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Abstract   This essay examines the shared literary approach to the Book of Mormon in recent essays by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hickman. These two scholars use the literary tool of deconstruction to investigate ways in which the Book of Mormon not only presents a narrative but also offers an implicit critique of its own narrative. Each sees this self-critical or deconstructive aspect of the Book of Mormon as central to the volume's historical and political force, a means by which the book could subtly but powerfully work against major assumptions in nineteenth-century American culture. Although they share this methodology, Fenton and Hickman use it for slightly different aims or go to slightly different lengths with it. These differences help to clarify both the usefulness of and the potential dangers or temptations inherent to the deconstructive interpretation of the Book of Mormon.

The Self-Critical Book of Mormon: Notes on an Emergent Literary Approach

Joseph M. Spencer

Review of Elizabeth Fenton. "Open Canons: Sacred History and Lay American History in *The Book of Mormon*." *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 1/2 (2013): 339–61; Jared Hickman. "*The Book of Mormon* as Amerindian Apocalypse." *American Literature* 86/3 (September 2014): 429–61.

THE NAMES OF ELIZABETH FENTON AND JARED HICKMAN have quickly become associated in the past couple of years with one another by students of Mormonism. In 2013, as essays on the Book of Mormon by these two scholars were being finalized for publication in *American Literature* and the *Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, these scholars began circulating a call for proposals for an edited collection of literary essays on the Book of Mormon, then under negotiation with Oxford University Press. In the two years since that time, both scholars' essays have appeared in print, and the proposed Oxford publication—*The Book of Mormon: Americanist Approaches*—has taken shape, with plans in place for its appearance in 2016. Rather quickly, Fenton and Hickman have come to represent jointly the possibility of a first flowering of literary study of the Book of Mormon produced primarily for a non-Mormon readership.[1]

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1. For a brief survey of literary study of the Book of Mormon, see Michael Austin, "The Brief History and Perpetually Exciting Future of Mormon Literary Studies," *Mormon Studies Review* 2 (2015): 66–72.

While students of the Book of Mormon have to wait a little while yet to see what the coming collection of Americanist approaches will yield, a taste of Fenton's and Hickman's own work can be had by looking at their already-published essays on the Book of Mormon.

More than just a shared editorial project brings Fenton and Hickman into a single orbit. There are striking similarities between their respective literary approaches to the Book of Mormon. Both understand the book to operate in a deconstructive manner (in the technical theoretical sense of the term *deconstructive*), and both argue that the deconstructive operations of the book lend it a peculiar political forcefulness in the context of its appearance in nineteenth-century America. In the following pages, I wish to explore critically the virtues and potential vices of this particular way of making sense of the Book of Mormon. Summarily put, my argument is that the deconstructive approach to the Book of Mormon is revealing in an essential way but that its usefulness encounters certain important limits. On my interpretation, Fenton's work is somewhat more attuned to these limits than is Hickman's, a difference marked in an important way by the fact that the latter scholar makes certain interpretively problematic moves with respect to the Book of Mormon.

Although both Fenton and Hickman develop deconstructive readings of the Book of Mormon, Fenton's "Open Canons" addresses this point in more overtly theoretical terms. Noting the manner in which the Book of Mormon "is preoccupied with the process of compiling and interpreting records," presenting "plates within plates and writing about writing," she argues that the volume "operates both as a history and as an account of history making" (pp. 340–41). Appearing in a geographical place and a historical period characterized by "the impulse to compile and preserve [historical] records" that would attest to the divinely orchestrated history of the young United States (p. 341), the Book of Mormon undercuts such impulses by both presenting the impossibility of recovering from the archives any full account of providential history and laying out a radically alternative conception of America's past, present, and destiny. The key to both of these moves, on Fenton's account, is

the complicated relationship the Book of Mormon establishes between itself and the Christian Bible. Borrowing from the famous allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5, Fenton uses the image of grafting to clarify this relationship: "Though the grafting process aims to produce a new whole, it is as an act of laceration as well as repair, highlighting the incompleteness of both its source and its recipient" (p. 344). The Book of Mormon's repetition, but "with a difference," of biblical texts ultimately has the effect of "complicat[ing] the distinction between source material and copy" (p. 345).

