

An Introduction to the Book of Mormon

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There are many questions about the Book of Mormon. In order to engage these questions properly, one must have a basic understanding of the facts concerning the Book of Mormon. This introduction provides an orientation to the study of the Book of Mormon.

What Is the Book of Mormon?

We will begin by explaining in general terms what the Book of Mormon is and why it is such a significant aspect of the Mormon religion.

The Book of Mormon is one of the four “standard works” of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which views it as a scriptural record translated by founder Joseph Smith Jr. from gold plates engraved by prophets in the ancient New World. When Joseph formally founded the LDS Church on April 6, 1830, eleven days after publishing the Book of Mormon, he stated that it contained “the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also” (Doctrine & Covenants [D&C] 20:9).

In 1841 Joseph stated, “I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book” (quoted in the modern “Introduction” to the Book of Mormon). That this statement implies some greater reliability for the Book of Mormon than for the Bible is confirmed in the LDS scriptural text Articles of Faith, composed by Joseph Smith in 1843. It affirms, “We believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly; we also believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God” (Art. 8). This last statement reflects the LDS belief that the Bible suffered substantial corruption, especially loss of important teachings it originally contained, through centuries of copying and translating, but that the Book of Mormon, being a divinely inspired translation, does not suffer from such deficiencies.

In 2010 the number of copies of the Book of Mormon in print reached 150 million, including complete versions in 82 languages.

The Book of Mormon plays a primary role in Mormon evangelistic efforts. LDS missionaries encourage prospects to read the Book of Mormon and pray to receive a spiritual witness or testimony that it is the word of God (based on a statement toward the end of the Book of Mormon in Moroni 10:4-5). The LDS Church has often run television commercials offering to give away free copies. Because the Book of Mormon’s doctrines differ only in comparatively subtle ways from those of orthodox Christianity, people with Christian backgrounds are more likely to obtain a positive impression of Mormonism based on the Book of Mormon than if they were introduced first to Joseph Smith’s later doctrinal innovations. Once a person accepts the Book of Mormon as the word of God, however, it is a small step to accepting Joseph Smith as God’s prophet and the LDS Church as God’s only true and living church on the earth.

Contents of the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is a lengthy and somewhat complex book. A clear understanding of its various parts and how they fit together is essential to understanding the issues pertaining to its historical and religious claims.

The front matter of contemporary editions of the Book of Mormon include the following elements:

- Joseph’s translation of the Book of Mormon’s ancient title page
- a modern introduction
- two affidavits to the existence of the gold plates called the Testimonies of Three Witnesses and of Eight Witnesses
- excerpts from Joseph’s account of how he came to translate the Book of Mormon
- a “Brief Explanation” that distinguishes four groups of metal plates of relevance.

The Book of Mormon text, which runs to about 269,000 words (531 pages), is divided into fifteen books, which are further subdivided into chapters (239) and verses (6,607).

Of the fifteen books, all but two form a more or less continuous narrative that begins about 600 BC and ends in AD 421 (these dates, which are not part of the Book of Mormon proper, appear at the bottom of nearly each page of the published Book of Mormon). This millennium-long narrative recounts the history of two warring peoples called the Lamanites and the Nephites who were descended from an Israelite family that left Jerusalem and sailed from Arabia to the Americas. The Book of Mormon also tells about two other migrations from the Middle East to the Western Hemisphere, one around the same time (the people of Mulek) and another a millennium or more earlier (called the Jaredites).

| Plates | Author | Book | Chaps. |
|-------------------------|---|-----------------|---------------|
| (Small) Plates of Nephi | Nephi | 1 Nephi | 22 |
| | | 2 Nephi | 33 |
| | Jacob | Jacob | 7 |
| | Enos | Enos | 1 |
| | Jarom | Jarom | 1 |
| | Omni and three others; Amaleki | Omni | 1 |
| Plates of Mormon | Mormon | Words of Mormon | 1 |
| | Mormon (his abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi) | Mosiah | 29 |
| | | Alma | 63 |
| | | Helaman | 16 |
| | | 3 Nephi | 30 |
| | | 4 Nephi | 1 |
| | Mormon (1-7) and Moroni (8-9) | Book of Mormon | 9 |
| | Moroni’s abridgment of Ether’s 24 plates | Ether | 15 |
| Moroni | Moroni | 10 | |

The Books and the Plates

The Book of Mormon divides into two groups of books, each group of which we are told were engraved on a different set of plates (see Table 1). The (small) Plates of Nephi include the first six books and have Nephi as their main author. The Plates of Mormon consist of the remaining nine books, of which Mormon is the primary author. These nine books begin with a short transitional book written by Mormon, followed by six books which (except for two closing chapters) are Mormon's abridgment from a longer narrative on the (large) Plates of Nephi. Both Nephi and Mormon quote extensively from Old Testament writings said to have been taken to the New World on plates of brass. Mormon's son Moroni, who appends two chapters to Mormon's abridgment, is the author of the last two books and the one who buried the plates; he is also the angel, or resurrected being, who gave the plates to Joseph Smith fourteen centuries later. Thus the whole work is attributed to three main authors: Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni.¹ Since Mormon composed about two-thirds of it, the whole is known as The Book of Mormon.

Summary of the Book of Mormon

1 Nephi and *2 Nephi* (600-545 BC; 55 chapters). Lehi, a Jew living in Jerusalem, takes his family to Arabia shortly before the Babylonian Exile and from there sails to the Americas. He and his son Nephi have visions, prophesy of the coming of Christ, and seek to teach the rest of the family the ways of the Lord. Nephi's brother Laman rejects his revelations, establishing the precedent for the wars that will ensue between the Nephites and Lamanites for the next thousand years. Over a 30-chapter stretch (1 Ne. 20–2 Ne. 27), Nephi quotes 18 chapters from Isaiah—nearly verbatim as they appear in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible.

Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni (544-130 BC; 10 chapters). Nephi passed the gold plates to his brother Jacob, and from there the plates are passed from father to son, with each man serving as a prophet for his generation and writing something on the plates—though what they write becomes shorter and shorter. Thus the book of Jacob has seven chapters, the books of Enos and Jarom one each, and the one chapter of the book of Omni actually covers five generations of prophets. The last of these, Amaleki, tells that Mosiah discovered a land called Zarahemla, was made king there, and was succeeded by Benjamin.

Words of Mormon (ca. AD 385; 1 chapter). This is a transitional book, the first book on the Plates of Mormon. In this short book, Mormon explains that he had abridged the records from Lehi to Benjamin but had also included a shorter, parallel account on other plates of Nephi that he had found, “for a wise purpose” that only the Lord knew. This shorter account is the first six books of the Book of Mormon. The significance of this information will be made clear below.

