Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology?
Commenting on the Book of Mormon: A Review Essay

Louis Midgley


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Review of
Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon,
Volume I: First and Second Nephi (1987), and Volume
II: Jacob through Mosiah (1988), by Joseph Fielding
McConkie and Robert L. Millet.

The faith of the Nephites and the language of the
Book of Mormon tends to be harmonized with certain
contemporary statements about Mormon beliefs. The
Book of Mormon should be more than a resource for
theology. Rather than seeking confirmation for what
we already know, we should search for the meaning
and message of the text.

Prophetic Messages or Dogmatic Theology? Commenting on the Book of Mormon: A Review Essay

Reviewed by Louis Midgley

In two handsome volumes taking us through Mosiah,1 Joseph F. McConkie and Robert L. Millet reproduce the text of the Book of Mormon divided into blocks of dissimilar length, which they follow with annotations on what they understand to be doctrinal matters. Though they never indicate exactly what they mean by doctrine, the Book of Mormon is treated as a “theological treatise” (2:2) containing “theological gems,” which provides an indication of what they have in mind. *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* is a series of statements, either about phrases or about topics suggested by some of the language in the Book of Mormon. The primary exception to this practice is found in the treatment of the long passages taken from Isaiah (2 Nephi 7-8, 12-24), where brief paraphrases are provided for entire chapters, and the text, as it is found in the Book of Mormon, is not reproduced.2

Topics are addressed in *Doctrinal Commentary*, whose outlines are occasioned by language in the Book of Mormon, but little or no attention is given to literary forms, narrative contexts, or to larger structures, patterns or distinctive language in the text. The statements of others are at times quoted either to advance or bolster the opinions of the authors. *Doctrinal Commentary* is thus an inventory of statements about what are thought to be Mormon doctrines or Mormon theology, cast in the form of glosses (or annotations) on the text. Because the Book of Mormon is viewed as a source for theology, little effort is made in *Doctrinal Commentary* to ascertain the subtlety of

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1 Presumably the remainder of the Book of Mormon will be covered in yet unpublished volumes, though no explanation of the plan for the series appears in the currently available volumes.

2 It is also indicated that in “the latter part of the book of Alma, where history dominates the text,” the text of the Book of Mormon will not be included (1:xvi).
what it teaches, or to weigh possible alternative readings of the
text. Instead, the faith of the Nephites and the language of the
Book of Mormon tend to be harmonized with certain contem-
porary statements about Mormon beliefs, though that is of
necessity done in a random manner, and always on the
assumption that the two must be made to appear identical.
Unfortunately, in some ways the work tends to resemble the
mode of biblical interpretation employed by Protestant
Fundamentalists, including argument by assertion and a
pencilant to proof text the scriptures, sometimes augmented by
statements made on various topics by certain of the Brethren.

"The genius of the Book of Mormon, like any work of
art," according to Richard Bushman, "is that it brings an entire
society and culture into existence, with a religion, an economy, a
technology, a government, a geography, a sociology, all
combined into a complete world. For purposes of analysis, we
must, of course, call forth one thread, one theme, one idea at a
time, but we must also bear in mind the existence of this larger
world and relate individual passages to greater structures if we
are to find their broadest meaning."3 If anything like that is
correct, then it is a mistake for us to claim to possess the one and
only proper mode of interpretation and explication, since, when
we begin to focus on any one theme or thread to the exclusion of
the whole and especially in opposition to the legitimate work of
others on other threads or themes, we threaten to warp the world
that is called into existence by our text. Instead of focusing
merely on a single aspect or theme, as important as that may be,
when we approach the Book of Mormon we must strive to keep
in sight the entire world which it evokes. And we need to take
advantage of all possible resources for understanding and
probing every aspect of the book. Collaboration among the
faithful in the serious study of the Book of Mormon would help
us avoid being drawn into the quarrelsome factions which now
tend to divide us and weaken our efforts to build the Kingdom.

From my perspective, the Book of Mormon signals that far
more is going on in the restoration achieved through its means
than merely an awkward way of providing a random assortment
of theological gems that we can fit into our own schema. If the

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3 Richard Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon
History," in New Views of Mormon History, ed. by Davis Bitton and
Maureen Ursenbach Beecher (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1987), 3-
18, at 5.
existence of the Book of Mormon shows us anything, it is that our words about God—our efforts to do theology—are both futile and arrogant, and that what we need is access to messages from the heavens. When we narrow our focus, we tend to turn the Book of Mormon into a mere resource for our own theologizing. There is an element of pride in such ventures. If what we needed was an authoritative theological treatise, the Book of Mormon was an odd way for it to have been made available. Looked at that way, it turns out to have been a failure, which may explain why some students of doctrine tend to discount it.

The question that needs to be addressed is why we have a complex record of prophetic teachings presented in an historical setting intimately linked with the tragic fate of defiant peoples. As we begin to address that question, we inevitably move away from theology either in its dogmatic or systematic forms. But the Saints have always tended to ignore those portions of the Book of Mormon—by far the bulk of the book—that could not be easily exploited as simple proof texts for dogmatic theological purposes.

What seems to have led the Saints to neglect the Book of Mormon—there is no denying that, as a rule, we have done that—is a desire for dogmatic or systematic theology, rather than a yearning for the restoration of a past that can function as a key to understanding our present and future, both as individuals and as a community. Have we really understood the significance of what is implied in the story of the angel or the historical accounts he provided to Joseph Smith? It seems that we have not, for we have neglected the wonderful gift brought by the angel. To fasten our attention on one theme or thread in the Book of Mormon to the exclusion of the whole is to perpetuate our neglect of what was restored.

