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Inattentional Blindness: Seeing and Not Seeing The Book of Mormon

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INATTENTIONAL BLINDNESS: SEEING AND NOT SEEING THE BOOK OF MORMON

Robert A. Rees

Review of Earl M. Wunderli, *An Imperfect Book: What the Book of Mormon Tells Us about Itself* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2013), 328pp + Appendices, Maps, and Index.

Earl Wunderli, an attorney who has made a lifelong study of the Book of Mormon, concludes that the book is a product of Joseph Smith's mind and imagination. In doing so, Wunderli marshals evidence and presents his argument as if he were an attorney defending a client in court. Unfortunately, Wunderli's case suffers from the same weaknesses and limitations of other naturalist criticism in that it exaggerates Joseph Smith's intellectual and cultural background and compositional skills while ignoring the Book of Mormon's deep structure, narrative complexity, and often intricate rhetorical patterns.

Emerson said, "Tell me your sect and I'll tell you your argument." Having had a number of casual conversations with Earl Wunderli over the years about the Book of Mormon, I could have predicted the kind of study he has produced. I don't say that in a pejorative or demeaning way but rather to clarify that the different ways the two of us have approached the book give clues as to how differently we see and read it (at least in some ways). Had someone asked me to describe Wunderli's study before I read it, I would have said something like the following: "Earl is a smart guy, and he is very serious about the kind of research and analysis he does. My guess is that he has

examined the Book of Mormon over a period of years with a sincere attempt to understand it — or at least a sincere attempt to get to the bottom of a number of questions he and others have raised about it. I predict that his conclusion will be that the book is not an ancient document but rather was written by someone (or several someones) living in nineteenth-century America.” That’s not a condemnation since it matches the point of view held by a number of scholars and lay people. Frankly, I’m impressed with Earl’s thoroughness and the nearly exhaustive (if somewhat narrow) scope of his research. He seems to have read the Book of Mormon seriously and extensively and read voluminously on Book of Mormon criticism and commentary (with what I consider some serious exceptions, which I share below).

I would also have predicted that Earl would approach the book as if he were cross examining it and its defenders in a court of law. Like any good lawyer defending his client or arguing a case, he calls witnesses from both sides and engages in a sort of interrogation — even though I think he has been selective in his choice of witnesses — (none of whom, of course, is in the courtroom to affirm or defend his or her scholarly writings). Again, this is not surprising since Wunderli has years of training and professional experience in the law. Judging from his thoroughness, I conclude that he is a very good lawyer. But as every lawyer knows, in defending a client or point of view, it is not requisite to give a balanced presentation, perhaps only the impression that you are trying to. That is, Wunderli is defending his client (himself and naturalist criticism), and his primary motive is in making a convincing case.

Wunderli raises (or repeats) a number of important questions about the Book of Mormon, with most of which those who have studied the book and followed the debate about its claims over the years are familiar. They include questions about such things as the use of KJV Bible, internal stylistic consistency,

geography, Egyptian and Hebrew influences, anachronisms, character development, scientific understanding of ancient and modern peoples, and mythology.

Like almost everyone who approaches the Book of Mormon from a scholarly point of view, Wunderli sees himself and those who agree with him as being on the side of reason, science, and truth, whereas those who see the text differently, who find evidence of an ancient text composed by a disparate group of writers, and who may rely on spiritual as well as rational and scientific means to “sound” the book, he sees as unreasonable, unscientific, and inclined to believe in myths and falsehoods. As he states in his Introduction, “Critics prefer evidence and reason over faith and prayer as the method for testing truth” (p. 3). What Wunderli doesn’t seem to acknowledge is that there are scholars who don’t accept such a Manichean epistemological divide in the approach to discovery. That is, some scholars, to use Lowell Bennion’s metaphor, “carry water on both shoulders,” studying, weighing, pondering, considering alternate/opposing views, and, yes, also being open to intuitive and spiritual ways of knowing.