Mosiah, Alma, and Helaman (200-1 BC; 108 chapters). These three books and the next two are all attributed to Mormon as his abridgment from the (large) Plates of Nephi. The three books give a detailed narrative concerning the history of the Lamanites and the Nephites beginning from the time of Benjamin, with an annual countdown to the birth of Christ. Various prophets

¹ See Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

during this period preach the Christian gospel, referring explicitly to the future coming of Jesus Christ (who is repeatedly named) and to his crucifixion and resurrection.

| TABLE 2: BOOK OF MORMON OVERVIEW | | | |
|--|---------------|--------------|--|
| Book (chaps.) | Order* | Dates | Story |
| 1 Nephi (22) | 9 | 600-570 BC | Lehi and his son Nephi travel to Arabia (1-7); Lehi's and Nephi's visions (8-15); they sail to the Americas (16-18); Nephi writes, quotes Isaiah 48-49 (19-21); Nephi's exposition (22) |
| 2 Nephi (33) | 10 | 570-545 BC | Lehi speaks, dies (1-4); Nephites and Lamanites divide (5); Jacob speaks, quotes Isaiah 49:22-52:2 and 55:1-2, prophecies (6-10); Nephi quotes Isaiah 2-14 (11-24), prophecies, quotes Isaiah 29 (25-33) |
| Jacob (7) | 11 | 544-480 BC | Nephi dies (1); his son Jacob preaches Christ (2-6); Sherem denies Christ and is struck down (7) |
| Enos (1) | 12 | 480-420 BC | Jacob's son Enos preaches Christ |
| Jarom (1) | 13 | 420-361 BC | Enos's son Jarom preaches Christ |
| Omni (1) | 14 | 361-130 BC | Plates passed down to Omni, Amaron, Chemish, and Abinadom (1:1-11), and Amaleki, who tells that Mosiah discovered Zarahemla, was made king there, and was succeeded by Benjamin (1:12-30) |
| Words of Mormon (1) | 15 | AD 385 | Mormon abridged the records from Lehi to Benjamin but also includes a parallel account on other plates he found, "for a wise purpose" that the Lord knows** |
| Mosiah (29) | 1 | 200-91 BC | Annual countdown to Christ begins; Benjamin dies; his son Mosiah rules the Nephites, who are joined by Mulekites that return to Zarahemla led by Alma; quotations of the Ten Commandments, Isaiah 53 |
| Alma (63) | 2 | 91-52 BC | Alma and his sons preach Christ and along with Moroni rally the Nephites to defend their liberty against insurrectionists and Lamanites |
| Helaman (16) | 3 | 51-1 BC | Helaman's son Nephi returns to Zarahemla and with the help of Samuel convinces many to believe in the soon coming Christ |
| 3 Nephi (30) | 4 | AD 1-35 | The risen Christ appears to the Nephites, preaches the Sermon on the Mount (12-14), starts a Nephite church, quotes Isaiah 54, Malachi 3-4 (22, 24-25) |
| 4 Nephi (1) | 5 | 36-321 | Nephites and Lamanites all convert to faith in Christ; three centuries later, the church is apostate |
| Book of Mormon (9) | 6 | 322-421 | Lamanites defeat the Nephites at the hill Cumorah; Mormon hides the plates on that hill except for a few given to his son Moroni, who writes about the future coming forth of the record |
| Ether (15) | 7 | (undated) | Moroni tells about the Jaredites who came to the Americas from the Tower of Babel and died out about the time Lehi's party arrived |
| Moroni (10) | 8 | 400-421 | Moroni seals up his father's records |
| *Order in which Joseph dictated the books. | | | |
| **To serve as a replacement text for the 116 pages Joseph dictated but then lost | | | |

3 Nephi (AD 1-35; 30 chapters). In this book, Mormon tells about the birth of Christ (dated in AD 1) and his death and resurrection from the viewpoint of the Nephites. Following Jesus' resurrection, he appears to the Nephites, preaches the Sermon on the Mount to them (nearly verbatim as it appears in Matthew 5-7 in the KJV), chooses twelve Nephite apostles, establishes the church there, and quotes Isaiah 52 and 54 as well as Malachi 3-4.

4 Nephi (AD 36-321; 1 chapter). Mormon tells about the rise and fall of the Christian church in the Americas. The Nephites and Lamanites all convert to faith in Christ and the people enjoy three centuries of peace and prosperity, which come to an end in an apostasy in the early fourth century (just as Mormons traditionally believe happened in the Old World church).

Book of Mormon (AD 322-421; 9 chapters). This short book has the same title as the whole work. Wars between the Lamanites and the Nephites end with the utter defeat of the Nephites at the hill Cumorah. Mormon hides plates on that hill but leaves other plates (those containing the material summarized so far) to his son Moroni, who writes (in the last two chapters) about the future discovery of the record.

Ether (undated; 15 chapters). Moroni abridges a set of 24 plates from Ether, which tell about the Jaredites, a people who left the Tower of Babel and settled in the New World, where their civilization flourished and then disintegrated about the time that Lehi's party arrived.

Moroni (AD 400-421; 8 chapters). Moroni provides some final teaching before he seals up his father's record, ending with a challenge to future readers to pray to know that the record is true.

See Table 2 for another summary of the books of the Book of Mormon.

The Modern Discovery, Translation, and Editions of the Book of Mormon

Like any book, the Book of Mormon has a history. We will here trace its modern history from Joseph's accounts of discovering the gold plates from which the Book of Mormon is said to have been translated to the most recent editions of Joseph's translation.

Modern Discovery

The history of the publication of the Book of Mormon is complex and extremely controversial (see Table 3 below for a chronology). According to Joseph Smith, an angel (whom he later identified as Moroni) appeared to him repeatedly between September 1823 and September 1827 to show him the gold plates and related materials buried in a stone box in a hill near Joseph's home in Palmyra, New York. This span of four years between initial contact and Joseph's coming into possession of the plates is probably related in some way to the fact that during part of those years Joseph was engaged in "money-digging" or treasure-hunting, a widespread if somewhat disreputable activity in his day. According to the traditional account (see Joseph Smith—History [JS-H] 1:27-59), on September 22, 1827, Moroni allowed Joseph to take custody of the plates, along with an apparatus for translating the plates called the interpreters (and later, after the publication of the Book of Mormon, often called the Urim and Thummim).

