

Terryl L. Givens. *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a World Religion*.

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Reviewed by Edward S. Cutler

**A**mbitious in concept and scope, Terryl L. Givens's *By the Hand of Mormon* is a unique study of the Book of Mormon, the founding scripture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Unlike many academic treatments of the Book of Mormon, Givens's study seeks neither to defend nor to challenge the truth-claims inherent in the Mormon scripture and the story of its coming forth. It examines, rather, the reception of the Book of Mormon itself, both within and outside of Mormonism, throughout its more than 170 year history. This focus allows Givens to examine the various approaches—historical, archeological, philological, and doctrinal—by which commentators on the Book of Mormon have sought since its publication either to establish its legitimacy or to expose its fraudulence.

In Givens's view, these efforts at legitimization or exposé generally miss the mark; doctrinal or historical aspects of the Book of Mormon only partly account for its significance to Mormonism. To limit the Book of Mormon to its historicity or to its doctrinal message is to overlook its more dynamic, religion-building function as a sacred sign—the tangible manifestation of divine purposes in modern times. Givens posits that the most important implication of the Book of Mormon is that latter-day prophetic authority is made evident by the book's very existence, and this implication of authority has been a distinguishing religion-building function of the American scripture from the outset.

The first sixty pages of *By the Hand of Mormon* recount a history familiar to most Latter-day Saints. Chapter one covers the Second Great Awakening, Joseph Smith's First Vision, the visitation of Moroni, the eventual acquisition of the golden plates, the unusual process of their translation, Martin Harris's visit to Columbia professor Charles Anthon, Harris's loss of the 116 translated pages, and the testimony of the three and then the eight witnesses who viewed and handled the actual plates. The second chapter briefly summarizes the narrative structure of the Book

of Mormon and then details events surrounding its publication at E. B. Grandin's printing house.

That Givens condenses the more common aspects of the Book of Mormon history to two largely summative chapters indicates his interest lies elsewhere—in the reception of the Mormon scripture after its publication. Even so, he is careful to reference the more recent and interesting scholarship concerning the translation. He cites, for instance, the research of Royal Skousen, Milton Backman, and Stan Larson, who have written on the “homophonic miscues, or errors of the ear” in the original manuscript (such as “no” corrected to “know”). These and other textual clues indicate that the Book of Mormon manuscript was transcribed from oral dictation and not visually copied from an undisclosed source text, as some skeptics have speculated (31–32).

The first chapter also describes the unusual process of translation itself, in which Joseph Smith is reported to have regularly used a “seer stone” that he had discovered while digging a well the year before his first meeting with the angel Moroni (16, 34). Joseph would place the stone in the bottom of a hat and, while peering into the hat, dictate the text to his scribe. This secondhand account about the translation is not new, but it may be unfamiliar even to many Latter-day Saint readers, who commonly believe (in conjunction with various accounts from Joseph and his scribe) that the Urim and Thummim, the Hebrew “interpreters” Joseph found with the plates, were the primary instrument of translation. Givens later argues that the Urim and Thummim served as signs of priestly authority that connected Joseph Smith to the prophetic lineage of Moses and Aaron (83).

By extension, one may wonder, what function, symbolic or otherwise, does the seer stone serve? Was Joseph's earlier discovery of this stone a divinely sanctioned, preparatory step in his prophetic calling? Why is this seer stone largely forgotten in the contemporary Mormon imagination? Did the plates themselves not need to be viewed through the agency of the Urim and Thummim in order to translate them? Some may argue that firm answers to such questions are not to be found. Even so, Givens might have offered more interpretive commentary here, given the peculiar accounts about the seer stone and the role it may have played in the translation process.

After the second chapter, which summarizes the Book of Mormon's contents, *By the Hand of Mormon* turns attention to the various reactions to the book, both within Mormonism and outside it. In chapter three, Givens introduces a point he will develop throughout the remaining chapters: that the Book of Mormon is “preeminently a concrete manifestation

of sacred utterance, and thus an evidence of divine presence, before it is a repository of theological claims” (64).

The Book of Mormon’s function as an “ensign to the nations,” then, is about more than its content; the scripture’s marvelous manner of appearing also came to link Joseph Smith and the Church he founded to the divine purpose that its coming forth signifies. As the millenarian expectations of mid-nineteenth-century Mormonism faded, Givens argues, the association of the Book of Mormon with Joseph Smith’s sacred calling as a latter-day prophet was increasingly emphasized: “The wedding of sacred record to prophetic authority was even more profound, and it has been a connection that lasts to the present day” (82). This linkage between the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, and the Church he founded is a commonplace of many Latter-day Saint expressions of faith today. This associative logic exemplifies what Givens sees as the Book of Mormon’s function as divine evidence of God’s latter-day purposes, a function that goes beyond the narrative or doctrinal message of the scripture itself.