Although much of her language is perhaps more suggestive of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze, Fenton ties her presentation to Jacques Derrida, calling the Book of Mormon "a supplement of the Derridean kind, adding 'only to replace,' highlighting the very gap it would address, and compensating 'for what *ought* to lack nothing at all in itself'" (p. 344).[2] This is deconstruction of a rather classic sort, according to which careful attention to the details of a text reveals the impossibility of producing a fully complete and internally consistent system of meaning. Fenton argues first that the Book of Mormon performs a deconstruction of the biblical text—that is, it strategically reveals the instability of the Christian Bible by replacing the supposedly inerrant (because quintessentially original) Word of God with an entire network of volumes of scripture, no one of which can be said to be the pristine original from which others are derived. As Fenton puts it, "through the highlighting of fissures in sacred history, [the Book of Mormon] challenges the very notion of textual sufficiency—even when the texts in question are divinely inspired" (pp. 348–49). Once Fenton has established this first point, however, she turns to a still more striking point: that the Book

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2. These last words come from Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, which remains his most important theoretical work. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974). Fenton's talk of repetition with difference, and especially of blurring the boundary between source and copy, is suggestive of Deleuze's earliest and most influential works. See Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); and Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

of Mormon systematically deconstructs *itself* just as much as it deconstructs the Bible. The readable text of the Book of Mormon presents itself as suspended between two unreadable poles: the "phantom limb" of the lost "Book of Lehi" on the one hand (p. 349) and the revelatory portion of the volume sealed in "perpetual obscurity" because it remains to be translated (p. 351).[3] And what stretches out between those two poles as the readable text of the Book of Mormon is presented explicitly and deliberately as "a series of incomplete histories" (p. 351). Still more, the Book of Mormon itself claims that it is to be eventually supplemented by still other books of scripture that would call its own sufficiency into question (see pp. 351–52). Thus the Book of Mormon not only contests the total and inerrant status of the Bible, but it also undercuts its own completeness and consistency in its complex self-presentation.

In the final part of "Open Canons," Fenton brings these several sorts of deconstructive gestures to bear—albeit in a relatively limited way— on the context in which the Book of Mormon first began to circulate. Working against the deep but retrospectively naïve trust evinced by nineteenth-century American historians, the Book of Mormon's deconstruction of the Bible, coupled with its self-critical regard, made it a profoundly countercultural document when the first Mormon missionaries began to circulate it. But it is Hickman's "*The Book of Mormon* as Amerindian Apocalypse," more than Fenton's "Open Canons," that takes the measure of the possible countercultural force of the Book of Mormon in the nineteenth-century American context (and beyond). Responding to straightforward accusations that the Book of Mormon contains "patent racism" (p. 435), Hickman mobilizes the self-critical nature of the volume to complicate its relationship to questions of race. Fenton finds in the

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3. Fenton's presentation of these two poles presents an unresolved tension between the possibility that the Book of Mormon's incompleteness is a product of the contingent circumstances of its production (the loss of the manuscript that shaved off the original opening of the volume was anything but intentional on Joseph Smith's part) and the possibility that the volume's incompleteness is a necessary feature of its own self-conception (the postponement of the translation of the sealed portion of the volume is deliberate and organizes the purposes of the entire volume). The relationship between these possibilities remains to be investigated deeply.

book both an attempt at presenting history *and* a complex contestation of every pretension—even its own—to present history in a complete or consistent manner. Hickman, in turn, finds in the book both a text that seems destined to justify racism *and* a complex contestation of every text—even itself—that seems destined to justify racism.

Hickman works out his reading in two sequences.[4] First he presents others' attempts to respond to accusations of racism against the Book of Mormon, systematically arguing that every potential relativization or destabilization or problematization of racial categories in the volume is undercut by the persistent racial binary between white (the righteous Nephites) and black (the wicked Lamanites). Moments that suggest otherwise, he argues, are "counterfactual blip[s]" rather than suggestive resources (p. 438), drowned in a sea of rigid racial structures. The only possible exception, Hickman claims, is the volume-wide claim that the white Nephites end up eradicated by the black Lamanites, who live on to receive the fulness of Christian truth. Yet even this fails to excuse the Book of Mormon, according to Hickman, because the means for bringing the dark-skinned Lamanites in the last days to the truth of the Christian gospel is the Book of Mormon itself, written by the white Nephites who, as it were, rise from the dead to continue in their paternalistic superiority. Whatever "providential ascendancy" the Book of Mormon grants to the Lamanites, it is "to be mediated by the white Nephite narrative itself" (p. 443). For Hickman, then, the Book of Mormon should be read as deeply and irreparably racist in nature.