| Table 3: Modern Timeline of the Book of Mormon | | |
|---|--|-----------------------------|
| Date | Event | Reference |
| 21-22 Sept. 1823 | Moroni first appears to Joseph Smith, quotes Malachi, tells Joseph about the plates | JS-H 1:27-54 D&C 2 |
| 1825-1826 | Joseph known as involved in “money digging” | JS-H 1:56 |
| 22 Sept. 1827 | Moroni allows Joseph to take the plates and the Urim and Thummim (interpreters) | JS-H 1:59 |
| Dec. 1827-Feb. 1828 | Joseph copies some of the characters and translates them using the Urim and Thummim | JS-H 1:62 |
| Feb. 1828 | Martin Harris shows a copy of characters from the plates to Prof. Charles Anthon | JS-H 1:63-65 2 Nephi 27 |
| 12 April 1828 | Joseph begins dictating his translation of the plates (“The Book of Lehi”) to Martin | |
| 14 June 1828 | Martin takes the manuscript, 116 pages so far, to show his wife | |
| 1 July 1828 | Martin tells Joseph the pages are lost; Moroni takes the plates and interpreters away from Joseph | |
| 8 July 1828 | Joseph produces his first revelation, concerning the lost pages | D&C 3 |
| 9 July 1828 (?) | Joseph produces a revelation warning that evil men stole the pages and directing Joseph to translate a parallel account instead | D&C 10 |
| 22 Sept. 1828 | Moroni returns the plates to Joseph | |
| 2 March 1829 | Joseph produces a revelation that three men will be witnesses to the gold plates and that Martin may be one of them if he repents | D&C 5 |
| 7 April 1829 | Joseph begins dictating to Oliver Cowdery, to whom Joseph had spoken revelations urging him to stand by Joseph and to be his scribe; Joseph evidently dictated Mosiah through Moroni, then went back and dictated 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon, replacing the lost text | JS-H 1:66-67 D&C 6, 8, 9 |
| 11 June 1829 | Joseph copyrights the Book of Mormon | |
| 17 June 1829 | The Three Witnesses see the plates | D&C 17; Ether 5 |
| 24 June 1829 | The Eight Witnesses see the plates | |
| 26 June 1829 | The Wayne <i>Sentinel</i> publishes the title page of the Book of Mormon | |
| 1 July 1829 | Joseph finishes dictating the Book of Mormon | |
| Jan. 1830 | The Palmyra <i>Reflector</i> prints an unauthorized excerpt from the Book of Mormon | |
| 14 March 1830 | Joseph writes a preface to the Book of Mormon, focused on the issue of the lost 116 pages | |
| 26 March 1830 | First edition of the Book of Mormon is released | |
| 6 April 1830 | Joseph officially founds the Church of Christ | |

Translation

Recently married and quite poor, Joseph persuaded an older friend named Martin Harris, a prosperous farmer, to finance the work of translating and publishing the book contained on the plates. To encourage his support, Joseph gave Martin a paper on which he had copied from the plates characters described as Egyptian hieroglyphs and sent him in February 1828 to New York City to have them authenticated by some scholars including Charles Anthon, a reputable classicist. According to Joseph's later account, Anthon deemed the characters to be authentic and a translation Joseph had written underneath to be accurate (JS-H 1:62-65). However, according to Anthon's own account, the paper contained no translation, and the characters, though some of them resembled characters of various ancient languages, did not represent a coherent language or text. Nor could Anthon have verified a translation of a text that used Egyptian hieroglyphs, since the Rosetta Stone had only recently been deciphered by European scholars and the knowledge derived from it had not yet reached America. Although Anthon warned Martin that he was being defrauded, his comparison of some of the characters to those of unrelated ancient languages was apparently enough to satisfy Martin. Years later the paper, commonly called the Anthon transcript, surfaced in the possession of the Reorganized Church (now called the Community of Christ). The paper shows no translation of the characters, and the characters themselves overall bear no discernible relation to Egyptian, Hebrew, or any other known language.²

For about two months that spring of 1828, Joseph dictated a translation from the gold plates to Martin, with a curtain shielding him so that Martin could not see Joseph or the plates. Indeed, by all accounts, Joseph allowed no one to examine or even see the gold plates for nearly two years after he acquired them. The two men produced a reported 116 pages of handwritten manuscript even as Martin's wife Lucy, who was understandably skeptical of the project, repeatedly demanded to see the plates or at least the manuscript. After several denials of these requests, on June 14 Joseph said that God had given permission for Martin to take the manuscript pages home with strict instructions to show them only to his wife and four other close relatives. Martin showed the pages not only to his family but to a number of friends, keeping them in a locked drawer at home. Within two weeks someone broke into the drawer and stole the pages; they were never recovered and the thief never identified. A common theory is that Lucy herself took the manuscript and destroyed it, which would explain why it has never resurfaced.

When Martin informed Joseph on July 1 that the pages were gone, Joseph was at first distraught, and he reported that the angel had taken the plates and interpreters away from him. A week later, though, he issued his first modern revelation (known now as D&C 3), in which the Lord severely castigated Joseph for letting Martin take the pages (despite the earlier claim of divine permission) and asserted that his purposes would nevertheless be accomplished. In a follow-up revelation, Joseph said that the Lord had foreseen that evil men would steal the pages in order to alter them so as to make Joseph look like a fraud if he dictated a new translation of the same text from the gold plates.

² See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., "[Anthon Transcript](#): Did Charles Anthon Authenticate the Book of Mormon Characters or Translation?" (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2016).

To circumvent this threatened deception, the Lord had inspired two parallel accounts of the same history: the longer narrative that Mormon had abridged and a shorter narrative that emphasized spiritual matters over historical details (D&C 10). This is the significance of the short book called the Words of Mormon: it forms a transition between the “spiritual” account from 1 Nephi through Omni on the (small) Plates of Nephi and Mormon’s abridged account of the events that followed Omni that begins with Mosiah. The “wise purpose” for the inclusion of two accounts of the same period among the plates was that Joseph would have a replacement account to translate after his first manuscript was stolen!³

On September 22, 1828, one year after Joseph said that Moroni had originally turned the plates over to him, Joseph reported that they had again been entrusted to him to translate. Over the next six months Joseph dictated translation of the plates occasionally to his wife Emma, though how much is unknown. In March 1829, Joseph issued another revelation announcing that three men would be permitted to be witnesses to the gold plates and that Martin Harris might be one of them if he repented (D&C 5). On April 7, Joseph began dictating anew with Oliver Cowdery, a schoolteacher and new friend (see JS-H 1:66-67; D&C 6, 8, 9). Although no record of each day’s work was kept, what references exist to the contents of the translation on various days has led to general agreement among both LDS and non-LDS researchers as to the order of translation. It appears that Joseph began the dictation about where the narrative of the 116 pages had left off, dictated Mosiah through Moroni, and then dictated 1 Nephi through Words of Mormon.⁴ One possible reason for this unusual order was to allow more time to pass in case the lost 116 pages turned up after all.

