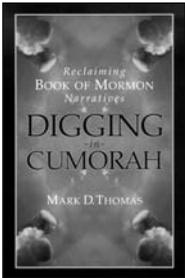


B O O K R E V I E W

PROSPECTING ON CUMORAH: NEW VEINS
FOR BOOK OF MORMON STUDIESDIGGING IN CUMORAH: RECLAIMING
BOOK OF MORMON NARRATIVESby Mark D. Thomas
Signature Books, 1999
236 pages, \$24.95*Reviewed by John-Charles Duffy*

This important study applies literary methods used by biblical scholars to shed light on the “messages” of the Book of Mormon while avoiding questions of its origin. Is it successful?

DIGGING IN CUMORAH presents the latest fruits of a project Mark D. Thomas has been working on for over twenty years: applying the tools of literary criticism to the Book of Mormon in the same way they have been applied to the Bible. Though *Digging in Cumorah* was published three years ago, it has received little notice either within or without Mormon circles. This is unfortunate, for Thomas offers fascinating insights into how the Book of Mormon is put together and what it has to say. But if my theory about why *Digging in Cumorah* has attracted so little notice is correct, there may be an important lesson here for future work in Book of Mormon studies.

Just as many of John W. Welch’s studies of the Book of Mormon have revolved around the term “chiasmus,” so Thomas’s study revolves around the term “narrative form.” Narrative forms are the patterns, conventions, or formulas that give shape to a written work. Narrative forms function at both the level of structure and at the level of language. For example, fairy tales or folk tales are often structured around threes (three bears, three

brothers, three billy goats gruff); this would be a narrative form at the level of structure. The formulas “once upon a time” and “they lived happily ever after” would be narrative forms at the level of language. Narrative forms of one kind or another can be found in all written works, fiction and non-fiction alike.

Drawing on the work of scholars such as Robert Alter and John Meier, who have analyzed narrative forms in the Bible, Thomas seeks to identify the narrative forms that shape the Book of Mormon. For example, by comparing different Book of Mormon narratives about prophets—Lehi, Abinadi, Alma and Amulek, Nephi son of Helaman, Samuel the Lamanite, Ether—Thomas identifies a form he labels the “warning prophet” that gives these different narratives a common structure: (1) the call, (2) the proclamation of the message, (3) violent reaction from the people, and (4) deliverance of the prophet. Having recognized this structure, Thomas goes on to draw conclusions about the Book of Mormon’s understanding of prophecy (chapter 1). Similarly, Thomas identifies a

“captivity and deliverance” form (chapter 4), an “evangelical conversion” form (chapter 6), a “dying heretic” form (chapter 8), and a “final destruction” form (chapter 10).

While Thomas’s conceptual vocabulary is distinctive, his basic approach is familiar. Essentially, Thomas looks for parallels: between one Book of Mormon passage and another, between the Book of Mormon and the Bible, and between the Book of Mormon and nineteenth-century texts. Thomas’s work differs, however, from that of many other parallel-hunters in that he does not seek parallels in order to make an argument about the origin of the Book of Mormon. We’re used to seeing researchers draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and ancient American or Near Eastern texts to establish that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document; and we’re used to seeing researchers draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and nineteenth-century texts to establish that the Book of Mormon is a modern creation. By contrast, Thomas uses language that is meant to be neutral on the question of origin: he frequently uses passive voice constructions and tends to talk about the Book of Mormon in terms of form or reader response rather than in terms of authorial intent.

Thomas acknowledges that the debate over the Book of Mormon’s origin “is an important one” and “needs to continue” (1), but he fears that apologetics have flourished at the expense of hermeneutics. Instead of getting bogged down in the debate about when the Book of Mormon was written and by whom, Thomas wants “to read the text itself” (viii)—to focus on the Book of Mormon’s meaning, not its historicity or authority. Hence his determination not to press the patterns and parallels he identifies into the service of an argument about origin.

