

Review of John Christopher Thomas, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction*, Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2016. 448 pp. + bibliography. \$24.95

In recent years the Book of Mormon has enjoyed increased attention from the scholarly world.¹ This is entirely welcomed by the Latter-day Saints, especially when such attention comes from a place of fairness

and open-mindedness. A praiseworthy example of how non-Mormon academics can fruitfully engage the Book of Mormon is John Cristopher Thomas's new volume *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction*.² Thomas is well-equipped to approach the Book of Mormon on a literary and theological angle. He is, after all, an erudite biblical scholar whose work on New Testament text and theology has appeared in such prestigious venues as Sheffield Academic Press, T&T Clark, Eerdmans, Mohr Siebeck, *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, and *Novum Testamentum*.³ He is also friendly toward the Latter-day Saints, both in his academic work and, I'm told, in his personal dealings with his Mormon acquaintances.⁴

A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon is a good faith attempt to open an ecumenical conversation on the religious traditions of Pentecostals and Latter-day Saints. It is free from the acrimony, spitefulness, and dishonesty that can often be seen in the shabby literature of the Christian counter-cult. For this Thomas is to be immediately commended. Unlike many of his predecessors who have provided commentary on Mormonism, Thomas performs actual scholarship, including a close and fair reading of the Book of Mormon. It is refreshing to have a non-Mormon engage the Book of Mormon in such a manner and an encouraging sign that the academic discourse surrounding the Nephite record is improving.

While there was much about *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* that I enjoyed, there were nevertheless more than a few aspects of the book I found rather weak. In this review I shall therefore proceed as follows: First, I provide an overview of the contents of the volume. [Page 293]Second, I highlight what I thought were some of the book's strengths. Third, I highlight what I thought were some of the book's weaknesses.

Contents

The structure of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* is rather straightforward. Thomas begins with a preface in which he describes the origins of his interest in Mormonism (xi-xv). His first encounter with the Book of Mormon was in 1974 "as a result of a visit to Temple Square in Salt Lake City, Utah" (xi). This evolved into lasting relationships with members of both The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints) that continue to this day.

Thomas introduces his book by explaining why he, a non-Mormon academic, would undertake this kind of project. "There are voices emerging from within the somewhat cloistered world of Mormon Studies that acknowledge the need of and issue an invitation for more scholarly work to be done by those from outside the tradition(s) in order to make Mormon Studies a more mainstream discipline," Thomas writes. This, he insists, will bring "new, and sometimes fresh" eyes to read "the texts and history sacred to the LDS family of churches" (2).

A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon can easily be situated in the Mormon Studies movement that has come to be distinguished by an avoidance of passing judgment on matters such as religious truth claims. "Despite the plethora of studies devoted to the Book of Mormon, few of them address many of the questions (at least under one cover) that I brought to this text," Thomas indicates. Whereas many of these works "are primarily interested in whether the Book of Mormon is

historically true or false, verifiable or not," *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* attempts merely to "acquaint its (mainly non-Mormon) readers with the [Book of Mormon] while offering engagements from a Pentecostal perspective" (2).

Since Thomas is primarily approaching the Book of Mormon from a theological and textual vantage point, he bypasses any initial narrative exposition on the origins of the Book of Mormon and jumps right into outlining the structure of the text (11-23). This includes an overview of the various books, authors, and redactors presented in the Book of Mormon as well as a timeline for Book of Mormon events (what Thomas calls "chronological indicators"). In following Grant Hardy, Thomas draws specific attention to the roles of Mormon and Moroni as the [Page 294]book's principle authors-redactors.⁵ Oddly, Thomas does not talk much at all about Nephi's role as the abridger of his father Lehi's text and the author of his own record. This is a curious oversight but doesn't really detract too much from Thomas's overall presentation.

