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The Case for the Documentary Hypothesis, Historical Criticism, and the Latter-day Saints

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THE CASE FOR THE DOCUMENTARY HYPOTHESIS, HISTORICAL CRITICISM, AND THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS

Colby J. Townsend

Review of David Bokovoy. *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy*. Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014). Foreword by John W. Welch. 272pp. Paperback and hardcover.¹

Abstract: Bokovoy's new volume substantiates the claim that faithful Latter-day Saint students of Holy Scripture can apply the knowledge and methods gained through academic studies to the Bible.

Latter-day Saints have sometimes viewed critical studies in the history and text of the Bible negatively, which has led to a common view today that any sort of study involving the methods or “criticisms” prevalent in biblical studies can only lead to a secularized view of holy scripture. This is not necessarily true, and the volume under review is the best example that I am aware of in Mormon Studies of the claim that faithful Latter-day Saint students of Holy Scripture can apply the knowledge and methods gained through academic studies to the Bible.

David Bokovoy holds a PhD in Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East Studies from Brandeis University. He is fluent in five

1 I am reviewing an advanced reading copy. Some of the material I review may be updated in the final printed form, with some of my quotations and page numbers of Bokovoy's book possibly being updated by then.

ancient Near Eastern languages² and has studied with some of the leading scholars in the field of the history of the Pentateuch. This volume is the first of three that will be released in the set, *Authoring the Old Testament*. The set is a part of the forthcoming Greg Kofford Books *Contemporary Studies in Scripture* series, with an open number of books written by numerous authors.

Following the order of the books in the Hebrew Bible (the Jewish version of the Old Testament), *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* covers the Torah, or the first five books of the Old Testament. In Volume Two he will cover the *Nevi'im*, the Hebrew term for the prophets, and in Volume Three he will cover the *Kethuvim*, the writings.

Authoring is introduced by a “Foreword” by John Welch, which is followed by a prologue that serves as an introduction for the inexperienced reader of biblical studies. Bokovoy works through a critical reading of the Bible. He introduces the Documentary Hypothesis and the sources in the Pentateuch, indicating how we are to identify the sources, how scholars date them, and the influence of other Mesopotamian cultures and texts on the writing of the Pentateuch. He sketches how he believes Latter-day Saints should study the Bible critically. He ends with three chapters exploring how the rest of the book can help in a faithful, academic approach to the Book of Mormon, the Book of Moses, and the Book of Abraham. Bokovoy then concludes with multiple new points that help the LDS student appreciate the academic study of the Bible.

John Welch’s “Foreword” introduces Bokovoy’s book to the LDS reader.³ Welch states that this “is a welcome introduction,

2 David is fluent in Akkadian, Biblical Hebrew, Moabite, Official Aramaic (700–300 BCE), and Ugaritic. See his biographical information on the University of Utah’s webpage: https://faculty.utah.edu/u0339845-David_Edward_Bokovoy_Dr/biography/index.html (Last accessed 2/21/2014).

3 It is highly recommended, as Bokovoy does (see Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, xv, nt. 2), that the reader not jump ahead in the book, especially if one is not experienced in biblical studies. The chapters on the Book of Mormon,

from a faithful Latter-day Saint perspective, to the academic world of Higher Criticism of the Hebrew Bible.” However, Welch resists some of Bokovoy’s arguments, even though he has praise for the book. Welch has done much to introduce biblical studies to an LDS audience, so his insights are invaluable.⁴ He defines Bokovoy’s use of Higher Criticism in a way that any reader of the book should take into account. Higher criticism is neither higher nor critical but springs from Enlightenment thought and means that the scholar is attempting to get “above or behind the wording of the text,” and criticism deals with adopting standards of interpreting information. The term “Higher Criticism” could easily be understood as a negative approach, one that wants to criticize rather than uplift. Higher criticism is just the opposite.⁵

Bokovoy begins his treatment with a prologue offering reasons that a Latter-day Saint audience can and should work within a historical-critical paradigm when approaching the scriptures. This is done through reviewing statements made by Joseph Smith Jr., Elder John A. Widtsoe, Elder B. H. Roberts, and others highlighting the importance of academic studies in the life of a Latter-day Saint. He notes that although he is providing a scholarly introduction into the authorship of

Book of Moses, and Book of Abraham will most likely make very little or no sense if they are read outside the context of the preceding chapters.

4 Welch has served on the executive committee of the Biblical Law Section of the *Society of Biblical Literature*. See the back flap of his book *The Legal Cases in the Book of Mormon* (Provo: BYU Press and The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008). He has also edited numerous titles in the field of Biblical studies, for example see Edwin B. Firmage, Bernard G. Weiss, and John W. Welch, *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990).

