2003

By the Hand of Mormon: the American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction

> [Mani] seem[s] to suggest that already in the third or fourth century the idea had got around, at least to perceptive minds, that religious movements have each a book, that a new religious movement must have a new written book.
>
> —Wilfred Cantwell Smith

In 1842, four years after Governor Lilburn Boggs expelled all Mormons from the state of Missouri, and two years before his own martyrdom, Joseph Smith sent a now famous account of the new religious movement he had founded to the editor of a Chicago newspaper.[1] Included was a description of the golden plates delivered to him by the angel Moroni, which he had translated and published as the Book of Mormon in 1830.

> These records were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold. Each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness, a part of which was sealed. The characters on the unsealed part were small, and beautifully engraved. The whole book exhibited many marks of antiquity in its construction and much skill in the art of engraving.

The passage reads rather like a catalogue description penned by a connoisseur of fine books. It shows not just an eye for detail, but an aesthetic sensibility and an appreciative but restrained regard for the beauty and sheer craftsmanship of what was before him. There is some-

thing almost uncanny in the dispassion with which the prophet focuses on the pure physicality of the plates. Already, they had generated a legacy of cultural conflict and religious controversy that would culminate in both empire building and martyrdom. But Smith's eye is here focused on the plates as concrete, inert artifact. It all reminds one of the great impressionist painter Claude Monet's last painting of his beloved Camille; as she lay deceased upon her death bed, he was drawn to paint her one final time. Instead of seeing his dead wife, he wrote, he suddenly found himself "in the act of mechanically observing the succession . . . of fading colors which death was imposing on [her] immobile face."[2] Certainly the deceased may have coloring that intrigues us, and even the stone tablets of Moses, assuming they were real, must have had particular dimensions. Still, we do not generally think of holy artifacts or of departed loved ones in such terms as these.

Scripture is not an easy category to define. Religious scholar Miriam Levering describes three traditional approaches: We consider to be sacred texts those that have supernatural origins, those that are used to define our relationship to the sacred, or those that are simply treated as sacred. But Levering suggests that such categories do not do full justice to the multidimensional ways in which scripture can be experienced by a community. Consequently, she advocates "examining all of the ways in which individuals and communities *receive* these words and texts: the ways people respond to the texts, the uses they make of them, the contexts in which they turn to them, their understandings of what it is to read them or to understand them, and the roles they find such words and texts can have in their religious projects."[3] Shlomo Biderman agrees that "to understand scripture is to understand the conditions under which a group of texts has gained authority over the lives of people and has been incorporated into human activities of various important kinds."[4]

Since its publication, the Book of Mormon has been cast in a variety of roles that served the "religious projects" of both believers and detractors. Sign of the end times, litmus test of prophetic authority, Rosetta stone of Mesoamerican civilizations, barometer of public gullibility, prima facie evidence of blasphemy—these and other functions have characterized the record's tumultuous history. One astute—and generally objective—observer of Mormonism has remarked that "the tale of an unsophisticated farm boy who found some engraved metal plates and used 'magic spectacles' to translate therefrom a thousand years of pre-Columbian American history appears so incredible to many non-Mormons that they simply dismiss the prophet's visions as hallucinations, regard his 'golden bible' as a worthless document, and wonder how any intelligent person could ever accept it as true."[5]

This present work is an attempt to answer that question, among others, but in the context of a larger history of the reception and impact of a scripture that has hitherto received little critical investigation. From the day of its founding, Mormonism's name, doctrine, and image have been largely dependent on this book of scripture, transmitted to the boy-prophet Joseph Smith by an angel. After the Bible, this Book of Mormon is the most widely distributed religious book in America. By the new millennium, over fifteen thousand copies a day were being printed, in some 94 languages.[6] Long considered a sacred revelation by the faithful, a fraud by detractors, and ignored by non-Mormon scholars, the book in recent years has been undergoing significant reappraisal on all three fronts.

Within the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), discussion has emerged over the role and significance of the Book of Mormon in establishing early LDS doctrine, and recent years have seen both a repackaging of the sacred volume (newly subtitled, as of 1982, "Another Testament of Jesus Christ") and a dramatic reemphasis on its place in the lives of individual members. For the first century and more of the Book of Mormon's existence, its historicity was assumed by the faithful, but attempts to authenticate its antiquity were confined largely to amateurs. Increasingly sophisticated endeavors began by midcentury, and since 1980, several LDS scholars have worked under the aegis of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies to amass literary, anthropological, historical, and other support for an ancient origin for the Book of Mormon. Then in 1997, the Church officially took that institute under its wing, incorporating it into Brigham Young University in a move that represents a significant shift in the church's policy toward scientific approaches to the Book of Mormon.

