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REVIEW – THE BOOK OF MORMON: A VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Reviewed by Mauro Properzi

Terryl L. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Paperback.

About a decade ago Oxford University Press embarked in a groundbreaking project which is yet to be completed. With the Very Short Introduction Series the renowned publisher set out to offer its readers a large reference library which would eventually “encompass every major academic discipline” of general interest. Its numerous yet thin volumes claim to offer a “concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects... [providing] trenchant and provocative – yet always balanced and complete – discussions of the central issues in a given discipline.”¹ Within the wide spectrum of subjects addressed by the series it is only to be expected that the Book of Mormon would find its place, having been described as “perhaps the most religiously influential, hotly contested, and, at least in the secular press, intellectually under investigated book in America.”² It is then only fitting that the very author of this statement would be asked to complete a very short introduction of this remarkable book of Scripture which has been both highly revered and utterly rejected for almost two centuries.

Indeed, Terryl Givens was the obvious choice for this endeavour having already established his credentials through his widely acclaimed *By the Hand of Mormon*, an academically rigorous study of the reception history and theological significance of the Book of Mormon, which was also published by Oxford University Press in 2003. Yet, *A VSI (A Very Short Introduction)* is not a summary of *By the Hand of Mor-*

¹ <http://www.oup.com/us/catalog/general/series/VeryShortIntroductions/>
Accessed on October 11, 2010.

² Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 6.

mon, although those who have read both books will certainly identify common claims and themes and recognize the same “voice” throughout their pages. In this latter work Givens gives greater prominence to the structure and content of the book itself while limiting his analysis of what preceded and followed its controversial historical emergence to very brief statements and observations. In this manner, the author ensured that the 218th volume in this highly successful series focused on its stated title, namely the book itself, and not on what mockers or apologists and prophets or sceptics may have concluded about it. Indeed, this is perhaps the greatest contribution of Givens’ work, to have provided a much needed overview of the Book of Mormon content which is thoughtful, insightful, and scholarly while appealing to both neophyte and long-term students of this ‘keystone’ LDS scripture.

As is typical of this series, the book respects the 140 pages limit (which includes references, list of further readings, and an index) that characterize it as “a very short” analysis of the subject. In this context of unavoidable tension between required synthesis and desired completeness Givens’ choice of structure for his exposition appears appropriate, or even ideal. In fact, the book is divided into three parts, entitled respectively “The Book of Mormon speaks for itself,” “The coming forth of the Book of Mormon,” and “The life and reception of the Book of Mormon.” To complete the package and to facilitate understanding, the book is also interspersed with relevant illustrations, direct quotations of key Book of Mormon passages, and helpful charts. Two diagrams in particular are effective in simplifying the all but straightforward internal structure of the Book of Mormon and in outlining the process of transmission of “the original plates” as described in the Joseph Smith’s translation of the text.

When examining the first part of the VSI it is immediately evident that this is where the author is at his best. Quantitatively Givens ensures that the section entitled “The Book of Mormon speaks for itself” receives sufficient attention within the strict word limits of his work by devoting almost two thirds of the book (81 pages to be exact) to his analysis of the structure, themes, stories, characters, and teachings of the book. Qualitatively, it is in this section that he provides ample evidence for the articulate and engaging literary style which has brought him praise and recognition in the field of Mormon studies. Yet, this is much more than an exercise in flowery prose which makes an arid summary of a plot emotionally engaging and attention grabbing. Giv-

ens' analysis has literary and theological substance because it provides unique insights which will resonate with both Mormons and other interested Christians, particularly in light of his frequent juxtapositions of Book of Mormon's claims with traditional Christian perspectives as expressed in the Biblical record. A few examples that illustrate this analytical depth are now in order.

Givens identifies five main themes in the book, namely personal revelation, Christ, varieties of Zion, new configuration of Scripture, and centrality of family. Yet, the reader is not simply asked to trust the author's selection; instead, Givens highlights their relevance by pinpointing their presence in the earliest theophanies of the very first Book of Mormon prophet, Lehi. Thus, by identifying the above mentioned themes as the core foundations of Lehi's six visions he draws the reader's attention to the centrality and tone-setting nature for the whole of the Book of Mormon of the very first book of Nephi. This is certainly a connection which has probably eluded many faithful readers of this volume of scripture.