This irreparable racism, however, turns out for Hickman to be a virtue due to the self-deconstructive nature of the book, explored in a second sequence. Hickman claims that "in order to dismantle the kind of theological racism the text features, what must be challenged is the very authority of the narrative that elaborates the framework in the first place" (p. 444)—and this the deconstructive nature of the book actually

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4. Hickman divides his presentation of the Book of Mormon's relationship to race into three "levels." Because both the first and the second of his levels achieve the same (negative) results, I group them into a single first sequence here. What I will call the second sequence corresponds to Hickman's third level.

accomplishes.[5] He explains: "Insofar as *The Book of Mormon* purports to be scripture, its self-deconstruction draws attention to that which the literalist hermeneuts of Biblicist America were keen to ignore—the contingent human conditions of scripture writing and scripture reading, in other words, precisely the conditions from which might conceivably arise spurious notions of theological racism" (p. 444). Here Hickman refers to the intense antebellum debate, almost always with reference to biblical texts assumed to be inherently and unquestionably authoritative, concerning the moral permissibility of the institution of black slavery.[6] Hickman's contention is that the Book of Mormon, which presents itself at once (1) as racially problematic scripture (in this way quite like the Bible) and (2) as consciously self-deconstructive text (in this way quite unlike the Bible), had the potential in the nineteenth-century context of its appearance to undermine a crucial presupposition (the inerrancy of scripture, despite its embrace of institutions of slavery) that underlay the defense of American slavery.

The extension of the deconstructive approach beyond questions of providentialist history writing (Fenton) to questions of race and slavery (Hickman)[7] strains this particular literary interpretation in certain ways. It is difficult to disagree with Fenton's conclusions regarding the

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5. Importantly, Hickman uses the language of deconstruction in two distinct registers. In the course of the first sequence of his presentation, he speaks of the "self-deconstruction" of the Book of Mormon's narrative, a function of the Nephite authors prophetically anticipating their own people's eventual eradication. This form of deconstruction Hickman places among those that fail to undercut accusations of racism against the book. In the second sequence, Hickman speaks again of the "self-deconstruction" of the Book of Mormon's narrative, but there more positively. And it is this second sort that matches up with what Fenton outlines as the deconstructive nature of the Book of Mormon.

6. For a thorough introduction to the basic cultural, political, and religious presuppositions that gave the debate its shape, see Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

7. Fenton actually addresses race briefly in the course of her study (see pp. 354–55), a discussion to which Hickman refers in his own study (see p. 457). Importantly, however, Fenton, unlike Hickman, contextualizes the Book of Mormon's presentation of racial matters within the larger frame of providentialist history writing.

manner in which the Book of Mormon contests a certain conception of American history (although believers in the book's historicity will understandably chafe at her suggestion that such contestation locates the volume's origins in the nineteenth century). It is less difficult by far to disagree with Hickman's conclusions regarding the manner in which the Book of Mormon undermines its own scriptural authority in a brilliantly subtle attempt to contest the use of scripture to justify the institution of slavery. Fenton's essay marks the deeply revealing nature of the deconstructive approach to the Book of Mormon; Hickman's essay presses this approach to a kind of extreme, one that at once suggests the radical potential of the deconstructive reading and makes one wonder whether the deconstructive reading does not in the end go too far.

It thus seems to me necessary, in the last analysis, to distinguish Fenton's and Hickman's respective deconstructive gestures, at least in terms of what might be called their tendencies. In effect, Hickman's argument tends toward the claim that the Book of Mormon as deconstructive text fully *undermines* scriptural authority, Fenton's toward the claim that the Book of Mormon simply *recasts* scriptural authority. Both readers find in the Book of Mormon's self-deconstruction a rather direct contestation of a certain conception of scriptural authority: that of inerrancy, according to which the scriptural Word of God remains pure despite its passage through the conflicting vicissitudes of history.[8] But where Fenton appears to see this contestation to be aimed at replacing one conception of scriptural authority (inerrant) with another (deconstructive), Hickman appears—at least at times—to see it as aimed at a kind of total (or at least potentially total) dismantling of scriptural

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8. Although much of Christian biblical scholarship has for centuries abandoned any strict notion of inerrancy, a certain spirit of inerrancy can be said to have remained alive in it until quite recently, at least in the form of a certain (in part Romantic) assumption that the pure Word of God lies *behind* or *at the origin of* the texts that must be said to be impure. The search for the original words of the prophets or of Jesus or of the apostles, assumed to be directly if irrecoverably inspired but then obscured or repurposed in constitutively less inspired ways by editors and redactors, continues in the general spirit of inerrancy. The past few decades, however, have witnessed a partial shift in mainline Christian biblical scholarship away from even this form of inerrancy.

authority as such. Thus where Fenton might be said to suggest that the Book of Mormon *calls for a deconstructive conception of scriptural authority*, Hickman might be said to suggest that the Book of Mormon *directly deconstructs scriptural authority*. This distinction might seem overly subtle, but it is essential. On the one reading, deconstruction plays a role in a transformation of what it means to speak of scripture. On the other, deconstruction plays a role in undercutting the very viability of speaking of scripture.

