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Abstract Review of The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy (1990), edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr.
Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., The Book of Mormon: Jacob through Words of Mormon, To Learn with Joy. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1990. viii and 306 pp., subject and scripture indexes. $11.95.

Reviewed by Scott Woolley

This book comes as an exceedingly pleasant surprise. The latest in a series of volumes of collected papers from the annual Book of Mormon Symposia sponsored by the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University (here, the fourth such symposium, held in 1988), this book continues the focus of the yearly compilations on discrete portions of the Book of Mormon. One might be forgiven for harboring lesser expectations for this installment, coming as it does after the one concentrating on Second Nephi and limited to an examination of the books of Jacob, Enos, Jarom, Omni, and the Words of Mormon. But the authors here reveal these smaller books to hold more treasure than a casual reader might suspect.

As with any compilation of this sort, these papers vary widely in terms of the authors' approaches, and of course the value of any individual piece will be in the eye of the beholder, but for me the overall standard is almost uniformly surprisingly high. Ten of the seventeen contributors are current or emeritus members of Brigham Young University's religion faculty, and one wishes for a broader perspective. The editors are apparently soliciting contributions from a somewhat larger group than in previous volumes in this series, and that is a welcome development. Still, unless the annual Book of Mormon Symposium is intended as an in-house event for the religion faculty, why not take better advantage of the wealth of available resources? This very collection argues for such an approach: as a group, the papers by professors from other Brigham Young University departments are perhaps the strongest in the book.

The opening essay, entitled "The Law and the Light," is Elder Boyd K. Packer's carefully reasoned testimony about the origin of man. I have chosen my words with care here—Elder Packer has thought long and hard about the theory of organic evolution and reasons cogently, but in the end it is a testimony and not a scientific or philosophical work (though it does have a strong philosophical component). That is because it reasons from the standpoint of a believer and assumes a common starting
place with its intended audience. It does not attempt to refute or
rationalize the considerable scientific evidence tending to support
the theory of evolution; instead, its author begins with what God
has revealed about man’s origin.

Elder Packer starts by defining “law” as “an invariably
consistent rule, independent and irrevocable in its existence” (p.
2), and he posits the existence of spiritual (or moral) law as well
as physical law, each demonstrable by dramatically different
methods but each equally valid. Conscience is one manifestation
of spiritual law, or one means by which its existence may be
demonstrated, and “if conscience is the only thing that sets us
apart from the animals, it sets us a very long way apart indeed”
(p. 5). Conscience makes moral law possible, and moral law
“sets man apart from, and above, the animal kingdom. If moral
law is not an issue, then organic evolution is no problem. If
moral law is an issue, then organic evolution as the explanation
for the origin of man is the problem” (p. 6, first emphasis
added).

There follows a scriptural exploration of the creation, the
fall, and the atonement, concluding that if man simply evolved
from animals, there could have been no fall and thus no need for
an atonement. Elder Packer finishes with a “Declaration of
Conviction” to the effect that the theory of evolution, to the
extent that it asserts that man is the product of an evolutionary
process, the offspring of animals, is false. He also rejects the
notion of “theistic evolution,” the view that God used an
evolutionary process to prepare a physical body for man’s spirit,
which he sees as a well-intentioned (but unsuccessful) attempt to
resolve the conflict between the theory of evolution and the
gospel. He gives six reasons for his conviction: the Lord’s
revelations; an understanding of the sealing authority and its
ramifications; two First Presidency declarations—from 1909
(Joseph F. Smith) and 1925 (Heber J. Grant)—regarding the
Church’s position on organic evolution (both are appended to
his article, pp. 28-31); the existence of moral law, reason, and
conscience; the existence of beauty and harmony in the physical
universe; and, finally, personal revelation.

It is difficult to argue with that sort of authority, and I at
least am not inclined to try. Elder Packer is careful at the outset
to identify his thoughts as his own, not presented in any official
Church capacity. I have shown only a glimpse of his reasoning,
but given his fundamental assumptions, which I share, his
conclusions seem to me to be inevitable. Where we have no
definitive answers, either scientific or spiritual, we must be more than usually careful about where we place our trust.

Elder Packer’s article has no apparent thematic connection to the Book of Mormon books around which this collection is organized, or indeed to the Book of Mormon at all. The other papers relate more specifically to the subject matter at hand, though not all confine themselves to topics contained solely within the books under consideration. The editors have attempted no categorization, but at least two broad groups emerge into which most of the various pieces fall.