But there is a more practical reason for Thomas to remain neutral on the question of origin: he is trying to reach out to two very different audiences. On the one hand, he says, “I have written this book for those who have lost—or who are losing—all belief” (ix). In practice, this appears to mean that he hopes to make the Book of Mormon spiritually meaningful to people who cannot bring themselves to believe that it is an ancient record. Thomas attempts this by producing readings of the Book of Mormon that do not insist on the book’s antiquity and that lend themselves to a liberal theology. He maintains that the Book of Mormon’s message is countercultural: the book criticizes social elites and religious establishments, “replaces religious expectation with perceived heresy” (48), and “points to honesty and the search



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for truth as fundamental religious principles” (169). The Book of Mormon, Thomas claims, is written for spiritual seekers and the alienated, “for readers who have misplaced their world somewhere along the way” (ix).

On the other hand, Thomas wants *Digging in Cumorah* to appeal to theologically conservative Mormons, who believe that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document. Thomas knows this audience is likely to suspect that his numerous parallels to the Bible and to nineteenth-century sources are a covert plug against Book of Mormon antiquity. (At least one of Thomas’s critics has already voiced this suspicion.)¹ So he takes pains to use language that will not suggest he believes the Book of Mormon is a modern creation. In Thomas’s parlance, the Book of Mormon doesn’t “reflect” nineteenth-century ideas or values; it “appeals” to them, or “echoes” them, or “parallels” them. When he presents a wealth of evidence that Book of Mormon conversion narratives parallel nineteenth-century evangelical conversion stories (chapter 6), Thomas denies outright that this necessarily challenges belief in Book of Mormon antiquity. He suggests that the parallels can be accounted for on the grounds that the Book of Mormon is written for a nineteenth-century audience (Morm. 8:35); that God speaks to people “according to their language, unto their understanding” (2 Ne. 31:3); or that conversion is essentially a universal experience.

I ADMIRE Thomas’s effort to promote a discourse that lets us talk about what the Book of Mormon means while remaining neutral on the question of origin. I admire this effort for its inclusivity, its attempt to bridge a deep theological divide.

But I suspect that *Digging in Cumorah* has not won a greater readership because in attempting to address two very different audiences, the book ultimately fails to satisfy either. Thomas’s suggestions that the Book of Mormon promotes a countercultural theology are tantalizing but underdeveloped, insufficient to convince “those who have lost—or are losing—all belief” (ix) to embrace the Book of Mormon as the foundation for a renewed faith. And though Thomas tries hard to convince theological conservatives that his approach to analyzing the text is consistent with belief in Book of Mormon antiquity, it’s hard to see how someone could accept Thomas’s claim that the Jaredite migration narrative is “based on” a passage in the Gospel of

Thomas claims the Book of Mormon is written for spiritual seekers and the alienated, “for readers who have misplaced their world somewhere along the way.”

Matthew (73), or that the story of the Gadianton robbers contains a “subtle allusion” to Josephus (203), without concluding that the Book of Mormon is a modern creation. (If, as I suspect, Thomas does *not* believe the Book of Mormon is a modern creation, I would be fascinated to know more about his understanding of how the Book of Mormon was produced.)

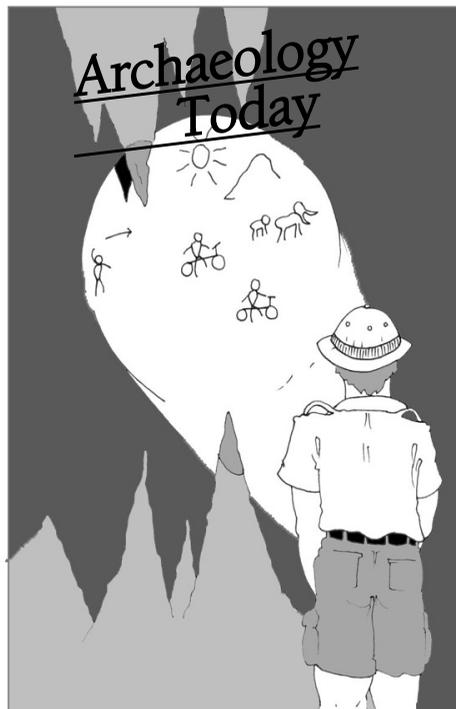
I believe the lesson to be learned here is that we cannot, as Thomas hoped to do, “transcend” the debate about Book of Mormon origins (2). Up to a point, we can use language that is neutral on the question of origin. But ultimately, our convictions about the Book of Mormon’s antiquity and accuracy cannot be separated from our efforts to interpret the book, because those convictions determine which interpretations we will each consider credible.

