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Abstract Review of *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word* (1992), edited by Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr.

Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: Alma, The Testimony of the Word*. Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1992. viii + 344 pp., with subject and scripture indexes. \$11.95.

Reviewed by Brian M. Hauglid

This volume contains nineteen papers delivered at the Sixth Annual Book of Mormon Symposium in 1991. The contributors include: Dean L. Larsen, Robert L. Millet, K. Douglas Bassett, S. Kent Brown, C. Max Caldwell, Richard O. Cowan, H. Dean Garrett, Gerald Hansen, Jr., Gerald N. Lund, Robert J. Matthews, Monte S. Nyman, Donald W. Parry, Robert E. Parsons, H. Donl Peterson, Rex C. Reeve, Jr., Elaine Shaw Sorenson, Thomas R. Valletta, Clyde J. Williams, and Fred E. Woods.

Elder Dean L. Larsen, a member of the Presidency of the Seventy, begins this work with an address entitled "Likening the Scriptures unto Us." Elder Larsen instructs us that with Book of Mormon history, particularly Alma's account, "we may be able to predict with some degree of accuracy the consequences of human behavior in our day. We can also gain vital insight into how we may continue to merit the Lord's blessings and thus avoid the calamities that so often befell these ancient people" (pp. 1-2). He then draws significant parallels between ancient Nephite problems that brought down their civilization and very similar problems that exist today. His is a positive message underscored with firm warnings to keep our covenants. Appropriately, Elder Larsen points out that although we have been promised that a complete apostasy will not occur in our dispensation, because of the conditions of our day individuals may stumble if they are not rooted in the gospel. This address should be carefully studied and applied.

Most of the remaining papers represent well-oiled methods of scriptural elucidation established over many years. However, there are a few papers that provide a fresh, insightful, and original approach to the book of Alma. While contemplating how to review this volume, I was reminded of Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" in which he speaks of a divergence of two roads "in a yellow wood." The traveler took the one "having perhaps the better claim" though both were worn "about the same. . . . I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference." Traditional Latter-day Saint scripture scholarship

is easily identifiable and, in most instances, interesting and sometimes even intellectually stimulating; however, rarely does it have a newness or originality that inspires one to a higher level of commitment and dedication which makes a real “difference” in one’s life.¹ Some Latter-day Saint scholarship seems to be written in a vacuum in which a chosen few can communicate with each other on a level most Latter-day Saints will never attain. This is not to mean that there is no viable use for good scholarship in the Church. On the contrary, there is a need for further study in many areas of the gospel that can be dealt with at a scholarly level. Occasionally, however, there is a tendency to lose touch with the fundamental truths in order to emphasize the details of fringe concepts.

This volume is representative of two roads of Latter-day Saint scripture scholarship diverging. I will here focus on those papers which impressed me as taking the road “less travelled by” and thereby having “made all the difference” in rounding out this work and making it a useful and inspiring contribution to the study of the Book of Alma.

In his paper, entitled “The Probationary Nature of Mortality,” Robert J. Matthews argues that Alma’s discourse in chapter 12 “emphasizes the doctrine of life as a probationary state, a time of imperfect knowledge, when we learn the gospel by degrees and show our commitment to it by righteous living” (p. 47). Matthews adds many of his own insights and brings light to significant verses as he unveils Alma’s deep spiritual understanding of man’s condition in mortality. For instance, Zeezrom desired to know more about the doctrine of the resurrection, but Alma explained that the mysteries can only be revealed to those who are spiritually ready to receive them. Matthews connects this principle in Alma 12:9–12 to Jesus’ teaching in parables, saying, “make no mistake about it, Jesus used parables to conceal the mysteries of the kingdom from the unworthy and the spiritually careless” (p. 50). Later, Matthews discusses the need of members to seek the mysteries of the kingdom, concluding that “if we do not have the deeper concepts of the gospel, it may be that we ourselves are to blame for our lack of desire and our unpreparedness” (p. 52).

¹ Joseph Smith also felt that there was validity in approaching subjects in original ways. In 1844 he remarked, “It has always been my province to dig up hidden mysteries—new things—for my hearers”; *TPJS*, 364.

One of the most original and significant papers is "The Holy Order of God" by Robert L. Millet. The author demonstrates a thorough understanding of the priesthood, recognizing that Alma's discussion in Alma 13 "is a deep and ponderous and insightful prophetic declaration as to how . . . the people of God may be sanctified from sin and enjoy the 'words of eternal life' in this mortal sphere, all in preparation for eternal life with God and holy beings hereafter (see Moses 6:59)." Millet brings together pertinent verses from Alma 13 and quotes from various prophets and apostles to illustrate the interrelationship of doctrines such as entering into the rest of the Lord, becoming a member of the Church of the Firstborn, and receiving the fullness of the priesthood. He explores the type of priesthood (Levitical, Aaronic, and Melchizedek) the Nephites held, the principle of foreordination, and Melchizedek as a scriptural prototype. To those who have a desire to understand a deeper dimension of the priesthood, and even the temple ordinances, this discussion will be well worth the effort of careful study. At the conclusion of the paper, Millet notes that "what was true for the Former-day Saints is true for the Latter-day Saints. What inspired and motivated them can and should entice us to continued fidelity and devotion" (p. 86).