Not unexpectedly, several authors focus on individual characters featured in this portion of the Book of Mormon. Robert J. Matthews leads with a thoughtful reconstruction of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jacob, Nephi’s younger brother and successor as spiritual leader of the Nephites. He is aided in this by the comparative wealth of information that we have in the books of 1 and 2 Nephi as well as in the book of Jacob about this pivotal figure. The author writes: “There have been few people in history who have possessed the combination of spirituality, intellectual capacity, judgment, literary ability, parentage, faith, and seership that Jacob did” (p. 33). Dr. Matthews’s admiration for his subject is fully justified, as he demonstrates. In addition to putting together a coherent biographical sketch of Jacob, he gives a brief overview of the several important doctrines expounded upon by Jacob, emphasizing Jacob’s role as a witness of Christ.

Jacob is also the principal subject of my personal favorite of all the papers in the collection, John S. Tanner’s “Literary Reflections on Jacob and His Descendants.” An admirer of what he calls the “literary diversity” of the small plates of Nephi, Dr. Tanner takes as his thesis that “we do not, as a church, sufficiently appreciate the literary qualities of Jacob and his descendants” (p. 252). While recognizing the limitations of a literary approach to the Book of Mormon, he contributes to our understanding of the scriptures in ways that a religion professor, with his (natural and proper) emphasis on scripture as doctrine, could not. His focus is on individual voices:

As a literary critic, I am naturally drawn to first-person documents like the small plates. I savor truths bred in the bone, supposing that nuances of style

1 Compared, at least, to the textual references to Enos, Sherem, and Amaleki, all of whom are the subjects of separate essays.
reveal the man, and I listen for echoes of a human voice in every sort of discourse, however ostensibly impersonal—even in prophetic speeches. I do not believe that God’s co-authorship normally eradicates an individual’s voice, since the Lord speaks through his servants “in their weakness, after the manner of their language.” . . . Close attention to a prophet’s words can be—and I mean it to be—an expression of love for those through whom the Lord speaks (pp. 253-54, citations omitted).

There is nothing scientific in this approach, no computer wordprints. “I come, rather, with conjectures about the timely, human contexts of timeless, divine utterances, and with confidence that more attention to the human context of the Book of Mormon can greatly enrich our appreciation of its content” (p. 254). This analysis, as a supplement to rather than a substitute for a more straightforward doctrinal approach, is tremendously enlightening. Having devoted most of his attention to Jacob, Dr. Tanner concludes: “Jacob is a poet-prophet whose voice we should learn to recognize, and to love” (p. 268). I’m convinced.

Jacob’s antagonist, Sherem the anti-Christ, is the focal point of Robert L. Millet’s definitive essay. President Benson has said that the Book of Mormon brings men to Christ in at least two ways: by telling plainly of Christ and his gospel, and by exposing the enemies of Christ. Dr. Millet examines Sherem as an archetypal anti-Christ, the sort of enemy of Christ which the Book of Mormon aims to expose. It becomes very clear why Jacob thought it important to add the account of the episode of Sherem to the Nephite record after apparently having concluded his writings in the previous chapter.

The two pieces centered around Jacob’s son Enos provide excellent examples of how much can be gleaned from thoughtful consideration of a short scriptural passage. The emphasis of “Enos: His Mission and His Legacy,” by Dennis L. Largey, is on Enos’s “brief but vital” doctrinal contribution to the Book of Mormon, especially regarding the nature and process of repentance and the fruits of conversion. Enos’s story is also the model for David R. Seely’s exploration of the concept of the “words . . . concerning eternal life” (Enos 1:3) and their role in the conversion process, in which the author mines a wealth of

2 As far as I am aware—it is difficult to imagine a more thorough treatment.
insight from the concise scriptural description of Enos’s experience.

Even Amaleki, the last of five writers of the short book of Omni and the last on the small plates of Nephi, turns out to be worthy of an entire essay. Amaleki’s time, of course, was a key juncture in the history of the Book of Mormon peoples; Gary R. Whiting offers a treatment of Amaleki’s account of the three groups of people who come together here, aided by what we know of the subsequent history from the book of Mosiah. Amaleki himself turns out to be a substantially more important figure than I had ever considered, and his testimony of Christ, as set forth by Mr. Whiting, only adds to his stature.

Beyond its intrinsic value, this paper is interesting because of the author’s background. Even without the identification of Mr. Whiting as “an elder in the RLDS Church,” attentive readers might find slightly jarring one or two unfamiliar locutions and a faint echo of evangelical Christianity in the description of Amaleki’s testimony of Christ. How much of that (if any) is attributable to Mr. Whiting’s RLDS orientation, I cannot say. But the discussion is doctrinally sound as far as it goes, save for the attempt to make the joining of the Nephtes to the Mulekites into a fulfillment of the Ezekiel 37 prophecy about the joining of the sticks of Joseph and Judah.