Although the gold plates were said to be in Joseph’s possession again, the interpreters were not. According to most of the reports from those who were in the house while the translation work was being done, Joseph did not read or even look at the plates while dictating the translation. Instead, he would place a “seer stone” (which he had owned from his treasure-hunting days) inside his hat, put his face into the hat to block all outside light, and dictate the text he claimed to “see” in this manner. The plates themselves were laid on the table or nearby wrapped in cloths, or kept in another part of the house, or even hidden outside the house somewhere. Joseph would dictate a sentence or a line of words at a time, wait for Oliver to write those words and read them back to him, and move on if Oliver’s text was correct.⁵

This description of the dictation process suggests a number of difficult questions. On the one hand, the use of the seer stone in the hat would seem rather clearly to preclude the use of written or printed sources (such as a Bible) during the dictation sessions. On the other hand, this process implies that Joseph’s dictation was essentially no more than a repetition of whatever words were

³ See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., “[The Lost 116 Pages and the Book of Mormon](#)” (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2016).

⁴ The case has been most thoroughly presented in (non-LDS) Brent Lee Metcalfe, “The Priority of Mosiah: A Prelude to Book of Mormon Exegesis,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 395-444. This “Mosiah first” theory is now widely accepted by LDS scholars.

⁵ See further Robert M. Bowman Jr., “[Joseph Smith’s Seer Stone](#)” (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2015).

supernaturally made to appear before him in the dark of his hat. If this implication is correct, then Joseph’s translation of the Book of Mormon should not be dependent on modern sources for its specific wording—yet much of the Book of Mormon repeats verbatim or nearly so the wording of many passages in the King James Version of the Bible.

These and similar questions have made the whole issue of the translation “method” of the Book of Mormon something of a quagmire in Mormon intellectual circles. Some LDS scholars defend a relatively “tight control” model of translation in which Joseph’s dictation closely and literally translated the ancient text on the gold plates, so that the resulting English text reflects very little if any of Joseph’s own mind or knowledge (and leaves comparatively little room for errors). Others defend a looser model in which Joseph had to study or think through each part of the text before giving his dictation, so that the resulting English translation reflects in varying degrees significant elements of Joseph’s own knowledge (and so has more potential for errors). A few Mormon scholars have even suggested that Joseph made substantial use of the King James Version and his own knowledge to expand or interpret the ancient Book of Mormon text.

Joseph and Oliver’s work on the translation proceeded at a much more rapid pace than had been the case a year earlier with Martin Harris. In less than three months (April 7 through late June) they apparently produced a handwritten manuscript for the entire Book of Mormon. The qualification *apparently* is justifiable because again no daily record was kept of the progress on the manuscript and we know that Joseph had dictated at least some pages to Emma earlier. He may also have spent those nine months from July 1828 to March 1829 working out a plan or story line for the book. Mormon apologists commonly argue that the extreme rapidity of the dictation (equivalent to six to eight pages of the modern printed edition a day) makes any naturalistic theory of the book’s origin implausible.⁶ From an outsider’s point of view, on the other hand, the fact that Joseph was able to generate text about three times faster with Cowdery than with Harris suggests that Cowdery, an educated man, had a more active role in the work than the men testified. The generally unchallenged yet gratuitous assumption is that all of the pages of the manuscript were actually produced during the dictation sessions that Joseph’s family and friends witnessed.

In June 1829, as the work of translation neared completion, Joseph arranged for select witnesses to view the gold plates (see D&C 17). Harris, Cowdery, and David Whitmer (in whose home Joseph stayed during much of the translation work) reported that Joseph took them to a secluded location in the woods, where after some intense prayer they were permitted to see the angel (Moroni), who showed them the plates. (Harris, though, reported having his vision of the angel and plates separately from the other two.) “The Testimony of Three Witnesses,” printed in the front matter to the Book of Mormon, is vague as to the nature of this experience, and some evidence (including some later accounts) suggests that the experience may have been visionary rather than physical. Joseph also showed the gold plates (this time without the angel) to eight other men, whose “Testimony of Eight Witnesses” emphatically affirms that they examined and even held the plates to verify their physical reality. All eight of these witnesses were members of

⁶ E.g., John W. Welch, “How Long Did It Take to Translate the Book of Mormon?” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret; Provo: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 1-5.

the Smith and Whitmer families: David's brothers Christian, Jacob, Peter, and John Whitmer, their brother-in-law Hiram Page, and Joseph's father Joseph Smith Sr. and brothers Hyrum and Samuel. The evidential value of the eleven witnesses has been a contentious issue ever since the Book of Mormon was published.

Once the translation work was complete, Joseph reported, Moroni took the gold plates back into his custody. It is therefore impossible for anyone to examine the plates or to decipher whatever text, if any, may have been written on them.

Both the witnesses and Joseph himself later provided specific information about the physical dimensions of the gold plates. Some of the eight witnesses reported lifting the plates and estimated them to weigh a total of about fifty to sixty pounds. The flat surfaces of the plates measured about six by eight inches, and the entire collection measured about six inches high (that is, with the plates stacked together). These dimensions are inconsistent with the claim that the plates were composed of gold, since a stack of gold plates of that size should weigh close to two hundred pounds. Mormon apologists usually explain this discrepancy by arguing that the plates were only gold in color, not in composition. Even if the plates weighed only fifty or sixty pounds, however, the weight raises other difficulties. For example, most Mormon scholars argue that Mormon and Moroni lived in Central America and that Moroni walked from there to upstate New York where he buried the plates before his death. This means that Moroni would have walked some three thousand miles carrying fifty or sixty pounds of gold plates (along with whatever other supplies he might have possessed). Such a scenario seems highly implausible and even pointless, especially considering the fact that Joseph never actually looked at the gold plates while dictating his translation.

