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Approaching Abinadi

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APPROACHING ABINADI

Stephen O. Smoot

Abstract: *The recently released Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise, a new book from Brigham Young University's Book of Mormon Academy, offers readers multidisciplinary approaches to Mosiah 11–17 that highlight the literary, historical, and doctrinal richness of the story of Abinadi. Students and scholars of the Book of Mormon are sure to benefit greatly from this new volume.*

Review of Shon D. Hopkin, ed. *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2018), 404 pp. \$27.99.

In 2013 a group of Latter-day Saint scholars organized the Book of Mormon Academy, “an academic think tank and research group begun at Brigham Young University ... to promote scholarship and teaching on the Book of Mormon.”¹ The first publication of the Book of Mormon Academy, *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*, offers a collection of articles that explores Mosiah 11–17 from textual, theological, historical, and anthropological perspectives.

The first section of the book (“Literary Lenses: Narratological, Sociopolitical, Biblical”) approaches Mosiah 11–17 from a narratological perspective. As Jared W. Ludlow (“A Messenger of Good and Evil Tidings: A Narrative Study of Abinadi”) explains in his contribution, “A narratological study looks at all the components that go into the telling of a story in order to appreciate its different narrative facets (the aesthetic

1. Shon D. Hopkin, “Introduction,” in *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise*, ed. Shon D. Hopkin (Provo and Salt Lake City, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book, 2018), vi. Subsequent citations of this volume appear in the body of this review.

dimension) and to better understand the purpose and emphasis of the writer (the rhetorical dimension)” (2). A narrative approach helps readers better appreciate the story of Abinadi as just that: a story. It can clarify and amplify how the story should be read and understood by looking closely at the bare bones text. As the additional articles in this section by Daniel L. Belnap (“The Abinadi Narrative, Redemption, and the Struggle for Nephite Identity”) and Frank F. Judd Jr. (“Conflicting Interpretations of Isaiah in Abinadi’s Trial”) help further demonstrate, the story of Abinadi is rich and rewarding when read closely and carefully.

The next section of the book (“Intertextual and Intratextual Lenses: The Book of Mormon and the Bible”) looks at the relationship between the Bible and the Book of Mormon as witnessed primarily in Mosiah 11–17. Nicholas J. Frederick (“If Christ Had Not Come Into the World”) explores the nature of the quotations of the King James Bible in the Abinadi pericope, while Shon D. Hopkin (“Isaiah 52–53 and Mosiah 13–14”) looks at the variants in the Book of Mormon’s quotations of biblical texts and compares them to textual witnesses, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Masoretic Hebrew Bible, and the Greek Septuagint. Combined, their articles paint a complicated picture when it comes to how exactly the Book of Mormon quotes the Bible (and the significance of such).

On one hand, as Frederick points out, the Book of Mormon is very clearly “filled with hundreds of quotations from and allusions to the King James Bible” (117), including the KJV New Testament.² At first blush this would appear to undermine the Book of Mormon’s claims to historicity. But on the other hand, at some key points the Book of Mormon’s quotations of the Bible include variant readings not found in the KJV that do nevertheless find support from ancient textual witnesses. As Hopkin explains, “In the Abinadi narrative, of the twenty variants that exist [between the Book of Mormon and the KJV], fourteen find support in an ancient manuscript witness — such as the Septuagint, the Targums, or the Dead Sea Scrolls — or they are an equally appropriate translation from the Masoretic Text” (153).

How might we reconcile this? Hopkin reasonably suggests, “The Book of Mormon may not have been a modern *creation*, but it was certainly a modern *translation*, purposefully reflecting language from Joseph Smith’s day, most importantly the King James Version, and

2. See further Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Vancouver, B.C.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016).

departing from it only when necessary” (162, emphasis in original).³ All of this is to say that while this particular issue (the relationship between the KJV and the Book of Mormon) is still being explored, the intertextual work exemplified in *Abinadi* is precisely what is needed for further understanding.

In Part Three (“Cultural-Historical Lenses: Mesoamerican and North American”) of *Abinadi*, Kerry Hull (“An ‘East Wind’: Old and New World Perspectives”) and Mark Alan Wright (“Ethnohistorical Sources and the Death of Abinadi”) situate Mosiah 11–17 in an ancient New World context by reading some small but significant details about the Abinadi narrative in light of current archaeological and ethnohistorical knowledge. Take, for instance, Abinadi’s martyrdom. According to the Book of Mormon, the wicked priests of Noah “took [Abinadi] and bound him, and scourged his skin with faggots, yea, even unto death” (Mosiah 17:13). This method of execution — a torturous death by firebrand — has been documented to have been practiced by post- and pre-Columbian North and Central American peoples.⁴

By understanding the ethnohistorical background of this gruesome practice, Hull and Wright conclude, readers can better appreciate both evidence for the Book of Mormon’s antiquity as well as the figure of Abinadi as a true martyr.

The death of Abinadi was an act of martyrdom, an act of bravery, and a result of obedience. . . . His bold teaching in the face of certain death represents the very essence of his faith in the words and promises of his God. . . . Beyond the pains and physical anguish of possibly being burned at the stake, Abinadi likely suffered for hours if his death conformed to standard ethnohistorical accounts. (224)⁵

The final section of *Abinadi* looks at the theology of Mosiah 11–17 (“Theological Lenses: Historical and Philosophical”). Amy Easton-Flake (“Infant Salvation: Book of Mormon Theology in a Nineteenth-Century Context”) focuses her remarks on what the Book of Mormon

3. This converges nicely with the argument laid out in Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2011).

4. See additionally, “Why was Abinadi Scourged with Faggots?” online at <https://knowwhy.bookofmormoncentral.org/content/why-was-abinadi-scourged-with-faggots>; John W. Welch et al., eds., *Knowing Why: 137 Evidences That the Book of Mormon is True* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2017), 221–22.

5. As a nice bonus, the “textual details on Abinadi’s manner of death given in Mosiah 17:3 echo perfectly what we find in these ancient traditions” (224).

teaches about infant baptism and the status of infants and children in the plan of salvation (Mosiah 15:25; Moroni 8:10–21). She specifically compares the Book of Mormon’s teachings on this matter to those espoused by other 19th century New England and New York Christian movements, including Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Restorationist, and Universalist sects. After looking carefully at early 19th century theological treatises and sermons from leading voices of these traditions, her research reveals that “the Book of Mormon does not prescribe to or endorse any one of the dominant theological positions in early nineteenth-century America. Instead, the book clearly resonates with different aspects of various denominational thought while also offering a more concise rationale for infant salvation and maintaining a focus on Christ’s grace that is not seen in other denominations’ treatises on the subject” (252–53).

All told, *Abinadi: He Came Among Them in Disguise* is an excellent example of the sort of scholarship that can and should be performed on the Book of Mormon. It offers something for those interested in approaching the Book of Mormon from multiple perspectives while moving the scholarly discussion forward.

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