

Review: JAR4332

U.S. SENATOR DEFENDS BOOK OF MORMON

a book review of
Leap of Faith
by Bob Bennett

(Deseret Books, 2009)

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The Book of Mormon has been controversial since it was first published by Joseph Smith, Jr., in 1830. Today missionaries from the fourteen-million-member Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS/Mormon) challenge prospective converts to read and study what Smith called “the most correct book on earth.”

Over the past 180 years, many have criticized the Book of Mormon and doubted its historicity. To counter such claims, Sen. Bob Bennett (R-UT), a Mormon, compiled his support for the scripture that details how ancient Israelites came to America before the time of Christ. The book includes stories of Christ, who is said to have visited this continent soon after His resurrection in Palestine. The result of Bennett’s research is the book *Leap of Faith*, which he hopes will show how the Book of Mormon is trustworthy.

Bennett, who became a Utah senator in 1992, once served as a public relations director for Howard Hughes; in fact, Bennett was instrumental in detecting two forgery attempts involving Hughes, including a supposedly authorized biography of the billionaire as well as a fake will of the Hughes estate. Admitting that he is not “a scholar of high academic standing” (p. 18) and utilizing the “standard disclaimer” that his book is “neither commissioned nor sanctioned by the (Mormon) Church” (19), Bennett nonetheless uses his background to lend himself credibility in detecting fraud.

Bennett attempts to deal with arguments against the Book of Mormon that LDS scholars and apologists often gloss over. He says he is trying to take an objective approach because previous “authors who have written about (the Book of Mormon) have started out with a firm conclusion regarding it, for or against, and then assembled evidence to support that conclusion” (11). He is right when he says the conclusion one makes is vital: “If the claims regarding the Book of Mormon are accurate, then the book is genuine scripture. If, however, the Book of Mormon is an invention of human origin—in short, a forgery—then the Church itself is a fraud” (9).

Unfortunately, the reader is expected to make a major “leap of faith” in order to disregard the difficult arguments against the Book of Mormon. The result is that Bennett uncritically takes many things for granted and ends up glossing over many inconsistencies.

For one thing, Bennett places far too much confidence in the credibility of Smith (who was called the “author” as well as “translator” in the original edition). Bennett utilizes standard LDS arguments to uphold Smith’s credibility: he was too young with too little of an education, and he compiled it in too short of a time (two months) to come up with the story on his own. Of course, there has been no way to test Smith’s ability to translate the Book of Mormon plates because they were supposedly given back to the angel Moroni.

However, I never saw any mention made of the Book of Abraham, which Smith said was written by the patriarch on ancient Egyptian papyri that the church purchased from Michael Chandler in 1835 in Kirtland, Ohio. Smith claimed that he could translate the hieroglyphics with his special ability. Today the Book of Abraham is found in the Mormon scripture Pearl of Great Price, which includes the important teaching of the preexistence of humanity. The hieroglyphics code was not broken until the mid-nineteenth century, long after the Rosetta Stone (an Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic artifact) was discovered in 1799. This, unfortunately, meant there was no one to question Smith's translation in his lifetime.

When Smith was killed in 1844, his wife took possession of the original Book of Abraham manuscripts and sold them. They were later thought to be lost and destroyed. However, the papyri were rediscovered at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in the mid-1960s, finally providing scholars the opportunity to determine if Smith understood the Egyptian language. It turns out that the manuscripts are common funeral papyri, and Smith was not even close in his translation of them, a fact that has shaken the faith of many Mormons.¹ If Smith was creative enough to compile the Book of Abraham, why not the Book of Mormon?

While Bennett says that he is open-minded, it is apparent that his presuppositions limit his ability to be objective. He ends the book by saying he has "made the leap of faith." While faith in the truth is admirable, faith in something with questionable evidence is neither reasonable nor biblical (Heb. 11:1–2).

—Eric Johnson

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NOTES

1. See Sandra Tanner, "The Oldest Biblical Text? Joseph Smith's Book of Abraham Examined," *Christian Research Journal* 32, 3 (2009): 30–37.