The exact language of the Book of Mormon is another matter of controversy even among Mormons. In the second verse of the Book of Mormon, the author Nephi states, "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2; see also Mosiah 1:4). The Book of Mormon explicitly states that it was not written in Hebrew (Mormon 9:33). It asserts that the text was written "in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us" (9:32) and explains that the interpreters were prepared because "none other people knoweth our language" (9:34). In addition, Joseph had described the language of the plates as "Egyptian" (JS-H 1:64). For most of Mormon history, LDS scholars assumed that the Book of Mormon language was a modified type of Egyptian, and have cited linguistic and literary parallels from ancient Egyptian sources. In recent years, however, Mormon scholars have generally inclined to the view that the Book of Mormon language was in effect a form of Hebrew written using Egyptian characters, and they have cited linguistic and literary parallels primarily from the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Hebrew texts. Yet the matter remains unsettled.⁷

The various issues just discussed lead to the question of the reality of the gold plates. On one side are Joseph's secretiveness about the plates, the controversial elements of the testimonies of the eleven men who affirmed they had seen the plates, and the discrepancies concerning the

⁷ See Neal Rappleye, "Learning Lehi's Language: Creating a Context for 1 Nephi 1:2," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015): 151–59.

plates' dimensions, composition, contents, and language. These facts appear to support the view that Joseph did not actually have a set of ancient gold plates. On the other side are the testimonies of the eleven men, reports of the plates wrapped up and sitting on the table, and the reported subterfuges of Joseph to hide the plates from those who might try to steal them, all of which support the existence of the plates. Perhaps Joseph at some point did have metal plates of some sort, but they were not gold and were not ancient documents written with Egyptian characters. Such a conclusion probably fits the available facts and testimonies better than any other explanation.

The First Edition

Once the translation was complete, Joseph had Oliver produce a second handwritten manuscript by copying the dictation manuscript. These two manuscripts of the Book of Mormon have become known as the Original (O) and the Printer's (P) manuscripts. Only 28 percent of O (including most of 1 Nephi, much of Alma, and little else) is now extant, while P has survived essentially intact and is in the possession of the Community of Christ. The period of time during which Oliver produced the backup manuscript may have been an opportunity for the original to be corrected or even augmented. According to LDS scholars, about one-sixth of the first printed edition of the Book of Mormon actually followed O rather than P. A local printer, E. B. Grandin of Palmyra, New York, typeset and published the first edition of the Book of Mormon, released on March 26, 1830 with an initial printing of 5,000 copies. Eleven days later, Joseph Smith founded the Church of Christ (as he then called it) on April 6, 1830.

Later Editions

Two major new editions of the Book of Mormon were published during Joseph Smith's lifetime. The most significant of these was published in Kirtland, Ohio, in 1837. Hundreds of grammatical and spelling changes were made to the text as well as some theologically significant revisions. The most interesting of these changes was the revision of three references to Jesus that appeared in the first edition to identify him as God the Father. For example, "the mother of God" was changed to "the mother of the Son of God" (1 Nephi 11:18); "the Lamb of God, yea, even the Eternal Father" was changed to say "even the Son of the Eternal Father" (1 Nephi 11:21; see also 1 Nephi 11:32; 13:40). These changes are known departures from the original manuscript (O) as well as the 1830 edition. In 1840 Joseph published another edition with additional changes. While some of these changes represented corrections conforming the text to O, at least one famous change was a departure from it. In O as well as the 1830 and 1837 editions, 2 Nephi 30:6 said that a remnant of people descended from Lehi's family would someday convert to faith in Christ would thereby become "a white and delightsome people." The 1840 edition changed these words to "a *pure* and delightsome people." Subsequent editions, however, reverted to "white" until the 1981 edition.

In 1879 the LDS Church published a new edition of the Book of Mormon edited by apostle Orson Pratt. This edition introduced the chapter and verse system still used today. Significant new editions were published in 1920, edited by James E. Talmage; in 1981, edited by a committee of LDS apostles led by Bruce R. McConkie; and in 2013.

The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, which arose in the 1850s among Mormons who did not follow Brigham Young to Utah, published its own editions of the Book of Mormon. Its main edition was published in 1908 and continued to serve as the official RLDS version of the Book of Mormon for the rest of the twentieth century. It follows a different chapter and verse system than the LDS Church's editions.

In the 1980s, Royal Skousen, an English language scholar at Brigham Young University (BYU), began work on a comprehensive study of the “textual criticism” of the Book of Mormon, reviewing the O and P manuscripts and the printed editions from Joseph Smith's lifetime in an effort to establish a more correct Book of Mormon text. His Critical Text Project of the Book of Mormon, launched officially in 1988, produced published transcripts of O and P (2001), a massive six-volume *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon* (2004-2009; a second edition was published in 2017), and *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (2009).

The Institute for Religious Research is at work producing the first independent, non-LDS critical edition, called *The Book of Mormon Study Text*. This work in progress will make the entire Book of Mormon available in searchable format. It uses the 1830 edition as its base text but then makes numerous corrections based on the O and P manuscripts. A special feature of this study edition is its distinctive formatting of biblical quotations so that readers can see immediately when the Book of Mormon is quoting from the Bible.⁸

Sources and Composition of the Book of Mormon

The production of the Book of Mormon is by all accounts an impressive accomplishment by Joseph Smith, who was only 23 years old when he dictated it to his scribes. How he did this has been a contentious issue ever since its first publication. Three main explanations have been proposed: that Joseph received the text by divine revelation, that he plagiarized the text from an earlier publication, or that he composed the text himself using the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible and perhaps some other sources. The first two views generally assume that the production of the Book of Mormon text would have been utterly beyond Joseph's capacity. Rather than prejudging that question, a sound method would be to examine the proposed sources in order to determine which explanation is most likely.

The Use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon

Regardless of how the Book of Mormon as a whole is explained, it is really beyond reasonable doubt that a major source used in the Book of Mormon is the KJV. This includes both the many chapters duplicated whole or in large part and the many shorter statements in the Book of Mormon that parallel or allude to statements in the Bible. All non-Mormon critics of the Book of Mormon (and some Mormons) agree on its heavy use of the KJV. Of the 239 chapters in the Book of Mormon, 27 are duplicates of most or all of 27 chapters in the Bible. These include the Ten Commandments (from Exod. 20), 21 chapters from Isaiah (Isa. 2-14, 29, 48-54), Malachi 3-

⁸ See [*The Book of Mormon Study Text*](#), edited by Robert M. Bowman Jr. (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2017).

4, and Matthew 5-7. Eighteen of these duplicated chapters appear in the first two books of the Book of Mormon, mostly in 2 Nephi.

There are several reasons to question the Book of Mormon's claim that these chapters were all repeated by ancient Nephite prophets on the gold plates that Joseph said he merely translated. For one thing, two-thirds of the Bible chapters duplicated in the Book of Mormon happen to appear in the material Joseph produced to replace the lost 116 pages—accounting for over one-fourth of that replacement text. For another thing, the Book of Mormon itself makes statements in tension with the presence of so much material from the Bible. It states repeatedly that there was a shortage of space on the plates forcing the authors to economize on what they tried to include (e.g., Words of Mormon 1:5-6; Mormon 8:5; 9:33). Nephi, who does most of the quoting from Isaiah, had Isaiah and other Jewish scriptures preserved on “plates of brass” taken to the New World (e.g., 1 Ne. 5:10-19; 19:21-22; 2 Ne. 4:2, 15). So why use precious space on the gold plates copying, for example, all of Isaiah 2-14 without interruption (2 Nephi 12-24)?