It is ironic that, as we praise the Book of Mormon, we may indulge an urge to systematize and even elaborate where the sacred text—one that should function as our canon—remains silent. From the desire to have tidy synopses of Mormon doctrines, we may sow seeds of contention, and end up disputing over what we may even want to identify as the doctrines of salvation. Against such the Book of Mormon provides an emphatic warning. Latter-day Saint scholars would do well to guard against the arrogant desire to advance theological systems—to develop a kind of Mormon scholasticism—rather than assuming a more modest role which
gratefully accepts what is taught in the scriptural canon and by the prophets. The Book of Mormon directly confronts our pride and hence also our academic ambitions and pretensions, both of which are at work in our dogmatism and in our urge to harmonize and systematize.4

The flaws in Doctrinal Commentary are ones common to much of Mormon scholarship. The tendency is to divert attention away from the message and meaning in the text under consideration, and back towards what we already know. Such efforts do not enhance our understanding; they tend to make the very teachings they celebrate seem merely sentimental and insubstantial. Such endeavors also tend to close the door on the untapped possibilities within the scriptures. Our tendency is to rely upon presumably authoritative statements on matters that may seem urgent to us, but which may not have been of concern to those responsible for providing us with the Book of Mormon. These secondary materials may be edifying or at least harmless, but are quite often of limited value, being themselves flawed by the kind of neglect of the enigmatic and yet fruitful particulars found in the Book of Mormon that has brought the Church under divine condemnation. Part of the neglect of the Book of Mormon and the resulting censure (D&C 84:54-57) may be traced to our urge to advance seemingly authoritative answers to questions that are not addressed in that text.

4 Of course, in reading the Book of Mormon we should strive to see its teaching, prophetic messages, and warnings as a coherent whole, as far as the text makes that possible, and as much within the linguistic horizon of the text as is possible—we should strive to see the world through the lens provided by the text, and not the other way around. The meaning of the text is paramount, and should not be subordinated to later dogmatic or theological understandings. The mistake about which I am complaining is the urge to see in the Book of Mormon merely scattered fragments from which one might fashion a theology or system of Mormon doctrines, which are also roughly harmonized with notions drawn from exterior sources. The other mistake is to assume that the Book of Mormon is composed of bits and pieces of dogma and doctrine inserted into a narrative by Joseph Smith in an attempt to address his and others' theological quandaries up to 1830, which he later discarded as he began what is now called the "reconstruction of Mormon doctrine" upon less orthodox and more progressive, liberal lines. An approach that looks in the the Book of Mormon for a system of theology, which now must be authoritatively elaborated, or was later terminated by more liberal insights, does not do justice to that text understood as an authentic revelation from God containing the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
McConkie and Millet claim that it is not their "intent to suggest that a proper understanding" of the Book of Mormon "requires the interpretative helps of trained scholars" (2:xiii), and they express "some concern" because certain Latter-day Saints inquire about the historical claims of the Book of Mormon (2:xiii). Unfortunately, Doctrinal Commentary seems to rest on the notion that thoughtful scholarship and an explication of scripture are inimical (2:xiii). It is, of course, no secret that elements of Secular Fundamentalism—including certain of the dominant modes of understanding divine things in the modern world—tend to work against faith, especially as Latter-day Saints understand such things. But it is simply wrong to hold that all scholarly endeavors are harmful to faith (2 Nephi 9:29).

After making those assertions, McConkie and Millet apologize for their own endeavors. Curiously, they do that by launching an attack on all biblical scholarship, which they claim is necessarily damaging to faith (2:xiii). Are we to assume that all inquiries into the Book of Mormon, other than their own, have the same impact as what they accuse biblical scholarship of doing to faith? Instead of merely indicating that they wish to highlight for the beginning student some of the more familiar teachings in the Book of Mormon, they seem intent upon defending their mode of interpretation against other approaches to the text. Hence, they extend their attack on all biblical scholarship to include virtually everyone not engaged in a theological exegesis of the Book of Mormon. They brush aside

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5 Doctrinal Commentary does not contain an indication of the division of labor between the two authors. Nevertheless, certain blocks of text seem to have been written by one of the authors. For example, much of what seems to be the general introduction to the series, "Glad Tidings from Cumorah" when it appeared in 1987 (1:2-16), was later published by McConkie as "A Comparison of Book of Mormon, Bible, and Traditional Teachings on the Doctrines of Salvation," in The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture, Paul R. Cheesman, ed., assisted by S. Kent Brown and Charles D. Tate, Jr. (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 73-90. The material in "Glad Tidings from Cumorah" (1:9-16), which appears with numbered subheadings (1 through 12) in Doctrinal Commentary, is reproduced, with a somewhat more felicitous editing, in The Keystone Scripture, without the last paragraph under the subheading "Revelation" (87), and the "Conclusion" (87-89), and also with a section entitled "Scriptural Inerrancy and Infallibility" (85-86) inserted between items 11 and 12 in Doctrinal Commentary), when these materials were republished in the The Keystone Scripture.
as insignificant (and even perhaps pernicious) other scholarly work on the Book of Mormon.6 Ironically, both McConkie and Millet are capable of better scholarship,7 and have written less tendentious essays. But given what appears as hostility to the scholarly enterprise, McConkie and Millet never satisfactorily answer the question of why we need a commentary on the Book of Mormon (2:xiii). “The only justification for a commentary,” they opine, “is an expanded understanding of holy writ and of the manner in which its teachings apply in our lives” (1:xv).

