

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded on the teachings of the Book of Mormon, and the amazing story of its translation from golden plates by Joseph Smith has been a central selling point of Mormon proselytizing. But today, after many years have passed since the foundational truths of Christianity are said to have been restored by the Book of Mormon, do Mormon leaders still believe in its doctrinal statements?

The Book of Mormon and Contemporary Mormon Doctrine

The Book of Mormon teaches, for example, that there is:

- ♦ only one God
- ♦ who is a Spirit, and
- ♦ is "unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity" (Alma 11:26-31; 2 Nephi 31:21; Mormon 9:9-11, 19; Moroni 7:22; 8:18).

Present-day Mormon doctrine, by contrast, teaches that:

- ♦ three separate gods are in charge of our planet
- ♦ two of these have bodies, were once men, and
- ♦ earned the right to become gods through faithful obedience to the Mormon gospel.

The LDS church now also teaches that there are millions upon millions of these gods, each of whom earned godhood and shaped matter into earths over which they rule. Faithful Mormon males expect to become gods themselves and fashion and populate worlds of their own, with the cooperation of their wives.

Joseph Smith, who originally dictated the words of the Book of Mormon, later rejected its teaching that God is "unchangeable from all eternity to all eternity" (Moroni 8:18). Toward the close of his life, as recorded in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, he announced, "We have imagined and supposed that God was God from all eternity. I will refute that

idea ... he was once a man like us" (p. 345). The present Mormon gods, therefore, are plural, not spirit, and not unchangeable as the Book of Mormon teaches.

Furthermore, the Book of Mormon insists that all mankind "must be born again," that is, they must be "changed from their carnal and fallen state" or "they can in no wise inherit the kingdom of God." It proclaims one must "become a new creature" by having "spiritually been born of God" and by having "experienced this mighty change in your hearts" (Mosiah 27:24-28; Alma 5:14, emphasis added). Modern Mormonism, by contrast, stresses the indispensability of water baptism by the Mormon church to receive the new birth. "No one can be born again without baptism" (McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine*, p. 101). In the Book of Mormon, however, baptism is unnecessary for children and for Gentiles ("they that are without the law") because "unto such baptism availeth nothing" (Moroni 8:11-13, 20-22).

Again, the Book of Mormon declares there are only two destinies for mankind: eternal happiness or eternal misery. Those who die rejecting Christ receive eternal torment, with no second chance after death. They are "cast into fire, from whence there is no return" and "must go into the place prepared for them, even a lake of fire" (3 Nephi 27:11-17; Mosiah 3:24-27; 2 Nephi 28:22-23; Alma 34:32-35). By contrast, Mormonism today believes nearly everyone will enjoy some degree of glory, and even those who have died can be rescued from the "prison house" when the living perform proxy baptisms for them.

Thus, Book of Mormon teachings have little bearing upon these current major Mormon doctrines. Several other major doctrinal changes dealing with the nature of God, prayer, polygamy, authority, etc. need to be discussed here but space is limited.*

A Nineteenth-Century Product?

While Mormon leadership pays scant attention to the Book of Mormon's theology, scholars of the faith have attempted to employ American archaeology to lend the book the appearance of genuine antiquity. So zealous have been their efforts that the Smithsonian Institution has found it necessary to issue a disclaimer that the book is ever used as a guide in their archaeological work. Mormon attempts to establish the Book of Mormon as an ancient production have been more than off-set by the mounting evidence that the book is really a nineteenth century piece of fiction. Two important studies underscore this human origin.

A General Authority's Own Findings

The first of these consists of two manuscripts written about 1922 by the Mormon General Authority and apologist Brigham H. Roberts. It is startling to find this defender of the Mormon faith arguing relentlessly that Joseph Smith could well have authored the Book of Mormon himself. Roberts' family has now allowed serious examination of these two manuscripts that have been in their possession since his death in 1933. They have been published by Mormon scholars in a book titled *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, (University of Illinois Press, 1985 and Signature Books, 1992).

Roberts makes four major points in the 375-page study. He observes in his first manuscript, "Book of Mormon Difficulties," that the book's account of the ancient Americans is in conflict with what is known about them from recent scientific investigation. The Book of Mormon represents them as having an Iron Age culture, while archaeology has shown them to have advanced only to a polished Stone Age level at the arrival of European (*Studies*, pp. 107-112).

