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Abstract Robert J. Matthews was influenced by the Book of Mormon to pursue his studies of the Joseph Smith Translation. He was intrigued by what the Book of Mormon said about the Bible. To further one's understanding of the Book of Mormon, Matthews recommends further study on the Near East and an analysis of the internal structure of the book. Royal Skousen's work on the comparative text, Hugh Nibley's *Book of Mormon* writings, and articles in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* on the Book of Mormon are sources for increasing one's knowledge of that book.

A CONVERSATION WITH

ROBERT J. MATTHEWS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK PHILBRICK

This interview with Robert J. Matthews continues a feature added to the Journal two issues ago when the Journal published an interview with John Sorenson, the departing editor. Robert Matthews served as dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University from 1982 to 1991. He also served as the first president of the Mount Timpanogos Utah Temple. He is best known to many church members as the person who published important inaugural studies on the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. As the following interview will show, the Book of Mormon was one of the important influences that led Brother Matthews to his interest in the Joseph Smith Translation. —ED.

JBMS: How did you become interested in the Book of Mormon? Was it a process? Was it an experience?

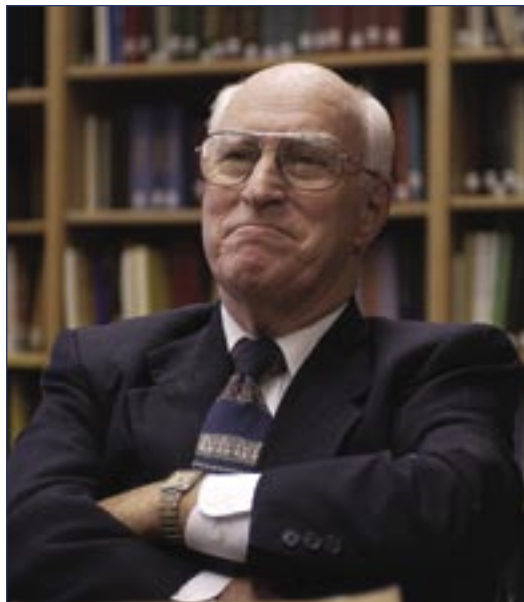
RJM: It was a growth experience. I would say my interest was because my parents used to talk to me about the book and tell me I ought to read it. I didn't find much real interest in it until I came to BYU as a freshman in 1945. Brigham Young University did not have classes on the Book of Mormon in 1945, but I read it on my own. I read it because of my parents' urging.

JBMS: Were courses on the Book of Mormon later offered while you were a BYU undergraduate?

RJM: No. I never had an undergraduate class on the Book of Mormon. My only Book of Mormon class was a graduate class from Dan Ludlow [formerly dean of Religious Education at BYU].

JBMS: How did your parents encourage you to read the book?

RJM: My parents were converts to the Church



of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Book of Mormon was very important to them. When I was about 16 or 17, they said that I really ought to start reading the Book of Mormon. I would start, but it wasn't very interesting to me. When I arrived at BYU, somehow there was an inner urge to read it. So I read it. I decided I would not use any bookmarks and I would read what I could read in the available time. I had to read some of it two or three times, but that is the way I read it the first time.

JBMS: How have you sustained your interest in the

Book of Mormon?

RJM: By continuing to read it and listening to other people. I took a class from Brother Sidney B. Sperry on the New Testament, and he talked a lot about the Book of Mormon. It was from Brother Sperry that I first got the idea that we could use the Book of Mormon to help us understand the New Testament.

But my interest in the Book of Mormon was not because I was trying to gain a testimony. I already believed it. I just wanted to read it. Whether or not it was true was never an issue with me. I knew it was true. Through the years, anything else that I have done hasn't convinced me any more that it was true, because I knew that all along. But an appreciation of it, and joy from reading it, and a comprehension of what the Book of Mormon says and how it fits into the overall picture of all of the scriptures—these have been continually growing. When Brother Nibley wrote his little book *Lehi in the Desert*, that was very impressive to me, as well as his book *The World of the Jaredites*. Then he wrote a book used as the Melchizedek Priesthood course of study, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*. That was also impressive to me.

