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- Author** Jenny Webb
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John Christopher Thomas. *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction*. Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2016.

Reviewed by Jenny Webb

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JOHN CHRISTOPHER THOMAS begins *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* by noting several somewhat random events in his life. He visits Temple Square while on a college choir tour, he has various conversations with missionaries, he enrolls in a graduate course on Mormon history as part of his advanced studies—gradually these events ultimately work their way together to form a narrative in which his interest in and study of Mormonism, and particularly the Book of Mormon, seem almost inevitable. And as I read my way through this work, I was continually impressed, and even moved, by the genuine open charity with which Thomas approaches the Book of Mormon. He is not afraid to be critical or ask questions, but his motivation in doing so consistently appears to come from an open curiosity and desire for dialogue. Over and over again, I was struck by the productive *readings* that emerged from this approach: Thomas sees the Book of Mormon foremost as a *book*, and as such, a text capable of being read. This may sound somewhat obvious—of course the Book of Mormon is a book!—but Thomas performs the work of literary reading in a way that results in an oddly familiar yet surprisingly, and productively, jarring orientation to the Book of Mormon and its theology, history, reception, and connections with Pentecostalism. The result is a sort of mapping of one individual’s various approaches to working with and reading the text that is both personal (these are the questions, thoughts, and approaches of a specific individual reading and writing from his own unique context) as well as universal (Thomas’s openness inherently invites others’ engagement and response to the Book of Mormon itself).

Interestingly, Thomas begins his approach through the question of *literary* structure. He wishes to “identify the overall structure of the

book by means of literary markers within the text itself” (p. 3), with “attention . . . given to textual indicators that serve to guide readers through the narrative” (p. 3). His approach allows him to discuss broad structural issues as well as to note structures specific to a discrete portion of the text. He glosses, probes, questions, and compares. He seeks clarity and precision, often running through various interpretive possibilities as plainly numbered alternatives. But what struck me with this approach was the way in which Thomas treats the Book of Mormon as a structural whole—that is, as a complete *narrative* project. For Thomas, the Book of Mormon is “one extended narrative” (p. 11), and this literary identification carries connotations of textually driven action, cause, and effect (e.g., “the narrative *implies*” [p. 232, emphasis mine]).

While others have certainly discussed the Book of Mormon as narrative, Thomas’s approach—one that prioritizes the narrative genre over others, including scripture—reads the text with a refreshing clarity of commitment: he is interested in how the narrative of the Book of Mormon *works*, and focusing on the literary functionality allows questions and conjectures on theology to emerge in such a way that their relationship to the literary or narrative aspects of the text is brought into a unique focus. As a result, I began to consider all sorts of questions and speculations:

- How does literary form produce, in a certain sense, the theological?
- What kinds of literary training actually facilitate productive theological readings? Any? Is there something inherently useful in a structuralist approach?
- How do the narrative structures and emphasis in the Book of Mormon affect Mormon theology?
- In the section on theology, Thomas uses narrative both as an illustration and as a claim—does narrative function in Mormonism as a sort of theological shorthand? If so, why narrative?
- Does a focus on the way the narrative shapes the text and thus the theology momentarily remove God from the text?

- What theological expectations do we Latter-day Saints hold of a narrative? Do we take it as seriously as we would, say, a sermon? A poem? An essay?
- Does narrative provide a secure ground from which to cultivate theology?
- If God has given us the Book of Mormon in the form of a narrative, what can we infer about God being someone who gives gifts like the convoluted narrative structure of the Book of Mormon?
- In other words, when we look at the Book of Mormon, do we see what we expect God to have given, or do we see what has actually been given?

For myself, at least, the questions brought about by Thomas's work helped me to recognize various lacunae in my thought processes in ways that I will continue to reflect upon for some time and in a variety of contexts.

But beyond the issues of literary structure that Thomas so ably investigates and raises, I was also struck by the conditions of Thomas himself as a reader: after so many responses to the Book of Mormon hinging on the text's historical validity in one way or another, Thomas separates questions of such validity from his underlying motivations to undertake this project. As Thomas himself put it, "It seems to me that whoever wrote the book or whatever the issues that explain its origins, there are any number of interesting and important issues that insiders and outsiders should be able to discuss about its structure, content, theology, reception, and relationship to other faith traditions without being derailed from the start by the divisive issue of origins" (pp. 445–46). This approach enacts charity through reading and interpretation; it is an approach we would do well to cultivate in our reading and interaction both within and without our faith tradition.

Taking Thomas's enacted charity as a model allows those who feel they have a proprietary relationship to the Book of Mormon, because of their own response of faith and conversion, to set aside these feelings of ownership. Enacting such charity can feel uncomfortable as

it is accompanied by the recognition that church membership does not bestow permission to control others' responses to the text. Rather, such enacted charity encourages and welcomes potentially discordant responses to the Book of Mormon because its aim is not to produce doctrine but rather to encourage interaction on any level. As an example of this approach, consider the potential outcomes of rethinking the way the Book of Mormon functions in narratives of conversion. As Latter-day Saints, we often focus on teaching friends and neighbors how to read the Book of Mormon so that it teaches Mormonism. We take the story of Nephi, for example, and direct the attention of our friends to the themes of obedience, prayer, and faith in explicative terminology that corresponds to our current doctrines and practices. But how would that story look if we were not focused on ensuring it was read in order to produce the "right" doctrinal lessons? What if instead our job as believers was simply to provide the opportunity for others to interact with the text? What if we had others reading from their own (uncorrelated) frameworks and our response was to listen? What if we listened not for what others got "right" but for what they actually said? The story of Nephi could, and does, I am convinced, look very different when it is removed from the space of the proprietary pedagogy it currently inhabits.