Immediately after this quick rundown on the structure of the Book of Mormon, Thomas launches into an extended look at its contents. This includes a section of roughly 160 pages that breaks down the individual books of the Book of Mormon into individual subdivisions (29-187). This is done, Thomas informs his readers, "to acquaint readers with the book's basic story line as well as identify the literary markers around which the individual books are structured." In short, with this section Thomas wishes "to approach the text on its own terms, allowing its own narrative structure to emerge in order to inform the readers" (27).

After providing his readers with a respectable look at the structure and content of the Book of Mormon, Thomas goes on to approach the text's theology. This takes up roughly the next 100 pages of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* and includes a look at such theological topics as the Godhead, soteriology, ecclesiology, angelology, eschatology, and "a few other matters" such as women in the Book of Mormon (193-291). Obviously, Thomas approaches these topics from his Pentecostal background and later specifically offers a comparison between Pentecostal theology and the Book of Mormon (351-87). Thomas's investigation uncovers what he sees are "points of surprising overlap" between Pentecostal thought and the Book of Mormon while also admitting "significant differences." Ultimately, Thomas hopes to "underscore such similarities and dissimilarities, perhaps serving as a basis for future conversations between Pentecostalism and those for whom the Book of Mormon functions as Scripture" (387).

Part four of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* is a valuable look at the reception history of the Book of Mormon (297-344). "Reception history as a discipline ... does not focus so much on whether this or that individual or group has correctly interpreted a given text ... but rather is concerned to trace the impact of that text throughout history without judgment" (295). The Book of Mormon in particular "has had an incredible history of reception, ranging from intended to unintended effects." From art and music inspired by the Book of Mormon, recasts of the book as scripture in various communities, and even to the book's role in influencing the "disastrous interpretations" of Ron and Dan Lafferty (339-42), the Book of Mormon's reception, Thomas insists, testifies "to [Page 295][its] powerful influence" (345). Although irksome to many Latter-day Saints, the popular musical *The Book of Mormon* is one cultural artifact that can be situated in this reception history (324-28).

The last two parts of the book cover more reception history ("Pentecostalism and the Book of Mormon," 351-87) and a discussion on Book of Mormon origins, including a look at academic controversies surrounding such ("Book of Mormon Origins," 393-443). Thomas's analysis of how Pentecostals have historically interacted with the Book of Mormon as well as his own personal engagement from the perspective of his Pentecostal faith are especially illuminating. Although Pentecostals have historically opposed Mormon claims to new revelation and living prophets,

Thomas is careful to eschew any polemics and offers a fair assessment for the sake of maintaining “future conversations between Pentecostalism and those for whom the Book of Mormon functions as Scripture” (387).

Strengths

The most obvious strength of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* is its thoroughness. Thomas has clearly taken the time not just to read but to try to understand the Book of Mormon’s narrative and teachings. He spends almost 200 pages structuring the Book of Mormon and synthesizing its narrative. The level of patience and care Thomas has taken with the Book of Mormon is apparent and easily establishes his credibility as a commentator on the text. For instance, I was appreciative of Thomas’s observation (31) that 1 Nephi can be structured into three parts: the prologue involving Lehi and his sons (1 Nephi 1–9), Nephi’s endowment of spiritual power (1 Nephi 10–14), and Nephi assuming leadership over the group (1 Nephi 15–22).

Thomas’s reception history of the Book of Mormon is also insightful and engaging. Instead of focusing on just the dominant branch of Mormonism headquartered in Salt Lake City, Thomas pays attention to the Book of Mormon’s reception in other branches as well, including the Community of Christ and smaller splinter groups (297–310). This wider scope invites a stronger ecumenical emphasis that seeks to bridge the various Mormon denominations and find common ground.