Because obtaining a spiritual witness of the Book of Mormon is basic to Latter-day Saint conversion, some readers of *By the Hand of Mormon* may be surprised to discover the extensive history of LDS research—from archaeological expeditions to computer analysis—aimed at authenticating the scripture. Why would a people so privileged with personal revelation be so concerned with substantiating this record? Givens portrays Book of Mormon research largely as part of an ongoing apologetics, as a tactical interchange with Mormonism’s critics. At the same time, he observes that credible scholars outside the Church have by and large ignored the Book of Mormon and that those criticisms launched by evangelical opponents of Mormonism are typically facile, erroneous, or long discredited, as even some evangelical critics of Mormonism have recently come to acknowledge (5, 143). “Under the burden of Mormon scholarship that is increasingly well credentialed, . . . the polemics of nineteenth-century preachers are no longer an adequate response,” Givens asserts (143). As one-sided as the cause comes to appear in *By the Hand of Mormon*, however, “the Book of Mormon wars” seem in good part to be shadow boxing. Latter-day Saint researchers appear to have been far more energetic in their efforts to legitimize the Book of Mormon than religiously motivated evangelicals have been in their efforts to discredit it.

Might Book of Mormon apologetics serve, then, as something more than a response to Mormonism’s detractors, perhaps even as a means of reinforcing faith or exploring concerns about Book of Mormon authenticity among Latter-day Saint believers? Givens indirectly addresses

this possibility, noting Austin Farrer's view that rationalist arguments have their place even for the faithful: "Though argument does not create conviction, lack of it destroys belief. . . . Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish" (118). Rationality and scholarship, from B. H. Roberts's questions about seeming anachronisms and nineteenth-century influences in the Book of Mormon to Hugh Nibley's tour-de-force reading of the text in light of ancient Egyptian, Hebraic, and Arabic semantic parallels, permeate the Mormon tradition. This search for "rational belief," as Givens terms it, reflects the initial "evidentiary spectrum" by which Givens argues the Book of Mormon plates were revealed to the chosen witnesses. The spectrum combines "supernatural vision" and "simple, tactile experience," for those three and then eight witnesses who were allowed to view or handle the plates (40).

The combination of spiritual *and* empirical substantiation may serve as a prototype of the Mormon view of faith; Givens suggests as much in a reference to the Book of Mormon prophet Alma's teachings about the interplay of faith and experiential knowledge in the development of spiritual understanding (117–18). Even so, Givens is careful to offer a caveat to those who would treat an object of faith as an object of scholarship: "If a sacred text presents itself as provable, it is by definition disprovable as well" (154).

Indirectly, *By the Hand of Mormon* illustrates something of the post-Enlightenment tensions surrounding the very category of "knowledge." Givens seeks to distinguish the almost tactile and empirical grounds of the Mormon faith experience from earlier mystical notions of divine experience. The appeal to an evidentiary spectrum is not uncommon in the nineteenth century. The Book of Mormon comes forth, after all, in an era increasingly characterized by juridical and forensic examination of truth-claims. The forensic impulse is reflected not only in the history Givens charts, but also at times in the very language by which he narrates this history. Describing the selection of Book of Mormon witnesses, for instance, Givens writes that Joseph Smith "was allowed to summon witnesses who left signed affidavits testifying to their contact with actual plates of gold" (38). Such language is strikingly juridical. Givens, however, wishes here to emphasize that the concrete, matter-of-fact treatment of miraculous things signals the uniquely Mormon departure from the ineffability typically associated with miraculous or mystical experiences.

The act of gathering witnesses and collecting affidavits itself connects to a broader cultural complex of nineteenth-century notions about probability and sufficient proof. If, as Givens suggests, emphasis upon witness testimony and tangibility did not inform conventional mysticism before

Mormonism, it should be noted that contemporaneous movements like American spiritualism were doggedly committed to forensic and quasi-scientific substantiation of the spirit manifestations in the early 1850s. The *United States Magazine*, for instance, offered a tongue-in-cheek commentary upon the odd materiality of the new spiritualism in 1856: “People see spirits thick as blackberries—they take hold of spiritual hands . . . and have bell ringers and rappers, so that they cannot tell which is the street door and which is the ghost.”<sup>1</sup> One might claim that Mormonism’s emphasis upon tactile experience signals an overthrow of the longstanding theological division of spirit and matter. It might equally be read as the adaptation of the spiritual to the evidentiary dictates of material science.

