to jump into the fray. Whatever the response, Givens's analysis in *A Very Short Introduction* has focused the ensuing debate on content rather than the hoary obsessions with historicity or heresy. This is perhaps *A Very Short Introduction*'s greatest contribution.

A Very Short Introduction's shaping of the debate concerning Book of Mormon content parallels the way in which Givens's other books have already worked to shape Mormon studies generally. As noted above, Givens's analyses in his various publications have enjoyed broad appeal. While much could be said on this note, we will point out two more specific examples.

Givens first described in *By the Hand of Mormon* (chap. 8) his concept of "dialogic revelation"—the revolutionary notion of personal revelation introduced by Joseph Smith and showcased in the Book of Mormon. Givens notes that the Book of Mormon includes a plethora of examples of God speaking to individuals other than prophets or on matters other than those typical of prophetic discourse. For example, Lehi and Alma pray to know about the welfare of their sons, Nephi and Enos pray to know about principles of the gospel, Nephi prays about where to hunt, Moroni prays to know where the Lamanites will invade, the brother of Jared prays about how to light the barge, etc. Importantly, in each and every case, God responds in articulate, discernible human speech. Givens's discussion is meant to describe the Mormon notion of revelation as something new on the theological scene. His careful, incisive description, however, reads like an edifying discourse to those within the Mormon community, where this form of revelation is often an intimate part of their religious lives.

Another example may be found in his *People of Paradox*. Here Givens explores what he terms as "four especially rich and fertile tensions, or thematic pairings, in Mormon thought." These are the (1) "polarity of authoritarianism and individualism," (2) "epistemological certainty" and Mormonism's "eternal quest for saving knowledge and . . . Perfection," (3) the "disintegration of sacred distance," and (4) "exile and integration, and a gospel viewed as both American and universal" (xiv–xv). In a handful of concise chapters, Givens takes what, for the everyday Saint, typically remain existential paradoxes implicit in their religious experience and makes them explicit. It is these dynamic tensions, Givens argues, that "give [Mormon] cultural expression much of its vitality" and have "inspired recurrent and sustained engagement on the part of writers, artists, and thinkers in the Mormon community" (xiv).

While the relevance, usefulness, and even doctrinal accuracy

of each paradox that Givens identifies is debatable (as are the examples he provides to sustain them), his analysis nevertheless offers profound insights into tensions at the root of the Mormon beliefs that set Latter-day Saints apart as a people. While we might question its ultimate efficacy, this explicit analysis at least has the potential of helping average members relate more deeply to their own religious experience and possibly even better understand the deep anxiety often felt by intellectuals and artists in the Church.

In *People of Paradox*, Givens hails the disintegration or collapse of sacred distance as one of the most culturally and theologically “potent innovations of the Mormon world view” (xv). Though not the first to notice it, Givens is perhaps the most thorough and compelling author to describe Joseph Smith’s radical collapse of the banal and the holy. In his interview with Helen Whitney, he noted:

One of the hallmarks of Mormonism, and of Joseph Smith in particular, is the collapse of sacred distance. Joseph insistently refused to recognize the distinctness of those categories that were typical in traditional Christianity, the sense that there is an earthly and a heavenly, a bodily and a spiritual. . . . He did this in ways as divergent as commenting on the fact that God himself was once as we are, that He is embodied; by arguing that when revelations came to him, they came through vehicles as palpable and earthly as seer stones, or Urim and Thummin, or gold plates. . . . Every time that we think we have found an example of what we think is a dichotomy, Joseph collapses it into one.⁸

In Mormon studies, Givens accomplishes something analogous: collapsing devotional and academic distance. In his work, he consistently manages to apply an academic lens to Mormonism in a way that satisfies both the believer and the skeptic. Givens’s ability to resonate with such diverse audiences is the proof in the pudding of Bushman’s call for a new approach to Mormon studies and may well be Givens’s defining contribution to the discipline. Mormon scholars can indeed be less defensive, more open to criticism, more candid, and yet more successful at the academic table with their Mormonism fully intact.

Notes

1. Richard Lyman Bushman, “What’s New in Mormon History: A Response to Jan Shipps,” *Journal of American History* 94, no. 2 (Septem-

ber 2007), <http://www.historycooperative.org/cgi-bin/justtop.cgi?act=justtop&url=http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/jah/94.2/bushman.html> (accessed August 7, 2010).

2. Interview: Terryl Givens and Richard Bushman, Part I, *By Common Consent*, March 1, 2007, <http://bycommonconsent.com/2007/03/01/interview-terryl-givens-and-richard-bushman-part-i/> (accessed August 7, 2010).

3. This description is particularly true of *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), in which Givens spends Chapter 5 (117–54) showcasing much of the important Book of Mormon research done by FARMS and BYU scholars. *A Very Short Introduction*, discussed below, likewise makes use of this scholarship and refers its reader to other Mormon research sources.

4. Terryl Givens, interviewed in Helen Whitney, *The Mormons*, PBS documentary, <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/etc/whitney.html> (accessed August 7, 2010).

5. Ibid.

6. Terryl L. Givens, “Lightning Out of Heaven: Joseph Smith and the Forging of Community,” *BYU Speeches*, November 29, 2005, <http://speeches.byu.edu/reader/reader.php?id=10924> (accessed August 7, 2010). The address’s popularity is highlighted by its being reprinted in condensed form under the title “Lightning Out of Heaven” in *BYU Magazine* (Summer 2006), <http://magazine.byu.edu/?act=view&a=1851> (accessed August 7, 2010).

7. Ibid.

8. Givens, Interview, *The Mormons*. On the collapse of the sacred in Mormonism, see also his *Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82–93; *People of Paradox: A History of Mormon Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 37–51; and “Lightning Out of Heaven.”

The World According to Golden

Brady Udall. *The Lonely Polygamist*. New York: Norton, 2010. 572 pp. Hardcover: \$26.95. ISBN 978-0-393-06262-5

Reviewed by Phillip A. Snyder

Brady Udall has always been a highly readable writer, one who en-