Perhaps my favorite part of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* is, not surprisingly, where the Pentecostal Thomas deliberately reads the text through a Pentecostal lens (351–87). This unique contribution by Thomas stands out as the real focal point of his treatment. It reveals his willingness to put aside the old sectarian debates and instead in a spirit [Page 296]of comradery look for ways that Latter-day Saints and Pentecostals might better appreciate what they share in common. For instance, Thomas points to the Book of Mormon’s insistence that those who wish to follow Christ must be baptized both by water and by fire (2 Nephi 31:13–14, 17). He compares this to the concept of spirit baptism in the Pentecostal tradition (377–79), and concludes that the two find overlap.

So there was plenty in *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* that I thought was quite good. That being said, I think it’s important to highlight a few areas where I felt Thomas was at his weakest.

Weaknesses

Thomas is not explicitly hostile towards Joseph Smith’s account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Polemicists eager to get their hands on anti-Mormon fodder will have to look elsewhere, as Thomas does not indulge in any of the often offensively petulant antics of many sectarian critics of the faith of the Latter-day Saints. In the spirit of objectivity and fairness he does, however, devote much attention to what he calls “complications to the standard story” (401). Here Thomas is at his weakest, as he does a decent job summarizing the objections to the “standard story” without giving the responses to these complications a fair shake. I do not detect any overt malice on Thomas’s part, however. I suspect it is perhaps a matter of Thomas’s not being completely aware of the scholarship that has been produced in defense of the Book of Mormon, with perhaps an understandable non-Mormon bias influencing how much time and attention he allots to the two sides of this issue.

This is most easily discerned with a quick glance at Thomas’s bibliography. Whereas the work of Fawn Brodie,⁶ Dan Vogel,⁷ Grant Palmer,⁸ Michael Coe,⁹ Thomas Murphy,¹⁰ and Jerald and Sandra Tanner¹¹ [Page 297]are all featured in the bibliography and footnotes, hardly anything appears from scholars who have responded to these and other writers who have passed negative judgment on the Book of Mormon’s historicity. John Welch and John Sorenson find themselves in

Thomas's book but not their strongest or most relevant works.¹² Sorenson's work blasting amateurish attempts to find archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon is quoted by Thomas, for instance,¹³ but not his seminal *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, nor his magnum opus *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*.¹⁴ Amazingly, the work of major Book of Mormon scholars such as Hugh Nibley and Royal Skousen is missing altogether from Thomas's treatment.¹⁵

Take Thomas's treatment of the DNA issue as a case study. He skips through the issue in little over a page and a half (418-20). "Just as with the archaeological attempts to vindicate the Book of Mormon," Thomas writes, "the DNA explorations were terribly disappointing to those" who sought to find a genetic link between modern Native Americans and Middle Eastern populations (419). Thomas then immediately proceeds to quote the damning judgments of Thomas W. Murphy and Simon Southerton on this matter. As a gesture towards the apologetic response to this, Thomas does briefly summarize Terryl Givens (one of the few believing scholars he bothers to quote at all in this section¹⁶) thus: [Page 298]"The disappointing nature of the results of such DNA testing has resulted in a tendency among some LDS readers to devalue the importance of such testing and even to dismiss the possibility, suggesting that such testing is virtually impossible to carry out" (419).¹⁷ Thomas does not give even a brief mention to the work of Latter-day Saint geneticists such as Ugo Perego, John Butler, Michael F. Whiting, and David A. McClellan responding to the criticisms leveled by Southerton and Murphy.¹⁸

Besides summarizing a number of issues surrounding Book of Mormon historicity and translation, Thomas also devotes attention to other Joseph Smith translation projects that he thinks likewise complicate the "standard story." Once again, though, all Thomas really accomplishes is to give a megaphone to critics of Mormonism while essentially ignoring those who have spoken in Joseph Smith's defense. Thomas thus wades into the issues surrounding the Book of Abraham and the Joseph Smith Papyri (403-5). After summarizing the controversy, Thomas simply concludes with a quotation from Richard Bushman to the effect that some Mormons have suffered a faith crisis because of this issue,¹⁹ topped off with a citation to Robert Ritner, a vocal antagonist of Joseph Smith.²⁰ *Not once* in this section does Thomas even mention [Page 299]in passing the work of Hugh Nibley,²¹ John Gee,²² Kerry Muhlestein,²³ Brian Hauglid,²⁴ and others who have written on the Book of Abraham from a faithful perspective. Reading Thomas's treatment, it's as if an apologetic response to the Book of Abraham controversy from believing Latter-day Saint scholars doesn't even exist!