The situation, he found, was further complicated by the Book of Mormon's declaration that the original settlers came to the New World when it was *uninhabited*. The Jaredites came "into that quarter where there never had man been" (Ether 2:5) and fought themselves to extinction. The Nephites likewise came to a land "kept from all other nations" (2 Nephi 1:9-11). Since the latter group's arrival is placed at about 600 B.C., it would not allow sufficient time for the development of the 169 known New World language stocks, each with its varying dialects. Roberts confessed he had no answers to such discrepancies. "The recent accepted authoritative writers," he says "leave us, so far as I can at present see, no ground of appeal or defense — the new knowledge seems to be against us" (*Studies*, p. 143). Archaeology to this day has uncovered nothing to overturn his findings.

Having shown the book is at variance with recent scientific knowledge, Roberts shows in his second manuscript, "A Book of Mormon Study," that the book agrees with the "common knowledge" believed about the American aborigines in the early nineteenth century. This agreement included even the erroneous ideas that the Indians were descended from the "Lost Tribes" of Israel and that they had once enjoyed a high degree of civilization.

The "common knowledge" was well summarized in "almost hand-book form" in a book by the Rev. Ethan Smith. That work, *View of the Hebrews*, was in print in its second, enlarged edition five years before the Book of Mormon was published. Moreover, it was published in the same small town where Oliver Cowdery was living. Cowdery was a cousin of Joseph Smith Jr. and his assistant in producing the Book of Mormon. In an analysis running nearly 100 pages, Roberts shows that Ethan Smith's book contains practically the "ground-plan" of the Book of Mormon (*Studies*, p. 240; 151-242).

Both books present the Native Americans as Hebrews who journeyed here from the Old World. Both claim a portion broke away from the civilized group and degenerated into a savage state. The savage portion completely destroyed the civilized one after long and terrible wars. Both books attribute to the civilized branch an Iron Age culture. Both represent these settlers of the New World as once having had a "Book of God," an understanding of the gospel, and a white messianic figure who visited them. Both regard American Gentiles as having been singled out by prophecy to preach the gospel to the Indians who are the remnant of those ancient American Hebrews. Roberts hauntingly asks concerning these and the other parallels he found, "Can such numerous and startling points of resemblance and suggestive contact, be merely coincidence?" (*Studies*, p. 242).

As his third main point, Roberts establishes the fact (using Mormon sources exclusively) that Joseph Smith had imaginative powers of mind sufficient to have produced the Book of Mormon. He describes Smith's creativity as being "as strong and varied as Shakespeare's and no more to be accounted for than the English Bard's" (*Studies*, p. 244).

Roberts rounds out his case for the human origin of the Book of Mormon with a 115-page discussion of the errors that result from Joseph Smith's untrained, though creative, mind. Roberts points to the impossibility of Lehi's three-day journey from Jerusalem to the shores of the Red Sea—a 170-mile trek on foot, with women and children along. He cites their arrival in America, the land "kept from all other nations," where they unaccountably find *domesticated* animals—"the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse, and the *goat* and the *wild goat*" (1 Nephi 18:25, emphasis added). Roberts finds an amateurish repetition of the same plots with only the character changed. The book, he notes, attempts to outdo the Bible miracles and presents some incredible battle scenes. In one instance, 2060 "striplings" fought wars over

a 4-5 year period without one being killed (Alma 56-58). This leads Roberts to ask:

Is all this sober history . . . or is it a wondertale of an immature mind, unconscious of what a test he is laying on human credulity when asking men to accept his narrative as solemn history? (*Studies*, p. 283).

The question appears to need no answer. Roberts also points out how typical of the revivalism of Smith's time are the swoonings and religious "falling" found over and over in the Book of Mormon. At this point Roberts' manuscript breaks off, but not before he has made us conscious of how heavily the Book of Mormon depends upon the culture of its day for its content and style (*Studies*, p. 308).

King James Bible Plagiarized

Following hard on the heels of the Roberts' analysis is a study by H. Michael Marquardt,** demonstrating by very strong evidence that the King James Version was used in the composition of the Book of Mormon.

Marquardt shows that the portion of the Book of Mormon that was supposed to have been written during the Old Testament period is literally peppered with phrases and quotations from the *King James New Testament* (he lists 200 examples). Even the "prophecies" appearing in the Old Testament portion of the book are often given in the New Testament wording that accompanies their fulfillment. John the Baptist, for example, is predicted to come and prepare the way for One "mightier than I" (1 Nephi 10:8 / Luke 3:16), "whose shoes latchet I am not worthy to unloose" (1 Nephi 10:8/John 1:27). Similarly, there shall be "one fold, and one shepherd" (1 Nephi 22:25/John 10:16) and "one faith and one baptism" (Mosiah 18:21/Eph. 4:5).

