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WITNESSING TO THE NEW WITNESS

Brant A. Gardner

Review of Robert A. Rees, *A New Witness to the World* (Salt Lake City: By Common Consent Press, 2020). 244 pages. \$9.95 (paperback).

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A *New Witness to the World* collects Robert A. Rees's essays covering six decades of serious thought about the Book of Mormon. It necessarily covers multiple topics. All writers who approach the Book of Mormon naturally view it with the tools in their personal kit. Rees is a literary critic and unsurprisingly examines themes in the Book of Mormon and comparisons to the literary world into which the Book of Mormon was presented. The breadth of his interests over time confirm that he takes the Book of Mormon seriously and thinks seriously about how it speaks to its readers.

Preamble: It Has Opened My Heart Wider to Experience His Love

Rees loves the Book of Mormon. That isn't my description. It is his. The very first line of the very first essay (labeled as the Preamble) is "I love the Book of Mormon" (p. xvi). In total, eight of the sixteen paragraphs in the essay begin with "I love ..." and develop a different aspect of the text. It is a testament to his literary sensitivity that the repetition enhances the

message without becoming boring. I would like to imagine that it was an unconscious mirror of the parallelisms in the book he loves.

This essay is the oldest in the collection, originally having been published in 1989. Placing it at the beginning of the collection declares that it also reflects a current sentiment. As a preamble, it is intended to set the tone for the essays to follow, and therefore, the rest of the essays contextually become examples of things that Rees loves about the Book of Mormon.

There are a total of fifteen essays, including the preamble and introduction. Two essays date from the 1980s. Most were published in the 2000s. The introduction, chapter 1, and chapter 13 were written for this volume. I offer my impressions from each of the articles.

Introduction: Carrying Water on Both Shoulders.

Rees's opening sentence is, "How are we to regard the Book of Mormon and how are we to read it?" (p. 1). The essay is a short tour through the ways that the Book of Mormon has been approached through history and moves to important changes that represent the current approaches. Rees's discussion of history is on point, but what resonates is the current situation.

Rees's love for the Book of Mormon is strong enough that he can use critical thinking when approaching it. He clearly keeps up with some of the best of the secular approaches to the Book of Mormon, specifically citing a work by Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hicks.¹ He does not review the articles but emphasizes their insight that the Book of Mormon continues to be polarizing and tends to form two camps — the religious and the secularist (p. 9). The history he has already described is evidence that this is a persistent issue, but it becomes one that needs to have some resolution. We are beginning to see a newer dichotomy that is no longer between true and false, but between faithful examination and secular examination. To be certain, secular examination separates itself from the religious, but it is a qualitatively different approach than past issues that focused only on truth claims. The secularist approach is beginning to accept the Book of Mormon as a text. It is understood that it is a text sacred to a community, but the examinations have no interest in the religious truth claims. Fortunately, neither is it their primary intention to contradict truth claims.

1. Elizabeth Fenton and Jared Hicks, eds., *Americanist Approaches to The Book of Mormon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

The current state of Book of Mormon studies places us in a new position. Rees suggests that, too often, “in relation to Book of Mormon scholarship, the heart of the problem as I see it is that those on each side of the argument seem to be talking past one another or, to use Paul’s words, to be ‘speaking into the air’ (1 Cor. 14:9)” (p. 10). Rees sees the emergence of the modern secularist approaches to the Book of Mormon as a good thing, and one that we on the religious side need to understand. He warns, “We need to recognize that as extremes each position is limited. Those who defend the Book of Mormon primarily with their testimonies tend not to be open to some of the challenging questions the book presents in its claim to be a translation of an ancient text. They need to acknowledge that some questions raised by those who do not consider the book of divine origin and influence are worthy of consideration and examination” (p. 11). I find myself nodding in agreement when I read this. Personally, I have found that questions, and even hard questions, can lead to an enriched understanding of the Book of Mormon.