6 Virtually the only serious scholarship on the Book of Mormon cited in Doctrinal Commentary is the 1967 edition of Hugh Nibley’s Since Cumorah (see 2:323, for the Nibley citation in their bibliography), but even this is inadequately utilized. A thirty-three word passage taken from p. 393 of the 1967 edition of Nibley’s book (pp. 356 and 357 of the 1988 edition, published as volume 7 of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley), and quoted in Doctrinal Commentary, 2:13-14—commenting on Jacob 2:13-16—is as follows: “Wealth is a jealous master who will not be served half-heartedly and will suffer no rival—not even God ... [ellipses where 157 words and six citations have been removed]. The more important wealth is, the less important it is how one gets it.” The passage quoted from Nibley is part of his exegesis of 2 Nephi 9:30: “But wo unto the rich, who are rich as to the things of the world. For because they are rich they despise the poor, and they persecute the meek, and their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their God. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also.” But in dealing with that passage, Nibley is not quoted. Doctrinal Commentary would have been materially improved if more materials like Nibley’s pithy explications of the teachings and prophetic warning of the Book of Mormon had been assembled under the appropriate headings. It is in essays like Nibley’s on the message of the Book of Mormon that we begin to see the possibilities of an insightful exegesis of that text.

7 Both have published fine scholarly treatments of themes ancillary to the doctrines of salvation. For example, McConkie’s best essays—I think of his “Premortal Existence, Foreordinations, and Heavenly Councils,” in Apocryphal Writings and the Latter-day Saints, ed. by C. Wilfred Griggs (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1986), 171-98—make considerable and effective use of the work of a wide sampling of gentile scholarship. Hence his attack on all attempts to generate a competent scholarship on the Book of Mormon is puzzling. Of course, competent exegesis of themes in the Book of Mormon need not necessarily always draw upon gentile scholarship, but there is nothing in principle that calls for a rejection of the learning of those outside the Church. A judicious use of that learning has advanced our understanding of a number of matters about which we were previously partially in the dark, as McConkie’s essay on heavenly councils illustrates.
They then beg the question of how that is to be done, and why their particular mode of interpretation should take precedence.

To pursue other than theology in the Book of Mormon, "no matter how interesting the material presented, is to create a spiritual eclipse or to upstage the divine message with something that by its very nature is of lesser importance" (1:xv). They claim to approach matters of greatest worth—everything else is secondary. They "have chosen...to confine their attention almost exclusively to the doctrines espoused within the book, leaving it to others to deal with such matters as culture, history, and geography, as well as internal and external evidences of the book. In so doing they do not seek to suggest that such matters are without importance" (1:xv), but later they more than merely hint that to deal with the teachings in any other way, or to take up any other themes or threads in the Book of Mormon than the issues they consider of paramount importance, is to be involved in things of secondary value, and that such endeavors are even harmful to the faith (2:xiii-xv).

McConkie and Millet say many things that are both familiar and fine. But by dealing with the Book of Mormon primarily as a resource for narrowly focused theological declamation, they fail to provide a thoroughgoing, competent explication of its teachings. They falter at the very thing they undertake because they ignore many of the hints, clues, subtleties, obscurities, complexities and puzzling passages in the Book of Mormon. By treating the scriptures merely as a collection of proof texts to be fitted into a theological system, the authors of Doctrinal Commentary downplay or ignore the historical setting and content, narrative structure, language, and literary form in the text, and hence fail to identify fully and explicate the prophetic message and warnings found in the Book of Mormon.

An essentially ahistorical approach to the Book of Mormon is unable to take us much beyond the received opinion on Mormon beliefs. Doctrinal Commentary thus remains on the surface, and is not calculated to probe the less familiar and yet more subtle and profound teachings in the text. Let me illustrate the kinds of teachings that are neglected in Doctrinal Commentary. The name and description of the community (or church) in the Book of Mormon was People of God, or Covenant People of the Lord. Those names, as well as a complex of related language, are linked with the making and renewal of the covenant binding the faithful to God. The covenant was at times renewed through rituals involving the
entire community. Those rituals admonished and constituted, as they did with ancient Israel, what the Book of Mormon calls "ways of remembrance" (1 Nephi 2:24). The constant stress on cursings and blessings, and the offering of sacrifices, coupled with the reading and explication of an account of the creation that functioned as the historical prologue to the covenant, forms the emblematic and dogmatic horizon in which the life and sacrificial death of Jesus of Nazareth was taught and understood. Are we not to remember, as the Nephites of old remembered? And are we not to remember curses brought upon the Nephites, which they inflicted upon themselves by forgetting the terms of the covenant? Are we not to understand that we are cut off from the presence of God—that is, in bondage and captivity—to the extent that we do not remember the terms of our covenants, including the Book of Mormon? The sacred records brought with the Lehi colony, when coupled to a host of dramatic epiphanies, explicated in highly formulaic ways in accounts of prophetic speeches, in letters and blessings, but also in political proclamations, as well as legislation, judicial proceedings, and so forth, provide us with prophetic direction and warning by preserving and enlarging our own memory of God's mighty deeds, and of the terms of the covenant that made them (and us) the People of God.

McConkie and Millet tend to ignore the peculiar and complex structure of language in the Book of Mormon; they therefore neglect some of its more intriguing elements. For example, the Hebrew verb meaning "to remember," in its various declensions, appears in the Old Testament one hundred and sixty-nine times, for the most part with God and Israel as subjects. But the language of memory and remembrance, often closely associated with covenants, and their renewals, and with records and their role in the life of the People of God, occurs in the Book of Mormon some two hundred and twenty-seven times. One looks in vain for an explication of such matters in *Doctrinal Commentary*. What is provided instead is a rather familiar treatment of themes as they are commonly understood by the Saints.