Again, Alma's life and ministry in the Old Testament period of the Book of Mormon are virtually a copy of the life of the Apostle Paul. Typical Pauline expressions are even found on his lips: "faith, hope and charity" (Alma 7:24/1 Cor. 13:13), "the power of Christ unto salvation" (Alma 15:6/Rom. 1:16), "without God in the world" (Alma 41:11/Eph. 2:12), etc.

Biblical Disharmony

Book of Mormon believers have tried to account for these anachronisms by explaining that in translating, when a

phrase was sufficiently close to one from the English Bible, Smith simply employed the familiar biblical phrase. This explanation fails to account for the fact that not only is the New Testament phrase used, but in many instances the New Testament *interpretation* of the Old Testament material is also adopted and even expanded.

For example, the New Testament's interpretation of Melchizedec as a type of the Son of God is adopted and expanded in the Old Testament portion of the Book of Mormon into an entire order of priests "after the order of his Son," and an explanation is added as to why Melchizedec was called "King of Righteousness" and "King of Peace" (Alma 12 & 13; cf. Heb. 7:2). Thus the New Testament material has become an integral part of the Book of Mormon text itself. New Testament concepts, not just occasional phrases, have been transported into the Old Testament part of the Book of Mormon. As a result, there is no gradual unfolding of doctrine such as is found in the Bible. Christianity is known, full-blown, as early as the building of the Tower of Babel.

Moreover, the Book of Mormon occasionally blunders in its use of the biblical material. Peter's *paraphrase* (Acts 3:22f) of Moses' words (Deut. 18:15, 18f) is mistakenly referred to as Moses' *own* words (1 Nephi 22:20). Thus, Peter is accidentally quoted hundreds of years before the book of Acts was written or Peter had ever uttered his words. Again, the words of Malachi 4:1 appear in 1 Nephi 22:15 over a hundred years before Malachi wrote them.

In the second part of his study, Marquardt points out other contemporary material which was worked into the Book of Mormon. American patriotism of the New England variety and the anti-Mason excitement that arose near Smith's home in 1827 are reflected.

More telling yet are the events of Smith's life written into the work. Martin Harris' visit to the scholars in New York City to check on Smith's translating ability shows up in the Book of Mormon *after* Martin returned from his trip. Smith even added a "prophecy" about himself as called to be the translator of the Mormon record (2 Nephi 3:11-15). How easy it is to make "prophecies" after the event has already happened.

The Final Blow

Perhaps most damaging of all is the way the Book of Mormon confuses the Old and New Covenants. It stresses that before the coming of Christ the faithful kept the Law

of Moses (2 Nephi 5:10; 25:23-25, 20; Alma 30:3), yet they also established churches, taught and practiced Christian baptism, and were conversant with New Testament doctrines and events (e.g. 2 Nephi 9:23; Mosiah 18:17). The gradual unfolding of theological themes so evident in the Bible is completely lacking in the Book of Mormon. In the Bible the Old Covenant is taken away to establish the New (Heb. 10:9). The Book of Mormon disrupts this divine pattern and intermingles the covenants and their ordinances. The book also adds Protestant revivalistic language and ideas which were current in Smith's day. All this makes the Book of Mormon seem "plainer" than the Bible to one who has little acquaintance with God's Holy Scriptures.

However, a careful examination of this book, whose theology has been largely discarded by the Mormon church, discloses that it is really a piece of early American fiction. Through its wholesale borrowings from the Bible and contemporary material, and its imitation of the King James style of language, it was designed to have a powerful appeal to the church-goers of that day. A careful evaluation, however, clearly shows that it is in no sense an authentic revelation from God.

—Wesley P. Walters

* Documentation and further information available from the Institute for Religious Research.

** H. Michael Marquardt, *Literary Dependence in the Book of Mormon: Two Studies* (Institute for Religious Research, 2000). Available on the internet at: www.irr.org/mit/marquardt-bomla.html or, for a printed version, contact IRR or your local book seller.


INSTITUTE FOR RELIGIOUS RESEARCH
1340 MONROE AVE. NW
GRAND RAPIDS, MI 49505-4604 USA
Phone: (616) 451-1562 Fax: (616) 451-8907
E-mail: info@irr.org Internet: <http://www.irt.org>

Copyright © 2000 Institute for Religious Research

English version

Order # TR001

THE BOOK of MORMON TODAY