Now, Fenton's interpretation seems to me unquestionably right. On the Book of Mormon's account, the authority of scripture cannot be divorced from its passage through the minds and pens of its many (and often irreconcilable) authors. Not only grace but the word of God is stored in earthen vessels. Indeed, voices in the Book of Mormon find themselves wrestling with the doctrine of grace especially when they confront their own ineptitude at writing scripture.[9] In essence, the Book of Mormon dismisses as entirely unnecessary—and in fact undesirable—the extensive machinery that so much of historical Christianity has constructed to defend the idea that God saw an inerrant text unscathed through history.[10] The Book of Mormon seems intent on asserting that the divine Word sounds always and only as an echo within unmistakably human words. But whether it is possible to push the Book of Mormon *further*, to find in its humanization of scripture a certain disqualification of appeals to scripture in debates about ethics and politics, seems to me more questionable. Certainly, one must confess that important texts scattered throughout the Book of Mormon aim to work against the kind of secularism that would most naturally approve of what I am calling Hickman's interpretation.[11] And Hickman himself pulls back from the most radical interpretation of his own gesture in the

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9. In this regard, see especially Ether 12. For a good theological treatment of this text, see Adam S. Miller, *Rube Goldberg Machines: Essays in Mormon Theology* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2012), 99–105.

10. Especially relevant here is Nephi's vision in 1 Nephi 13, where he witnesses the transformation of the Bible into a text stripped of any "purity" (1 Nephi 13:25–28).

11. Such texts have been cataloged most thoroughly in a work that argues for nineteenth-century origins for the Book of Mormon. Whatever its conclusions on this

final paragraphs of his essay: "Paradoxically, *The Book of Mormon* is a scripture whose successful inculcation . . . demands that we *not* read it as 'scripture' *insofar as that honorific presupposes a naive literalist cession of transcendental authority to the narrative voice*" (p. 454).[12] This caveat marks Hickman's own recognition that the position toward which his deconstructive reading tends lies outside the scope of what the Book of Mormon presents.

All this makes clear to me that, while the deconstructive reading is immensely productive and revealing, it runs up against a certain limit—a limit that Hickman's essay especially helps to identify because of the way it works at and—perhaps (at times)—beyond that limit. The Book of Mormon is best read as subtly but intentionally calling its own authority into question, but always and only in the literal sense of "calling into question." The Book of Mormon, in other words, poses the question of its own authority, insisting that no assumptions—whether naively *for* or dismissively *against*—be made too quickly about that question. To trust that the book is simple and didactic, a rather artless pastiche of Christian truisms or even a rather artless container of timeless religious truths, is to miss the volume's complex self-critical nature.[13] Similarly, though, to trust that the book ultimately undoes itself by its own self-critique, dissolving into so many diverse positions that they cannot be critically gathered into a relatively unified project, is to miss the limits the volume imposes on its readers. To embrace the deconstructive reading responsibly is to find a position somewhere between these problematic extremes, to recognize that individual passages in the Book of Mormon—however simple and didactic they might seem on their faces—cannot be interpreted independently of larger structures and frames organizing the volume. Its texts must always be read in the light of their place within an immensely complex, constitutively incomplete, and ultimately self-aware book.

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score, it serves as a helpful index of the relevant texts. See Robert N. Hullinger, *Joseph Smith's Response to Skepticism* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

12. I have added italics only to the final clause here for emphasis.

13. That close interpretation of the Book of Mormon's narrative strategies can prove rewarding has been abundantly demonstrated by Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

Fenton and Hickman both capitalize on the virtues of the deconstructive reading, demonstrating its real force. Hickman, I have suggested, also illustrates—again, at least in terms of what should be called the tendency of his reading—the potential vices of the deconstructive reading. Unfortunately, exacerbating or at least confirming Hickman's tendency toward a problematic literary construal of the Book of Mormon are a number of interpretive problems scattered throughout his essay.[14] I worry that highlighting what seems to me the more important among these might seem either petty or pedantic—some kind of exercise in dismissive attack. At the same time, I worry that failing to highlight them would be a disservice, since the best literary work—like the best work of any sort—on the Book of Mormon must be grounded on solid exegesis. In the spirit of pushing for an always-more-responsible approach to the text of the Book of Mormon, and fully recognizing the richness of the deconstructive approach Hickman has joined Fenton in promoting (not to mention my admiration for Hickman's success in bringing literary study of the Book of Mormon into the premier journal in his field!), I want to note some places where I think Hickman has in particular misrepresented the text of the Book of Mormon in weaving his literary account.