There are many more problematic aspects of this part of the book that I could talk about, but these few examples should suffice. This section of *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* was completely disappointing. So disappointing, in fact, that I'm tempted to advise readers to skip it altogether. To be fair, Thomas does acknowledge up front that it is not his intention once and for all to settle the matter of Book of Mormon historicity. Nor, as I mentioned, is he coming from a place of malice. "As any one familiar with the literature knows, this chapter merely scratches the surface of this issue," Thomas admits. "It should also be observed that not all of these complications are of equal weight nor are they equally problematic for the standard story of origins" (429-30). I thus was not at all expecting Thomas to act as some sort of final arbiter on the issue of Book of Mormon historicity, as he specifically disclaimed such a position himself (430).

Also to be fair to Thomas, he does give a cursory plug for the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies after describing issues facing the Book of Mormon's historicity (431-34). I suppose, then, that his section detailing the "complications to the standard story" is meant to be something of a legal brief and not so much a discussion of both sides of the issue. Nevertheless, I still would like to have seen Thomas give more attention to the Mormon responses to these [Page 300]complications, if only to maintain the spirit of fairness he had cultivated throughout the rest of

his book. After all, Thomas had handled the Book of Mormon in such a relatively intelligent and respectful manner for a non-Mormon that I was hoping his discussion of historicity would be as engaging and evenhanded as it had heretofore been for the rest of the Book of Mormon. I was, however, greatly disappointed in this regard.

Conclusion

My issues with the book notwithstanding, I would still recommend *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon*. The book is an encouraging sign of wider Book of Mormon readership and broader participation in the scholarly discussion. Whatever one ultimately thinks of the quality of Thomas's contribution, *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon* deserves credit at least in these two regards. Thomas has also set an excellent example of how non-Mormon Christians should seriously interact with the Book of Mormon from the perspective of their own faith tradition. Hopefully we will soon see more titles such as *A Catholic Reads the Book of Mormon* or *An Episcopalian Reads the Book of Mormon* and fewer titles such as *Behind the Mask of Mormonism: From Its Early Schemes to Its Modern Deceptions* or *Unveiling Grace: The Story of How We Found Our Way out of the Mormon Church* from Christian authors.²⁵

Thomas set out to "acquaint readers for whom [the Book of Mormon] does not function as Scripture with the book, readers who desire to know more about the book but prefer an approach that is not overly apologetic for or against the book and its claims." He also had the goal to help readers "for whom the book functions as Scripture ... gain some insight into the book they treasure, insights that result from a reading that comes outside their tradition" (448). Even with some weaknesses in mind, I think Thomas largely succeeded in this laudable endeavor.[Page 301]

1. A survey of recent publications from non-Mormon academic institutions clearly reveals this. See for instance Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Grant Hardy, ed., *The Book of Mormon: A Reader's Edition* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); Joseph Smith, Jr., trans., *The Book of Mormon*, ed. Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp (New York: Penguin Books, 2008); Terryl L. Givens, "'Common-Sense' Meets the Book of Mormon: Source, Substance, and Prophetic Disruption," in *Revisiting Thomas O'Dea's The Mormons: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Cardell K. Jacobson, John P. Hoffman, and Tim B. Heaton (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008), 79-98; *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Margaret Barker and Kevin Christensen, "Seeking the Face of the Lord: Joseph Smith and the First Temple Tradition," in *Joseph Smith Jr.: Reappraisals after Two Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143-72; Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); John A. Tvedtnes, "Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, 4 vols., ed. Geoffrey Khan (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), 195-96; "Names of People: Book of Mormon," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, 787-88; Noel B. Reynolds, "The Gospel According to Mormon," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 68, no. 2 (2015): 218-34; Grant Hardy, "The Book of Mormon," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mormonism*, ed. Terryl L. Givens and Philip L. Barlow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 134-48.