Digging in Cumorah is a must-own book for anyone interested in Book of Mormon studies. It provides an important departure point—a “foundation” as Thomas puts it (ix)—for future work. Thomas makes observations about the Book of Mormon’s form

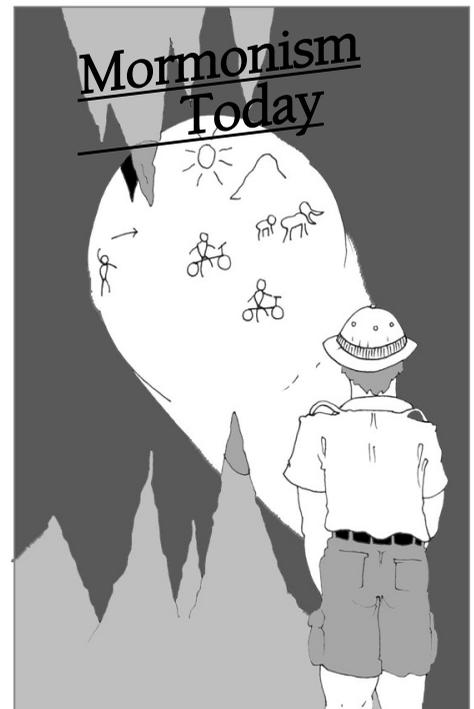
and messages that cry out for further exploration. What does the “warning prophet” form suggest about Joseph Smith’s understanding of his own prophetic calling? What theory of Book of Mormon origins will best account for the numerous and complex Biblical parallels Thomas identifies? What does it mean, exactly, to say that the Book of Mormon “builds new worlds out of old ones” (x), and more specifically, what could that mean for Mormons who feel alienated from the Church? *Digging in Cumorah* gives us intriguing glimpses of where Book of Mormon studies might go—should go—in the future; but in doing so, and judging by its reception to date among competing scholarly camps, Thomas’s book also shows how much work has yet to be done. ☞

NOTE

1. See Richard Lloyd Anderson’s review of Thomas’s earlier article, “A Rhetorical Approach to the Book of Mormon: Rediscovering Nephite Sacramental Language,” in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6, no. 1 (1994): 379-417.



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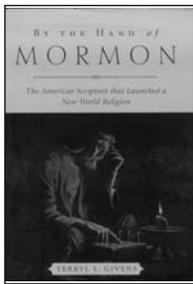
LDS APOLOGETICS FROM OXFORD?

BY THE HAND OF MORMON

by Terryl L. Givens

Oxford University Press, 2002

320 pages, \$30.00

Reviewed by Massimo Introvigne

What is the current state of Book of Mormon scholarship? Why does the Church value non-LDS scholars who take the Book of Mormon seriously but not as history, yet condemn LDS scholars who hold a similar position?

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS has published one of the most comprehensive studies to date of Book of Mormon controversies, authored by Terryl L. Givens, a (Mormon) professor of English at the University of Richmond, Virginia. The book includes not only history and theology but also Givens' analyses of contemporary controversies. The first part of the book is largely devoted to telling, once again, the story of Joseph Smith, Hill Cumorah, and how the Book of Mormon was received, translated, and published by the prophet. There is nothing particularly new here, although Givens' summary will be useful for readers who are not acquainted with the most recent specialized scholarship. Secondly, Givens explains Book of Mormon usage by early LDS missionaries and how first-generation anti-Mormons reacted to it: what was new, and controversial, about the Book of Mormon was not its content, but rather the fact that a new scripture had been found buried under an American hill. The first Mormon preachers always mentioned the marvelous circumstances surrounding the coming forth of the book but seldom bothered to elaborate on its content and theology. The trend among Latter-day Saints to examine Book of Mormon content is a comparatively recent affair.

This issue leads to a second theme in the book, Givens's questioning the perception that Book of Mormon theology is not substantially different from mainline Protestant theology of the time, that the distinctive LDS doctrines are found in revelations received by Joseph Smith, not in the Book of Mormon. Givens is very successful here, arguing persuasively that Book of Mormon doctrine is less standard Protestant fare than many have thought, and that it at least anticipates many of the LDS peculiarities more clearly articulated in other texts.