In undertaking a doctrinal commentary, McConkie and Millet neglect to indicate what they mean by "doctrine." They also neglect to examine the meaning and content given to that

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8 See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 5-6, 107.
word in the Book of Mormon. They may have assumed that "doctrine" is unproblematic, but it would seem to be a mistake to ignore the way otherwise ostensibly familiar words like "doctrine" are used in a text upon which one wishes to comment. What is currently meant by "doctrine" includes virtually everything that is taught or believed, and also perhaps whatever supports or explains what is done by Latter-day Saints. But when we look at the way in which the word is used in the Book of Mormon, we are in for a surprise.

The word "doctrine" appears in the Book of Mormon twenty-four times, always with the narrow meaning of the gospel of Jesus Christ. McConkie and Millet are fascinated with what they call "the doctrines within the Book of Mormon" (2:xiii). In the two page preface to the second volume, they mention "doctrines" four different times. Clearly, they assume that the book is full of various "doctrines." But when the word "doctrine" is used affirmatively in the Book of Mormon, it is always singular, though there are "points of doctrine" (1 Nephi 15:14; Alma 41:9; Helaman 11:22-23; 3 Nephi 11:28; 21:6); when plural, the word identifies foolish, vain, and false teachings that deny the gospel—that Jesus is the Christ (see 2 Nephi 28:9, 15; Alma 1:16).

The "doctrine" of Jesus Christ is declared by him to consist of the following: "And this is my doctrine, and it is the doctrine which the Father hath given unto me;... and I bear record that the Father commandeth all men, everywhere, to repent and believe in me. And whoso believeth in me, and is baptized, the same shall be saved; and they are they who shall inherit the kingdom of God. And whoso believeth not in me, and is not baptized, shall be damned" (3 Nephi 11:33-34). The Book of Mormon, of course, contains more information about both human and divine things than the fulness of the gospel, which is the doctrine of Jesus Christ. But the additional historical information, as well as the norms, descriptions, emblems, figures, images, tenets, categories, and instructions are never identified as "doctrine." That word is reserved for the core message that Jesus is the Christ—the Messiah, the Redeemer of mankind. Everything else is strictly subordinated to the one "doctrine of Christ," by which we may "know how to come unto Christ and be saved" (see 1 Nephi 15:14), for it is the Redeemer who is the way of salvation, the way, truth, life, light, and so forth—that being the one and only doctrine identified as such in the Book of Mormon. What we need is a
commentary on the Book of Mormon—one that begins with an examination of the conception of doctrine found in the text, and not a doctrinal or doctrinaire commentary. When we get clear on exactly what constitutes the doctrine of Jesus Christ, we are able to understand the term “anti-Christ,” for they who teach false, vain or foolish “doctrines” are those who deny the doctrine that Jesus is the Christ.

“Doctrine” (usually in the singular, as opposed to the plural form, as in “false doctrines”) identifies the gospel understood as faith, repentance, and baptism—how to come unto Christ to be saved. It does not identify the whole range or complex of opinions, speculation or beliefs about divine and human things, or the rites, practices, and traditions that go into the making of a contemporary Mormon; it is, instead, the most primary, elementary, plain teachings of Jesus Christ. Ironically, Doctrinal Commentary rests upon an understanding of doctrine which is foreign to the text upon which it comments. This is obviously innocent, and would be harmless except that the careless use of the word “doctrine” leads McConkie and Millet to pay inordinate attention to the details of beliefs as currently understood, beliefs they think of as crucial doctrines concerning which one must have the right opinion in order to be saved. On this matter it is instructive that after Jesus declared his doctrine to the Nephites (3 Nephi 11:31-39), he added that “whoso shall declare more or less than this, and establish it as my doctrine, the same cometh of evil, and is not built upon my rock; but he buildeth upon a sandy foundation, and the gates of hell stand open to receive such when the floods come and the winds beat upon them” (3 Nephi 11:40).

By conceiving the Book of Mormon as a source of details about matters that some may currently identify as doctrines, and hence want to include as part of a dogmatic theology that binds the Church, McConkie and Millet end up playing into the hands of those who argue that Joseph Smith, after 1835, was involved in a radical “reconstruction of Mormon doctrine” as it was set forth in orthodox Book of Mormon theology.9 The argument is as follows: additional texts claiming to be authentically ancient,

more revelations, additional rites and ordinances, instructions, information, as well as speculation and interpretations, obviously followed the Book of Mormon. Many of these, even those coming directly through Joseph Smith, must be read as constituting a radical shift in perspective, and are inconsistent and discontinuous with his early theology—that is, with the doctrines taught in the Book of Mormon. After 1835 there was a shift away from an essentially orthodox theology, which was basically drawn from the Protestant sectarian world, to a new “progressive theology,” with a “liberal” rather than pessimistic view of human nature, and a radically different conception of God. Instead of interpreting later revelations as clarifications, elaborations, and applications of the doctrine of Jesus Christ, as plainly and emphatically set forth in the Book of Mormon, a “development of Mormon theology” is postulated which does not rest on “an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.”

