

Is the Book of Mormon a Divine Revelation?

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Even though Mormon prophets and leaders have always stressed the divine authority of the *Book of Mormon*, and therefore that it could withstand any and all critical scrutiny, many theologians and scholars over the years have shown the falsity of the claim. Here we will briefly highlight just several of the many facts that disqualify the *Book of Mormon* for any serious consideration of revelation from God. A more in-depth discussion can be found in our book *What Do Mormons Really Believe?* (Harvest House, 2002).

Psychic Method of Writing

Even though the Mormon church claims that Joseph Smith translated the alleged gold plates (containing the alleged historical records of the “Nephites” and “Lamanites”) by the power of God using divine implements called the Urim and Thummim,¹ the *Book of Mormon* was actually produced through psychic methods and has nothing to do with ancient history. It is merely a product of nineteenth-century occultism.

Historical documents prove that when Smith translated the *Book of Mormon* he was only engaging in his usual practice of crystal gazing. The testimonies of David Whitmer (one of the three key “witnesses” to the *Book of Mormon*), Emma Smith (one of Joseph Smith’s wives and scribes) and William Smith (Joseph’s brother) make this clear.

In 1877, Whitmer confessed that the alleged “Egyptian” characters on the gold plates (Nephi 1:2) and their English interpretation appeared to Joseph Smith while using his seer stone with his face buried inside a hat:

I will now give you a description of the manner in which the *Book of Mormon* was translated. Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Crowder, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear. Thus the *Book of Mormon* was translated.²

Emma Smith revealed the same occult method. “In writing for your father, I frequently wrote day after day.... He sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.”³ Clearly, the *Book of Mormon* was produced through a form of crystal gazing. Testimonies such as these (and others)⁴ have brought even some Mormons who reject the idea to at least concede its possibility. The tenth president and prophet, Joseph Fielding Smith, confessed in his *Doctrines of Salvation* (Vol. 3, p. 225) that “it may have been so.”

Human Sources

The Mormon church believes that the *Book of Mormon* is an account of ancient writings first inscribed on gold plates at least fifteen hundred years ago that chronicled the history of the so-called “Nephite” and “Lamanite” peoples, who spanned a period from 600 B.C.—A.D. 421. The *Book of Mormon* therefore claims to be a translation of ancient historical records that date long before Joseph Smith lived, and Mormons maintain that apart from divine revelation it would have been impossible for Joseph Smith to have done this translation. Thus they consider this a great proof of its heavenly derivation. Mormons, however, rarely consider the other possibilities that explain the origin of the *Book of Mormon* far better; for example, that it could have been a combination of Smith’s natural talent and spiritistic revelation from crystal gazing. Concerning the former, there are several possible human sources for the *Book of Mormon*.

Fawn Brodie, who was excommunicated from the Mormon church for her scholarly critical study on Joseph Smith, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*⁵ cites persuasive evidence for the likelihood of a nineteenth-century origin of the *Book of Mormon*. For example, how likely is it that Jewish writers between 600 B.C.—A.D. 421 would discuss the social and religious issues common to nineteenth-century Christian America?

Any theory of the origin of the *Book of Mormon* that spotlights the prophet [alone] and blacks out the stage on which he performed is certain to be a distortion.

[For example, in] the speeches of the Nephi prophets one may find [discussions of] the religious conflicts that were splitting the churches in the 1820’s. Alexander Campbell, founder of the Disciples of Christ, wrote in the first able review of the *Book of Mormon*: “This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his *Book of Mormon*, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decided all the great [religious] controversies... [and even the questions of] Freemasonry, Republican government and the rights of man. But he is better skilled in the controversies in New York than in the geography or history of Judea. He makes John baptize in the village of Bethabara and says Jesus was born in Jerusalem.”

The theology of the *Book of Mormon*, like its anthropology, was only a potpourri.... Always an eclectic, Joseph never exhausted any theory he had appropriated. He seized a fragment here and another there and of the odd assortment built his history.⁶

In his study *A Parallel, The Basis of the Book of Mormon*, Hal Hougey observes a number of striking similarities between the *Book of Mormon* and Ethan Smith's 1823 text *View of the Hebrews*, a book that was available to Joseph Smith.⁷ Parallels between the *Book of Mormon* and *View of the Hebrews* were sufficient enough to prompt no less an authority than Mormon historian B. H. Roberts to study the issue. He concluded that it was possible for Smith alone to have written the *Book of Mormon*.⁸

The language of the King James Bible is also enlightening. According to Dr. Anthony Hoekema, some 27,000 words taken from the King James Bible appear in the *Book of Mormon*. Anyone who compares the following list, which carries just several examples, will see that Smith copied material from the King James Bible:

- 1 Nephi chapters 20,21—Isaiah chapters 48, 49
- 2 Nephi chapters 7,8—Isaiah chapters 50, 51
- 2 Nephi chapters 12,24—Isaiah chapters 2-14
- Mosiah chapter 14—Isaiah chapter 53
- 3 Nephi chapters 12,14—Matthew chapters 5-7
- 3 Nephi chapter 22—Isaiah chapter 54
- 3 Nephi chapters 24,25—Malachi chapters 3,4
- Moroni chapter 10—1 Corinthians 12:1-11.⁹

[See the chart at the end of this article for a comparison of Isaiah 53 with Mosiah 14.]