Rees makes explicit his understanding that both secularist and religious approaches to the Book of Mormon can have value. “It is the dialogue between the two, the respect for what they each can teach us, which should inform our quest for both temporary and ultimate meaning, for what our brains can help us discover from empirical evidence and what our hearts can help us discern of what lies beneath and beyond such evidence” (pp. 13–14).

I continue to find myself agreeing with Rees when he begins to propose a way forward. He references his approach, and it is one that I hope more can take: “As I have read the Book of Mormon over a lifetime, I have been committed to thoroughly and thoughtfully considering all the evidence and arguments put forth by scholars, believers, and skeptics as to the book’s claims. In doing so, I have tried to employ my best scholarly and analytical skills while being open to intuitive and imaginative perceptions — and appraising and pondering my spiritual experiences with the book” (p. 15). I can say no more than Amen.

1 Nephi: Reading Nephi Closely

As I often did with his introduction, I find myself nodding in agreement with his statement that

In both fiction and non-fiction, as in real life, first-person narrators can be unreliable storytellers. It isn’t that they consciously are deceptive or dishonest (although that possibility always exists), but rather that, like everyone, they

have their individual motivations, objectives, prejudices, and limitations in the way they see and make sense of the world, including their own and other's experiences. Invariably, if we read closely, such narrators may tell us more than they intend to, including about themselves. (p. 22)

Implicit in Rees's discussion of Nephi's writing is that he understands that Nephi was a real person. That implicit understanding that we are reading a first-person account of a real person distinguishes the way the text can be approached. Were we to approach it as an author's fictitious first-person account, the analysis would differ. The texture of the human reality that can be seen behind the story that is being told would be very different. From a literary perspective, Rees sees an interesting shift occur when the story of Laban's death is told. Rees sees Nephi approaching that scene as a young man, and then notes that after that event, Nephi describes himself as "being a man, large in stature" (1 Ne. 4:31). Rees sees this as a significant turning point in the development of Nephi's character. Becoming a man involved the hard choice of following a divine command that he was hesitant to do.

The article continues in the vein of examining the emotional and spiritual biography of a Nephi whose overt purpose in writing was not to tell that biography. Rees is an acute and perceptive reader, and the Nephi that emerges in this article is a very believable and relatable human, for all that at times Nephi might "come off as a bit insufferable, at least in the beginning" (p. 23).

To Sing the Song of Redeeming Love: The Book of Alma

This essay first appeared in *The Reader's Book of Mormon*. That context is important for understanding what Rees has done in this chapter. Recently the Maxwell Institute commissioned and published a series of Theological Commentaries on the Book of Mormon, with different authors examining (typically) one book. This article is a similar introduction to important themes in one book, the book of Alma. However, because it spends time on important insights, it ignores the half of the book of Alma that endlessly speaks of battles, commanders, and military strategies. Few readers will be disappointed in that lack of coverage.

Rees begins the meat of the essay with the sentence, "It is that burning desire to share the gospel that informs nearly every page of the book of Alma" (p. 38). That encapsulates Rees's interest in the book as well as implicitly foretells the absence of the half of the text that would

be hard-pressed to fit into the idea of sharing the gospel. This is, however, the context in which the first half of the book of Alma feeds the soul.

Because the context of the article was an overview of the book of Alma, Rees moves through the general events of the text and provides perspectives on the lessons that might be learned from those events. Rees provides a section on the “Evocative Silence of Women,” which highlights a place where we wish to have known more of the role of women in Book of Mormon times and contrasts that silence to the story of Abish. This section is a good read on understanding the seldom explicit presence yet continued importance of women in the Book of Mormon.

Ammon: The Hero’s Journey

Like Rees’s essay on 1 Nephi, this essay is a spiritual biography. He is telling Ammon’s story, but in a way that expands our understanding of the person and the way his story is told rather than simply recount events. Rees suggests that “the power of this story, with its compelling similarity to other epic heroic journeys, may be one of the reasons Mormon, faced with choosing among a repository of narratives, chose to include it in his abridgement” (pp. 55–56).

