
Book Reviews

Dale E. Luffman. *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers*. Independence, MO: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013. 212 pp. Hardcover: \$40.00 ISBN: 978-0-83091-566-8

Reviewed by Matthew J Frizzell

A REVIEW OF Dale Luffman's text, *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers*, is overdue. As Dean of the seminary whose press published the book, you might expect a positive review. This is, but it is also critical. My aim in this review is to situate the reader and book together in such a way to illuminate its creative elements and literary intent. Three things shape my review: the distance of a few years since its reception, my own study of the Book of Mormon, and the opportunity to use the text teaching Restoration Scripture at Graceland University. I trust the reader finds the following critical, helpful, and informed—just as *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers* is to its academic and nonacademic audience, alike.

Published in 2013, *The Book of Mormon's Witness* is an important addition to a nearly fifty-year tradition of intellectually honest and historically critical literature from Community of Christ scholars on Restoration tradition and scripture. The author, Dr. Dale Luffman, retired as a member of the Council of Twelve Apostles in Community of Christ in 2013. Luffman remains an adjunct professor of Community of Christ scripture for Graceland University's Community of Christ Seminary. A student of Princeton and Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, he is theologically well trained, receiving his doctor of ministry in theology and preaching.

Perhaps not immediately obvious, Luffman's academic background and calling clearly shape *The Book of Mormon's Witness*. A preacher is always, in her/his practice, simultaneously a theologian and hermeutician (or interpreter of scripture). The task of each is to mine the faith tradition and its scripture for their most critical element: its relevant *witness*. This critical insight orients the reader to careful language of the book's title. The careful selection of the book's title and thesis are clarified in the Introduction. The book's aim is an "authentic understanding of the witness of the Book of Mormon" through a critical inquiry into the text's character. This includes a critical consideration of the "sources, conditions, and practices" that illuminate the

text, its message, and meaning. (6) This is precisely what *The Book of Mormon's Witness* accomplishes with hermeneutical sophistication, historical consciousness and theological clarity.

Controversy concerning the nature and historicity of the Book of Mormon haunts receptions of Luffman's *The Book of Mormon's Witness*. This is evident in Christopher James Blythe's review, when he notes the "moments when [Luffman] seems to be deliberately arguing for a nineteenth-century authorship of the text." Respectful of each tradition, I suggest that concern for the historicity of the Book of Mormon distracts the reader from the text's thesis and meaning. Carefully focused, *The Book of Mormon's Witness* is not primarily interested in the historicity of the Book of Mormon because historicity does not ultimately determine the Book of Mormon's status as scripture or its power as revelation. In *Community of Christ*, scripture and its witness emerge from within history in order to speak of God acting in and through history. In other words, scripture points beyond itself to its message. The central theme of Luffman's work, therefore, is not the historicity of scripture, but the Book of Mormon's role and purpose as prophecy. The author states it clearly in the preface, "Prophecy, as it is represented in the Book of Mormon narrative, is central and essential to the book's message." (viii) Luffman's use of both historical and literary criticism throughout concerns clarifying this message.

Utilizing diverse Protestant and Restoration scholars, Luffman demonstrates something more compelling and interesting than the Book of Mormon's historicity. He demonstrates that the Book of Mormon, regardless of its origins, deals prophetically with far-reaching nineteenth-century cultural and theological concerns. This accomplishment is particularly illuminating because prophecy, to be authoritative at all, must do more than speak for God. It must speak into history. It must address people in history in their historical circumstance. Luffman shows how the Book of Mormon's emergence and message functioned together to strengthen Joseph Smith Jr.'s legitimacy as a nineteenth-century prophet. Smith's claim that the Book of Mormon was special revelation was essential to establishing his own authority and ministry as a modern-day prophet.

A close reading of *The Book of Mormon's Witness*, therefore, requires the reader to prioritize the Book of Mormon's message and theology, not history. Its message is most important. Grant Hardy accomplishes the same maneuver—even if unintentional—around the question of historicity by focusing on narrative in his well-known *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide*. Hardy's text is important to Luffman's work. Luffman compliments Hardy's text by also focusing on narrative, but situating the theology of the Book of Mormon's narrative and message historically. This is what illuminates its prophetic function. By focusing on the Book of

1. Christopher James Blythe, "Review of *The Book of Mormon's Witness* to Its First Readers," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 24 (2015): 203–6.