JBMS: *Where has this interest led you?*

RJM: I am sure it was my interest in the Book of Mormon that kept me interested in the church and probably had some influence on my wanting to join the Church Educational System. I remember very well when I was reading the Book of Mormon for the first time and came upon Second Nephi, chapter 29. The passage says, "Many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible." None of that seemed too compelling to me. But I remember the first time I read a few verses later: "Know ye not that there are more nations than one? Know ye not that I, the Lord your God, have created all men, and that I remember those who are upon the isles of the sea; and that I rule in the heavens above and in the earth beneath; and I bring forth my word unto the children of men, yea, even upon all the nations of the earth? Wherefore murmur ye, because that ye shall receive more of my word? Know ye not that the testimony of two nations is a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another?" (2 Nephi 29:7–8). I was lying on a couch in my apartment just off the hill from the BYU campus. It was a Saturday. There was something about the concept that there is more than one nation and therefore there ought to be more than one book. That really caught my attention. I can remember saying out loud, "This is true." I was so impressed with that concept: if there is more than one nation, there ought to be more than one record; and God speaks the same things to one nation that he does to another. I have thought a lot about that since. That's the first real live action I remember

getting out of the Book of Mormon.

JBMS: *Would you characterize that as a spiritual witness?*

RJM: There's no question. It's what the Book of Mormon said about the Bible that really interested me: First Nephi, chapter 13, and Third Nephi, chapters 12 through 14—the sermon that's like the Sermon on the Mount—and the chapters from Isaiah. I think if they didn't lead me into the JST [Joseph Smith's "translation" of the Bible], they always supported what I could see about the Bible.

Before I read the Book of Mormon, I had read a good portion of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels, and also Genesis. I don't remember the exact sequence. Most of my thinking about scripture in those years was on the need for two witnesses. The Book of Mormon also says that the Bible has not come to us in its original clarity. I think the Book of Mormon had a large impact on me in realizing that the Bible, as wonderful as it is, is not as accurate as it once was. That thought by Nephi surely touched my soul.

If you read the Book of Mormon without any tutelage from anybody, you don't get it all. But I remembered from my reading that there was a chapter somewhere in the Book of Mormon that told where we go when we die. It turns out to be Alma 40. I didn't know it was Alma 40, but I remembered reading that. After I went home in the summer, I worked in a service station. A good friend owned an airplane and he wanted me to go up for a ride. He said, "Next Sunday morning let's go up for a ride." I really liked him and I wanted to go, but I didn't think I ought to go on Sunday. Each day at work we would talk about it. Saturday night, as I left the garage, he asked if he should pick me up in the morning. I said, "No. I'm not going."

He had the most disappointed look on his face. But I knew I needed to be in church on Sunday, not up flying an airplane. So I went to church. I remember as I was walking to church seeing the plane circle above. An airplane in Evanston [Wyoming] that long ago was a rarity. We hardly ever saw one. I went in to church and, when I came out, my sister-in-law met me and said, "There's been an airplane crash." I said, "Oh?" I asked about my friend who owned the plane. She said, "He was badly hurt." But another friend was killed. He was sitting where I would have been sitting because, when I didn't go, the owner got him to go, and he was killed. That

was a shock. I went home and I thought, “I wonder where he is now?” I remembered that somewhere in the Book of Mormon it told where a person went at death. I searched until I found it. I have never forgotten that. I read that place in the Book of Mormon with a religious fervor.

JMBS: *What did your pilot friend say?*

RJM: I went to see him that afternoon. He was badly beaten up but he could talk. He told me that he let the other person fly the plane and they were looking for deer. They saw some and swooped down. But they flew too slowly and went into a stall. The plane crashed.

That experience had a cementing influence on my knowledge of the Book of Mormon. Since I had read that chapter about the spirit world, I knew it was in the book. I searched the Book of Mormon with real intent. I have never forgotten where it was. That was because it had a real meaning in my life. I have often thought that I might have died that day if I had gone. But I do know that Alma became a real hero to me that day.

JMBS: *So the Book of Mormon really hasn't shaped your career except for the passage you read in Second Nephi that speaks about the second witness and became a springboard for your interest in the Bible and the JST?*

RJM: It certainly helped. However, the real thing that triggered my interest in the JST was a statement that Joseph Fielding Smith made on the radio when he quoted John 1:18: “No man hath seen God at any time.” Then he said, “That’s not right. Joseph Smith corrected that verse by revelation.” When he said, “by revelation,” I had another of those spiritual experiences. The word *revelation* meant something. I hadn’t known that Joseph Smith had made some corrections in the Bible. Joseph Fielding Smith’s statement penetrated me. That was the summer of 1944.

By January 1946, I was on my mission. I asked my mission president about Joseph Smith’s translation of the Bible and he said, “Well, I don’t know everything about it, but I know it is true.” This was Bruce McConkie’s father. He said, “I have heard Bruce talk about it.” None of us knew who Bruce was. Bruce was not a General Authority then. But my mission president told me, “If you are interested

in it, you ought to work on it. But not on your mission. Wait until your mission is over. Then if you want to do something about it, you can.”