Givens also insists that the Book of Mormon already hints at a way of producing and receiving revelation that he regards as uniquely Mormon and identifies as "dialogic revelation." Givens argues that both Book of Mormon Nephites and Latter-day Saints receive personal guidance and revelations without being constrained by a closed canon. What Givens writes about the importance of the LDS open canon is indeed interesting; it is, however, questionable that an open canon and reliance on personal revelations is a uniquely Mormon peculiarity. Five hundred million Pentecostals are encouraged to receive revelations and personal prophecies on an almost daily basis. In the contemporary Catholic Church, private revelations from

Jesus or the Virgin Mary are widespread and booming. It is true that the hierarchy explicitly approves very few of these (such as Lourdes or Fatima), but most of the others are tolerated insofar as the seers and their milieu do not claim that they are normative for the whole church. This is, of course, also true for personal revelations received by individual Latter-day Saints, from the Prophet's time until the present.

The third theme of Givens' book, and the one most likely to be noticed and discussed, is a review of both old and present controversies. As the author of the excellent award-winning book on the subject, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy*, (Oxford University Press, 1997,) Givens is a very astute scholar of anti-Mormonism. And he is at his best when he ridicules claims by both early and contemporary anti-Mormons who have argued that the Book of Mormon can be disposed of by using two or three simple arguments. Early critics claimed that non-primitive cultures never existed in America, an argument which soon became untenable in the face of new archaeological discoveries. Contemporary anti-Mormons often maintain the Book of Mormon is incompatible with the wide diversity of pre-Columbian cultures, which would be a valid objection if the book were interpreted as hemispheric history. Although Joseph Smith implied something similar himself—Givens claims it was not while speaking as prophet—the author insists the idea that the Book of Mormon is the history of the whole American hemisphere is a "red herring" (128). The semi-official position of the Church is that the book does not relate the whole history of the Americas, but only that of a particular Mesoamerican area (including a small part of Southern Mexico, Honduras, and El Salvador—according to the most popular LDS hypotheses): a small area, indeed, which is however larger than the area where "95 percent of Old Testament events took place" (128). More generally, Givens observes that most anti-Mormons still criticize nineteenth and early twentieth century LDS works on the Book of Mormon and are unaware of most of the scholarship produced by contemporary LDS scholars, particularly those associated with Brigham Young University and FARMS (the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies). Some readers may be disturbed by the fact that, even on such controversial items as theories about the origins of Native Americans, Givens (who, after all, has published his book with Oxford rather than BYU) most often takes sides with the likes of FARMS and against FARMS' critics. Overall, however, he makes a convincing case that



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most anti-Mormons need to redo their homework and understand the arguments LDS scholars are using in 2002, rather than crossing their twenty-first century swords with nineteenth century apologists.

Although Evangelical and secular anti-Mormons are not particularly persuasive, nor dangerous for the Church, Givens notes that more serious damage to the Book of Mormon may come from Signature Books, “the main vehicle for publications that challenge the borders of Mormon orthodoxy,” or the journals *SUNSTONE* and *Dialogue*, which “provide comparable forums for intellectual inquiry that from time to time takes the form of dissent or outright hostility” (296).

Another theme of the book is Givens’s criticism of the “middle ground” or “accommodationist” position that he sees as typical of many liberal LDS intellectuals and sympathetic non-LDS scholars. Many, he claims, do not believe in the Book of Mormon as history yet criticize those who regard the prophet as a fraud, concluding that he was a religious creative genius, a genuine seer, a mystical visionary who created a meaningful and inspired scripture capable of gathering a sincere and dedicated community.

Givens strongly rejects such an approach:

Joseph Smith could not have produced a fraudulent work that God validates as His own designated sign of Joseph’s chosenness, as the verifiable emblem of God’s renewed presence in human history, or as the most efficacious vehicle ever provided humans for revelatory experience. *Those* roles . . . are what have defined the Book of Mormon’s status as Mormon scripture—not some torturous “striving for the divine” by a “religious sociopath” who just happened to produce a document pregnant with edifying potential (178).