Jerald and Sandra Tanner, who have done massive amounts of research on Mormonism, have also supplied evidence for other sources for the creation of the *Book of Mormon*, including: Josiah Priest's *The Wonders of Nature and Providence Displayed* (Albany, NY: 1825); *The Wayne Sentinel*; *The Apocrypha*, a dream of Joseph Smith's father and *The Westminster Confession and Catechism*. All this indicates that the *Book of Mormon* could not have been a translation of ancient records. What then is the real source of the *Book of Mormon*? The most appropriate answer is that it combines human sources from other books and spiritistic revelation through Smith's use of the seer stone.

Archaeology and the Book

If the *Book of Mormon* were truly an historical record of ancient peoples inhabiting a vast civilization, it is probable that at least some archaeological data would confirm the civilization, just as it has confirmed, in varying degrees, biblical and other ancient histories. The *Book of Mormon* claims to represent the history of three different groups of people, all of whom allegedly migrated from the Near East to Central and South America. Two of the groups supposedly traveled as far north as Mexico and North America (the *Book of Mormon*, Ether and 1 Nephi).¹⁰ The Nephites and Lamanites are said to have been Semitic, with the most important group being led by Lehi of Jerusalem. His descendants became the

Nephites. The main history of the *Book of Mormon* concerns the Nephites.

But not a shred of archaeological evidence exists to support that any of this is history, despite many vigorous archaeological excavations financed by the Mormon church. This has forced any number of non-Mormon researchers to conclude that the *Book of Mormon* is primarily myth and historical invention. Dr. Walter Martin refers to “the hundreds of areas where this book defies reason or common sense.”¹¹

Both the prestigious National Geographic Society and the Bureau of American Ethnology of the Smithsonian Institute have issued official statements denying Mormon claims, and the Tanners’ book, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, and other works, show that archaeological confirmation claimed by the Mormon church is untrustworthy.¹² Dr. Gordon Fraser, observing that Mormons still accept their book as history, asserts that it in no way corresponds to the known facts of the ancient Americas.¹³

Nevertheless, Mormon apologists and lay writers alike claim that archaeology proves that the *Book of Mormon* is true. In fact, this is a standard argument frequently used by Mormon missionaries around the world in their attempts to convert people. As Hal Hougey observes in *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, most Mormons think that archaeology is on their side.

The numerous books and articles by Latter-day Saints over the years have shown that Mormons believe that the fruits of archaeological research may properly be applied to verify the *Book of Mormon*. Dr. Ross T. Christensen, a Mormon anthropologist, agrees: “If the book’s history is fallacious, its doctrine cannot be genuine.... I am fully confident that the nature of the Book is such that a definitive archaeological test can be applied to it.”¹⁴

But definitive archaeological tests have already been applied, and they have discredited the *Book of Mormon* as history. Mormon authority Gordon Fraser correctly observes the *Book of Mormon’s* fictitious nature:

Mormon archaeologists have been trying for years to establish some evidence that will confirm the presence of the [Mormon] church in America. There is still not a scintilla of evidence, either in the religious philosophy of the ancient writings or in the presence of artifacts, that could lead to such a belief.

The whole array of anachronisms [historical errors] in the book stamps it as written by someone who knew nothing about ancient America and presumed that no one ever would know. It is total fiction, done by one who assumed that cultures in ancient America would probably be about the same as those of our own north eastern states in the 19th Century. While certain Mormon apologists are pledged to the task of defending the credibility of the *Book of Mormon*, because the church demands it, some professors at Brigham Young University are demanding caution concerning claims that the ruins of old temples and other artifacts found in Mexico and Central America are positive evidence of the claims of the *Book of Mormon*.

The problem has become a sticky one for Mormon scholars who would like to be investigators in depth but are forbidden by their church authorities.¹⁵

Lack of Manuscript Evidence

Another problem with Mormon claims about ancient Nephite history is the lack of ancient manuscript evidence. Because of their perceived importance, the religious scriptures of most ancient peoples have been preserved, despite the sometimes incredible odds against it. Occasionally, the preservation is almost perfect, and the Bible of the Jews and the New Testament of the Christians are unique in this regard.¹⁶ Even with the Qur'an of the Muslims and with Hindu and Buddhist scriptures some evidence exists to determine a religious document's genuineness. For example, sufficient extant manuscript evidence may exist to prove that a document is as old as its proponents claim it to be.

