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**Title** A Rare Gem

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**Abstract** Review of *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (2002), by Terryl L. Givens.

## A RARE GEM

John L. Sorenson

In the 170 years since the Book of Mormon was first published, five or six hundred books have been written that seriously discuss it. Perhaps half of those have tried to impeach the scripture. Many others are either essentially devotional in intent or are by authors not prepared to offer ideas or documentation of consequence. Only a few score may be said to be “scholarly,” and virtually all those appeared within the last quarter century. Terryl Givens’s *By the Hand of Mormon* is the only book that seeks to present “an overview of what this ‘golden bible’ has meant, and might conceivably yet come to mean, to its various readerships” (author’s note). Givens has produced the first serious survey of the place of the Book of Mormon in the history of American thought and culture.<sup>1</sup>

One’s pessimistic expectation for a work of such ambitious scope is that it will be constrained in its view of the history of culture, stronger

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1. The only previous treatment that even bows in that direction is Robert B. Downs’s short piece “Latter-day Saint: Joseph Smith’s *The Book of Mormon*,” in *Books That Changed America* (New York: Macmillan, 1970), 26–35.

Review of Terryl L. Givens. *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. ix + 320 pp., with notes and index. \$30.00.

on the author's opinions than on historical coverage, and stylistically arid. It is a tribute to the author's erudition, logical and literary skill, and good judgment that such fears prove unjustified in this case.

Givens provides a succinct summary of the historical and doctrinal content of the Book of Mormon, but he also makes a number of acute observations that those who have thought themselves familiar with the Nephite scripture will probably not have noticed for themselves. One is that the record was perceived by the early Saints, and still is today, primarily as a sign—that is, its significance lies in the fact of its miraculous origin more than in its content. The very concreteness of the golden plates and of the published translation shifted much of Joseph Smith's burden from having to prove himself a prophet to playing the role of fulfiller of ancient prophecy.

Givens sketches nineteenth- and twentieth-century efforts at identifying and communicating "external evidences" for the authenticity of Mormon's account. He then observes that it remains to be seen whether the kind of historical substantiation (not to say "proof") of the sort which scholars in the FARMS tradition have sometimes sought may lead to unanticipated effects on the understanding the Latter-day Saints have of the Book of Mormon.

The author discusses a wide range of theories about the book's origins that have been proposed by many critics since 1830: He deals with (1) questioners such as B. H. Roberts; (2) critics such as Alexander Campbell, Fawn Brodie, and Dan Vogel; and (3) theories of possible sources such as Solomon Spaulding's work, Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*, New England folk "magic," epilepsy, Joseph Smith as a genius/fraud, "automatic writing," the orthodox Latter-day Saint view, and Blake Ostler's notion that modern-day influences might have entered the ancient account because of the translation process. In every case Givens deftly and fairly summarizes the strengths and weaknesses of the position while also sketching responses orthodox LDS scholars and teachers have given to the challenges. The development of faithful-but-critical scholarship (which FARMS exemplifies) that has arisen especially in the last quarter century is also accurately pictured. This long view gives readers a valuable historical perspective

on the 170-year culture war over the source and significance of the Book of Mormon. Yet throughout Givens places these clashes in a context of general American, and even Western, intellectual and literary history.

Givens writes in language that is clear and attractive. To be sure, the presentation is more demanding of the reader than the language of a seminary manual, for example, but only occasionally does the author's expository style leave the serious reader struggling to penetrate the complexities at issue and wishing for simpler phrasing.

Surely one of the most impressive characteristics of this book is that it was published by Oxford University Press. Most mainstream publishers would shun the risk of issuing such bellwether writing, but Oxford's success with Givens's first book, *The Viper on the Hearth*,<sup>2</sup> apparently gave them enough confidence in his abilities and in the potential market to go ahead. From the point of view of the future of scholarship on the Mormons and the Book of Mormon, it is of great significance to have this major scholarly press publish this book. The important point is not that these auspices somehow polish the "image" of our people, but that we have arrived at a point where studies of high quality on this and other Mormon topics have a chance to be evaluated fairly and published if their quality is high enough.

In my opinion, the combination of Givens's careful scholarship, felicitous writing, and wide scope combine to make *By the Hand of Mormon* one of a handful of must-read, must-own volumes for serious students of the Book of Mormon.

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2. Terry L. Givens, *The Viper on the Hearth: Mormons, Myths, and the Construction of Heresy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