The scriptures suggest that we use both approaches. In Isaiah, the Lord invites us to “reason together” with him, and the Book of Job reminds us that “there is a spirit in man and the inspiration of the Almighty gives him understanding” (Job 32:8 KJV). Based on my own experience, I believe that those who use both of these approaches see differently from those who use only one. Wunderli’s “critics” may tend to miss the intuitive, poetic, and deep structural complexities of the text, whereas those who rely solely on the spirit generally are indifferent to any evidence, internal or external, that challenges their absolute conviction. In my experience in reading Book of Mormon scholarship over the years, I don’t think it is fair or helpful to stereotype those in either group — or in any group for that matter.

Wunderli sees himself (and his fellow “critics”) as objectively examining a set of fixed facts: “The value of internal evidence is that it is accessible and verifiable by anyone. It does not change, and it is fairly understandable.” Such “internal evidence” is set off against “historical, linguistic, archeological, and other external evidence ... which is incomplete, hard to access, or difficult to understand” (p. 9). He says, “I wanted as much as possible to deal with the simple facts and what they meant” (p. 12).

I applaud Wunderli for wanting to focus on the internal evidence of the book, on “the simple facts,” but as a longtime student of the book, I find the facts anything but simple and the internal evidence anything but obvious. In his poem, “Introduction to Poetry,” Billy Collins writes of trying to get his students to look deep into a poem to unravel its revelations:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide
or press an ear against its hive.
I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,
or walk inside the poem’s room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

He laments,

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.¹¹

That’s the impression I had with much of Wunderli’s examination of the facts and internal evidence of the

1 Billy Collins. “Introduction to Poetry.” *The Apple that Astonished Paris*. (University of Arkansas Press, 1996). <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/176056>

Book of Mormon. In fact, early on in speaking about his wish to catalogue and compare “every word and phrase used by every author,” he confesses, “This is as far as my imagination carried me” (p. 11). The fact is, those who write rationalist criticism themselves operate within the context of myth, whether they recognize it or not. As Jack Whelan observes, “Rationalists are wrong if they think that they have no need of myth. If they think so, they are almost certainly unconscious of the mythic structure that undergirds their worldview. They think they are being rational when in fact all they have done is substitute a new mythic or ideo-mythic narrative for an older one.”²

At times Wunderli’s approach to the Book of Mormon reminds me of Gradgrind, the teacher in Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times* who asks a student (“girl number twenty”) to give a definition of a horse. When she is unable to do so, Gradgrind says, “Girl number twenty possessed of no facts, in reference to one of the commonest of animals!” He then calls on another student, Bitzer, to do so. Bitzer responds: “Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.” Gradgrind says triumphantly, “Now girl number twenty, you know what a horse is.” As my BYU Bible as Literature teacher Robert K. Thomas observed, Bitzer would have given a better answer (but nevertheless failed Gradgrind’s expectations) if he had instead quoted from the book of Job:

Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck
with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a
locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He

² Jack Whelan. “The Power of Myth.” *After the Future Blog*. September 15, 2010. <http://afterthefuture.typepad.com/afterthefuture/2010/09/the-power-of-myth.html>

paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground; he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds. At the blast of the trumpet he snorts, “Aha!” He catches the scent of battle from afar, the shout of commanders and the battle cry. (39:19–25)

Another way of putting this is that I feel Wunderli’s approach seldom gets beyond the book’s details. He tends to skim along the surface of the narrative or stay in the rhetorical shallows when, at least in my reading, the text invites a deeper seeing, a more profound probing, a greater attention to its density, patterns, and complexities. That doesn’t by any means imply that one should ignore facts, only that one should try to see through, beneath, and beyond them. That involves not simply managing the text, as it seems to me Wunderli does, but rather submitting to it. By that I don’t mean being seduced by the text but rather imaginatively and intuitively engaging it and therefore being open to what is not obvious, what cannot be easily catalogued or put into lists. As Rabbi David Wolpe says, “A God who encompasses all things must have poetry, too.”³