A first set of interpretive difficulties arises in connection with Hickman's critiques of standard defenses against the Book of Mormon's purported racism. Three of these standard defenses Hickman groups together as attempts at "troubling racial categories" (p. 437). The first concerns the complex place in the Book of Mormon narrative of two peoples of origins quite distinct from that of the Nephites and the Lamanites, the two non-Lehite peoples usually referred to as the Jaredites and the Mulekites. Hickman quite nicely notes that the intersection of

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14. So far as I am aware, Fenton makes only one interpretive faux pas in the course of her essay. This comes when she interprets references to the Christian Bible in 1 Nephi 13 as references to the Book of Mormon (see p. 357). This misinterpretation of a passage in the Book of Mormon, however, does not affect her argument, since she might well have made exactly the same point with reference to a text only a few verses after the one she cites, where reference *is* made to the Book of Mormon, and in a way that would substantiate the claim she makes with regard to the misinterpreted passage.

these two largely marginal nations takes place in the most "conspicuous narrative seam" in the Book of Mormon—namely, in the transition from the small to the large plates of Nephi, between the book of Omni and the Words of Mormon (p. 438). According to Hickman, this narrative seam itself "implicitly interrogates the nature and authority of origins" (p. 438). This seems right, but Hickman overlooks the fact that it is at the non-Lehite intersection of the Jaredite and Mulekite stories that some of the most racially charged elements of the Book of Mormon appear. Hickman suggests that the Jaredite record in the book of Ether might be read as "an additional case study of New World declension in which racial curses do not figure" (p. 437), and yet a close reading of Ether makes clear that the distinction between covenant Israel and noncovenantal peoples with no promises regarding their seed is central to that story—quite as central as elsewhere in the Book of Mormon and with parallel consequences.[15] Still more interesting, it is arguably in the story of the Mulekite encounter with the Jaredites—this supposedly entirely nonracialized story—that the only intentionally Native American element appears in the text of the Book of Mormon. Richard Bushman points out that the Book of Mormon "contains none of the identifying words [associated in the nineteenth century with native culture] like squaw, papoose, wampum, peace pipes, tepees, braves, feathers, and no canoes, moccasins, or corn."[16] Yet one rather apparent exception is the language used to describe the brief encounter between the Jaredites and the Mulekites: the last-surviving Jaredite lived with the Mulekite settlers "for the space of nine moons" (Omni 1:21). Close reading suggests that the Jaredites and Mulekites are deeply entangled in the larger story the Book of Mormon wishes to tell about peoples and races.

Of course, the objection I have just mentioned in no way vitiates Hickman's larger thesis, since he himself goes on to undercut the

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15. I have spelled out this interpretation in some detail in Joseph M. Spencer, "Christ and Krishna: The Visions of Arjuna and the Brother of Jared," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 68–72.

16. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism's Founder* (New York: Knopf, 2005), 97.

potency of his own suggestion regarding the alternative histories of the Jaredites and Mulekites.[17] Only slightly more problematic are some interpretive issues that arise in the last part of his essay, where he reviews the Book of Mormon as a whole, attempting to show the consistent racism of its white authors—interrupted only occasionally by marginalized Lamanite voices and by the visiting Christ of the book's climax. His summary interpretation of Nephi's record is more than a little heavy-handed, especially clear when he claims that the deliberate narrowing of the scope of Nephi's record to "spiritual things" indicates primarily "the profane imperatives of ethnocentrism" (p. 448). Hickman is right that Nephi "unabashedly filters his historical chronicle through that which is 'expedient to [him]'" (p. 447), but he expends no (obvious) effort in uncovering what rather apparently *is* expedient to Nephi, according to the text.[18] More egregious is Hickman's later citation of what he calls "a rare Lamanite primary document" (p. 449), Ammoron's letter to Moroni contained in Alma 54. After quite rightly noting "the traces of something like a 'Lamanite view of *Book of Mormon* history'"