For Rees, this sentence is simply a setup for the rest of what he will discuss of Ammon’s story. Personally, it is a place where I want to stop briefly and add my own observation about how important Rees’s suggestion is. I believe (and I think Rees may as well) that it is important to understand that what we have in the Book of Mormon is a choice Mormon makes from a large amount of material. I would suggest that it is never sufficient to simply accept that a story is told in the Book of Mormon because it happened. Many, many things happened that were not told. Mormon declared, “I cannot write the hundredth part of the things of my people” (Words of Mormon 1:3). Mormon intentionally selected the stories he included, and understanding the possible reasons he chose them enhances our understanding of the message Mormon wanted us to learn.

The selectivity in Ammon’s story appears again when Rees reminds us that of all the events that happened in the fourteen years Ammon spent among the Lamanites, we have only one detailed account: Ammon in the land of Ishmael (p. 58). Rees sees the selection of this story as representing the conversion possibilities of making a missionary journey.

As Rees concludes his brief spiritual biography of Ammon, he declares, “The story of Ammon speaks to those of us in Christ’s kingdom today. It reminds us that repentance takes courage and sacrifice; it

inspires us to share the gospel with others, no matter how hardened their hearts or foreign their way of life; it teaches us that heroism inspired of God is possible for all and that with faith we can perform great miracles” (p. 64).

Alma the Younger’s Seminal Sermon at Zarahemla

Rees believes Alma the Younger to be “the greatest spiritual orator in the Book of Mormon” (p. 65). To be fair to other Nephite spiritual leaders, he didn’t have too much competition for the title. Mormon included five of Alma’s sermons, but only one of King Benjamin’s (which was pretty darn good, by the way). Still, the point isn’t to quibble but to understand, and this essay delves into the first of Alma’s recorded missionary sermons after giving up his position as the Chief Judge.

Rees situates Alma’s sermon in a Zarahemla that had recently received two immigrant groups from the land of Nephi: those who followed Alma’s father and those who fled with Limhi. Both of those groups brought with them the stories of political and religious divisiveness that had plagued them in the land of Nephi. They entered a Zarahemla that had been facing those same pressures. Rees contextualizes Alma the Younger as one who straddled both the division and the need for a return to the religion (and political unity) of the Nephite religion. Alma the Younger had fought against the Nephite religion. After his dramatic conversion, he championed it.

Rees notes, “It is against this backdrop of recently subdued external threat and internal discord that Alma surrenders his position as chief judge and, retaining his office of high priest, goes ‘forth among his people ... that he might preach the word of God unto them’” (p. 67). The sermon in Zarahemla is the first of this new mission. It is important for its position in history and socio-political impact, but Rees is a literary critic. Rees understandably sees Alma’s sermon against his own background in literature, and for the benefit of all who don’t have that sensibility, applies it to Alma’s sermon in enlightening ways.

It is best to let Rees describe what he examines in Alma’s sermon: “Alma’s sermon to the church members in Zarahemla as recounted in Alma chapter 5 is a skillful blending of various rhetorical devices, making it an exceptional achievement, a virtual sermonic tour de force. Those include parallelism, allusion, repetition, imagery, symbolism, contrasting pairs, rhetorical questions, and more” (p. 68). I encourage all to read this essay for perspectives and appreciations that are enhanced by Rees’s ability to see and explain these details.

The Heart in Alma 12–13

Alma 12–13 contains one of Alma’s responses to the religious conflict in Ammonihah, a conflict played out in a confrontation with Ammonihah’s Nehorite lawyers. It is a response to issues brought up to contradict the Nephite religion and focuses on resurrection and judgement. Rees doesn’t really talk about any of that. His touchpoint for his essay is “harden hearts,” a phrase that is repeated three times in Alma chapter 12 (in verses 33, 36, and 37). Rees finally discusses what it means to harden one’s heart nine pages in to an eleven-page essay. This simple placement of what may have been the verses that launched the essay should alert readers that this essay ranges much further than a simple commentary on Book of Mormon verses. This is an essay that comments on meaning.