Speaking of lists, Wunderli has four appendices devoted to them: “Names for Deity, and Derivatives, in the Book of Mormon”; “Nephite, Jaredite, and Biblical Names”; “Nephite and Jaredite Names Found in the Bible”; and “Possible Derivation of Names.” The cumulative effect of these lists is to make one wonder how Wunderli could have seen so much and missed so much! It reminds me of Edgar Allen Poe’s story, “The Purloined Letter” (one of Poe’s “stories of ratiocination”) in

3 David Wolpe. *The Healer of Shattered Hearts: A Jewish View of God*. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1991), 47.

which the police, systematically but unsuccessfully search the residence of the prime suspect for a letter stolen from the royal apartments. Even with the reward doubled and another month of searching in all of the places a thief might be expected to hide stolen property, they are unsuccessful. Finally, the master detective, C. Auguste Dupin, reveals to the prefect of the Paris police that the letter had been hiding in plain sight all along! Thus, focusing on the trees of individual lists of words, phrases, names, etc., seems to prevent Wunderli from seeing the interpretive forest that comprises much of the Book of Mormon.

For me an example of something that is not easily seen in the Book of Mormon is the use of irony. In a paper I published on the subject, I tried to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon contains numerous examples of rhetorical and dramatic irony similar to that found in the Bible and other texts, ancient and modern.⁴ One example of what I consider a conscious and complex ironic composition is found in 1 Nephi 16 & 17. These chapters contain a sophisticated play on the words “to know,” showing how Nephi very cleverly uses repetition to turn the epistemological tables on his older brothers. It is a brilliant tour de force, one that is all the more successful because Laman and Lemuel unknowingly set themselves up for it. As I summarize, “Nephi uses the word *know* eleven times [in these chapters], each to deliberate effect.” I also point out how this episode, like many in the Book of Mormon, foreshadows a later episode or episodes (as with the epistemological conflicts between Gideon

4 Robert A. Rees, “Irony in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (Fall 2003), 20-31. As I point out, “In terms of verbal irony, the Nephite text contains examples of most of the kinds distinguished by Classical rhetoricians, as outlined in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetics*, including—“meiosis and litotes (understatement), hyperbole (overstatement), antiphrasis (contrast), ... chleuasm (mockery); mycterism (the sneer); and mimesis (imitation, especially for the sake of ridicule).”

and Nehor, Amulek and Zeezrom, and Alma and Amlici--all found in the book of Alma).⁵

The kinds of irony one finds in the Book of Mormon are not accidental nor the kind that any writer might see in or pull out of a hat. Rather they require a highly sophisticated compositional skill, a skill that seems significantly beyond the literary capacity of Joseph Smith at the time he supposedly wrote the Book of Mormon. Such irony cannot be made up on the spot nor composed beforehand and dictated at will. Rather, it requires time, care, and deliberation to produce. Also, it is not a figment of the critic's imagination but rather demands some understanding of the nature of irony and experience in analyzing ironic texts. As Mormon scholar and specialist in irony Wayne Booth states, "Every good reader must be ... sensitive in detecting and reconstructing ironic meanings."⁶ Thus, what Wunderli lacks in his thorough and exhaustive discussion of the "facts" (many of which are undisputed) is the ability to see the often intricate, complex and highly sophisticated elements in the Book of Mormon, what the novelist Henry James called "the figure in the carpet."⁷

Nevertheless, anyone has to be impressed by the extent of Wunderli's decades-long study of the Book of Mormon. It says something about his seriousness that he did much of this before modern computer-based analytical tools were available. And some of Wunderli's lists are helpful in allowing us to see how such an approach to textual analysis opens us to see usages, patterns, and apparent anomalies. What is lost in such details and technicalities, however, is the *meaning* produced when these words are put back into their context with other words.