JMBS: *Is your testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith tied to the Book of Mormon?*

RJM: Yes. A great deal. I wasn’t looking for a testimony and searching the book to find it. I never did doubt it. Reading the book gave me these good feelings. I didn’t search the book so thoroughly except

for that one chapter in Alma. But that wasn’t a search to learn if it was true. It was a search to find where the chapter was. I would say that my conviction of the Book of Mormon was spiritual. It came from reading the book itself. Then everything I have learned since that time, both by my own study and from others, has broadened my appreciation for it.

JMBS: *In your view, what direction should Book of Mormon studies go?*

RJM: What I would say is every direction. I think there is room in the Book of Mormon for a more careful analysis of the book itself—what is in it. Elder Milton R. Hunter toured the mission when I was there. He told me that he had read the Book of Mormon 45 times. By then I had probably read it one and a half times. I was very interested that Milton R. Hunter was such an avid reader of the book. He knew the internal structure very well. He turned to archaeology in his later years. I am a little surprised that that is the direction he took. I would be more inclined to go in the direction of Book of Mormon doctrine rather than archaeology.

There is room for more Near Eastern studies. There is room for Western Hemisphere archaeology. But I feel that the Western Hemisphere archaeology may be a little less important than those other two. I really think the answer to the Book of Mormon, as far as unbelievers are concerned, is going to be better proved by Near Eastern studies than by studies of Central America. I heard Hugh Nibley say one time that if you want to do Book of Mormon research, you should do Middle East research of the sixth or seventh century BC rather than trying to find answers somewhere in the Western Hemisphere through archaeology and such. I thought he was right, and still feel that way.

I don’t think we have done enough on the in-



ternal analysis of the book. I did a little book a number of years ago called *Who's Who in the Book of Mormon*. I did it out of my own private interest. I had just come home from my mission. I was excited about the Book of Mormon. I wanted to analyze it. One thing that impressed me was its complexity. There are so many groups that are hard to track. I heard Brother Nibley say that it is a minority record, and I think he is right. We see branches break off from the main branch. A prophet leads people into the wilderness, taking the records with them. I am not sure that enough people in the church have really analyzed that. I feel like I have not adequately done that. Who is Abinadi? I don't know that we can pinpoint who Abinadi is. I assume he is a Nephite. Who is Samuel the Lamanite? These people just show up. But you know they have families somewhere.

I remember in an Old Testament class that Brother Sidney B. Sperry talked about Bible customs. He had us all buy a little book by [George M.] Mackie called *Bible Manners and Customs*. I had an emotional aversion against that because I felt I didn't need to know that kind of information. Just read the scriptures, I thought. That was because I was naive. I heard him talk about Bible manners, and it changed my whole appreciation. I think that is the kind of thing we could do with the Book of Mormon if we knew more about Near Eastern customs. There is a large portion of the Book of Mormon that we don't know the background to but could know if we researched it, including the name of the place where Ishmael died and was buried, "which was called Nahom." Ellis Rasmussen [a BYU professor of ancient scripture] told me one day, "You know, there is a Hebrew word that means 'mourning' or 'sadness' that fits that name."

JBMS: *If the Book of Mormon stands on its own and you received a spiritual witness by reading it, what is the value of the professional teacher?*

RJM: For a teacher, studying would not be to determine whether or not the book is true but to understand what it means. There is a good reason to listen to other people because they see things. For example, when Nephi is arguing with his brothers about seeing Laban, they say, "He is a mighty man. He can slay fifty. He commands fifty." Hugh Nibley said that



50 was not just a number out of a hat. That was the size of a military group in Jerusalem in Laban's day. I didn't know that. Those kinds of things just continually add to my appreciation of the book.

JBMS: *In your opinion, what are some of the most important published helps for Book of Mormon students? What could they acquire that would really help them?*

RJM: Published books that have meant the most to me are Nibley's *World of the Jaredites*, *Lehi in the Desert*, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, and *Since Cumorah*. The book *Since Cumorah* sounds like it's not about the Book of Mormon, but it is. George Reynolds published *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon*. It has been out of print for years. I think that reference is very helpful. Dennis Largey's *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* will no doubt be very helpful.

JBMS: *How about George Reynolds's Concordance [A Complete Concordance of the Book of Mormon]?*

RJM: He wrote his *Dictionary* and then his *Concordance*. They are both important.

