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A SYMPATHETIC BUT FLAWED LOOK AT BOOK OF MORMON HISTORICITY

Brant A. Gardner

Review of Terrence J. O’Leary, *Book of Mormon: A History of Real People in Real Places* (Pennsauken, NJ: BookBaby, 2020). 274 pages. Softcover, \$20.

Abstract: *Terrence O’Leary enters the field of books attempting to describe a geographical and cultural background to the Book of Mormon. Placing the action of the text in Mesoamerica, O’Leary explains the Book of Mormon against his understanding of the geography and therefore culture of the Book of Mormon peoples. He begins with the Jaredites, then moves to the Nephites and Mulekites. Along the way, he uses historical data to back up his ideas. While I agree with much of what he has written in principle, his lack of expertise in the cultures of Mesoamerica leads to times when he incorrectly uses some of his sources.*

For Latter-day Saint scholars of the Book of Mormon from the Utah-based church, it becomes too easy to forget that we are not the only children of the Restoration who are interested in the text. In particular, the Community of Christ has scholars who continue to approach the Book of Mormon as a historical record, even though the Community of Christ itself has institutionally moved away from an emphasis on historicity. It is a welcome addition to the literature on the historicity of the Book of Mormon to have Terrence J. O’Leary write his findings. He grew up in the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and continues through the 2001 name change to Community of Christ. He attended Graceland College (now Graceland University) which is affiliated with the Community of Christ.

The chance to have more serious scholars working on the Book of Mormon is wonderful, and it is important to cooperate in

examining the text that is important to both traditions. Unfortunately, there appears to be an invisible wall separating the Book of Mormon scholars in the two traditions. Latter-day Saint writers seldom cite Community of Christ writers, and at least in O’Leary, there seems to be the reciprocal for Community of Christ writers not citing Latter-day Saint scholars. A simple but glaring example is that O’Leary places the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica but has no bibliographic entry for John L. Sorenson. Anyone looking at a Mesoamerican background for the Book of Mormon who does not at least acknowledge, let alone engage, Sorenson is immediately lacking research depth and perhaps unwittingly attempting to cover ground well-covered before without necessarily adding anything new.¹

I find myself agreeing, in principle, to perhaps 80 percent of what O’Leary has written, but my hesitations come from the lack of scholarly discernment he shows in using his sources. This occurs very early when he cites Ether 5:30–31 about the brother of Jared moving the mountain Zerin. O’Leary cites a Chinese legend, then another author who suggests the miracle occurred in a pass through the Altai mountain range known as the Dzungarian Gate (pp. 6–7). I miss any solid analysis of why O’Leary elects to send the Jaredites eastward (though it is not an unusual suggestion in the literature), and then why it would be possible to associate the mountain Zerin’s absence with the Dzungarian Gate. While interesting, O’Leary has not built a strong case.

He has the Jaredites arrive in Olmec territory in Mesoamerica, a very common connection in the literature on Book of Mormon historicity. However, one of his evidences is the use of Chinese characters on Olmec celts. Since he has the Jaredites going through Asia, the Chinese connection becomes plausible, but he is totally reliant on Michal Xu’s work suggesting that identifiable early Chinese characters appear on some Olmec celts (p. 19). This sounds interesting, but O’Leary clearly didn’t follow the academic discussion of those celts, which has totally repudiated the theory. Xu read as Chinese characters pieces of a large artwork that existed on the stone before it was broken up into celts. The scholars have clearly demonstrated that they could be reassembled to show the original picture. Therefore, they were not Chinese characters at all.

1. O’Leary has not totally ignored the Latter-day Saint writings. Several are listed in the bibliography, but the absence of Sorenson or anyone else explicitly working on a Mesoamerican cultural background is glaring.

O’Leary’s chapter 7 is entitled “A Skin of Blackness,” and is a very good addition to the literature discussing that topic. Much of his analysis is not new and has appeared in different essays over the years, but his suggestion that the “&c” found in the 1830 edition of what we know as Alma 3:14–17 suggests that “the complete text of the curse was lost and is not found anywhere in the Book of Mormon” (p. 125). It is a new and interesting argument.

My biggest criticism of O’Leary is that when he begins to use sources on the history of central Mexico, he demonstrates that he has only a layman’s understanding of those sources. Hubert Howe Bancroft was a great synthesizer but should not be used as a primary source. He interpreted his sources as he retold them. Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl would appear to be a great source, since he was fluent in the native language and declared that his history in Spanish was based on pre-Contact histories. Unfortunately, Ixtlilxochitl also modified his stories as he told them to enhance possible biblical connections for the benefit of the Spanish fathers. He needs to be used with care as a source, which it seems O’Leary does not know.

O’Leary sees connections between the Aztec stories of Hueman (Huemac is probably the more likely name based on Aztec sources) and Mormon. O’Leary doesn’t explain how stories about Mormon, whose people died out, would influence Aztec stories collected some eight hundred years later. He also seems unaware that the timing of the Huemac stories is much later than Mormon.

This is a book that can give a reader a nice overview of Book of Mormon history set against a real-world scenario, but the reader should beware that much of the evidence used to create a connection between stories in the Book of Mormon and stories from the Maya or Aztecs are strained. If I take the liberty of adjusting the language from D&C 91:2–4: “There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations ... therefore, whoso readeth it, let him” already have a good background in the subject.

Brant A. Gardner (*M.A. State University of New York Albany*) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol* and

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