It seems to me that clarity on exactly what has been restored as the doctrine of Jesus Christ (or the fulness of the gospel) by divine revelation, rather than what some of the early Saints believed or attempted to work out as part of their efforts to fashion a creed or do theology, would assist in overcoming the notion that a reconstruction of the doctrine, as set forth in the Book of Mormon, was undertaken by Joseph Smith. I am not denying that additional instructions, information, rites, and even additional ancient texts expanding the memory of the Saints were provided by revelation. Nor am I rejecting the notion that the understanding of the Saints was gradually expanded and modified. But this fleshing out of the core structure was not done in such a way that what came in the later revelations was, as some now claim, discontinuous or inconsistent with the doctrine taught in the Book of Mormon understood as the gospel of Jesus Christ. By failing to clarify exactly what constitutes the doctrine of Jesus Christ, it has been possible for some to assume

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10 According to Alexander, “This type of exegesis or interpretation,” that he accuses Joseph F. McConkie of employing, “may produce systematic theology and while it may satisfy those trying to understand and internalize current doctrine, it is bad history since it leaves an unwarranted impression of continuity and consistency.” See Alexander, “The Reconstruction of Mormon Doctrine,” 24, and also n. 1, where specific reference is made to the views of McConkie, who is cited as the example of an author who insists on reading earlier texts through the lens of later dogmas.
that a presumably sectarian Protestant "early theology," which they strive to find in the Book of Mormon, was later jettisoned by Joseph Smith after 1835, as he began to advance a different set of doctrines which constituted a liberal, progressive theology. "Mormon doctrine" (or theology) is understood in such discussions as whatever the Saints may or seem to have believed at any given point, rather than what the crucial texts mean.

Though Millet is clearly opposed to speculation about a radical "reconstruction of Mormon doctrine,"11 unfortunately both he and McConkie share basically the same understanding of "doctrine" as do the Revisionists, for they also think in terms of a complex network of dogmas answering a host of different questions. They are therefore prepared to say exactly what Mormon doctrine is on the nature of God and man, and numerous other theoretical questions. They differ from the Revisionists by holding that the vast array of statements and beliefs that Latter-day Saints have entertained on various questions must be winnowed, and the doctrines of what they call "true religion" (1:369; 2:102, 107, 115) or even "revealed religion" (1:369; 2:115) then ascertained, harmonized, and taught authoritatively. A commentary thus provides the occasion for setting forth an elaborate and detailed creed, at least partially explicated in terms of categories quite foreign to the scriptures, upon which assent is thought to be mandatory for salvation. Labels like "true religion" and "revealed religion," like "theology," are categories foreign to the scriptures, but common to our post-Enlightenment, secularized world. Such categories form the lens through which we tend to view the scriptures, when it is the categories of the scriptures that ought to form the lens through which we view the secular world.

A careful examination of the Book of Mormon, which seems to lack much that is familiar to Latter-day Saints, perhaps because of our neglect, points in a somewhat different direction, with its narrow conception of doctrine. The Book of Mormon, with its strict focus on Jesus Christ, rather than an expansive notion of doctrine composed of a complex assortment of details about the nature of divine and human things, turns our attention away from what are clearly theoretical questions that traditionally have constituted the substance of theology. In our urge for

11 See, for example, Robert L. Millet, "The Ministry of the Father and the Son," in The Keystone Scripture, 44-72, especially 45, n. 4.
theology we are sometimes disappointed to find how little is said in the Book of Mormon that helps us fashion a system of doctrines that deal with the nature of God, or the Godhead, the Holy Ghost, original sin, the nature of man, and so forth, about which it is sometimes thought that Mormons have or at least should have detailed doctrines.

The Book of Mormon focuses our attention, when read carefully, on essentially practical issues centered on the consequences of repentance and believing in Jesus Christ, of trusting God, keeping the commandments, building Zion, avoiding the works of darkness, and so forth, which relate us to eternal life in the presence of God as that is made possible by Jesus Christ as set forth in the doctrine of Christ. I am not persuaded that anything that came in the later revelations to Joseph Smith was anything more than an elaboration and clarification of the core message contained in the initial founding revelation. And I flatly reject the now popular notion that there is a discontinuity and inconsistency between the earlier and later revelations. Nor do I think that we do the Kingdom a service by attempting to harmonize or winnow the various attempts to fashion a Mormon theology with the contents of the Book of Mormon and later revelations. Those who postulate an inconsistency between the Book of Mormon and what was taught by Joseph Smith in Nauvoo begin with the assumption that they are dealing with theology—man’s words about God. But what we are dealing with is divine revelation—God’s words to man, and quite a different thing than theology. (Plato gave us the world theologia, from which we derive our “theology,” in the Republic [Bk II, 379a] to describe the tales appropriately told by poets in a well-ordered regime.) Whenever we attempt to do theology, or fashion a system of doctrines, we end up in contention and disputation, for the entire enterprise is an exercise in arrogance and pride, against which the Book of Mormon warns.

But even as an elementary and informal account of Mormon beliefs, Doctrinal Commentary is flawed, since it is brief, sketchy and necessarily a random rather than an orderly or even historical explication. The end result is, for the most part, a series of didactic discourses, little sermons, or homilies prompted by phrases in the Book of Mormon, which may have little or nothing to do with the meaning of the passage or even the phrase which functioned as the trigger. These homilies tend to opine about words or phrases, but they seldom probe for the
actual meaning of the message in the text; they tend to provide informal expositions of already familiar Mormon sentiments.

At times a phrase or incident functions as the springboard for sentimentality and moralizing, either of which might have a place in some other context than in a commentary on the scriptures. Let me illustrate by citing the three entries each dealing with 1 Nephi 1:1. The expression “born of goodly parents” leads to the following statement: “The text is a testimonial for the spiritual blessings that flow from the proper use of this world’s wealth” (1:19). The expressions “many afflictions...highly favored of the Lord” yield the following homily: “Life was not intended to be easy. The path of righteousness, that leading to eternal life, is ever an upward climb and hence uninviting to many. Nephi saw afflictions and blessings as compatible companions. Surely anything that brings us nearer to God is a blessing” (1:19). Without wishing to question such sentiments and observations, which may be fine, it is clear that they have little to do with explicating the actual meaning of the text. Instead, the text merely becomes the occasion for moralizing, platitudes, admonitions, while the actual meaning of the text may be ignored. Hence, the expression “mysteries of God” in 1 Nephi 1:1 becomes the occasion for the following homily: “The mysteries of God are known only to those who have so lived as to enjoy the companionship of the Holy Ghost. ‘No man can receive the Holy Ghost without receiving revelations,’ Joseph Smith taught, for ‘the Holy Ghost is a revealer’.... Because of his faithfulness in the face of affliction, Nephi became a rightful heir to these hidden treasures of God” (1:19).