The other broad category into which a number of essays may be grouped is doctrinal. Several of these pieces are outstanding, beginning with Lauri Hlavaty’s detailed, readable explication of the “religion of Moses.” The religion of Moses (a term not found in the scriptures) is defined as “the gospel as it was taught by Moses to his rebellious followers” (p. 104), encompassing the law of Moses but also including “all doctrines, beliefs, covenants, sacrifices, and rituals” (p. 104) associated with Moses’ teaching. Another way to look at it is as “the gospel without the Melchizedek Priesthood” (p. 104) but including some extra carnal commandments that we usually associate with the law of Moses. Ms. Hlavaty, a graduate student in Ancient Studies at the University of Chicago, aims to reconstruct the spiritual environment of Bible (Old and New Testament) times as well as the Book of Mormon, in order that we may read the scriptures “as though we stood in place of those who wrote them” (p. 103), as Brigham Young enjoined. Particularly enlightening is her discussion of how the Book of Mormon (especially through the words of Nephi, Jacob, and
Abinadi) illuminates the religion of Moses, which is shown to be much more Christ-centered than we might suspect.

Also excellent is Rodney Turner’s “Marriage and Morality in the Book of Mormon,” an essay in which Jacob 2 is used as a springboard. The doctrinal discussion is for the most part familiar; what is striking is the urgency with which the message is delivered. Dr. Turner writes in his introduction: “Certainly no generation since the Flood [!] has had a greater need for one particular message in [the Book of Mormon]: the vital importance of personal morality both before and during marriage. President Benson has said, ‘The plaguing sin of this generation is sexual immorality’ ” (p. 271). Dr. Turner examines sexual sin in the context of what Alma characterized as the three most abominable sins (Alma 39:5), all of which share a common element described by the author as violating “the principle of life” (p. 278). There is a brief, cogent discussion of the first two, sin against the Holy Ghost and murder, but the focus is on unchastity, especially adultery and its effect on marriage:

Unchastity, in any of its expressions, is the third greatest sin because of the spiritual devastation it produces: alienation from the Spirit, the clouding of one’s own spiritual identity and sense of worth, the crippling contamination of those human relationships—marriage and parenthood—which the Lord designed to fulfill and perfect the soul (p. 278).

The piece concludes with an examination of the doctrine of plural marriage. Dr. Turner recounts what we know of polygny as practiced (with and without divine sanction) in Old Testament and Jaredite times and turns to its practice among the Nephites. He quotes and discusses Jacob’s denunciation of the practice (Jacob 2:23-28) and continues with a wider treatment of the doctrine itself and a resolution of the apparent conflict between Jacob’s position and the defense of the doctrine by Joseph Smith and the revelations recorded in D&C 132.

Chauncey C. Riddle’s contribution is a thorough exploration of “Pride and Riches,” largely a sort of annotated explication, phrase by phrase, of what he aptly describes as “one

3 “Know ye not, my son, that these things [sexual sins] are an abomination in the sight of the Lord; yea, most abominable above all other sins save it be the shedding of innocent blood or denying the Holy Ghost?”
of the most memorable and striking passages" in the Book of Mormon, Jacob 2:12-21. Dr. Riddle also offers his reflections about what this passage means, or ought to mean, for us. I was hoping for some practical guidance here; having lived for the last decade in New York and Chicago, I have seen on an almost daily basis the most dramatic extremes of poverty and wealth, and I have never quite come to grips with what my personal response should be to the problems I see in the streets. Despite an attempt to provide a few concrete applications for the principles under review, Dr. Riddle is on the whole not concerned with practical matters. But his discussion of these crucial gospel concepts on a doctrinal level is deeply insightful, and the reader is amply rewarded for grappling with the author's slightly dry style.