5 Rees, 29–31.

6 Wayne C. Booth. *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1.

7 See Robert A. Rees, "The Figure in the Carpet: Grant Hardy's Reading of the Book of Mormon," *The John Whitmer Association Journal* (Fall 2011), 132–143.

That is, the rhetorical tone, patterns, styles, images, symbols, and other elements that make up the whole of a text or segment of text ultimately show us what is possible to see.

A weakness of Wunderli's approach is that it can lead the critic to overemphasize errors in the text while ignoring the substantial corresponding consistencies. For example, he refers more than once (pp. 211 & 323) to the Alma 51:26 misidentification of Nephiah as a city captured by the Lamanites and the misattribution of the city of Mulek as being in "the land of Nephi" at Alma 53:6 (pp. 212–13), but ungenerously fails to mention anywhere that: (1) these two errors are the *only* inconsistencies in over four hundred geographical references in the book (an astonishing feat for a written text, let alone a dictated one), or (2) that both of these errors occur in a section that Mormon apparently compiled from primary source documents rather than from a previously composed narrative (that is, the kind of error more likely made by an editor than an author).⁸

Another shortcoming of Wunderli's selective reading is his tendency to focus on individual words rather than on the deliberate, longer allusions (as evidenced by some combination of their explicit attribution, length, context, or clustered borrowing). An example is Alma 36:22 quoting 1 Nephi 1:8, or Helaman 5:9 quoting Mosiah 3:17. Wunderli also makes repeated mention of the Mosiah-first translation theory, but only to buttress his claims for Joseph Smith as the sole author (pp. 112–13, 317) and never as a potential counter to this theory, as when narrators allude to source texts not yet quoted (for example, Moroni at Ether 12:41, alluding to a phrase from his father's epistle produced in Moroni 9:26, or his "curtain call" in

8 See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 102 and 142–44. Grant Hardy graciously acknowledges the substantial contribution to his work by his wife, Heather, who chose not to be listed as co-author but deserved to be.

Moroni 10 alluding, in turn, to the farewell comments of each of the small plates' authors in 2 Nephi—Omni *that had not yet been dictated*).⁹

At a session at the 2013 Sunstone Symposium dedicated to proving that Joseph Smith was the author of the Book of Mormon, as an audience member I made the following statement: “If Joseph Smith composed and then dictated the Book of Mormon as he and other eyewitnesses attest and under the circumstances that seem firmly established and which you seem not to question, then please explain how he did it.” To dictate such a narrative hour after hour, periodically over a three-month period with frequent interruptions, personal crises, and abundant stressful episodes — and with no discernable manuscript, notes or other means of assisting the process of anamnesis — seems not merely superhuman but humanly impossible. At the very least Joseph Smith’s critics must be compelled to agree that in the long history of narrative composition, no one has accomplished a similar task. While ancient poets memorized catalogues of formulae that they used for improvisational tellings of such epics as *The Illiad*, *The Odyssey*, and *Beowulf*, and while some authors have used a process called automatic writing to dictate a wide variety of texts, there is no evidence either that Joseph Smith had the gift of voluminous memorization (especially dictated seamlessly over a period of months with numerous interruptions) or that his book was a product of automatic writing, as I tried to demonstrate in an article on the subject written a number of years ago.¹⁰

It is important to point out that Wunderli’s approach to the Book of Mormon does not differ in kind from that of some scholars on the other side of the ideological/interpretive

9 Again, see Hardy, 262–64.

10 “The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (Spring 2006), 4–17, 68–70.

divide. That is, like Wunderli, such scholars tend also toward lists, minutiae, and technical elements in proving their points — and they seem unable or unwilling to grant the legitimate problems that some have with the book or to be truly open to any evidence that challenges their axioms.