This is not true for the *Book of Mormon*. While the manuscript evidence for the Bible is rich and abundant, for the Mormon scriptures it is nonexistent.¹⁷ There is no textual evidence for either an ancient *Book of Mormon* or for any of Smith's other alleged ancient records. Is there a single ancient manuscript? Is there even a portion of one, or even one fragment of a page? No. There is none of this. Can the "gold plates" from which Smith allegedly translated the *Book of Mormon* be produced? Were these ancient records ever cited by another writer? No. There is none of this either:

As far as historical and manuscript evidence is concerned, Joseph Smith's scriptures have absolutely no foundation. The "records of the Nephites," for instance, were never cited by any ancient writer, nor are there any known manuscripts or even fragments of manuscripts in existence older than the ones dictated by Joseph Smith in the late 1820's. Joseph Smith's "Book of Moses" is likewise without documentary support. The only handwritten manuscripts for the "Book of Moses" are those dictated by Joseph Smith in the early 1850's. The "Book of Abraham" purports to be a translation of an ancient Egyptian papyrus. However, the original papyrus is in reality the Egyptian "Book of Breathing" and has nothing to do with Abraham or his religion. Therefore, we have no evidence for the "Book of Abraham" prior to the handwritten manuscripts dictated by Joseph Smith in the 1850's. It would appear, then, that there is no documentary evidence for any of Joseph Smith's works that date back prior to the late 1820's.¹⁸

Lack of Mormon Doctrines

A further point, briefly made here, but which should be of particular interest to many Mormons, is that Mormon teachings are not principally derived from the *Book of Mormon*. Mormon doctrine is derived primarily from another Mormon scripture, *Doctrine and Covenants*. Thus, "... doctrinally the *Book of Mormon* is a dead book for most Mormons.... The *Book of Mormon* teachings have little bearing upon current Mormon doctrine."¹⁹

The dilemma that this poses for the Mormon church is a serious one because *Doctrine and Covenants [D & C]*, emphasizes that the *Book of Mormon* contains basic, or fundamental, Mormon teachings. For example, according to *D & C*, the *Book of Mormon* contains "the truth and the Word of God" (*D & C*, 19:26); "the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ" (that is, Mormon teachings, *D & C*, 20:9);

and “the *fullness of the everlasting gospel*” (*D & C*, 135:3). *Doctrine and Covenants* also has Jesus claiming that the *Book of Mormon* has “the principles of my gospel” (*D & C*, 42:12) and “*all things written concerning the foundation of my church, my gospel, and my rock*” (*D & C*, 18:4, cf. 17:1-6; emphasis added; see also *Book of Mormon*, Introduction).

According to *Doctrine and Covenants*, then, the *Book of Mormon* must contain at the very least most of the central doctrines of Mormon faith. But the *Book of Mormon* contains few major Mormon teachings. It does not teach any of the following central Mormon principles, which form the foundation of the Mormon church and its “gospel”: polytheism; God as the product of an eternal progression; eternal marriage; polygamy; human deification; the Trinity as three separate Gods; baptism for the dead; maintaining genealogical records; universalism; God has a physical body and was once a man; God organized, not created, the world; mother gods (heavenly mothers); temple marriage as a requirement for exaltation; the concept of eternal intelligences; three degrees of heavenly glory (telestial, terrestrial, celestial); salvation after death in the spirit world; a New Testament era of Mormon organizational offices and functions such as the Melchizedek and Aaronic priesthoods; stake president and first presidency.²⁰

All this is why some Mormon writers have noted the theological irrelevance of the *Book of Mormon* to Mormonism. For example, John H. Evans observed “how little the whole body of belief of the Latter-day Saints really depends on the revelation of the Nephite record [the *Book of Mormon*].”²¹

Given the vast amounts of scholarly research that is similar to and affirms our brief survey of the *Book of Mormon*, all the evidence points to the unavoidable conclusion that the *Book of Mormon* is really a piece of nineteenth-century fiction. Whatever else it is, it cannot be a divine revelation. Writing in “The Centennial of Mormonism” in *American Mercury*, Bernard De Voto described it as “a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless and inconceivably absurd.”²² All this is why Mormon leaders tell potential converts to ignore criticism of the *Book of Mormon* and rely entirely upon subjective (completely personal) “confirmation.” Nevertheless, the church’s appeal to subjectivity does nothing to convince a rational person why he or she should believe in the *Book of Mormon*. To believe without any evidence is troublesome enough; to believe in spite of the evidence is folly.

