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Abstract Review of *Refuting the Critics: Evidences of the Book of Mormon's Authenticity* (1993), by Michael T. Griffith.

Michael T. Griffith. *Refuting the Critics: Evidences of the Book of Mormon's Authenticity*. Bountiful: Horizon Publishers, 1993. 167 pp., with index. \$16.98.

One Response to a Singularly Worthless Genre

Reviewed by K. Codell Carter
and Christopher B Isaac

Michael T. Griffith's *Refuting the Critics: Evidences of the Book of Mormon's Authenticity* (Horizon Publishers, 1993) is an attempt to answer a range of more-or-less familiar arguments that have been raised again and again, typically by fundamentalist anti-Mormons. Seven of Griffith's eight chapters address specific issues: Can the Book of Mormon be correct in claiming that Jesus was born "at Jerusalem" (Alma 7:10) rather than "in Bethlehem"? Can a benevolent and just God have been responsible for all the destruction reported in 3 Nephi? Is the Book of Mormon "in serious conflict with what modern archaeology tells us about ancient America and the Near East?" (p. 39) Was Solomon Spaulding's 1812 novel *Manuscript Story* the source for the Book of Mormon? Can the Book of Mormon be ascribed to ideas that were simply "in the air" at the time it was produced? If there have been changes in punctuation and wording in the Book of Mormon, how can it be said to be a perfect book? Is the Book of Mormon consistent with what is now Mormon doctrine? In addition to chapters dealing with these questions, there is a brief introduction in which Griffith discusses, along familiar lines, issues such as the proper role of evidence in relation to personal revelation. The concluding chapter refers the reader to some of the better works supporting the Book of Mormon. There is also a good bibliography that includes works

for and against the Book of Mormon as well as several major background works on the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica that do not focus directly on the Book of Mormon.

As most readers will recognize, the arguments that Griffith addresses are not new; indeed, for the most part, they can be traced back a century or more. Moreover, as Griffith himself explains more than once, the arguments have all been totally refuted—demolished—again and again (see pp. 16, 39, 63, 87, etc.). So why the need for this book? The simple fact is that these arguments (like the quest for a perpetual motion machine), however inane, will not go away. They are motivated by the desire to undermine, at any price, belief in the Book of Mormon, and so, in the absence of any better possibility, the critics come back, again and again, to poor old Solomon Spaulding *et al.* For whom is Griffith's book intended? Griffith states that his book is intended to help those who desire to have a testimony receive one (p. 10). In other words, this book is not written to persuade the critics themselves, but to help those who are open to the possibility that the Book of Mormon may be true and who may be troubled by the arguments of the critics. For this audience, the book seems about right. It surveys a range of the more famous arguments that have been raised against the Book of Mormon; it is interesting, readable, well documented, and more-or-less persuasive; and where appropriate it refers the interested reader to more thorough discussions.

As relative neophytes to anti-Book-of-Mormon literature and as natural-born skeptics, our first reaction to Griffith's book was this: "Good grief! the criticisms Griffith considers can't possibly be the most telling that have been made by these critics against the Book of Mormon." In other words, we immediately suspected that Griffith must be misrepresenting the critics to whom he was responding. But as P. T. Barnum pointed out, try as you might, you simply cannot underestimate human nature: after tracking down several of the original critical essays to which Griffith responds, we reluctantly report that, in our opinion, they are even stupider than Griffith makes them out to be.

For example, in his fourth chapter, Griffith considers Vernal Holley's 1983 revival of the Spaulding theory. Holley's main argument goes like this: there are lots of similarities between the

Book of Mormon and Spaulding's *Manuscript Story*; therefore, the second was the source for the first. Griffith takes this argument seriously—as indeed he must given the nature of his project—but, we confess, it wasn't easy for us to do so. Griffith attacks some of Holley's parallels (pp. 67–71), he dismisses others as too general to be of significance (p. 65), and he points out differences between the Book of Mormon and Spaulding's novel (pp. 78–83). Griffith also discusses recent discoveries (e.g. chiasmus, wordprint patterns, and ancient Near Eastern name patterns) that—however one is to account for them—clearly show the Book of Mormon could never have been simply derived from Spaulding's story. But Griffith devotes less than half a page to what seems to us to be the most glaring hole in Holley's argument—namely (as Griffith puts it) “the total lack of any hard evidence connecting Joseph Smith with Spaulding's *Manuscript Story*” (p. 62). Regarding this connection, Holley himself says this:

The *possibility* exists that the Joseph Smith Sr. family members were not strangers to Solomon Spaulding. During the time the Smith family lived in Sharon, Vermont, Solomon Spaulding's uncle, Ruben Spaulding, also lived there, Ruben was a deacon in the Sharon Congregational Church for forty-two years and was the justice of the peace for fifty years. His children would have been contemporaries of Joseph Smith Sr.'s children: Alvin, Hyrum, and Joseph Smith Jr. It is also *likely* that, while attending nearby Dartmouth College, Solomon Spaulding made visits to his uncle Ruben's home in Sharon and became acquainted with the Joseph Smith family. (Holley, pp. 10–11; emphasis added)

What about the facts that (a) the Smith family had moved from Sharon several years before the Spaulding manuscript ever appeared, and (b) the Smiths finally left Vermont before Joseph was ten years old—given these facts, what kind of transcendental influences are we to envision from Holley's conjectures? But, disregarding all such details, the claim that there is a direct influence between two works can only be justified by positive evidence of an actual connection—not by conjectures, possibilities, and what (Holley happens to think) may or may not

be likely. In fact, in the absence of any evidence that Joseph had ever seen or even heard of Spaulding's manuscript, there is no point in discussing supposed parallels or differences between the Book of Mormon and the *Manuscript Story*.

Holley also tries to demonstrate a connection between the Book of Mormon and the *Manuscript Story* by citing phrases that can be found in both books. But as anyone with access to a computer-readable edition of the scriptures can easily determine, about eighty percent of the phrases that, according to Holley, Joseph could only have derived from Spaulding can also be found in the Bible. So these shared forms of speech provide no significant evidence that Joseph was drawing on Spaulding.

Having read both Holley and the Spaulding manuscript, our conclusion is that no one with honest intent could ever seriously maintain that the Book of Mormon was derived in any way from the *Manuscript Story*. Thus, we think Griffith is far too easy on Holley: Holley's pamphlet isn't just error ridden and weak—it's either an hilarious exercise in sarcasm (perhaps by a closet Mormon) or is nauseatingly dishonest. Unfortunately, the dullness of the text forces us to the second alternative.

Of course, Griffith (in contrast to his present reviewers) can't really tell it like it is and still satisfy conventional expectations about politeness and fair play. So his generously tender treatment of Holley *et al.* is excusable if not entirely warranted. But the fact is, the numerous refutations (many cited by Griffith) of these boring, warmed-over, semi-digested so-called criticisms are so much more conclusive, original, and just plain interesting than the criticisms themselves that any fair-minded and neutral observer must conclude (with a non-LDS friend of ours): "I may not believe in the Book of Mormon, but if anything were to make me do so, it would be these arguments against it" Unfortunately for those of us who value logic, these inane arguments seem destined to be endlessly recycled. As a survey of the traditional fundamentalist criticisms of the Book of Mormon, and for the audience for which it was intended, Griffith's little book may be useful in limiting the damage inflicted by the latest round of publications in this singularly worthless genre.