Mormon's message and audience, the author fulfills the preacher's function of bearing witness to the revelation of God through illuminating the meaning of the text.

Luffman starts by clarifying that the Book of Mormon is both revelation and text. As revelation and text, it must be interpreted. Neither is self-evident outside its culture and historical assumptions. Luffman, then, carefully situates the text and its message theologically and historically. Again, the diversity of voices shaping his thesis demonstrates the quality and creativity of this work. Nathan Hatch (Presbyterian), Robert Hullinger (Lutheran), Grant Hardy (LDS), D. Michael Quinn (former LDS), and Paul C. Gutjahr help the reader find the clarity and meaning in Nephi's narrative through the intellectual currents of America's nineteenth-century religious milieu.

With the Book of Mormon historically situated, Luffman spends much of his book letting the Book of Mormon "speak for itself" (to draw from the title of RLDS scholar, Roy Cheville's 1971 text, *The Book of Mormon Speaks for Itself*). Not unlike the way Nephi narrates God's role in ancient events, Luffman narrates to the theological meaning and prophetic message of the Book of Mormon in its nineteenth-century milieu. Against the absent God of Deism, the Book of Mormon prophesied a present and saving God at work in history. To Paine's *Age of Reason*, the Nephite and Lamanite narrative depicted the power of belief in God and consequences of disbelief. Against the optimism of nineteenth-century liberalism and reason, the Book of Mormon prophesied the inevitability of evil in human nature, and metaphysical opposition of all things. Echoing the evangelical spirit defining America's great awakenings, the Book of Mormon professed that religious experience and conversion were the path to truth. Each issue is definitive of nineteenth-century America. Just like the witness of the Book of Mormon's first readers, experience and conversion testified to the truth of the book and its claims.

As a contemporary theologian, the strength and weakness of *The Book of Mormon's Witness* concerns its final two chapters. Like Grant Hardy, Luffman identifies social justice themes in the Book of Mormon. Both authors are persuasive. This is a strength. To be scripture, the Book of Mormon must also find its voice and witness for today. The real trouble, of course, is that this social justice message is deeply compromised. To his credit, Luffman is honest about the dearth of female figures and voices in the Book of Mormon, and how oppressive gender stereotypes are reinforced throughout. Moreover, Luffman notes the anti-Catholicism and latent racism that shape the text. Among LDS traditions, this acknowledgment is needed by both theologians and historians. There is little-to-no mention, however, of how the Book of Mormon narrative is clearly a colonial text, i.e. a colonization narrative superimposed over and atop the native inhabitants of North America. The historical placement and claims of the Book of Mormon have racial overtones. The historicity of the Book of Mormon, therefore, is a question and claim that cannot

be completely ignored because it has historical consequences. Alongside the Bible, the Book of Mormon narrative reinforced the mythology of divine justification for manifest destiny, its violence and economic interests in nineteenth-century America. This, too, is an essential aspect of the message and witness of the Book of Mormon in its nineteenth-century context. These are critical questions to which *The Book of Mormon's Witness* leads.

I recommend *The Book of Mormon's Witness to Its First Readers* to anyone who is interested in the history and reception of the Book of Mormon, as well as to those who believe the Book of Mormon is scripture. I also recommend it to anyone interested in scripture *as scripture*, particularly how it should be read. Like Albert Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus*, *The Book of Mormon's Witness* continues a modern tradition of approaching scripture with a historical consciousness. *The Book of Mormon's Witness* approaches the Book of Mormon directly and competently, faithfully using the exegetical tools of historical and literary criticism in order to illuminate its witness and message. *The Book of Mormon's Witness* deals squarely with the questions of God, revelation, and prophecy whether one's primary interest is in history or theology. Its breadth of influences makes it an ecumenical text worth reading because of its intellectual and spiritual commitments.

MATTHEW J. FRIZZELL lives with his wife and three daughters in Lamoni, Iowa. He teaches courses in religion and ethics at Graceland University and serves as Dean of the Community of Christ Seminary. Matt is a graduate of Graceland College and Saint Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He received his PhD in theology and ethics from Chicago Theological Seminary in 2010. He has served Community of Christ in full-time ministry as a youth minister, pastor, and Chicago Mission Center President.