McConkie and Millet justify their neglect of the competent literature on the Book of Mormon with dubious speculation about faith and its grounds (2:xiii-xv), as if such matters could be reduced to facile formulas, or argued with rather florid metaphors, or should be employed as grounds for dismissing the increasingly sophisticated scholarly undertakings of their colleagues and associates. It is in the competent scholarly literature generated in the last thirty-five years that we can begin to see the outlines of a more profound understanding of the prophetic message and inspired teachings of the Book of Mormon. It is lamentable that no use was made of that literature in Doctrinal Commentary.

A few examples will indicate the kind of problems that flow from the dismissal of the competent literature on the Book
of Mormon, and that afflict *Doctrinal Commentary*, and will also suggest how McConkie and Millet might have improved their efforts, even as they focus on the prophetic message.

(1) "It would appear," they say, "that King Benjamin’s mighty sermon [in Mosiah 1-6] was the forum for a large covenant-renewal ceremony" (2:175-76). Why is that so? And what is its significance? Why not cite, if not draw upon, Stephen D. Ricks, "The Treaty/Covenant Pattern in King Benjamin’s Address," *BYU Studies*, 24/2 (Spring 1984):151-62, where it is shown that, in addition to being a remarkable example of an ancient coronation ceremony, the materials in Mosiah 1-6 parallel the biblical covenant narratives and describe a covenant renewal festival which involves, among other things, a pilgrimage to the temple, where booths were erected and sacrifices offered, and instruction in the law was given, much like the ancient Israelite pattern? This festival provided a setting for explication of the meaning of the sacrifices and burnt offerings that formed part of the occasion. The Nephite festival appears to have been the ancient feast of the booths (or tabernacles). It involved the reading of the legal stipulations binding upon those entering or renewing the covenant, as well as a setting forth, in highly formulaic ways, of cursings and blessings associated with keeping or not keeping the commandments of the King or of God.

(2) The formula setting forth the cursings and blessings is described as "vintage Book of Mormon doctrine," but without indicating exactly why that is so or what it entails (1:189, commenting on 2 Nephi 1:20). McConkie and Millet neglect to mention that the formula occurs explicitly at least fifteen times in the Book of Mormon, or that the formula provides the lens through which the Nephite prophets explain what is happening to their people as they prosper and then eventually grow in arrogance or pride and turn away or forget the terms of the covenant, bringing upon themselves cursings, rather than the promised blessings. This illustrates how attention to historical and cultural matters would have materially improved *Doctrinal Commentary*, even or especially in dealing with the doctrine of Christ.

(3) The most common mistake in *Doctrinal Commentary* is the result of its being informal. In commenting on Mosiah 3:19, where King Benjamin, in describing fallen mankind as carnal, devilish, and sensual, also reports that "the natural man is an enemy of God," McConkie and Millet quaintly maintain that
“Benjamin is not teaching that man is depraved” (2:152). Of course, it is necessary and proper to distinguish Benjamin’s view of the depravity of sinful, debased mankind from the sectarian belief in a total depravity, transmitted genetically at birth to all mankind. Instead, Benjamin clearly teaches that carnality (or depravity) is “put on” by conscious choices, and can be “put off” by turning to, remembering, and trusting the merciful forgiveness made available through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. But McConkie and Millet make no such careful distinctions.

(4) It is also instructive, when McConkie and Millet venture outside what they conceive as strictly doctrinal issues, which they sometimes do, to compare their accounts with those found in the increasingly competent literature on the Book of Mormon. For instance, the account they give of the name Nahom in Doctrinal Commentary (1:127) suffers in comparison with that provided by Hugh Nibley in The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (5:79; and 6:251-52), and in the F.A.R.M.S. Update for September 1986, “Lehi’s Trail and Nahom Revisited.”

Given the limitations imposed by the narrow focus and informal and nonscholarly character of Doctrinal Commentary, much of what is said is, of course, both unexceptional and by and large sound. But, unfortunately, the mode of explication of the Book of Mormon adopted by McConkie and Millet tends to draw attention away from the meaning of the text. They substitute in its place presumably authoritative statements about words or phrases taken out of context, which are then used as an excuse for the elaboration of a theology. For the most part, the authors of Doctrinal Commentary merely assert; they do not demonstrate by careful textual exegesis. And, given that particular mode of argument, they tend to settle on a meaning for a phrase or passage in the Book of Mormon by drawing upon (or fashioning) some exterior and subsequent or even unrelated statement about what are thought to be Mormon doctrines. They seem to approach the text of the Book of Mormon already knowing, from sources exterior to the text, both the questions and the answers. Hence there are really no new insights, no discoveries on the teachings found in the text, that are not already accessible from sources already familiar to the Saints. There is little indication that the authors of Doctrinal Commentary are willing to allow the text to determine the questions or the answers on the issues they raise.
Questions of culture, language, literary form, legal practices, historical details, and so forth, are, of course, clearly secondary to the prophetic message and warnings contained in the Book of Mormon. But to fasten on any one theme or thread, without due consideration for the whole, both obscures and distorts the core message. My misgivings about *Doctrinal Commentary* are not the result of qualms about a serious examination of the teachings and message of the Book of Mormon. We need to have our attention focused on such things. But competent, careful attention to the text is needed, if we are to begin to understand its message.