Furthermore, in providing illustrations of the core themes thus highlighted he offers exegetical insights that in the least will make readers ponder. For instance, in addressing the shifting of revelatory contexts within the text he adds the following observation:

This shift of direction, from a public prophet advocating national repentance for the sake of collective survival in the face of geopolitical crisis, to a father contending for the preservation of his sons and daughters in the wilderness, is a perfect example of the Book of Mormon's tendency to abruptly shift the ground under our feet. Time and again, we see familiar themes and motifs invoked ... only to have the narrative swerve in a direction that reconfigures or reorients the thematic treatment.³

Undoubted acuity is also evinced in his description of the "portability of Zion" as a leitmotif (33), or in his emphasis on the dynamic life of scripture within the Book of Mormon, where "its nineteenth-century incarnation [is] one more stage, one more version, of prophetic utterance that can never be permanently fixed or final." (39)

³ VSI, p. 21.

When Givens' analysis shifts to stories and characters he continues to arrange and to shed light on relevant details which bring life to these accounts. This is certainly the case in his juxtaposition of two generations of heroes, as represented by both pacifist fathers and warrior children (50) or in his psychological analysis of evil in relation to the desensitized people who rejected the later prophet Nephi (58). Givens then places his focus on teachings and appropriately brings Christian theology into the conversation by explaining, for example, how the Book of Mormon view of the Fall has further implications than the Christian view of *felix culpa* (75) or when he goes at length in drawing a connection between justice and agency as he underlines that the "rational behind such a moral order...is the protection of a necessary framework for human agency." (80)

At the same time, it is in this 'theological' section where I found elements of Givens' analysis which I deemed to be somewhat unclear or unbalanced. For example, the author's focus on the fortunate Fall is lacking sufficient mention of the consequences of the same for humanity, especially in relation to agency. The reader may thus erroneously conclude that the Book of Mormon advocates a *tabula rasa* point of departure for the human family, unaffected by any negative consequence of the Fall. This failure further complicates the connection between the Fall and the need for an Atonement whereas even a brief mention of King Benjamin's "natural man" theology (Mosiah 3:19) or of some other key passages (2 Nephi 2: 29) could have provided a more nuanced perspective on the subject. I also found Givens' description of Atonement as skewed in the direction of a "ransom theory" perspective (81). While there is no doubt that the Book of Mormon indeed supports this view, I could not explain the lack of any mention of the unique perspective on the empathic suffering of Christ as constitutive of the Atonement (Alma 7:11-13).

It is perhaps unfair to express any criticism on what is missing in a work of this nature, which in its very title claims to be a very brief introduction to the subject. Yet, because the claim of this series is to be "always balanced and complete" it is only appropriate to highlight a couple of areas where such balance may not be immediately evident. Although I find the book as a whole to be well balanced and probably as complete as can be given the space the author had available I think that the last section on "the life and reception of the Book of Mormon" could have benefitted from a greater acknowledgement of alternative

views on the Book of Mormon which depart from the official claims of the LDS Church. Moreover, some mention of the place of the Book of Mormon within the Community of Christ or of the “expansion theory” as advocated by Blake Ostler would have provided a quick snapshot on perspectives which are not always as polarized as the “pure miracle versus fraud” dichotomy that have characterized Book of Mormon reception history.

Still, the author showed that he acknowledges alternative explanations on the origin and nature of the Book of Mormon by inserting in the “Further reading” section at least two sources which assume purely naturalistic explanations for its emergence. It is indeed difficult to expect Givens to have done more than what he was able to do in this little volume. He filled it with an unprecedented overview of the Book of Mormon content which is simple but not simplistic, while also adding analytical gems and insights in a style that is as pleasant, erudite, and articulate as his preceding works. Once again, Terryl Givens has confirmed that for the present and foreseeable future he is certainly one of Mormon Studies’ very best voices and pens.

Dr. Mauro Properi

Brigham Young University and Utah Valley University

mapropi@yahoo.com