The question, then, is what do we gain as believers when we read the Book of Mormon narrative from that perspective, and is that gain worth what we could potentially lose by not engaging with secular responses? If the answer is, "I lose nothing," then we may have a problem: interpretive pride stifles not only the ability to continue to receive personal revelation (with its accompanying increase in faith, light, intelligence, etc.) but also ultimately denies the Book of Mormon's ability to function as a universal witness of the new covenant in Christ.¹

1. "The Book of Mormon is the sacred expression of Christ's great last covenant with mankind. It is a new covenant, a new testament from the New World to the entire world." Jeffrey R. Holland, "A Testimony, a Covenant, and a Witness," *Ensign*, October 2011, 80, emphasis added.

The underlying charity modeled through Thomas's approach also caused me to reflect on the way the Book of Mormon as a text works in the world. If we look at the work that the Book of Mormon, as a text, performs, it is a work of restoration—a rebuilding and refashioning of the contours of Christianity and of the world itself. But the world in which the Book of Mormon appeared was a world originally constructed and contoured through the Bible. In order for the Book of Mormon to work, then, it must first be read, and read consciously apart from its assumed biblical context. The history of the reception of the Book of Mormon parallels, in many ways, the reception of Christ's original teachings and parables: those receiving the word do not necessarily understand it or even know how to respond to that word, precisely because it is a new word working a new language, building up a new world.

So the question then becomes, why should we read the Book of Mormon like the Bible, when it is not doing the same work as the Bible? Two texts, two witnesses, in distinct performative spaces cannot be read as the same. The response to "A Bible, we have got a Bible, and we need no more Bible" (2 Nephi 29:6) can be flipped: we have a Bible, and from it, a certain world—a mode of understanding and receiving the world in which we live—is built out and established. But, as Thomas's approach brings out, we also have the Book of Mormon. And a proper response to the Book of Mormon allows it to perform its own unique, separate, and distinct work. We need to allow it to work not as another Bible but rather as a text that paradoxically builds a new world specifically through a process of restoration.

Restoration forms the underlying historical and theological impulses of the Book of Mormon as a text. Its own textual history and its appearance in nineteenth-century America is founded upon Joseph Smith's claims to be restoring the primitive church, yes, but as Thomas's approach here highlights, tying the concept of restoration solely to the origin of the book ultimately weakens its theological potential. When Thomas sets aside the question of origin in order to respond to the text as a narrative, he clears a space for a broadened understanding of the work of restoration within the Book of Mormon. What would a new

world, erected through a text thoroughly grounded in and committed to a theology of restoration, look like? Restoration is enacted on multiple levels throughout the Book of Mormon: personal conversions, journeys and their returns, reunited families, reestablished societies, and, of course, the resurrected Christ himself, restored from death, and his ministry. Restoration emerges as both intimate and universal. Significantly, a world built out from this broad conceptualization of restoration validates and provides space for potentially contradictory responses.

I should note that Thomas does not dismiss questions of cultural historical reception of the Book of Mormon in their entirety—origins are discussed, as are various models of reception history. But to Thomas, these questions do not obscure a reader's ability to interpret the text. Interestingly, the question that arises in the cultural and historical reception of the Book of Mormon is a topic taken up by the Book of Mormon itself on several occasions: it is a question of signs and particularly of how we receive and live with the signs that God is willing to give. As Mormons, how do we shift from reading the Book of Mormon as a functional sign of Joseph Smith's divine calling, or even of God, and instead allow the book room to do its own work? The clearing of its textual identity, structure, and function is an important step in this process: Mormons hold the Book of Mormon so close, but we grip it as a *sign*, and particularly as a sign of power. What happens if we let go? Opening the text to readings outside the cultural clutter of modern Mormonism is a crucial part of allowing the text to work on its own terms.

If we truly believe that President Benson's call to read the Book of Mormon was made in the prophetic mode,² then we recognize that it is a call made to the world, Mormons and non-Mormons alike. Put another way, by that same prophet: "I have a vision of flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon."³ Floodwaters do not distinguish between faithful and secular readers; they cover all alike. A thoughtful secular

2. See, for example, Ezra Taft Benson, "The Keystone of Our Religion," *Ensign*, November 1986, 4–7.

3. Ezra Taft Benson, "Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon," *Ensign*, November 1988, 4–6.

response to the Book of Mormon is a rare kind of grace. It provides a response from an otherwise unavailable space. It is, quite literally, a gift we cannot give ourselves. We are fortunate, then, and I am grateful, to have readings like Thomas's that enact both the charity and the clarity the text needs to do its own work.

Jenny Webb is a freelance editor and production manager living in Huntsville, Alabama. She has contributed to several volumes on scriptural theology, including *Reading Nephi Reading Isaiah*, which she co-edited along with Joseph M. Spencer. She is the current president of Mormon Scholars in the Humanities, and she also serves on the executive board for the Mormon Theology Seminar.

Brant A. Gardner. *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015.

Reviewed by Matthew Roper

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TRADITIONS OF THE FATHERS: THE BOOK OF MORMON AS HISTORY is Brant Gardner's most recent contribution to Book of Mormon studies. His earlier works include a six-volume series, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (2007), and *The Gift and Power of God: Translating the Book of Mormon* (2011). This most recent volume provides selections from his commentary as well as new material from his research subsequent to 2007. Readers of *Traditions of the Fathers* will still find those earlier volumes useful as they contain much research that is not included in this most recent work.

As signaled by the title, Gardner's work touches on some popular "traditions" or readings of the Book of Mormon that are or may be