Notes

¹ In the *Book of Mormon* Introduction—testimony of Joseph Smith—the Urim and Thummim are described as two stones in silver bows fastened to a breastplate. We do not know exactly what the Old Testament Urim and Thummim were. Nevertheless: 1) they were restricted in usage to the high priest; 2) the God of the Bible only rarely “spoke” through them to reveal his will; and 3) apparently they were two separate objects, not a single stone, which is what Smith used. Thus, in each category Mormon claims are refuted. Whatever Smith used, it was not the biblical Urim and Thummim (Ex. 28:50; Num. 27:21). Joseph Smith was not an Old Testament high priest who used these implements to reveal God’s will. He used an occult seer stone to divine the

- “translation” of a “text” that denies God’s Word (cf. Mosiah 28 preface and verse 15).
- ² David Whitmer, “An Address to All Believers in Christ by a Witness to the Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon” (Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing Co., 1887, reprint 1972), p. 12
 - ³ *The Saints Herald*, May 19, 1888, p. 310.
 - ⁴ See Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Joseph Smith and Money Digging* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1970), passim.
 - ⁵ Einer Anderson, *Inside Story of Mormonism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1974), p. 61.
 - ⁶ Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, 2nd ed (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), pp. 69-70, 72-73.
 - ⁷ Hal Houghey, *A Parallel, The Basis of the Book of Mormon: B. H. Roberts’ “Parallel” of the Book of Mormon to View of the Hebrews* (Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing, 1975), p. 4; Harry L. Ropp, *The Mormon Papers: Are the Mormon Scriptures Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1987), p. 36.
 - ⁸ Originally cited in *The Rocky Mountain Mason*, Billings, MT, January 1956, pp. 17-31; also in Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Did Spaulding Write the Book of Mormon?* (Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1977), p. 17.
 - ⁹ Cf. Walter Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism*, rev. ed. (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House Publishers, 1978), p. 68.
 - ¹⁰ Although the traditional view is that the *Book of Mormon* story covers North and South America, some modern Brigham Young University academicians, apparently attempting to coordinate *Book of Mormon* claims and geography with existing data back pedal and accept a more limited geography. They believe, for example, that the Cumorah in New York was really in Southern Mexico. (Taken from the *Book of Mormon* and in part from Bruce McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1977), pp. 528-529; Martin, *Maze*, pp. 47-48; Floyd McElveen, *Will the “Saints” Go Marching In?: A Comparison of the Mormon Faith with Biblical Christianity* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1977, retitled *The Mormon Illusion*), pp. 59- 61; Gordon Fraser, *Is Mormonism Christian? Mormon Doctrine Compared with Biblical Christianity* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1977), chapter 16; and Arthur Wallace, *Can Mormonism Be Proved Experimentally?* (Los Angeles, CA: Arthur Wallace, 1973), chapter 9. They believe, for example, that the Cumorah in New York was really in Southern Mexico.
 - ¹¹ Martin, *Maze*, p. 328.
 - ¹² John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Behind the Mask of Mormonism* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), pp. 287-289.
 - ¹³ Fraser, *Is Mormonism Christian?* p. 135.
 - ¹⁴ Hal Houghey, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon*, rev. ed. (Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing, n.d.), pp. 3-4.
 - ¹⁵ Fraser, *Is Mormonism Christian?* pp. 143-145.
 - ¹⁶ Norman L. Geisler, William E. Nix, *An Introduction to the Bible*, rev. and exp. Ed (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971).
 - ¹⁷ Ibid.
 - ¹⁸ cf. Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism: A Behind the Scenes Look at Changes in Mormon Doctrine and Practice*, rev. ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), pp. 369-370.
 - ¹⁹ Wesley Walters, “Whatever Happened to the Book of Mormon?” *Eternity* magazine, May 1980, p. 32.
 - ²⁰ From Bob Witte, comp., *Where Does it Say That?: A Witnessing Resource for Christians* (Safety Harbor, FL: Ex-Mormons for Jesus, n.d.), p. 4.
 - ²¹ Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Changing World*, p. 560, citing *Improvement Era*, 16:344-345.
 - ²² Bernard De Voto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” *American Mercury*, 19 (1930), p. 5.

King James Version—Isaiah 53

1. Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?

2. For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.

3. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

4. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

5. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.

6. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.

7. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth.

8. He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? for he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of my people was he stricken.

9. And he made his grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death; because he had done no violence, neither was any deceit in his mouth.

10. Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.

11. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.

12. Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

Book of Mormon—Mosiah 14

[1] Yea, even doth not Isaiah say: Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?

[2] For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of dry ground; he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him there is no beauty that we should desire him.

[3] He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

[4] Surely he has borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted.

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[12] Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death; and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bore the sins of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

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