Matthews and Millet, like many Latter-day Saint scholars, use the term *mysteries* liberally throughout their discussions. There is, perhaps, a need to make some delineations to achieve more accuracy when dealing with the term *mysteries*, a word that sometimes causes confusion in light of counsel received by church authorities. For example, Elder Bruce R. McConkie quoted D&C 88:77-78 and made an important observation about verse 78, "Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand." Elder McConkie stated that the "last modifying phrase indicates that we are to leave the mysteries alone. There are some things that are not given us in clarity, and, as of now, do not need to be fully comprehended in order to work out our salvation."² It is interesting to note that footnote b for Alma 12:9 refers the reader to the Topical Guide under "Mysteries of Godliness." A closer

² Bruce R. McConkie, "The Teacher's Divine Commission," in Mark L. McConkie, ed., *Doctrines of the Restoration: Sermons and Writings of Bruce R. McConkie* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 324.

look at the terms *mysterios* and *mysterios of godliness* reveals an important distinction between the two. This difference is noted by Truman Madsen:

Oral tradition attributes another wise maxim to the Prophet: “Don’t climb to the extreme branches of the tree, for there is danger of falling: cling close to the trunk.” One translation: Avoid the vain *mysterios* and the discussion of them. Avoid imaginative speculation. But Joseph Smith, one must quickly add, made a distinction between the *mysterios* of godliness—that is, the deeper things that can only be known by revelation to the soul on the how of a godly life—and the speculative pursuit of matters that are without profit to the soul.³

With a more accurate definition of these terms it can be seen that “the vain *mysterios* are those of which we know nothing and need not know anything—whether, for example, the pearly gates swing or roll, or what is the ultimate destiny of the son of perdition”;⁴ the *mysterios* of godliness are those things of which we must know in order to secure exaltation. Of these Joseph Smith remarked, “I advise all to go on to perfection and search deeper and deeper into the *mysterios* of godliness.”⁵ Although the scriptures sometimes use these terms interchangeably, and, in most cases, they mean *mysterios* of godliness, the prophets have made this significant distinction between the two words to be more applicable to our day, that is, to search the *mysterios* of godliness and avoid the vain *mysterios*. I would like to see Latter-day Saint scholars be more specific in their use of the term.

Another unique paper is Gerald Lund’s study of Korihor in “An Anti-Christ in the Book of Mormon—The Face May Be Strange, but the Voice Is Familiar.” This is the best examination of Alma 30 I have seen. Lund argues that Korihor’s method of determining what is true connotes a philosophical approach and that it has parallels to modern metaphysics, axiology, epistemology and such modern *isms* as authoritarianism, rationalism, and pragmatism. It would also have been interesting to look at

³ Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1989), 104–5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁵ *TPJS*, 364.

Korihor's philosophy in terms of modern relativism. The maxim that "truth is relative" sounds much like Korihor's statement that "whatsoever a man did was no crime" (Alma 30:17). However, Lund carefully shows the brilliance of Alma's logic and his spiritual insights that thwart Korihor. In addition, several charts aid in seeing both Korihor's and Alma's methodologies.

Monte S. Nyman, in his paper "The State of the Soul Between Death and the Resurrection," has brought together a variety of teachings on the spirit world which I found not only enjoyable, but also highly instructive. Using Alma 40, Nyman explores such questions as: "What is the spirit world? Where is it? Are there divisions in the spirit world? Who are the righteous spirits? Who are the wicked spirits? Is it possible for the wicked spirits to escape from their prison?" This focused paper cites passages of scripture and interesting quotes from general authorities and others to form a comprehensive picture of the spirit world.

In "Teaching in Black and White: Antithetic Parallel Structure in the Book of Alma, Its Form and Function," Donald W. Parry notes that antithetical parallelism "is characterized by an opposition of thoughts, or an antithesis between two or more contiguous lines" (p. 282). Parry discusses several examples of this parallelism from verses in the book of Alma. This paper is original in that it illuminates yet another dimension to the beautiful poetic make-up of the Book of Mormon. Parry is brief, demonstrating a remarkable ability to present complex ideas with a clarity that enables one to understand and grasp the concepts quickly.

The majority of the other papers are well written and interesting, if a bit less original. A couple are either too long or are pedantic in nature. Fred Wood's paper, in particular, was seriously marred by grammatical and typographical errors.

All the papers in this volume can add to our understanding of the book of Alma, making this a useful work. Several, however, represent "the road less taken," offering refreshing, original insights which can make "all the difference" in the lives of serious readers.