Title

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These volumes on the Book of Mormon complete—with the exception of a forthcoming volume on 1 Kings to Malachi in the Old Testament—the eight-volume Studies in Scripture series, begun in 1984 by Kent P. Jackson and Robert L. Millet, as essays systematically treating the various books of Latter-day Saint scripture. The volumes include contributions by twenty-six different authors, most of them from Brigham Young University or the Church Educational System: Mae Blanch, Spencer J. Condie, Larry E. Dahl, Kay P. Edwards, S. Brent Farley, Camille Fronk, LaMar Garrard, H. Dean Garrett, Kent P. Jackson, Clark V. Johnson, Victor L. Ludlow, Thomas W. Mackay, Darrell L. Matthews, Joseph F. McConkie, Robert L. Millet, Monte S. Nyman, D. Kelly Ogden, Robert E. Parsons, Daniel C. Peterson, Rex C. Reeve, Jr., Andrew C. Skinner, Terrence L. Szink, Morgan W. Tanner, Catherine Thomas, Rodney Turner, and Gary Lee Walker, besides a recent conference address by President Benson and excerpts on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon by Oliver Cowdery taken from The Messenger and Advocate. Each of the chapters of the Book of Mormon is considered in order in these volumes. The contents of each of the chapters correspond to section divisions used for the Book of Mormon course at Brigham Young University.

The editor’s preface at the beginning of the first of these two Book of Mormon volumes sets out the intention of the essays in the volumes: “The reader will readily see that the emphasis in this volume is on the teachings of the Book of Mormon. The authors have stressed the messages contained in the sermons and writings of its prophets. At the same time, they have discussed Book of Mormon history to clarify the narrative and emphasize the lessons that are taught through the historical events it records. Since the primary purpose of the Book of Mormon itself is to teach and bear testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, our purpose in this volume has been to do likewise. Thus, we have considered external evidences of the
Book of Mormon, as well as contextual and comparative studies, to be of lesser value for this work” (p. viii).

In sacred history, as elsewhere—even in scripture where doctrine is the central focus—context must properly be given its due. While many of the details of history as well as of the realia mentioned in sacred writ are primarily of antiquarian interest, others are important in understanding the teachings. Awareness of, and attention to, the chiastic structure in Alma 36 helps the reader to see unmistakably the didactic and doctrinal core of the chapter at verse 18: “Now, as my mind caught hold upon this thought, I cried within my heart: O Jesus, thou Son of God, have mercy on me, who am in the gall of bitterness, and am encircled about by the everlasting chains of death.” Recognizing Mosiah 1-6 as a covenant renewal festival, where the king gives an accounting of his rule (cf. Deut. 17), such as those found in the the Old Testament in Exodus 19 and 20-24, the entire book of Deuteronomy, and Joshua 24, with an explicitly Christian element added, enables the reader to see the logic of the order of service and the specific choice of topics more clearly. Seeing the rending of garments by Moroni and the people in Alma 46 as a simile having a rich Near Eastern treaty and covenantal background provides insight into a dimension of ritual richness that might otherwise be missed. Even knowing something of Lehi’s desert experience lends meaning to Nephi’s terse comment, “My father dwelt in a tent” (1 Nephi 2:15) as well as to the imagery of his vision in 1 Nephi 8. Needless to say, such background details also add an important element of human interest to a study of the Book of Mormon.

As noted above, the emphasis in this volume is expressly laid on the teachings of the Book of Mormon. Yet Jackson and Millet, in their New Testament Studies in Scripture volume, place doctrine and history on an equal footing. But is the “primary purpose” of the Gospels in the New Testament (the focus of Jackson and Millet’s Studies in Scripture volume) any less “to teach and bear testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ” than the Book of Mormon? I think not. But Jackson does not explain for us his differing approaches to these two volumes of scriptures, although elsewhere he does note that “the Book of Mormon ... teaches its messages primarily though history.”

Fortunately, most of the essays in this volume do allow a role for history in the chapters under discussion, although it is often less than I might have wished and less than the available evidence would have permitted and could have been used to elucidate even doctrinal points.

Consciously or unconsciously, these two volumes tend more toward being theologies than the other volumes in the *Studies in Scripture* series. Within the parameters of their intentions, however, these two volumes are quite successful. Some of the essays have been splendidly done, and are fairly loaded with new, and sometimes challenging, insights—the essays of Rodney Turner and Robert L. Millet immediately come to mind, as do also the fine studies of D. Kelly Ogden on 1 Nephi 1-7 and Terrence L. Szink on 1 Nephi 16-18, which sparkle with fresh geographical, historical, and theological perspectives; others are workmanlike; others tend toward being pedestrian recapitulations of the contents of the chapters under discussion, which is unfortunate, since the primary justification for a commentary or other studies on scripture is to provide the reader new insights. Still, this is perhaps the best companion to the teachings of the Book of Mormon that is currently available, and could be used with profit as a teaching aid in the classrooms of the Church.