Rees examines the metaphorical use of “heart” in a wide range of literature, and even finds some support in a physiological study of the interaction of heart activity and higher brain centers dealing with cognition and the creation of emotional experience (pp. 80–81). As an essay focusing on a single metaphorical word in the text, it is itself a tour de force in appreciating the world of meaning that can be packed into a single word and how it is used.

Imagining Peace: The Example of the Nephites

This essay revises and consolidates two previous essays on the same topic. I continue to note how (quite unsurprisingly) Rees’s background as a literary critic informs the way he sees scripture. As he begins this essay, he tells us,

Studying scriptures over the years, I have been struck by how often writers of sacred literature use elements of drama to teach important lessons. In fact, one could argue that the extent to which God inspires and directs the writing of scripture demonstrates that he is himself a superb dramatist. The use of dramatic setting, plot, tension, and irony in scripture is similar to what one finds in greater literature, from the Greeks to the present. (p. 91)

This is an interesting way to begin an essay on peace, and signals that the reader is in for more than a declaration that the Nephite two hundred years of peace was a wonderful thing. Rees understands drama, and to build the drama, he contrasts peace with the very unpeaceful prelude.

This is an essay with a perceptive contrast between the days of light at Christ's birth and the days of darkness at his death. The mundane cycle of night and day are seen symbolically and set up an eventual contest between darkness and conflict and Christ, light, and peace. To intensify and replicate the drama, Rees moves to the destruction and darkness. It is not simply night; it is darkness as a possible loss of hope. He recounts the events of destruction that were followed by not just darkness, but thick darkness. He asks, "What would be your psychological state?" (p. 95).

Rees points out the symbolic ray of hope and light. The textual conditions are continuing darkness when a voice is heard. Rees focuses on the declaration that the speaker is "the light and life of the world" (p. 96). The theme of darkness and light returns but is (at this point in the drama) the promise of light. Of course, that light comes with the appearance and teachings of the Savior. It is at this point that Rees follows up on the destruction and darkness by having them replaced first by Christ (the light) and then Christ's teaching of the Gospel of Peace. Rees understands that the combination of the terrors of destruction and the appearance of the God of light bearing a message and method of peace to be the catalyst for the two hundred years of peace the Nephites enjoyed.

Rees doesn't back away from the sad fact that the peace didn't last. War and destruction returned, this time with a destruction that was to end the Nephites as a nation and people. His message for modern times is that

Since the purpose of drama is to engage us intellectually, imaginatively, and spiritually so that we may see ourselves in the distant mirrors of others' experiences, the dramatic narrative presented in Third Nephi places a special burden on us to be among those who work to end war and establish peace. How are we to do this? To begin with, we can accomplish what the Lord and his Latter-day prophets have urged us to do: "[R]enounce war and proclaim peace, and seek diligently to turn the hearts of the children to their fathers, and the hearts of the fathers to the children" (D&C 98:16). (p. 105)

Irony in the Book of Mormon

I must confess that this essay is the most difficult for me to review. It is an essay that almost requires a deep background in literature to even conceive of the article, and a greater appreciation of elements of

literature than what I bring to the essay. That does not mean that it isn't interesting or important (my copy has several paragraphs that I have marked to remember when I return to it). It means that I cannot do it justice. I apologize for that.

Rees begins by defining irony in literature as a concept and proceeds to show how it operates in the Bible. From there, he shows how the biblical forms of irony also appear in the Book of Mormon. His conclusion is, "I contend that the presence of irony in the Book of Mormon cannot be explained as the result of unconscious genius, absorption of biblical texts, or automatic writing. The most logical explanation is that the ancient writers of the Book of Mormon were consciously writing in an ironic tradition that was part of their Hebraic literary heritage" (p. 124).