It isn't that this is unusual even in scientific circles. Neurologists resisted the idea of the plasticity of the brain for a long time, even with the evidence staring them in the face. That is also true of geologists and paleontologist who refused for decades to believe the fossil texts that proved that evolution was a natural process or that some animals had become extinct. It is also true of the Climate Change deniers today. As the novelist Barbara Kingsolver observes, "We take in evidence only from sources we trust, whether that's Rush Limbaugh or NPR or a church pastor [or prophet]. We make these sort of animal decisions about who's on our team, and then we pretty much believe what they say."¹¹

My own personal view is that the greatest hindrance to reliable Book of Mormon scholarship has been the Latter-day Saint tendency of proof-texting. Another has been the unavailability of a clear, readable text — that is, until Grant Hardy's very useful *Reader's Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005). Hardy certainly helped me to see the text without all of its encumbrances — glosses, footnotes, arbitrary verse divisions, etc. Until Hardy's text was available, I preferred Eldin Ricks's wide margin edition (Provo, UT: Mountain West, 1987) because it gave me space to both read and take notes. When I first read Hardy's text, I felt as if I were reading the Book of Mormon for the first time. The most significant contribution of Hardy's text is that it has rescued the history of the Book of Mormon peoples from format captivity.

11 Barbara Kingsolver, "The Moral Universe: Barbara Kingsolver on Writing, Politics, and Human Nature." Interview by Jeanne Supin. *The Sun* 459 (March 2014), 7.

I wish Wunderli had used Hardy's text when he was preparing to write his book, but most of all I wish he had read Hardy's *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, a study I personally consider the most important and insightful book ever written on the Book of Mormon. It is puzzling why Wunderli doesn't refer to Hardy at all, given his rather exhaustive reading of Book of Mormon scholarship. *Understanding the Book of Mormon* was published in 2010, three years prior to Wunderli's, so it seems there is no excuse for his having neglected so important a work of scholarship.

Had Wunderli read Hardy, it is unlikely he would have come to some of the conclusions he does. For example, Wunderli argues that because "there are upward of 960 words and word combinations shared by two or more Book of Mormon writers, ... the stamp of a single writer seems all but certain" (p. 122). Later, he argues, "The four major writers in the Book of Mormon are nearly indistinguishable from each other" (p. 318). Hardy's much deeper, more careful and more precise analysis makes a convincing argument that there are three major narrators of the text — Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni — and that each has a distinctively different style. As Hardy writes, "Nephi's favorite themes and primary literary techniques are not those of Mormon or Moroni, and Joseph Smith's own opinions on such matters are perhaps still more difficult to ascertain, whether one regards him as a translator or an author who deserves a degree of separation from the inferred author and narrators of his book. But the narrators are explicit, self-disclosing presences in the text in a way that Joseph Smith never is."¹²

For all of Wunderli's criticism of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as "imperfect," his own study contains a number of mistakes and careless errors. Here are a few examples:

12 Hardy, 23.

p. 21, *Assertion*: “It is unclear why the Book of Mormon includes the book of Ether and the story of a people called Jaredites.” *Response*: Mormon promises a forthcoming account at Mosiah 28:19.

p. 21, *Assertion*: “Defenders have argued that its message is that those who possess the promised land ‘shall serve God or be swept off,’ but this does not explain why the later unrighteous Lamanites were not so removed.” *Response*: Samuel the Lamanite does explain the reason at Hel. 15:10–13.

p. 27: An angel, not Joseph Smith, showed the plates to the three witnesses.

p. 78: The KJV is not based on the Greek texts of Isaiah.

p. 87: “Abinadi” should be “Aminadi.”

p. 88: Mark Thomas was never a professor at BYU.

p. 323: Micah is an eighth-century BCE prophet, not a “late Old Testament author” anachronistic to the brass plates (besides, he is being quoted by the resurrected Jesus for whom he would not have been anachronistic).

p. 324: 2 Nephi 11:3 is not about latter-day witnesses to the Book of Mormon. Nephi here is speaking explicitly of himself, Jacob and Isaiah as being witnesses of Christ.