One of the really original pieces in this collection (along with, notably, Ms. Hlavyt's and Dr. Tanner's) is Wilford M. Hess's "Botanical Comparisons in the Allegory of the Olive Tree." "From a botanical point of view," writes Dr. Hess, a botanist, "Jacob 5 in the Book of Mormon is one of the most interesting chapters in all scripture" (p. 87). Well, yes. How many other scriptural chapters are there which would even fit into this category? This is an important chapter, however, and if a nonspecialist comes away knowing more about olive trees and their cultivation than he might care to know, Dr. Hess's observations are nevertheless valuable for the clarification they offer of Zenos's allegory. The events described in the allegory are botanically accurate, it turns out, with one notable exception—wild branches will always remain genetically wild, and though the quality of their fruit may improve after being grafted to a tame tree, they will never produce tame fruit. "The allegory violates a botanical principle," writes Dr. Hess, "to teach a spiritual truth" (p. 96), one that would have been striking to anyone familiar with the cultivation of olives. The author unfortunately only hints at the possibility that Zenos may have

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4 My dilemma is neatly summarized in my observation of two people regularly to be seen outside my downtown New York office building—one an immigrant woman who sold hot dogs from a cart seven days a week, rain or shine, and the other an apparently able-bodied young man who often stood just a few yards away asking for change. My inclination, of course, was to give whatever I thought I could spare (that is an entirely different question . . .) to the woman (who would probably have taken offense), but I was never entirely comfortable with the sort of judgment that that required me to make of the panhandler.
intentionally violated that botanical principle in order to drive home the point to his audience. The paper concludes with a point-by-point interpretation of the allegory, for which the author credits Monte S. Nyman. Though this section is not original with Dr. Hess, it provides an instructive review in light of our new botanical knowledge of olive trees. This is precisely the kind of perspective we do not get from full-time teachers of religion, whose approach is different, and the inclusion of papers like this one is to be commended here and encouraged for future symposia.

As much historical as doctrinal, Richard O. Cowan’s “We Did Magnify Our Office unto the Lord” is a clear and comprehensive examination of church organization in the Book of Mormon, from the patriarchal family organization of Lehi’s time (paralleling that in the Old World from Adam through Moses) to the organization of a Quorum of Twelve Apostles in Third Nephi. It includes a description of the chapters in Moroni wherein the ecclesiastical procedures which had been taught by the Savior are set forth as a sort of “short handbook of instructions” and finishes with a look at the example of Jacob and Joseph as individual priesthood holders, the essay’s main connection to the subject matter of the collection. Joseph Fielding McConkie contributes an excellent doctrinal exposition of the wonderful fourth chapter of Jacob, of which the author says that if Joseph Smith had been permitted to translate only that small portion of the plates, “that chapter alone would be sufficient to justify the mission and ministry of Joseph Smith” (p. 157). “The Testimony of Christ through the Ages” surveys the scriptural support for and theological implications of the doctrinal pronouncements Jacob made in this significant chapter.

Two papers focus on the structure of the Book of Mormon as it is clarified by the Words of Mormon. Eldin Ricks offers a clear\(^5\) explanation of Mormon’s work of abridgment and the records he was working with. Cheryl Brown’s aim is much wider in her insightful “I Speak Somewhat Concerning That Which I Have Written.” Beginning with Mormon’s explanation (in the Words of Mormon) of what he is including in the record and why, Dr. Brown pursues a wide-ranging examination of why the Book of Mormon contains what it contains and omits

\(^5\) But quite basic—this piece will be of most value to beginning students of the Book of Mormon.
what it omits. Reasons for exclusion range from the practical (lack of space, difficulty of engraving, language problems, and economy—that is, some things were to be written elsewhere, and there was no need to repeat them)\(^6\) to the spiritual (preventing sorrow for the righteous and temptation for the wicked, trying the faith of readers—by, for example, including only “a lesser part of the things which he [Christ] taught the people,” 3 Nephi 26:8). Reasons for inclusion are equally various: certain writings were especially intended for particular future readers; obedience (Jacob wrote in obedience to Nephi’s command, Nephi in obedience to the Lord’s); to restore plain and precious parts of the gospel; to testify of Christ. Dr. Brown’s emphasis throughout is on the Lord’s controlling hand shaping the Book of Mormon.

“Prophetic Decree and Ancient Histories Tell the Story of America,” by Clark V. Johnson, is a fascinating (if awkwardly titled) examination, from the perspective of history and prophecy, of the *Popol Vuh*, the “Sacred” or “National Book” of the Quiché Indians of southern Guatemala and the most important of the few works of Mayan literature which survived the Spanish conquest of Central America. The *Popol Vuh* is a compilation of Quiché religious and historical traditions, written by a member of the tribe shortly after the 1524 takeover of Guatemala by the Spaniards. It was translated into Spanish in the early eighteenth century, after which the original manuscript was lost. The translation was first published in 1857 in Vienna, and no English translation from the Spanish appeared until 1950 (so it is unlikely Joseph Smith could have known of the *Popol Vuh*).