JBMS: *Wasn't it important that somebody like Royal Skousen track the history of the text to demonstrate that the text is reliable?*

RJM: The text is a reliable one. Royal Skousen's extensive work reaches that conclusion, among other things. It needed to be done. Those kinds of things are extremely helpful, but perhaps not for beginners.

JBMS: *What would you say are the most important advances in Book of Mormon scholarship during the past few years?*

RJM: That is where I would put Royal Skousen's comparative text [a work that will comprise four volumes: typographical facsimiles of the original and printer's manuscripts, the history of the text, and an analysis of textual variants] and Stan Larson's master's thesis ["A Study of Some Textual Variations in the Book of Mormon Comparing the Original and the Printer's Manuscripts and the 1830, the 1837, and the 1840 Editions," BYU, 1974]. I think his work was incomplete compared to Royal's work. But when Stan's came out, it was more than we knew before. There is a huge portion of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*

that deals with the Book of Mormon. I haven't counted the pages or the number of articles. I think that the *Encyclopedia* is a major source for Book of Mormon information. I find that I get as much help from a dictionary or a concordance as I do from somebody writing an article. Of course, it depends on how good that somebody is.

JBMS: *Has there been any interest in a modernized version of the Book of Mormon?*

RJM: The Reorganized Church, now the Community of Christ, put out a modern version. The editors softened some of the language so that it didn't sound so quaint. My objection to an easy-to-read edition of the Book of Mormon would be that we lose some of its Hebrew character. Craig Bramwell did a master's thesis on Hebraisms in the small plates ["Hebrew Idioms in the Small Plates of Nephi," BYU, 1960]. It was very interesting: to war a warfare, to traffic in traffic. You would lose that if you modernized the speech.

JBMS: *Do you think there are things that artists could do in portraying the Book of Mormon?*

RJM: Possibly. To me it would be particularly helpful if they could illustrate what scholars have done. When I was on the Correlation Committee [of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints], there were groups producing scripture films. They would send to us for approval the text of the words that were to be spoken. We would read the text and decide whether we liked it or not. They would never send us the artwork for clearance. But when you see the artwork, that makes all the difference in the world. It was always too late then. I decided at that point that it is so difficult to create a motion picture, or any illustration, and not convey more than should be conveyed. If you paint a man or woman, they have to have clothes on. And the minute you paint that clothing, you have said something either right or wrong. It would be a marvelous help if there were artists who could illustrate things that researchers and archaeologists had discovered.

JBMS: *What do you think of publishing children's approaches to the Book of Mormon? Are they a service or a disservice?*

RJM: I have seen things done with the Book of Mormon, Bible, and church history. I think people get the main thrust. But sometimes there are things that shouldn't be in pictures because we don't know how to accurately depict them. I received a testimony of the Book of Mormon without them. I have a book

on the New Testament that we bought when our children were little. It was put out by the Seventh-Day Adventists. They had very good artists, and they told the story of Jesus' birth just beautifully. But they say that the new star was a group of angels that came together and were the light source. As far as I know, that is not correct. I think that unwittingly we might make mistakes if we illustrate children's materials based only on the text of the Book of Mormon. On the other hand, we have a statement in the Doctrine and Covenants [55:4] that the Lord wanted Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps to write books so that little children would receive instruction. It didn't say to illustrate them, but there is a pretty good precedent for that being a good thing.

JBMS: *From your experience, what might assist others in how they approach the study of the Book of Mormon?*

RJM: By reading it carefully many times and then reading what others have written. One of the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* articles quotes Read Putnam. He is the man who wrote the article "Were the Plates of Mormon of Tumbaga?" [*Improvement Era*, Sept. 1966]. Tumbaga is a form of gold, an alloy. Putnam is also intrigued by the fact that the Book of Mormon speaks of machinery [Jarom 1:8] and that the book of Ether mentions people using big animals for work. The term *machinery* intrigues me too.

JBMS: *Do you think that 10 years from now the Book of Mormon will be even more emphasized in the church than it is today?*

RJM: It will not be less emphasized, but I don't know how much it will go ahead. The very nature of the church is that it doesn't put all the emphasis on something old. This is a living church. We put emphasis on what the church is doing now. President Benson was able to get people very interested and to get the Brethren quoting the doctrine of the Book of Mormon, which I think is a very good thing. The Book of Mormon is never going to be out of style or out of date, and it certainly isn't ever going to be replaced. The teachings on faith, repentance, and baptism; the plan of salvation; the atonement; and the resurrection will always be in vogue. But at the present time I don't see that the Book of Mormon is going to become larger on the horizon, because current events are always going to enter into the picture for the true church. ■