

INTERPRETER

A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 30 · 2018 · Pages 1 - 4

An Ancient Survival Guide: John Bytheway's Look at Moroni

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Offprint Series

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ISSN 2372-1227 (print)

ISSN 2372-126X (online)

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AN ANCIENT SURVIVAL GUIDE: JOHN BYTHEWAY'S LOOK AT MORONI

Jared Riddick

Abstract: *Moroni's years of wandering alone after the battle of Cumorah have been often discussed, but not in the context of how they impacted his writing and editorial work. John Bytheway's latest offering provides us insight into the man Moroni and how his isolation impacted the material that he left for his latter-day readers.*

Review of John Bytheway, *Moroni's Guide to Surviving Turbulent Times*. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017). 159 pp., \$11.99.

Some who pick up John Bytheway's newest book, *Moroni's Guide to Surviving Turbulent Times*, may not be sure what they are going to get. His often-humorous approach deters many serious scholars from engaging his work. While his typical approach extends to this new book, those who chose to read it will find themselves pleasantly surprised and quickly drawn in.

The book centers on Moroni the man, not the angel. I find the book valuable for this alone, as scriptural figures are often placed on pedestals that deny them their basic humanity. Throughout the book, readers will find themselves getting to know Moroni and empathizing with his struggles. Youth and single adults will have a special reason to pay attention to Moroni's words when Bytheway reminds his readers that "This may be a family church ... but it was restored through an unmarried teenager who was visited and tutored by an angel-who spent at least the last twenty years of his life as a single adult, alone and wandering for his own safety" (3). "Moroni," he continues, "is one of the symbols of our membership" and "[his] best work was done while he was a single adult" (3).

The book encompasses Mormon 7 to Moroni 10; the section over which Moroni had editorial oversight. Bytheway provides a number of interesting insights and personal applications — which he refers to as “Likening Moroni” — in special sections at the end of each chapter.

In addition to introducing readers to Moroni, Bytheway’s book discusses a number of doctrines at some depth. A full examination is beyond the purview of this short review. As an example, however, I will touch on Bytheway’s discussion of the gift of the Holy Ghost in Moroni 2 (one of the longer chapters, at about seventeen pages). This is a chapter which I believe to be “worth the price of admission” on its own.

In each of his analyses, Bytheway speculates on why Moroni left his readers with these specific teachings and doctrines. Several of Moroni’s chapters are exceptionally short, and Moroni 2 is no different. Readers are reminded that Moroni was alone when he wrote these chapters. “Thus,” Bytheway states, “the importance of the companionship of the Holy Ghost for the lone man Moroni cannot be overstated” (45). Bytheway goes on to point out various roles that the Spirit fulfills for us: “warning light” (45–47), “tutor” (47–50), “sword” (51–52), and “protector” (52–54). This was accompanied by interesting study results from Wendy Watson Nelson on the power of prayer in the recognition of the presence of the Holy Ghost during times of trial (54–56). Bytheway followed this with a conversation on the privilege of having the Holy Ghost with us at all times. Interestingly, he reminds us that Mormon — through a letter recorded by Moroni — described his people’s demise in terms of their relationship with the Holy Ghost (59).

In the closing pages of this chapter, Bytheway points out that “the gift of the Holy Ghost is a privilege...to live up to” (59), and hence “we have to desire it, to want it, and to let it in as we would receive a guest into our home.” Bytheway writes, “Moroni knew of the privilege of the Holy Ghost, and he felt it important enough to devote precious space on the plates to teach future generations” (59–60).

One of the best ways this book can be described is as a starting point. Bytheway has not written a scholarly book; instead, he has produced a short work intended to encourage genuine discipleship and the applicability of ancient scripture to modern situations. He acknowledges this at the end of the book: “Not everyone will liken scriptural stories in the same way, nor should they. ... In sharing these ideas, I am hoping others may find them helpful and have something to think about as they ponder their own ways to liken Moroni’s final words” (155).

The doctrines and principles that Moroni emphasizes in his closing section of the Book of Mormon are relatively simple. Bytheway's message reflects that simplicity by focusing on the Gospel of Jesus Christ as a sustaining force in times of adversity. Moroni may have been physically isolated, but he was never truly alone. Christ's gospel helped him to survive. Bytheway helps readers see how the Book of Mormon can be a survival guide for the latter days too.

This book is heartily recommended for both youth and adults finding their own way into the Book of Mormon, as well as to experienced readers looking for new insights that will make the scriptures come alive for them. Above all, John Bytheway's in-depth discussion of Moroni and the invaluable work he accomplished offers counsel, doctrinal insights, and hope for anyone who has ever felt alone.

Jared Riddick graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho with a bachelor of arts in history education and an accompanying minor in English education. He is currently the archivist for Book of Mormon Central, based in Springville, Utah. His areas of academic interest include the Book of Mormon and the American Civil War.