The author does not set out to demonstrate every parallel between the *Popol Vuh* and the Book of Mormon, but he pays close attention to striking similarities between the two works in three specific areas: the origin of the ancient Americans (both works describe three groups of ancient migrants who came by boat from the east; Dr. Johnson is careful to note that the Book

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\(^6\) An illustrative example comes from 1 Nephi 13-15, the account of Nephi’s vision. Nephi was told not to write some of what he had seen, “for the Lord has ordained the apostle of the lamb of God that he should write [them]” (1 Nephi 14:15). The apostle John was shown the same vision and recorded it in greater detail in the Revelation of John. The Lord knew we would have the Bible and had Nephi record only that which would clarify John’s Revelation—a valid example of the fulfillment of Ezekiel 37:17.
of Mormon does not purport to explain the origin of all early Americans); the gods worshipped by those early inhabitants; and their belief in the Creation, the Fall, and the Flood. The essay notes differences as well as similarities—for example, the *Popol Vuh* was written late, largely the product of centuries-old oral traditions, whereas the Book of Mormon was written by the ancients themselves. This is a well-researched and well-written piece, demonstrating again the value of the perspective of secular scholarship in expanding our appreciation of the scriptures, though its connection to the Book of Mormon chapters on which this collection focuses is tenuous.

Less compelling, ultimately, is the contribution of Monte S. Nyman, one of the editors of this series, entitled “To Learn with Joy: Sacred Preaching, Great Revelation, Prophesying.” From its position (chapter 11 of 17), it does not seem to be meant as an introduction to the collection, although perhaps it might have been, for it begins promisingly enough with a hint about why the editors gave this volume the subtitle “To Learn with Joy.” The reference is Jacob 4:3, where Jacob expresses his hope that his posterity would “receive [the records of their fathers] with thankful hearts, and look upon them that they might learn with joy and not with sorrow, neither with contempt, concerning their first parents.” Jacob’s concern that his descendants learn from his writings is reflected in Joseph Smith’s rhetorical question, quoted by Dr. Nyman, to the Twelve in his day: “Why will not men learn wisdom by precept at this late age of the world, when we have such a cloud of witnesses and examples before us, and not be obliged to learn by sad experience everything we know?”76 “As believers in the Book of Mormon,” the author writes, “we should learn with joy from Jacob’s admonitions and not from the sorrow of our own experiences” (p. 194). A nice point—one that could serve as a worthwhile theme for the entire volume.

Those observations are by way of introduction; the emphasis of the essay is on Nephi’s instruction to Jacob that he write only the “most precious” things upon the small plates and that he “should not touch, save it were lightly, concerning the history of this people” (Jacob 1:2) in his writings. Instead, Jacob and his successors were to concentrate on sacred preaching, great revelations, and prophesyings (Jacob 1:4).

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Unfortunately, rather than discussing any of the items in those categories that were recorded on the small plates, or even presenting the main ideas in outline form, Dr. Nyman is content simply to give a schematic overview of the books from the small plates in light of the three categories. An example: "The book of 2 Nephi is even more spiritually oriented than 1 Nephi. Only one of its 64 pages and 29 of its 749 verses are historical. There are five incidents of preaching, eight great revelations, and five sections of prophesying" (p. 199). And so it goes for each book, so that at the end all we have is a mathematical demonstration that Nephi was more concerned in the small plates with spiritual matters and that Jacob and the other writers followed Nephi's instruction to touch only lightly on history, along with the author's lists of which sections of each book fit under the respective headings of sacred preaching, great revelation, and prophesying.

More troubling still is the conclusion. Despite protestations that the "light touch of history is not to be interpreted as a declaration that history is unimportant" (p. 193) and that the author still appreciates discussions about literary styles and external evidences, Dr. Nyman seems to suggest that we should approach not only the books from the small plates but the Book of Mormon as a whole from the same point of view. He makes the dubious assertion that the remainder of the Book of Mormon follows the pattern of the small plates, de-emphasizing nonspiritual matters, and asks,

Since this was the pattern set for writing on the Nephite record, should it not also be our pattern for studying, teaching, and applying its precepts to our lives, and to the lives of those whom we teach? Should we not learn and teach what the Book of Mormon itself teaches concerning the sacred preaching, the great revelations, and prophecies rather than what others have said about its contents, literary styles, or external evidences? (p. 207)

If anyone had suggested that other approaches should be followed to the exclusion of careful study of the scriptural text itself, Dr. Nyman would have a point. If we have to choose one approach only, of course we would be foolish to ignore the Book of Mormon itself in favor of external matters. Luckily, we do not have to make such a choice; and we are fortunate that Dr.
Nyman's suggestion was not the controlling editorial policy for this fine and varied collection of essays.