Nephi also states that the Bible was going to be altered by wicked religious people who would remove many “plain and precious” things from it (1 Nephi 13:24-40). Mormons, including Joseph Smith himself, have understood this to mean that the text of the Bible was severely corrupted in many places, whether by material being copied incorrectly, deliberately removed, mistranslated, or some combination of these actions. Oddly, though, the material from Isaiah in the Book of Mormon is remarkably similar to the text of Isaiah in the KJV. For example, the 654 words in the original edition of 2 Nephi 21-22 are verbatim identical to Isaiah 11-12 KJV. The Book of Mormon retains most of the mistranslations in the KJV passages it quotes, such as “Lucifer” (Isa. 14:12 KJV; 2 Nephi 24:12). There is only one long, significant addition to any of the biblical chapters in the Book of Mormon: over 700 words are awkwardly added to Isaiah 29 in 2 Nephi 27 to make it a prophecy about Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.

Other Possible Sources

Critical theories concerning the sources or origins of the Book of Mormon began to appear less than a year after its initial publication. The most controversial view of Book of Mormon origins is the “Spalding theory,” the hypothesis that the Book of Mormon was based in large measure on a novel by an early nineteenth-century writer, Solomon Spalding (also spelled Spaulding). The Spalding theory was the dominant view held by non-Mormons for most of the nineteenth century and continued to be influential in the twentieth. According to this theory, Spalding (1761-1816) had written an unpublished novel about the ancient inhabitants of America that had been stolen by Sidney Rigdon, a distant relative of Joseph Smith, and secretly passed to Joseph, who then used it as the basis of the Book of Mormon. One common objection to this theory is that Rigdon did not even join the LDS Church until several months after it was founded, and no hard evidence links Rigdon to Joseph Smith prior to late 1830. The Spalding or “Spalding-Rigdon” theory gained traction from a number of testimonies by individuals who had known Spalding and who said that the Book of Mormon was very similar to Spalding's lost manuscript. However, a manuscript by Spalding discovered in 1884 turned out not to have any significant similarities to

the Book of Mormon. Advocates of the theory since that discovery have argued that Spalding wrote a second unpublished novel that remains lost.⁹

Most non-LDS researchers on the Book of Mormon, while skeptical about the Spalding theory, think that Joseph Smith utilized ideas circulating and set forth in publications of his time period treating some of the same themes as those that dominate the Book of Mormon. The most commonly cited publication in this regard is *View of the Hebrews*, published in 1823 (and in a second edition in 1825) by a pastor named Ethan Smith (no relation) in the town of Poultney, Vermont.¹⁰ Since Oliver Cowdery lived for several years of his childhood in Poultney, he may have been Joseph Smith's connection to the book, although there is no hard evidence of Oliver and Joseph meeting before 1829 (when the general subject matter of the Book of Mormon was already established). B. H. Roberts, a noted Mormon leader and scholar, wrote a manuscript in 1927 listing eighteen parallels between the Book of Mormon and *View of the Hebrews*. This manuscript was part of a larger project in which Roberts addressed with unusual frankness many difficulties with the Book of Mormon in the hope that these difficulties could be definitively resolved.¹¹

Ironically, one of the main objections to the argument for the Book of Mormon's dependence on *View of the Hebrews* is that many of its ideas (especially about American Indians being the descendants of Israelites) were circulating widely in Joseph Smith's day. Such an objection may weaken the case for direct dependence on Ethan Smith's book but strengthens the case for an early nineteenth-century origin of the Book of Mormon. LDS scholars have also pointed out numerous ways in which the two books differ from one another—but such an objection is logically invalid, since the claim is not that the two books are identical but that one is significantly indebted to the other or at least reflects the same milieu.

Joseph Smith as the Primary Author

The dominant theory among non-Mormons since Fawn Brodie's 1945 biography of Joseph Smith has been that he was the true author of the Book of Mormon, perhaps with the help of Oliver Cowdery. According to this approach, the Book of Mormon was essentially a new text created by Joseph Smith, alone or with help from Cowdery. Several considerations suggest that Joseph was the primary author: his reported abilities as a storyteller, his evident familiarity with the KJV even as a youth (as he himself claimed in his 1832 autobiographical account), his reported lack of notes or other materials used in the dictation process (at least when it was observed by others), and the consistency of Book of Mormon doctrine with Joseph's earliest doctrinal views. Against this view, other non-Mormons as well as Mormons have objected that

⁹ The most sophisticated defense of the Spalding theory is a book by three members of the Spalding Research Associates: Wayne L. Cowdrey, Howard A. Davis, and Arthur Vanick. *Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Spalding Enigma* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005).

¹⁰ The most thorough attempt to show the Book of Mormon's indebtedness to *View of the Hebrews* to date is David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

¹¹ B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed. with a new Afterword, edited and with an introduction by Brigham D. Madsen (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1992).

Joseph did not have the ability to produce such a complex text especially in so short a time. The force of this objection is at least somewhat blunted by the use of the KJV and other sources and by the possibility of an active role for Cowdery in the production of the text.

The nature of the evidence makes it unlikely that any one source can be verified beyond reasonable doubt or can be shown to cover all of the evidence. Some of the many factors to be considered include Joseph's secretiveness about the gold plates, his refusal to provide specific information about the translation method, the complexity of the Book of Mormon, its demonstrable dependence of the KJV, the many gaps in our knowledge about Joseph's movements and activities during the 1820s, and the matter of the lost 116 pages. The best explanation is probably a complex one. Joseph Smith evidently made use of several sources, either directly and purposefully (as in his use of the KJV) or indirectly (as in his drawing on ideas attested in various books of the era, even if he never personally read them). He also likely had some help, with Oliver Cowdery being the most likely source of such assistance. The "faithful" LDS explanation, that Joseph translated the whole of the Book of Mormon by the gift and power of God, may be disarmingly simple but it has its own set of evidential challenges.

The Theology of the Book of Mormon

The theological and religious teachings of the Book of Mormon are important in three respects. First, its doctrine often agrees with traditional Christian beliefs in sometimes surprising ways and at other times undermines the Bible and traditional Christianity.

When Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon, his religious beliefs were rather typical of "restorationist" thinking within English-speaking Protestantism. Restorationists believed that the Protestant Reformation, though a good step, did not go far enough, and that what was needed was a fresh beginning, a return to primitive Christianity (in some cases with new apostles, miracles, and new revelations). Reflecting this restorationist perspective, the Book of Mormon castigates those Christians who think the Bible is all the scripture needed (1 Nephi 13-14) and rejects the notion that the age of miracles is past (e.g., Mormon 9).