At other times, Wunderli seems deliberately unfair to Joseph Smith. For example, in referring to his list of “curiosities” as “thoughtless mistakes in an unedited manuscript,” Wunderli seems to forget, as he has observed earlier (e.g., pp. 28 and 173–74), that the Book of Mormon is in fact an undisputed *dictated* (and therefore unedited) text! If Wunderli had decades to study, prepare for, write, and edit his book and yet be unable to avoid “thoughtless mistakes,” it seems a bit petty for him to speak of such mistakes in a volume dictated sporadically over a three-month period — and by someone with far less education and written/oral experience than he has.

Wunderli’s extensive reading of the critical literature should have led him to see that in many instances he rejects the

evidence of those who read the book differently from the way he does. As with many areas of human inquiry, what one scholar finds convincing and even compelling, another dismisses as untrue or irrelevant. This is, as Barbara Kingsolver argues, a natural human inclination/proclivity: “We believe we collect evidence and then use it to make up our minds, but in fact we make up our minds and then collect evidence to support our beliefs.”¹³ As I say, this is what nearly all critics of the Book of Mormon (believers and nonbelievers) do. There are exceptions, thankfully, among whom are Grant and Heather Hardy.

Of all the virtues of Grant (and Heather) Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, the one I admire and appreciate most is their willingness to present the evidence and leave the ultimate decision as to the Book of Mormon’s provenance and authenticity to the reader. Thus, they provide both argument and counterargument, showing that neither side of the interpretive divide is completely settled. And, unlike most critics (perhaps even myself at times) they do it with charity which, as Paul and Moroni tell us, “never faileth.”

I noticed an unexpected and therefore surprising shift in Wunderli’s tone from the Introduction to the Conclusion. In the beginning, he sounds somewhat like an academic. Although he has an agenda, he seems to be striving for a fair, objective, and respectful perspective. By the end of his book, however, he is more like a lawyer making a closing argument: a bit shrill in places, layering on the legal rhetoric, leading the jury to what he thinks they should see as an inevitable conclusion. As he goes along, Wunderli’s tone becomes both less neutral and less charitable. For example, his “defenders” at the beginning become the more pejorative “literalists” at the end.

In conclusion, I appreciate Earl Wunderli’s attempt to come to terms with the Book of Mormon. In our discussions over the

13 Kingsolver, 7.

years, I have found him to be a person of integrity. While I disagree with his basic approach to the Book of Mormon and his critical modus operandi, I understand how he can come to the conclusions he does. That is, the agnostic position is not a mindless way of viewing the world, and legalistic, rationalist criticism is defensible within the context and confines it defines for itself. Any work of scholarship that makes me think and causes me to challenge my own imperfect way of understanding the Book of Mormon is one that I can appreciate, even if it is imperfect — as this one is and as are all of the studies that have been written or will yet be written on this remarkable book.

Robert A. Rees (born November 17, 1935) is an educator, scholar and poet. He teaches Mormon Studies at Graduate Theological Union and the University of California, Berkeley. Previously he taught humanities at UCLA and UC Santa Cruz and was a Fulbright Professor of American Studies in Lithuania (1995-96). Rees is the author of No More Strangers and Foreigners: A Mormon-Christian Response to Homosexuality (1998), “In a Dark Time the Eye Begins to See’: Personal Reflections on Homosexuality among the Mormons at the Beginning of a New Millennium” (2000), “Requiem for a Gay Mormon” (2001) and, most recently with Dr. Caitlin Ryan, Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Latter-day Saint Families with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Children (2012). He is the editor of Proving Contraries: A Collection of Writings In Honor of Eugene England (2005), The Reader’s Book of Mormon (2008), and Why I Stay: The Challenges of Discipleship for Contemporary Mormons (2011). Rees, has served as a bishop, stake high councilor, Institute teacher, and a member of the Baltic States Mission Presidency. He is the co-founder and current vice-president of the Liahona Children’s Foundation, which addresses malnutrition among Latter-day Saint children in the developing world.