No, Givens argues, one cannot have it both ways. It is scripture *and* a historical record, or it is neither. The book’s “authority, as well as Joseph Smith’s, was made to depend on precisely that” (180).

ALTHOUGH on the dust jacket of the book, Jan Shippo calls Givens’s “an exceptional study,” my personal impression is that her position is implicitly criticized here. So is—if I am correct—the position I took in an article called “The Book of Mormon Wars: A Non-Mormon Perspective,” originally published in *FARM’S Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (5, no. 2 [1996]: 1–25). But is my impression correct? Many contemporary Saints are grateful when LDS scholars appear to be sympathetic to the

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Book of Mormon and embrace the “middle ground” position, yet at the same time are disturbed when the same “accommodationist” approach is exhibited by LDS intellectuals writing for Signature Books.

Just as he does when he presents as idiosyncratically Mormon the “dialogic revelation” position, Givens seems to tend to regard as unique to the Mormon community trends which are, in fact, quite common among religions in general. Givens, here, does not always distinguish between internal and external processes of legitimization, or at least this is the impression he may give to some readers. Internally, most religions would not allow their foundational truths to be questioned or denied, since this would be tantamount to deny the religious hierarchy’s legitimate role. Externally, religions which are interested in interreligious dialogue do not ask their discussion partners to accept the same foundational truths; they simply ask them to take these doctrines seriously.

There is no contradiction in this. A mainline Moslem organization presented an award to Karen Armstrong (who is a former nun and now an admitted irreligious author) for her sympathetic biography of Muhammad, although she obviously does not believe that the Qu’ran was received by literal dictation from Heaven, yet treats it with utmost respect as one of humanity’s great scriptures. A Moslem scholar in Iran reducing the Qu’ran to just this would be lucky to end up being deprived only of his academic position, rather than of his head (“his” is the appropriate pronoun here, since no women teach Qur’anic studies in Iranian universities). The same Vatican that cordially receives Hindu or Buddhist scholars who “accept” Jesus Christ’s resurrection as an event occurring only in the early community’s collective religious experience rather than in the empirical world, moved to discipline Catholic scholars who maintain just this same position. In short, external and internal dynamics are different. Interreligious dialogue does not require that partners convert to each other’s gospel, but simply that each take the other’s foundational story seriously and treat it with respect.

Accordingly, perspective partners in an interreligious dialogue with Mormons are not those (hypothetical) non-LDS religionists and

scholars who believe the Book of Mormon to be what Joseph Smith said it was, since such would quickly move from being dialogue partners to Mormon converts. Genuine partners are precisely those “accommodationist” non-LDS who are prepared to treat seriously the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s revelations as meaningful religious scripture, without passing judgment on whether the story of their “coming forth” is literally true or not.

The situation is somewhat similar when we move from interreligious dialogue to the discourse LDS scholars maintain with their counterparts in secular academia. Very few historians today maintain a strictly positivist approach, and most are not interested in passing judgement on whether a religious narrative such as Joseph Smith’s is empirically true or false. Most scholars are much more interested in the Book of Mormon’s meaning, historical function, and consequences. Even if (as Givens maintains) historians remain who are interested in knowing whether the Book of Mormon is indeed a valuable record for the early history of a significant, if small, portion of Mesoamerica, there should be no such problems with sociologists and scholars of religious studies. We in this latter category, by definition, are not interested in (nor claim to be capable of) determining whether religious narratives are empirically “true” or “false,” in either a theological or historical sense. Questions of meaning and function exhaust our chosen fields of research. Trying to corner partners in either interreligious or academic dialogue into a “yes or no” position on such matters is not only impolite (and disadvantageous for a religious institution), but misunderstands the very nature of the whole enterprise (perhaps an unavoidable mistake for comparative newcomers to these dialogues, as the Mormons still are). To what extent criticism within the LDS community may be tolerated by the Church’s hierarchy “without doing violence,” as Givens writes, “to its own account of divine origins and providential involvement” (174) is an entirely different problem. But, again, it is not a uniquely Mormon problem: dissent management is a challenge for all religious hierarchies in the twenty-first century, and different approaches have been adopted by various churches and communities, with mixed degrees of success. ☞