I am sure that I am not alone in not having noticed this aspect of the Book of Mormon. I continue to be amazed at all the little things in the Book of Mormon that sit so well in an ancient context. I continue to be amazed that a modern Joseph would allegedly have consciously added such obscure details — but neglect to point them out. The very fact that it has required trained readers from multiple disciplines to see the ways that the Book of Mormon fits a different context than the early 1800s emphasizes Rees's conclusion that the text itself is the result of antiquity.

The Book of Mormon and Automatic Writing

There have been many explanations for the Book of Mormon other than the one Joseph Smith declared for it (and which the faithful have accepted). One of the more interesting is the process of automatic writing, also known as spirit writing. The nineteenth century saw more than one of these texts, which the one producing the text claimed that the contents were transmitted by psychic forces, angelic voices, or some other supernatural entity (pp. 126–27). That very simple definition appears to so closely represent the story of the Book of Mormon's translation that it is no surprise that automatic writing has been proposed as a naturalistic explanation for the composition of the Book of Mormon.

Rees gives a background on the various means by which these spirit writings occurred (p. 127). He notes that the texts that were produced also range in content, and at could contradict other texts received by the same methods. The range of means of production as well as content led him to declare, "As one examines the wide range of texts claimed to have been received through the process of automatic recording of communication from another realm, it is difficult, if not impossible, to

conclude that all such communications are authentic and legitimate” (p. 129).

Despite the difficulty of accepting all such communications, there are those that do appear to defy explanation. Rees notes one case of the medium speaking in a Chinese dialect that has not been spoken in China for centuries. To test the medium, an expert provided the first line of an obscure Chinese poem. The medium finished the poem and used the correct ancient intonation. Rees doesn’t know how to explain these cases any better than any of the experts who have examined them. He says, “It is interesting to speculate about the possibility of a variety of communications coming from beyond the veil — some inspired and some not, some truthful and some not, some rational and some not” (p. 131).

How does this apply to the Book of Mormon? The Book of Mormon fits into the general category, but the category is broad enough that it becomes too easy a target. The Book of Mormon also “fits comfortably within the larger world of narrative fiction and the narrower world of sacred literature” (p. 134). Although one application of automatic writing might be to suggest that the Book of Mormon is not the result of authentic divine communication, the various spirit writings that are hard, if not impossible, to explain might also suggest that the Book of Mormon could be an authentically divinely transmitted text (p. 135).

Rees spends time examining scientific evidence that there may be legitimate communication with a spirit realm. It is a fascinating section of the essay. Having suggested that the naturalistic world might support such a divinely transmitted text, Rees summarized elements of the text that appear to be beyond the ability of Joseph’s information environment to produce. For that matter, most are beyond any available information environment. Rees concludes, “While I do not find the Book of Mormon a credible candidate as an automatic text, I believe it is more closely related to automatic writing than, say, normative narrative fiction, the former (in some instances) coming from some place outside the author’s mind and imagination and the latter coming entirely from within them” (p. 150).

Joseph Smith and the Writers of the American Renaissance

In this essay Rees examines the possibility that Joseph Smith could have authored the Book of Mormon (as opposed to being its translator). As a literary critic, Rees examines Joseph in the literary environment of his

contemporaries. Rather than a comparison that simply lists authors, Rees examines topics:

- Literary Imagination and Talent
- Education and Cultural Milieu
- Information/Knowledge Base: What did Joseph Smith Know?
- Sophistication

Rees agrees with many critics that Joseph Smith appears to have had a good imagination. He also notes, “There is an enormous difference between being able to conceive of something imaginatively and being able to shape it into a concrete, complex, and coherent artifact” (p. 153). There is much in the Book of Mormon that required a complex composition, and little else in Joseph’s writings suggest that he could produce a work of that length and complexity.

Other writers during the American Renaissance had a better education and, most importantly, their writings show evidence that they had other early writings that influenced their later masterpieces (p. 157). This lack of education also shows in the absence of references to either expected literary tropes or the influence of other writers. While books like Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews*² have been suggested as influences, the connections are tenuous. The Book of Mormon shows a familiarity with the Bible, but no other work, whether available to Joseph or not.