5 The author of this review is aware that at times certain scholars have attempted to utilize Higher Criticism to discredit or downplay religion. This is not always the case, and, again, David Bokovoy, among other scholars in various religious groups, is a perfect example of how this can be used to build faith while answering the more difficult questions of history.

the five books of Moses, his work is not comprehensive.⁶ The prologue works as a nice introduction to Chapter One, which discusses the necessity of reading the Bible critically. It will probably be new to many readers, but an important aspect in accomplishing the task is the ability to see the Bible as a book. This may sound strange at first, but viewing the Bible as a piece of real history, with human authors writing it and human groups passing it down over centuries, is essential to an understanding of the text. Bokovoy spends time discussing the understanding in modern scholarship that the five books of Moses were written largely by ancient Israelite scribal schools, critically viewing the history of the text with the realization that many aspects of the text require a much later date for the composition of these books than the time of Moses. When a sacred text is not viewed this way, when it is held to different standards than other texts, then the approach is the opposite of critical as outlined in Welch's foreword.

This can easily be seen in antagonistic arguments against the Book of Mormon. Many critics complain about the Book of Mormon, concluding that it is not from God, when they do not use those same standards on the Bible. For many with this viewpoint, the Bible is inerrant and infallible. It has no mistakes, not only theological, but historical or in its presentation of narrative. This could be no further from the truth. Our job is to simply be open to those mistakes present or introduced in the history of the transmission of sacred texts (as Bokovoy points out, like Joseph Smith was!), and utilize biblical studies in our search for deeper meaning and truth. The Bible needs to be seen as a real piece of history.

Doing this does not necessarily downplay the inspired nature of the text. As Bokovoy points out, "By reading scripture critically, a believer in the text's inspiration can gain

6 David Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament: Genesis–Deuteronomy* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2014), xi.

an increased understanding of the various ways in which God has touched the hearts and minds of his children.”⁷ He also politely notes that there are places in the book where there will be “a certain degree of discomfort for believers.”⁸ This need not worry anyone. Whenever an individual begins the task of studying a subject in greater detail, there will be things that person has never heard before. This is learning. If we are completely comfortable with everything that we are reading or hearing on a given subject all the time, the likelihood that we have not learned anything new is very high. There may be a degree of discomfort for Bokovoy’s readers, but he does an incredible job of providing faithful grounds for seeing why he thinks the way he does.

Bokovoy spends the first five chapters surveying the state of scholarship on the five books of Moses. He discusses such topics as how scholars separate the sources, how the sources are dated, and how ancient Mesopotamian text and culture influenced the writing of the five books of Moses. He begins chapter one with an interesting note that will catch the attention of his readers. He explicates the two creation stories as separated by critical scholarship and notes that Joseph Smith also noticed that there were different creation stories found in Genesis 1 and 2–3. Bokovoy points to the JST (the Book of Moses) and D&C 77 as evidence of this, where the first creation is seen as a spiritual creation, and the second as physical.⁹

The remaining chapters of the book describe the ways in which Latter-day Saints may apply historical criticism to the Book of Abraham, the Book of Moses, and the Book of Mormon. As with Bokovoy’s work on the Pentateuch in the early chapters, his focus here is on building faith and offering new ways of answering the problems historical criticism poses

7 Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, xiv.

8 Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, xv.

9 Bokovoy, *Authoring the Old Testament*, 4.

for Restoration scripture. Although there will be many readers who do not fully accept Bokovoy's conclusions, readers will be left with a lot of information to chew on. Like Welch states in his foreword, though he might not agree with all of Bokovoy's "holds," he still finds great value in his work.

Bokovoy has done a service for an LDS audience who are interested in learning and knowing more about our standard works. He provides a bibliography that can act as a starting point for those interested in the given topics, and, most importantly, he shows that it is possible to appropriate modern critical studies into a faithful approach for Restoration scripture. Any Latter-day Saint interested in the history of the Bible and Book of Mormon will do well to spend time getting lost in Bokovoy's book. I am sure this will also be the case with the upcoming two volumes.

Colby was born in Bountiful, Utah and has studied at Brigham Young University and Weber State. He is pursuing degrees in Comparative Literature and Religious Studies at the University of Utah, focusing his attention on the Hebrew Bible. Colby is currently writing his honors thesis on the J source of the Pentateuch's influence on the writing of the Book of Mormon. He is also working on a book project that will be a reference for scholarly studies comparing the text of the Book of Mormon with the King James Bible. He lives in Morgan, Utah, with his wife and child.

