Review of Marilyn Arnold, *Sweet is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—It's Narrative, Teachings, and People*

Author(s): Daniel C. Peterson
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Abstract: *Sweet Is the Word* is designed, Arnold tells us, for at least two audiences. It is written partially for her colleagues who are not Latter-day Saints—people who, as she herself says, may be perplexed that a person with such training and literary experience could take Joseph Smith and Mormonism seriously. The author continues, "I also write it for my Mormon friends, . . . those who have not yet been swept away by the miracle of the [Book of Mormon], and those who have. May the latter find new reason to celebrate it.

Book Reviews

MARILYN ARNOLD. *Sweet Is the Word: Reflections on the Book of Mormon—Its Narrative, Teachings, and People*. American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 1996. xv; 366 pp. Index. $15.95.

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson, Associate Professor of Asian and Near Eastern Languages at Brigham Young University.

At the height of a successful career as a scholar, teacher of American literature, and university administrator, Marilyn Arnold took early retirement from Brigham Young University. It would seem, from the writings appearing out of St. George (on both Latter-day Saint and general literary topics), that she is using her time well.

Sweet Is the Word is designed, Arnold tells us, for at least two audiences. It is written partially for her colleagues who are not Latter-day Saints—people who, as she herself says, may be perplexed that a person with such training and literary experience could take Joseph Smith and Mormonism seriously. The author continues, "I also write it for my Mormon friends, . . . those who have not yet been swept away by the miracle of the [Book of Mormon], and those who have. May the latter find new reason to celebrate it" (xi).

Arnold concentrates on the text of the Book of Mormon itself, giving virtually no attention to the growing body of secondary literature on the book. She writes "I am not a scriptural scholar, and I have not called on the scholars to assist my reading. This essay is, very simply, my personal response to the book" (vii). Her approach has considerable merit. Too often, we read the Book of Mormon for proof texts on, for example, faith and then, having found the isolated passages we want, proceed to discuss that subject, feeling little need to make further reference to the scriptures

themselves. But there is a much to be said for paying close sustained attention to the canonical texts themselves, to their style and method and nuances.

In some ways, we are fortunate to know so little of the original setting of the Book of Mormon. We know too little of pre-Columbian philology, archaeology, and history to let it distract us from the message of the book; every reader thus stands effectively equal to every other reader before the English text, which, for all practical purposes, is our original text. As Arnold asserts, "More than other scripture, the Book of Mormon can be read and appreciated by ordinary people with no special training or historical background, so long as they are humbly seeking the Spirit's understanding" (vii).

One of the few exceptions to Arnold's abstaining from citation of secondary literature is her reference to John Hilton's 1990 *BYU Studies* article about statistical analysis of the Book of Mormon text.[1] She cites Hilton in order to buttress her own, more subjective conclusion, based on an "English teacher's eye," of multiple authorship in the Nephite record (123). She is also aware of various opinions over the location of the ancient Hill Cumorah and, from her own reading of the text, comes to support the view that two different hills were called *Cumorah.*

A few minor errors in this book might have been avoided by consulting the secondary literature. Arnold's reference to Laban as a "priest" (4) seems to have no basis in 1 Nephi. And given that the Lehite party landed in Mesoamerica, it is not clear that the latter-day Gentiles of Nephi's prophecy should be identified solely with the British. In Mesoamerica the Spanish would be more likely candidates. She assumes that, apart from the peoples specifically enumerated in the Book of Mormon, the New World was entirely uninhabited. But the Book of Mormon does not demand this, and American archaeology seems to rule it out.[2]

Arnold finds it incongruous that the Lamanites, hostile to the religion of Lehi and Nephi and their descendants, would have named one of their cities Jerusalem. On the contrary, since Laman and Lemuel, at the fountainhead of the Lamanite tradition, identified themselves so closely with the ruling class of that city (an identification with which, ironically, Nephi agreed)—a city they did not want

to leave and to which they badly wanted to return—such nostalgia was to be expected. Furthermore, Arnold's suspicion that the cataclysmic destruction of 3 Nephi had perhaps altered the landscape beyond recognition has been discussed and shown to be groundless by the work of John L. Sorenson.[3] And, finally, the Jaredites, who originated in Mesopotamia, probably did not travel by way of either the Mediterranean or the Red Sea to reach the Americas.

But these are minor issues. Arnold's emphasis is on literary analysis, and this is indeed the book's strength. Moreover, her careful reading sometimes leads her to excellent points that go beyond the literary. For instance, her remark on the structural integrity of the Nephite barges is insightful and, so far as I am aware, original to her (316 n. 4).

She is acute and convincing in her recognition of vastly different personalities among the chief characters of the Book of Mormon. There are, for example, the solitary and melancholy Jacob and the sad Moroni, long surviving his annihilated people, painfully aware of the finality of what he is writing, and acutely conscious of his own perceived literary weakness. Her discussion of Alma as the great convert, who knew for himself the powerful change of heart that he so earnestly commended to his hearers, is powerful. Arnold says, "Whenever Alma speaks of this change, his language fairly shimmers with the beauty and wonder of it" (125).

As Arnold insists, the Nephite text is vastly rich and abundantly repays close attention: "The Book of Mormon is, quite frankly, the most challenging and compelling text I have ever tried to explicate, the most densely rich and rewarding text I have ever read" (vii). It is "many-layered and structurally complex" (vii). Of Mosiah 7–17, Arnold remarks, "Even if there were no other evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, the intricacies of these chapters should convince the most skeptical of readers. A narrative jumbled this way would tax even an accomplished fictionist, and a literary novice like Joseph Smith would have been lost before he began" (99).

Discussing the sermons of Alma the Younger, she says, "They rival the beauty and power of any scripture anywhere. . . . No paraphrase or discussion can adequately describe the verbal acuity and oratorical skills of this great man of God. . . . I cannot begin to do

justice to Alma 5. It simply must be read, preferably aloud" (119, 123). Of the great discourse on faith in Alma 32, Arnold writes, "This rather amazing sermon, so simple in its form and so grand in its message, is a diamond of lucidity and brilliance, a dazzling treasure" that reveals Alma to have been not only a prophet, but also "an artist" (168). She says of the account of the resurrected Savior's ministrations to the people at Bountiful, "Nothing in my reading experience equals this account for tenderness and pure feeling. . . . I am still awed by the quality of Mormon's mind" (258, 349).

Sweet Is the Word is, indeed, a kind of testimony to the truth and power of the Book of Mormon, borne by a trained and morally sensitive literary scholar. Of the Book of Mormon, Arnold writes, "This is the essence of Mormonism; this is the sweet word, the sweetest of words" (xv). Appropriately, she concludes her book with a final and eloquent expression of gratitude.

I suggest that the best use of *Sweet Is the Word* is not to read it straight through, as if it were a novel. Rather, its chapters should be studied in company with the relevant chapters of the Book of Mormon itself. Thus used, it will be very much like attending a class led by a wise, discerning, and profoundly committed teacher.

NOTES

[1]John L. Hilton, "On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship," *BYU Studies* 30, no. 3 (1990): 89–108; reprinted in Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 225–53. On page 123, note 2, of *Sweet Is the Word,* "Hilton" is incorrectly given as "Hinton."

[2]See John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1 (fall 1992): 1–34.

[3]John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1985), 45–46.