Meanwhile, skeptics are forsaking the facile scenarios of the nineteenth century (that Smith plagiarized accounts by Ethan Smith or Solomon Spaulding) and are searching for new sources of and explanations behind the scripture. (John Brooke, for example, finds parallels with hermeticism,[7] and D. Michael Quinn and others build upon Fawn Brodie's early explanation that emphasized nineteenth-century environmental influences.[8]) On a different front, two scholars at a recent regional meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society praised the professionalism of Mormon apologetics, and reproached their religious colleagues for the dearth of scholarly, sophisticated, and informed critiques of the book.[9]

In the larger realm of religious studies, developments have been equally dramatic. Academics here have traditionally ignored Joseph Smith and his story of gold plates. But theologians and religious scholars of the first rank, from Jacob Neusner to James Charlesworth to (the more controversial) Harold Bloom, have been suggesting for a few years

that it is time to take Smith's writings more seriously. Neusner calls the Book of Mormon "a fresh Christian expression" that has too often endured scholarly neglect.[10] Charlesworth and Krister Stendahl have presented papers that examine relations between the Book of Mormon and both pseudepigraphical and New Testament texts.

Harold Bloom refers to the profound and provocative parallels between kabbalistic texts and Smith's writings, and more recently has described the Book of Mormon and its "doctrine of angels" as being of "extraordinary interest."[11] In Europe, the late German theologian Ernst Wilhelm Benz and the Finn Heikki Raisanen have argued that Joseph Smith needs to be taken more seriously as a theologian.[12] Structuralist literary scholar Seth Kunin has written on the book, as has French critic Viola Sachs (who refers to the text as "the New World scripture").[13]

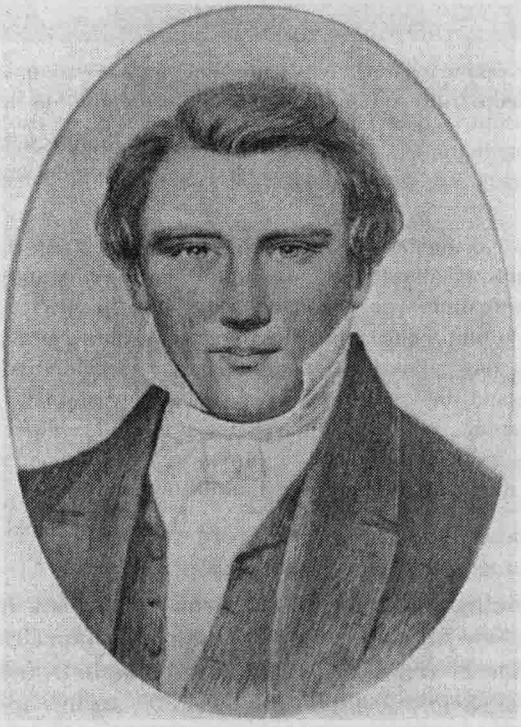
In spite of the book's unparalleled position in American religion and its changing meaning for apologists, critics, and theologians, no full-length study has attempted to present to the wider public a study of this book and its changing role in Mormonism and in American religion generally. In fact, as historian Nathan Hatch has written, "for all the attention given to the study of Mormonism, surprisingly little has been devoted to the Book of Mormon itself .... The pivotal document of the Mormon church, 'an extraordinary work of popular imagination,' still receives scant attention from cultural historians." He cites the opinion of sociologist and scholar of Mormonism Jan Shipps as well, that "historians need to return to the centrality of the 'gold bible,' Joseph Smith's original testament to the world, which certified the prophet's leadership and first attracted adherents to the movement."[14] "Whatever its source," Shipps writes elsewhere, the Book of Mormon "occupies a position of major importance in both the religious and intellectual history of the United States."[15]

Nevertheless, at the present time, available treatments are largely limited to apologetic or inspirational literature directed to the faithful, and vitriolic attacks shelved in the cult section of Christian bookstores.[16] The Book of Mormon is perhaps the most religiously influential, hotly contested, and, in the secular press at least, intellectually underinvestigated book in America. This study, then, will examine the initial shape and subsequent transformations of the Book of Mormon, how it has been understood, positioned, packaged, utilized, exploited, presented and represented, by its detractors and by its proponents. It will survey its shifting relationship to LDS doctrine and proselytizing, its changing status and reputation among theologians and scholars, and explore what impact its obtrusive presence may have on Christian conceptions of scripture, of revelation, and of the canon.

Principally, the Book of Mormon has been read in one of at least four ways by its various audiences: as sacred sign, or divine testament to the last days and Joseph's authorized role as modern day prophet and rev-

elator; as ancient history, or a factual account of the pre-Columbian peopling of the Western hemisphere first by a small Old World exodus occurring in the era of Babel and later by groups from Jerusalem in the age of Jeremiah; as cultural production, the imaginative ravings of a rustic religion-maker more inspired by the winds of culture than the breath of God; and as a new American Bible or Fifth Gospel, displacing, supporting, or perverting the canonical word of God, according to the disposition of the reader.

That it was accounted a "marvelous work and a wonder" by all who observed its coming forth is not to be doubted. But it is useful to remember that while for many Christians that expression implied a mighty act of God prophesied by Isaiah, for an equally substantial number the famous definition posed by Samuel Johnson was more pertinent: "All wonder is the effect of novelty upon ignorance."



Joseph Smith, Jr. (1805–1844).
Prophet and founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and translator of the Book of Mormon. From Charles W. Carter's glass negative (© 1885) of original by an unknown artist.
(Courtesy LDS Church Historical Department)