Regarding affidavits, it is also worth noting that Mormonism’s detractors relied upon witness testimony to refute the Book of Mormon as readily as the Mormons relied on witnesses to substantiate it. Givens devotes little space to the Spaulding manuscript controversy, which is perhaps the most widely reported challenge to Book of Mormon authenticity in the nineteenth century. Yet the Spaulding controversy serves as a useful illustration about the limits of testimony in substantiating experience. Solomon Spaulding, a sickly minister living in Ohio, wrote a number of stories and romances in the early decades of the nineteenth century. As the Mormons migrated to Ohio, certain locals, including Spaulding’s brother, were reported to have found the Book of Mormon narrative uncannily similar to an unpublished romance the minister had written some years before. In 1880, Spaulding’s daughter, Matilda Spaulding McKinstry, submitted a sworn and notarized statement confirming the presence of Book of Mormon names in a romance her father enjoyed reading to family and friends: “Some of the names that he mentioned while reading to these people I have never forgotten. They are as fresh to me to-day as though I heard them yesterday. They were ‘Mormon,’ ‘Maroni,’ ‘Lamenite,’ ‘Nephi.’”<sup>2</sup>

Givens dismisses the Spaulding theory because, in 1884, the manuscript believed to be the source in question resurfaced, showing no discernable parallels, and certainly no shared names, between it and the Book of Mormon. That this romance was not a Book of Mormon source makes the affidavits all the more remarkable; why would such a seemingly disinterested party as Spaulding’s daughter—who could not recall even knowing a Mormon—remember so vividly that which she apparently had never witnessed? At some point, “suggestion” would appear to have become “experience.” Direct and unambiguous testimony may thus offer a tactile counterpoint to the vagaries of mystical experience, but one may still wonder if such testimony finally aligns with the truth any more than does the mystic’s claim.

The epistemological division regarding the nature of religious experience culminates in Givens's concluding look at the Book of Mormon's role in conversion. Notwithstanding the miraculous claims about latter-day angels, prophets, and golden plates, Mormonism has enjoyed unparalleled success in attracting converts. To understand this, Givens proposes, one must recognize the Book of Mormon's unique appeal to clear and direct personal experience of sacred matters, which he terms "dialogic revelation." The Book of Mormon's "real radicalism," he holds, is "the way it emphatically models, chronicles, and then enacts a version of divine discourse that contests prevailing theologies of revelation" (208). In the Book of Mormon, "revelation" is understood as "personalized, dialogic exchange," not a human encounter with the unseen essence of grace and mystery (217). Givens thus proposes: "The particularity and specificity, the vividness, the concreteness, and the accessibility of revelatory experience—those realities both underlie and overshadow the narrated history and doctrine that constitute the record" (221).

Although the Book of Mormon closes with a prophetic denouncement of the skeptical age in which it would come forth, Givens's view of dialogic revelation itself appears, again, uniquely suited to a subjectivity informed by expectations of the kind of evidentiary experience we might readily associate with a rationalist epistemology. Put another way, dialogic revelation, as Givens describes it, seems to produce the same experiential *impression* of specificity, concreteness, and vividness that positivism sets forth as the ground of a more sure knowledge. Givens does not represent dialogic revelation as the discursive extension of positivism, but his study is certainly suggestive in this regard.

It is difficult to find fault with a book so erudite and groundbreaking as *By the Hand of Mormon*. If a shortcoming presents itself, though, it is in Givens's representation of dialogic revelation and of the Book of Mormon story itself as constituting a kind of Mormon exceptionalism in their appeal to the materiality and immediacy of divine things. Nineteenth-century cultural history offers various discursive parallels, beyond the two brief examples mentioned above. This is not to say that Mormonism is merely a product of its nineteenth-century cultural milieu; perhaps it is in reaction to such easy historicist reduction that Givens chooses not to explore certain contextual threads he might easily have taken up in his book. It is to say, rather, that if Mormonism's distinction lies in its appeal to a dialogic mode of religious experience, one that is alien to the mystical sublimities of the Christian tradition, greater care might have been taken to distinguish Mormon de-sublimation from the ongoing liquidation of mystery in other spheres of the post-Enlightenment, capitalist West. Without that

distinction, the question naturally arises: if Mormonism is distinguished from the Christian tradition by virtue of a certain de-sublimation, what preserves it from the banalities of the marketplace or from the debasement of imagination, from the unholiness of a world made glaringly explicit?

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1. "Ghosts," *United States Magazine* 3, no. 6 (December 1856): 530.
2. "The Book of Mormon," *Scribners Monthly* 20, no. 4 (August 1880): 615.