We all need to heed the warnings contained in the Book of Mormon against contentions or disputations over doctrines (e.g., 3 Nephi 11:28-30). We should not desire to dispute over doctrine, and the authors of *Doctrinal Commentary* clearly see themselves as settling questions, and perhaps even thereby preventing disputations, by giving simple, clear, contemporary interpretations of Mormon doctrines. The problem as I see it is that such an endeavor gratifies the desire of those who feel that what is needed is a theological system crafted out of selected statements currently found among the Saints on what they understand as crucial doctrinal matters. But it may well be that attempting to fashion such a system of doctrines is, by its very nature, one of the sources of disputation, rather than the cure, for the subtle sophistries of doctrinal and eventually perhaps

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12 McConkie and Millet would, of course, rightly deny that their intention is to do what is commonly called systematic theology, which is usually undertaken by those with some measure of philosophical pretension and sophistication. Even though they understand the Book of Mormon as a “theological treatise” (2:2), they may also want to deny that they are doing any other type of theology. But their obvious concern with getting the details of doctrine sorted out and settled—doctrines, which they also assume to be the key to getting in the right relationship with deity and crucial for salvation—focuses attention on the necessity of assenting to the right formulas rather than on faith understood as trusting God and keeping the commandments as conditions of the covenant that makes the People of God a genuine possibility. Stress on doctrine may unwittingly call forth disputation about the minute details of what becomes a kind of creed. When we assume that salvation is somehow the product of believing exactly the right doctrines—sometimes called “doctrines of salvation”—we thereby open the door to disputes over beliefs in ways that tend to obscure our fallibility and depravity—presumptuously stressing a presumed comprehensive knowledge of divine things rather than gratefully accepting what is offered in the scriptures.
theological systematization and speculation may function as the very medium of contention.

We also need to abandon the false assumption that one must either choose to work on the question of the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon or else examine its teachings. As I have tried to show elsewhere, the two issues are logically related in ways that make their facile separation both unfruitful and eventually impossible. We are currently faced with various attempts to persuade the Saints that there was no Lehi, and hence no Moroni—that the story of the angel and the Book of Mormon was merely Joseph Smith’s rustic effort to deal with some of his youthful doctrinal quandaries by fashioning fiction which appeared to provide answers to perplexing questions. These Revisionist accounts of the Book of Mormon argue that we may find some inspiring things in the Book of Mormon, while denying that it is an authentic history. Unfortunately, McConkie and Millet’s ahistorical treatment of the teachings of the Book of Mormon once again plays inexorably into the hands of the Revisionist ideology. By resolutely avoiding the issue of historicity, bolstered by a confused discussion of proof (1:6-7), McConkie flatly rejects the means whereby an honest and competent response to the Revisionist position on the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon can be mounted. There are dire consequences that flow from the flat denial that historical issues are worthy of serious attention, for if they are not worthy of our study, then it seems that it does not really matter whether there was a Lehi community, and hence whether there was an angel who made available to Joseph Smith the plates upon which the history of those people was recorded. Presumably that is not what McConkie wants to say. But it is easy to go too far in attempting to focus merely on some threads in the Book of Mormon—crucial as they may be—at the expense of the whole, for the message does not hold up without the historical component, since that element is not merely the occasion for some doctrines but is a necessary ingredient in the prophetic message.

The question that we must finally address is whether the volumes under consideration constitute a genuinely competent

14 Cf. ibid., 221-24, for an elaboration of this point.
exegesis of what is set forth in the Book of Mormon, or whether the venture is flawed. My view is that McConkie and Millet would have been more successful if they had been less concerned that the reader be coached on correct versions of what a Mormon ought to believe on a host of matters, and more concerned about attempting to get clear on the beliefs, practices, and understandings of divine things in the world called forth by the text, which necessarily includes much more than a collection of precise little doctrinal assertions or allusions, always seen through the lens of how we currently tend to understand such things. Only then would they have served well the larger end they have in view, which is bringing us to Jesus Christ through the distinctive prophetic message of the Book of Mormon. *Doctrinal Commentary* turns out to be an assortment of opinions on the teachings of the Book of Mormon, or on matters suggested by language in that text, but it is not a commentary on that book either doctrinal or otherwise. It is to be hoped that, in future volumes, the sometimes strident rhetoric found in the prefaces and introductions to the volumes currently available will be moderated by a more accurate and modest assessment of the limitations of the work, as well as a more thoughtful statement of the role of discourse about the meaning of texts, sacred and otherwise, that will reduce, rather than increase, contention and disputation over doctrinal matters among the Saints. We certainly do not need a tendentious Mormon scholasticism bathed in the style and armed with the methods of Sectarian Fundamentalism, any more than we need a Revisionist Liberalism grounded in the categories of the Secular Fundamentalism that has grown up since the Enlightenment.