Restorationists were broadly anti-creedal, and some of them vigorously denied the doctrine of the Trinity and argued that Jesus was a perfect man but not deity. Other restorationists, however, did not espouse radically different doctrines of the nature of God, Christ, or the Trinity. The Book of Mormon falls into this latter stream of restorationist thought. It appears to affirm in very explicit terms a Trinitarian theology, asserting repeatedly that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are "one God" (2 Nephi 31:21; Mormon 7:7). This language is also found in the Testimony of the Three Witnesses and in one of Joseph's earliest revelations (D&C 20:28). Some Book of Mormon statements even seem to err on the side of collapsing the personal distinctions within the Trinity, specifically several statements identifying Jesus as both the Father and the Son (Mosiah 15:1-5; Mormon 9:12; Ether 3:14). The Book of Mormon also explicitly teaches that traditional understanding of the attributes of God. For example, it teaches that God has always and eternally been God: "For I know that God is not a partial God, neither a changeable being; but he is unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity" (Moroni 8:18; see also 7:22; Mosiah 3:5; Alma 13:7; and cf. D&C 20:17).

There are distinctive elements of LDS theology that appeared for the first time in the Book of Mormon. These include, perhaps most notably, the idea that Adam and Eve’s transgression was a good and necessary thing that made it possible for them to have children and experience the full joy God intended (see especially 2 Nephi 2:22-25). In later Mormon theology this idea is taken even further by the notion that human beings existed in heaven before the earth was made and were sent here for the purpose of testing (Abraham 3:21-28).

Second, in important respects, the Book of Mormon’s doctrine is at best lacking key doctrinal elements of Mormonism as it developed following the publication of the Book of Mormon and at worst is clearly inconsistent with later Mormon theology. Theologically, the Book of Mormon differs substantially from the later teachings of Joseph Smith reflected in later parts of Doctrine & Covenants as well as the current official teachings of the LDS Church. In contrast to the staunch Trinitarian-sounding monotheism of the Book of Mormon, toward the end of his life Joseph was teaching that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were three Gods. This is implicit in the Book of Abraham, which teaches that a plurality of “Gods” organized the earth (Abraham 4-5), and explicit in Joseph’s last public discourse, the “Sermon at the Grove” on June 16, 1844: “I have always declared God to be a distinct personage, Jesus Christ a separate and distinct personage from God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost was a distinct personage and a Spirit: and these three constitute three distinct personages and three Gods.”¹²

Similarly, in contrast to the Book of Mormon’s affirmation that God is eternally God, Joseph claimed in another 1844 sermon, the King Follett Discourse, to “refute that idea”:

“We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that idea....”

Mainstream Mormon theology ever since 1844 has maintained that God has not always been God, but was a mortal man who progressed his way to become a God—and that we mortals can do the same. Thus, these differences between Book of Mormon doctrine and Joseph Smith’s later theology are not incidental, but reflect a shift in Joseph’s thinking to an entirely different worldview in which Godhood is an open category into which our God himself entered and to which human beings may also aspire—another idea missing from the Book of Mormon.¹³

Here is a list of the major aspects of contemporary Mormon belief and religious practice that are completely absent from the Book of Mormon:

- Plurality of gods
- God the Father having a physical body
- God the Father having once been a mortal man
- Heavenly mother
- Humans preexisted as spirits in heaven

¹² Quoted in the LDS curriculum manual *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 41–42.

¹³ See further Robert M. Bowman, Jr., “[The Mormon God Has Not Always Been God](#),” in 3 parts (Cedar Springs: Institute for Religious Research, 2013).

- Eternal progression
- Celestial marriage
- Baptism for the dead
- Three heavenly kingdoms or degrees of glory

Third, the theological and religious issues that dominate the Book of Mormon are clearly inconsistent with its supposed ancient context and obviously reflect Joseph Smith's nineteenth-century environment. Consider the following list of teachings of the Book of Mormon, all of which were part of the Anglo-American cultural context in which Joseph lived:

- Confusion about what the Bible teaches is the result of many plain and precious things being removed from the Bible, resulting in widespread apostasy in Christianity (1 Nephi 13-14).
- Everyone must be baptized to be saved (2 Nephi 9:23-24). People before the coming of Christ were also required to be baptized (2 Ne. 31:4-12; Mosiah 18:10-17; 26:4, 22; etc.).
- Believers on earth before the time of Jesus were saved through faith in Jesus Christ, because the prophets spoke explicitly about Jesus by name (e.g., 2 Nephi 25:13-20).
- There should be no paid clergy (2 Ne. 26:29-31; Mosiah 27:5; Alma 30:32-35).
- The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one God (2 Nephi 31:21; Mormon 7:7).
- Wearing "costly apparel" is a dangerous indulgence of pride (Jacob 2:13; Alma 1:6, etc.).
- The doctrine that everyone will be saved (universalism) is false (e.g., Alma 1:4).
- Skeptical atheists attack the Christian faith (Alma 30).
- The (Calvinist) doctrine of election is bad (Alma 31:15-18, 24-25).
- There is an intermediate state between death and resurrection in which righteous spirits are happy in paradise and the wicked are in outer darkness (Alma 40).
- America as a land of freedom is a fulfillment of prophecy (3 Nephi 21).
- God revealed the gospel in ancient times in both hemispheres, even sending Jesus to the Nephites to preach the gospel to them (3 Nephi 11-27).
- A church should not be known by the name of any man except Christ (3 Ne. 27:7-8).
- The time of miracles and revelations is not past (Mormon 9).
- Infants should not be baptized (Moroni 8:4-26).

Now contrast the above list of theological, cultural, and moral concerns with the types of issues that would have vexed any Israelite or Christian living in ancient Mesoamerica (where most Mormons think the Book of Mormon peoples lived):

- There are many gods, all associated with nature (maize, sun, earth, fire/lightning, rain, etc.).
- The gods made man from maize after experiments produced monkeys and other creatures.
- These gods were worshiped throughout ancient history using images or idols.
- Ritual bloodletting, human sacrifice, and cannibalism were normal, widespread practices.
- Quetzalcoatl was a feathered serpent deity associated with rain and fertility worshiped about a thousand years or more before the time of Christ.

This evidence shows beyond any reasonable doubt that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century book.

Book of Mormon Apologetics: How Mormons Defend the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon purports to be an inspired and accurate translation of an ancient historical narrative covering more than a thousand years. Its validity as scripture depends on its being historically authentic. If the events it records did not happen, and if it is actually modern rather than ancient in origin, then the Book of Mormon cannot be the word of God.