2. *A Pentecostal Reads the Book of Mormon: A Literary and Theological Introduction* (Cleveland, TN: CPT Press, 2016). Subsequent citations of this book will appear in parentheses in the body of this

review.

3. Thomas's CV is available online at

<http://www.itpbucuresti.ro/wp-content/uploads/CV-C-Thomas.pdf>.

4. See John Christopher Thomas, "Book of Mormon Pneumatology," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 217-30. The Neal A. Maxwell Institute hosted Thomas last Fall as he lectured on his work on the Book of Mormon at Brigham Young University. See "'The Book of Mormon Meets Pentecostals' by Christopher Thomas now available on YouTube," online at <http://mi.byu.edu/the-book-of-mormon-meets-pentecostals-by-christopher-thomas-now-available-on-youtube/>.

5. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*.

6. Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1995).

7. Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004).

8. Grant Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002).

9. Michael Coe, "Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 2 (Summer 1973): 40-48.

10. Thomas W. Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47-77.

11. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Modern Microfilm, 1969).

12. Thomas cites a single item by Welch (John W. Welch, "Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds [Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 1982], 33-52) and two early works by Sorenson (John L. Sorenson, "Ancient America and the Book of Mormon Revisited," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 4, no. 2 [Summer 1969]: 80-94; "Some Voices from the Dust," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* [Spring 1966]: 144-48).

13. Sorenson, "Ancient America and the Book of Mormon Revisited," 81 n. 2.

14. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985); *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013).

15. The voluminous work of Nibley and Skousen is accessible on the Neal A. Maxwell Institute website (for Nibley, online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/people/hugh-nibley/>; for Skousen, online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/people/royal-skousen/>) and the Interpreter Foundation website, online at <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/author/royals/>.

16. Thomas relies primarily on Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

17. Givens, *The Book of Mormon*, 118.

18. See Ugo A. Perego, "The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2011), 171–217; Ugo Perego and Jayne E. Ekins, "Is Decrypting the Genetic Legacy of America's Indigenous Populations Key to the Historicity of the Book of Mormon?" *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 12 (2014): 237–79; John M. Butler, "A Few Thoughts from a Believing DNA Scientist," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 36–37; "Addressing Questions surrounding the Book of Mormon and DNA Research," *FARMS Review* 18, no. 1 (2006): 101–8; Michael F. Whiting, "DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12, no. 1 (2003): 24–35, 115–16; David A. McClellan, "Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?" *FARMS Review* 15, no. 2 (2003): 35–90.

19. Richard Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 2007), 291.

20. Robert K. Ritner, *The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013).

21. As with his work on the Book of Mormon, Nibley's massive collection of work on the Book of Abraham can found on the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's website, online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/people/hugh-nibley/>.

22. Much of Gee's research can be found online at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute's website, online at <http://publications.mi.byu.edu/people/john-gee/>.

23. Kerry Muhlestein, "The Book of Breathings in Its Place," *FARMS Review* 17, no. 2 (2005): 471–86; "Egyptian Papyri and the Book of Abraham: A Faithful, Egyptological Point of View," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2011), 217–43; "The Religious and Cultural Background of Joseph Smith Papyrus I," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 1 (2013): 20–33.

24. Brian M. Hauglid, "Thoughts on the Book of Abraham," in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, ed. Robert L. Millet (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2011), 245–58.

[25.](#) John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Behind the Mask of Mormonism: From Its Early Schemes to Its Modern Deceptions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1992); Lynn K. Wilder, *Unveiling Grace: The Story of How We Found Our Way out of the Mormon Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013).