In addition to some extravagant criticism of all biblical scholarship (e.g., 1:206-07, 2:xiii), *Doctrinal Commentary* contains a number of instances of intemperate and gratuitous inveighing against such things as the “the philosophies of men” (1:336) or the “philosophies of the learned” (1:345), sometimes coupled to the charge that there are “too many in the Church today” or “among us” who are false teachers, and hence there are many who have been decoyed by “many learned and adept educators who teach things that are contrary to the divine will” (1:345). How such statements help us understand the message of the Book of Mormon is not clear. And neither is it ever made clear exactly against whom or what these bromides are aimed, except unidentified historians. “There are historians of self-announced renown whose works are false, much of their writing
being harmfully speculative and out of harmony with the divine will" (1:345). One wonders why historians are singled out. Are their sins, as a group, any more egregious than those of other scholars? Granted that some historians, like any other group of Latter-day Saint intellectuals, including those who see themselves as theologians and experts on Mormon doctrine, may be confused or have strayed from the path. But until such indiscriminate language is narrowed to certain specific cases, it tends to place all historians under an anathema, which is neither accurate nor just. The effect of such broadsides is to warn the reader away from intellectual pursuits.

It seems to me to be a serious mistake to employ language, the effect of which may be to begin to drive a wedge between learning and the Restored Gospel,\textsuperscript{15} especially since the Book of

\textsuperscript{15} An example of such a wedge may be seen in language in Doctrinal Commentary responding to 1 Nephi 17:45. Though the passage in the Book of Mormon says nothing about prayer, McConkie and Millet make the following statement: "It is common in anti-Mormon literature for attacks to be made on prayer and on trusting one’s feelings as sources for obtaining truth" (1:137). The words "feeling" and "feel" (in 1 Nephi 17:45) are made the occasion for the following assertion by McConkie and Millet: "True religion is a feeling" (1:137). But the Book of Mormon says nothing about "true religion," nor does it elevate the sentiments at the expense of other faculties such as actually hearing the voice of heavenly messengers and in other ways in knowing divine things. The reason Nephi offers for the condition of his older brothers is that they were both iniquitous and had forgotten the covenant they had made with the Lord—they had thereby brought upon themselves an awful curse. Nephi complains that his brothers, in spite of having been instructed by an angel, whom they had seen and heard, were "past feeling" and could no longer "feel" the power of the angelic "words" or message. McConkie and Millet simplify the matter too much by setting the "feelings" over against the presumably "erudite and sophisticated arguments" of anti-Mormons, which feelings, and not our reasoning or other evidences, somehow are shown to be false. "One does not have to be able to refute the argument to know that it is false." The reason seems to be that merely feeling that something is true (or false) is superior to a reasoned argument. But suppose I were now to say that I feel that the position advanced by McConkie and Millet is either true or false, would it not be appropriate to ask me for reasons, or for what may have generated that "feeling"? If one is not obliged to give reasons of some sort, are we not faced with the possibility of an endless parade of assertions backed only by the presumed spiritual certitude of their authors? It turns out that "feeling" and "religion" have been linked in some mischievous ways. For example, appeals to feeling are a favorite crutch of Protestant theologians, and in sophisticated formulations, they form the ground for one
Mormon explicitly encourages learning, on the one condition that appropriate attention be given to the counsels of God (2 Nephi 9:29). That one passage by itself provides a powerful charter making learning for the Saints desirable and even mandatory, given the one limiting condition. That passage, which McConkie and Millet virtually ignore, along with certain other passages in the scriptures, furnishes the ground for the confidence that the Saints have that more and better—not less—learning will enhance faith and build the Kingdom. Confidence in learning, as chartered in the Book of Mormon, thus helps to distinguish the Saints, at least in America, from anti-intellectual Sectarian Fundamentalists. One of the more attractive consequences of the Restoration has been the manner in which the Saints have been able to find ways of providing an abode for both the counsels of God and learning within their lives. It would be a mistake to begin to allow our concern about cases of intellectual pride to justify diverting our attention from the serious pursuit of learning, as is the case among Sectarian Fundamentalists. Unfortunately, some of the language of Doctrinal Commentary leans in that direction.

Though the Book of Mormon is lavishly celebrated in Doctrinal Commentary, at times in almost worshipful language, these volumes seem to rest on the assumption that the teachings found therein are really shallow or incomplete versions of the real thing. Since the focus is on what the Saints now believe—on Mormon doctrines or on setting forth a dogmatic theology for

strand of nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism. Friedrich Schleiermacher made sentiment, passion, or feeling the means of salvaging what he called "religion" from the ravages of enlightenment hostility to the contents of the Bible. He argued that those who feel deeply, especially about the absurdity of the biblical narratives and prophetic messages, are the truly religious ones, for religion is deep sentiment, which the despisers of the traditional biblical teachings have in large measure. See his On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers, trans. by John Oman, introduction by Rudolf Otto (New York: Harper, 1958). Obviously knowledge touches on and invokes the passions, but to confuse our feelings or sentiments with the work of the Holy Spirit or with genuine knowledge, especially in the absence of additional reasons that are open to public scrutiny, or when we have not been appointed by God to provide authoritative interpretations, is to invite a chaos of conflicting views, as well as to remove the possibility of assessing the merits of different views other than by the emotional intensity of the rhetoric used to advance them.
Mormons, such a thing can be approached more adequately through other and especially through more recent pronouncements. But given their narrow focus and obvious hostility to any other kind of literature on the Book of Mormon, these books constitute a compendium of materials one might already find being repeated, according to their authors, in sermons in Church meetings generally, as well as lessons in “Sunday School and other classes” (1:xv). That is not seen as a limitation, but is given as a justification for the entire endeavor. If the claims for Doctrinal Commentary were modest, if its rather severe limitations were clearly acknowledged, if the language of its homilies were less pretentious, more moderate and discriminating, and less excessively judgmental of others, and if its authors had been less inclined to contend with others over which mode of exegesis provides the one and only access to the message of the Book of Mormon, and more willing to see others as engaged in worthwhile scholarly endeavors, then these volumes would have better served the greater cause—bringing mankind to Christ—which they obviously espouse.