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17. It should be noted that Hickman ignores a host of exegetically rich studies that have closely investigated the role played in the Book of Mormon by the Mulekites. He claims far too simplistically just that "the numerically dominant Mulekites" merge with "relative seamlessness" into Nephite culture (p. 438). For a good recent discussion of the Mulekites with copious references to the literature, see Dan Belnap: "'And it came to pass . . .': The Sociopolitical Events in the Book of Mormon Leading to the Eighteenth Year of the Reign of the Judges," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 23 (2014): 117–27. Hickman similarly overlooks the important literature on the Amlicites, the importance of whose curse-related self-marking he overlooks by ignoring the role that the Amlicites (equivalent to the Amalekites, as study of the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon makes clear) go on to play in Nephite-Lamanite relations. For the case that the Amlicites and the Amalekites are equivalent, see J. Christopher Conkling, "Alma's Enemies: The Case of the Lamanites, Amlicites, and Mysterious Amalekites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 108–17, 130–32. For the best study of the Amalekites among other groups of Nephite dissidents, see John L. Sorenson, "Religious Groups and Movements among the Nephites, 200–1 B.C.," in *Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000), 163–208.

18. The best analysis of Nephi's expedients available in print is Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 58–86.

(p. 449),[19] Hickman quotes Ammoron's letter at length in order to illustrate "a sophisticated Lamanite worldview" (p. 449), but this drastically misrepresents the text. Ammoron is not a dark-skinned Lamanite but a light-skinned Nephite who has (through his brother) usurped the Lamanite government. That Hickman calls the letter's writer "the Lamanite Ammoron" (p. 449) seems to indicate that he is unaware of the racially problematic status of Ammoron and the voice he provides to readers of the Book of Mormon.

In these last-mentioned cases of interpretive difficulty, Hickman mingles interpretive acuity (recognition of Nephi's vexed relationship to the story he tells, attention to occasional traces of the Lamanite view throughout the Book of Mormon) with misleading suggestions (that Nephi's "spiritual things" are primarily racial in nature, that the most deplorable instance of Nephite paternalism represents a quintessentially Lamanite perspective). These interpretive mistakes again do not strongly affect Hickman's thesis, though perhaps they weaken it in certain ways, suggesting that there is complexity that Hickman's reading does not accommodate. But one interpretive move in particular, made right at the end of Hickman's essay, is more problematic than these, and it threatens his thesis in a serious way. Essential to his apocalyptic reading of the Book of Mormon is the way in which a racist element supposedly remains operative in the volume's claim that the light-skinned Nephite scriptures will eventually play a paternalistic role in the latter-day redemption of the dark-skinned Lamanites (see p. 443). Yet this very aspect of the Book of Mormon Hickman makes central to his deconstructive reading in the end, finding in the Lamanite prophet Samuel's presentation of this same paternalistic redemption of the Lamanites an indication that "the Nephites [are] mere instruments in the hands of the Lord to restore the Lamanites to their rightful place" (p. 453). Are we to understand that one and the same aspect of what the Book of

19. Hickman rightly cites the crucial study of this topic: Richard Lyman Bushman, "The Lamanite View of *Book of Mormon* History," in *Believing History: Latter-day Saint Essays*, ed. Reid L. Neilson and Jed Woodworth (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 79–92.

Mormon has to say about Nephite-Lamanite relations serves as *both* the last indication of its patent racism at one level (when presented by the Nephite narrators) *and* the first indication of its metacritical rejection of racism at another level (when presented by a Lamanite prophet)? However important the actual bearer of the voice is in each case (first Nephite, then Lamanite), the message is unmistakably the same, and there is real inconsistency on Hickman's part when he takes that same message to indicate ineradicable racism in one instance and inventive antiracism in another. Here if anywhere, Hickman's tendency to make the text of the Book of Mormon work to his own deconstructive ends, rather than to trace what genuinely and unmistakably is deconstructive in the text, makes itself known.

These criticisms are, I think, important. Recent academic work on the Book of Mormon has often suggested that little of value (apparently because little of a nonapologetic nature) has been written on the Book of Mormon, but this is simply untrue. For the still-young field of Book of Mormon studies directed primarily to non-Mormon readers to do its work the best way possible, it will be necessary to learn from all the essential exegetical work that has been done on the Book of Mormon over the past century. Only with the most responsible readings possible will literary work of real genius—like that of both Fenton and Hickman—receive a ready reception.

I sincerely hope it does.

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