Throughout the LDS Church's history, Mormons have mounted arguments for the historicity of the Book of Mormon and sought to answer objections to its authenticity. The field of Book of Mormon scholarship that has developed in that time is now far too complex (and LDS scholars far too prolific) to allow for a thorough review and assessment here. Instead, a few key figures and issues will be briefly described with only cursory critical responses.

Orson Pratt: Early Book of Mormon Apologetics

One of the earliest apologetic defenses of the Book of Mormon was Orson Pratt's *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (1850). According to Pratt, "If, after a rigid examination, it be found an imposition, it should be extensively published to the world as such; the evidences and arguments on which the imposture was detected, should be clearly and logically stated."¹⁴ Pratt argued at length for the validity and need of additional revelations beyond the Bible, appealed to and defended the testimonies of the witnesses to the gold plates (and to the angel), and argued that the Book of Mormon was consistent with and even prophesied in the Bible. He also argued that miracles of healing among the Mormons confirmed the truth of the Book of Mormon. Most of Pratt's arguments, other than his appeal to modern Mormon healings, are still staples of Book of Mormon apologetics.

Book of Mormon scholarship and apologetics today derives primarily from the work of three BYU scholars: Hugh Nibley, John Sorenson, and John Welch.

Hugh Nibley: Comparative Method

Hugh W. Nibley (1910–2005) taught at BYU from 1946 until 1994 and produced an astonishing body of scholarship, mostly in defense of the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, and LDS theology. Contemporary Book of Mormon apologetics really began with two lengthy series of articles from 1950 to 1952 by Nibley on the Book of Mormon, published in 1952 as the book *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites*. Nibley's method was essentially a comparative approach, ransacking ancient literature far and wide for parallels to the Book of Mormon.

John Sorenson: The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Book

John L. Sorenson (1924–) founded the department of anthropology at BYU and later taught as professor of anthropology there from 1971 to 1985. The year he retired, Sorenson published *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, which argued for a "limited geography"

¹⁴ Orson Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Liverpool: R. James, 1850), in *The Essential Orson Pratt*, Foreword by David J. Whittaker (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1991), 147.

theory that the Book of Mormon lands were restricted to ancient Mesoamerica, in what is now Guatemala and southern Mexico. That model, which Sorenson continued to augment in retirement, now dominates LDS academic scholarship and popular apologetics, although a minority of Mormons vigorously contend for other theories as to the location of the Book of Mormon lands. According to the most significant of these alternative views, the “heartland” model, much of North America, especially eastern and central United States, were the Book of Mormon lands. While Sorenson has made a more impressive case for his model from statements within the Book of Mormon, the heartland model fits far more easily with Joseph Smith’s own statements of relevance. As noted earlier, Sorenson’s model also entails that Moroni walked carrying the gold plates some three thousand miles outside the area in which all of the other events in the Book of Mormon supposedly took place in order to bury them near Joseph Smith’s boyhood home, even though Joseph never examined the plates when dictating his translation.

One of the implications of Sorenson’s Mesoamerican model is that the Book of Mormon peoples never amounted to more than a very small part of the population of the Americas. This implication has been radically reinforced in LDS apologetics by the controversy over DNA and the Book of Mormon. The traditional LDS belief has been that Native Americans, especially those living in the United States, are direct descendants of the Lamanites, the rebellious people of Israelite descent who wiped out the Nephites in the fifth century. Modern advances in the study of the genetics of human populations have allowed scientists to confirm the conventional scientific view that Native Americans are descended from people who came from the eastern regions of Asia across the Bering Strait many thousands of years ago. Such a view is inconsistent with Joseph Smith’s teaching about the American Indians as well as with the traditional understanding of the Book of Mormon. LDS scholars, however, argue that Israelite ancestry need not be expected to show up in DNA studies of Native Americans because the Nephites and Lamanites were only a very small part of the Mesoamerican civilization more than a millennium before Columbus. This apologetic salvages the plausibility of the Book of Mormon at the cost of abandoning Joseph Smith’s own teaching on the subject.¹⁵

John Welch: Biblical Scholarship and Mormon Apologetics

John W. Welch (1946–), born the same year that Nibley began teaching at BYU, in 1969 published an article arguing that the Book of Mormon contains significant instances of *chiasm* or *chiasmus* (a literary feature in which a text forms a pattern like A-B-B-A or A-B-C-B-A). Welch argues that chiasmus was common in ancient Hebrew literature but was unknown to Joseph Smith, so that its presence in the Book of Mormon is suggestive of its authenticity. Several questions of relevance to this claim have been debated: whether Joseph could not have known about this literary device, whether he might have used it without even realizing it, and the extent to which it can be found in his non-translated writings (such as his revelations in Doctrine & Covenants). More fundamentally, the apparent chiasms in the Book of Mormon are the result of the extreme repetitiveness of the text and the selective use of parallel elements by which chiasms

¹⁵ For a thorough review of these issues, see Robert M. Bowman Jr., “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies: [A Closer Look at the Book of Mormon](#),” and “Book of Mormon and DNA Studies: [A Closer Look at the Science](#)” (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2016).

are artificially imposed on the text.¹⁶ In 1980 Welch, an attorney by training, became professor of law at BYU, where he remains at the time of this writing. A year earlier Welch had founded the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), which later became subsumed as part of the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship and until 2012 was the leading Mormon apologetics think-tank. At that time the institute was reorganized and some of its former leading lights launched a new periodical, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*.

FairMormon: Book of Mormon Apologetics Online

Mormon apologetics, like practically everything else, entered a new phase with the advent of the World Wide Web. In late 1997 a new LDS apologetics organization, the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR), was established for the purpose of defending Mormonism online. This organization, later renamed FairMormon, is now at the forefront of LDS apologetics through its website and annual conference. Much of its work consists of taking the academic work of BYU scholars and presenting it in accessible form for non-scholars. A large part of what FairMormon does focuses on defending the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

A major focus of the Institute for Religious Research, an evangelical Christian organization, has been the development of a sound Christian response to Mormon defenses of the Book of Mormon. Such a sound response must rest on an accurate understanding of the issues and a careful consideration of Mormon apologetics. This introduction is intended to make a modest contribution toward that end.

¹⁶ See the articles by this author on alleged examples of chiasmus and a bibliography of relevant studies at "[Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon?](#)" (Cedar Springs, MI: Institute for Religious Research, 2016).

Basic Bibliography on the Book of Mormon

This bibliography is a deliberately short, selective list of representative works about the Book of Mormon, both pro and con. The focus of this bibliography is on issues pertaining to the Book of Mormon's authenticity or historicity, and for that reason the works listed here are generally academic or engage academic Book of Mormon scholarship in some fashion.

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