The Conception and Creation of a Major Work of Literature

This essay follows “Joseph Smith and the Writers of the American Renaissance” and really should be read after that essay. It was first published fourteen years after the previous essay but feels very much like a follow-up that moves more in depth in a comparison of the literary biographies of the major writers of Joseph’s era and how they contrast with Joseph.

The Matter of Dictation: Joseph Smith and John Milton

This essay examines Ryan Eikenbary’s idea that the best comparison for Joseph Smith would be to John Milton. “Eikenbary’s thesis was that just as Milton had absorbed an enormous amount of material through his education and his informational and cultural environment, that

2. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews* (Poultney, VT: Smith & Shute, 1823), <https://archive.org/details/ViewOfTheHebrews1823EthanSmith/mode/2up>.

allowed him, even after going blind, to dictate his masterful epic, so Joseph Smith did the same in mentally and imaginatively preparing for and then composing and dictating the Nephite-Jaredite narrative. This chapter examines the validity of that comparison” (p. 194). The details of the chapter are important, but one of Rees’s observations is one that I haven’t quite heard or seen expressed in quite this way:

Although there is ample evidence, according to Philp Barlow, that Joseph’s “mind was demonstrably saturated in biblical language, images, and themes,” the same and more could be said of many of his contemporaries (including most of the clerics and others more educated and scholarly than Joseph Smith) who failed to produce anything comparable to the Book of Mormon. (p. 201)

The Midrashic Imagination

Rees opens with the important and expected background necessary for those unfamiliar with what a midrash is. It was when he began to develop his idea of a midrashic imagination in relation to the Book of Mormon that he took a left-turn from my expectations. I had thought he would speak of the plausible use of midrash in the Book of Mormon. He does mention that it would not be surprising if the Nephites brought with them, along with the brass plates, the concept of midrash (p. 217). I agree, and I believe it can be an important understanding of how Nephi writes. But that isn’t what Rees wanted to say.

After presenting the introductory explanatory information, Rees declares, “All of this is a prelude to my argument that latter-day Saints should consider writing midrashim in conversation with Restoration scriptures, especially the Book of Mormon” (p. 213). Rees isn’t addressing what an ancient author might have done, but what modern writers could do. Perhaps should do. Rees’s ideas are interesting and provocative. I hope his ideas find writers willing to write these midrashim.

The Figure of Love: The Ultimate Message of the Book of Mormon

Literary critic that he is, I see Rees intentionally bookending his essays with the theme of love. His preamble spoke of his love for the Book of Mormon. The concluding chapter examines love as “the primary message from the Book of Mormon from the beginning to the end” (p. 229). More than just the theme of love for and in the Book of Mormon, the preamble

and the final chapter are personal. In a way, Rees turns a critical eye on himself and his own intellectual and spiritual development. This is not an examination of the concept of love in a text but of how God's love is manifest through texts and into receptive hearts.

My Last Comments

Readers bring much of themselves to the reading of a book. A good book speaks to the complex times and circumstances the reader brings. I read these articles months before writing this review. I had a hard time thinking of what to write, not because of what Rees wrote, but because of who I was when I picked up the book. I seem to be a little different of a person now. Going through it again I see things I had missed before. At times I wondered why I had marked some of the things I did. Fortunately, Rees has provided a collection of essays that can feed us in many of the personalities and appetites we bring to his table. It is also not a simple one-time meal. Read the book. Then come back to it and read it again. I did. I am better for it.

Brant A. Gardner (*M.A. State University of New York Albany*) is the author of *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* and *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon*, both published through Greg Kofford Books. He has contributed articles to *Estudios de Cultura Nahuatl* and *Symbol and Meaning Beyond the Closed Community*. He has presented papers at the FAIR conference as well as at Sunstone.

