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Il Libro di Mormon: Anticipating Growth Beyond Italy's Waldensian Valleys

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In the year 1850, Elder Lorenzo Snow of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles arrived in Italy as a missionary. He and his companions spent much of their time with a Waldensian community. Elder Snow soon began sending missionaries to Switzerland to preach the gospel to French speakers there and began publishing church materials into French. The new materials caused a lot of opposition from Swiss Protestants and Italian Catholics. Elder Snow then went to England, where he solicited the help of an anonymous translator, and together they completed the translation of the Book of Mormon into Italian. Elder Snow returned to Italy soon after, bringing copies of *Il Libro di Mormon* with him, but he and the other missionaries did not find much success. Because of the influence of the Catholic Church on the government, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was not given much freedom in their preaching. *Il Libro di Mormon* similarly did not significantly help the missionary work. Almost all the Italian converts to the church were French-speaking Waldensians. Because of the lack of progress, the Italian mission was closed in 1867 and not reopened until a century later, in 1966.
When Elder Lorenzo Snow of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles organized the Italian Mission in the Kingdom of Sardinia in 1850, he began a three-step process that culminated in the translation of the Book of Mormon into Italian. At the same time, two dimensions of life in the Italian peninsula converged to open the way for missionary work and the translation of the Book of Mormon into Italian. First, the revolutions that began in 1848 had dissipated, and the Kingdom of Sardinia (whose principal territory and capital were located in northwest Italy in Piedmont) was now viewed as a free enclave for Protestant Christians. Second, King Carlo Alberto (1798–1849) of the Kingdom of Sardinia had granted a constitution in 1848 that guaranteed individual liberty, press freedom, the right to congregate without arms, and certain civil and political privileges to non-Catholic minorities (Jews and Waldensians). Nevertheless, there were still serious impediments to the work. The constitution did not guarantee religious liberty to non-Catholics nor the same degree of press freedom that was ensured in England and the United States. In fact, the Catholic Church remained “the sole religion of the State,” and no Bibles, catechisms, or liturgical prayer books (Catholic or non-Catholic) could be published without permission of a Catholic bishop.

Welcomed by the Waldensians

In June 1850 Elder Snow arrived in the Waldensian valleys, a Protestant enclave located approximately 40 kilometers from Turin. He candidly admitted that during the first phase of the Italian Mission he and his companions did not “actively and publicly engage in communicating the great principles which I had come to promulgate” and that “[a]ll the jealous policy of Italy has been hushed into repose by the comparative silence of our operations.” In fact, during this phase it is unlikely that the Waldensians realized that Mormons were not Protestants. Elder Snow met Charles Beckwith, the Waldensians’ “great benefactor” who had devised a program to train ministers in their own valleys and had encouraged them to look beyond their valleys to seek converts among the Catholic population. In 1848 Beckwith told the Waldensian clergy: “Henceforth, either you are missionaries, or you are nothing. . . . Stand up for something, or be nothing.” After meeting Beckwith, Elder Snow wrote a letter to President Brigham Young to report that the great benefactor told him, “I shall not attempt to hinder your efforts, and if you preach to all in these valleys as faithfully as to me, you need fear no reproach in the day of judgment.” Beckwith probably concluded that the Waldensians could benefit from observing the
Mormons, since the Waldensians needed, according to Beckwith, to return to their roots, go forth as missionaries without purse or scrip, and witness to the Catholics in Italy. In large part, because of Beckwith’s benign attitude, Snow and his small band of missionaries were initially welcomed to mingle among the Waldensians and to preach before their congregations.

**Pamphleteering Stirs Opposition**

In December 1850 Elder Snow initiated the second phase of the Italian Mission: to proselytize among the Waldensians and in French-speaking Switzerland. To begin this process, he sent Elder T. B. H. Stenhouse to Switzerland to begin proselytizing in Geneva and Lausanne. Within the next six months, Elder Snow also published two pamphlets in French. The first pamphlet, *Exposition des premiers principes de la doctrine de l’Eglise de Jésus-Christ des Saints des Derniers Jours*, was a translation of The Only Way to be Saved, which he had written a decade earlier while serving a mission in England.7 It was apparently translated in Turin and published in January 1851 by Louis Arnaldi in the same city.7 The pamphlet described the first principles of the gospel. The discussion was based on passages in the Bible and did not mention Joseph Smith or the Book of Mormon (topics reserved for the second pamphlet).

Elder Snow wrote the second pamphlet, titled *The Voice of Joseph*, especially for the Italian Mission. After “fruitless endeavors” to locate someone in Italy to translate this pamphlet into French, perhaps because its content was obviously non-Catholic, Elder Snow sent the manuscript to England to be translated into French. But in June 1850 Elder Orson Pratt made arrangements with the University of Paris to translate it.7 When Elder Snow received the translation, he contracted with a printer in Turin, Ferro et Franco, to produce *La Voix de Joseph* even though the Albertine constitution required that a local bishop give his permission before such works could be published.

Due to its obviously controversial nature, *La Voix de Joseph* was published with “a woodcut of a Catholic Nun, Anchor, Lamp and Cross on the first page, and on the last, Noah’s Ark, the dove and the olive.” Although Elder Snow confused a lamp with a monstrance, all of these symbols were frequently used on religious material, and the printer may have insisted that they be included to avoid the appearance of impropriety.10 Despite this precaution, Elder Snow also recognized that he had “published books at the risk of coming into collision with the government. The Catholic priests called upon the Minister of State to prevent their sale, but in spite of every obstacle, we have disposed of nearly all we printed.”

Waldensian pastors became more anxious about Elder Snow’s activities when they learned from *La Voix de Joseph* that Mormonism was not a Protestant church. *La Voix de Joseph* emphasized those aspects of Mormonism that were particularly attractive to some French-speaking Waldensians. It recounted Joseph Smith’s first vision and subsequent events leading to the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830. It also described Joseph Smith’s teachings that the primitive church had been restored through revelation and that the church was endowed with continuing revelation, spiritual gifts, and priesthood authority. It explained the Mormon doctrine of gathering converts to America in anticipation of the Millennium and a church program—the Perpetual Emigrating Fund—that provided financial assistance to those who could not afford to emigrate.
Elder Snow sent Elder Stenhouse to Switzerland because he recognized that the Waldensians’ alignment with the Swiss reformers, and the “long . . . [and] intimate connection between the Protestants here [in the valleys] and in Switzerland,” provided him with an opportunity to ensure “that the Gospel may be established in both places.” Shortly after arriving in Switzerland, Elder Stenhouse began distributing Elder Snow’s pamphlets, and the following year he republished *Exposition des premiers principes.* These pamphlets attracted more criticism from Protestant writers in Switzerland than they had in the Waldensian valleys. In 1851 Louis Favez, then a pastor of the Swiss Reformed Church, wrote a pamphlet published in Vevey that criticized Elder Snow’s pamphlets. Two years later another Swiss cleric, Emile Guers, published a tract in Geneva that also discussed *La Voix de Joseph* and *Exposition des premiers principes.* Both Favez’s and Guers’ pamphlets were eventually circulated in the Waldensian valleys. To counter these criticisms, Elder Stenhouse began publishing a church periodical, *Le Reflécteur,* in January 1853, and the following year he published a book that rebutted Favez and Guers. Both Swiss clerics responded to Elder Stenhouse’s censure in three pamphlets between 1854 and 1856. These pamphlets discussed the Book of Mormon that was published in French in 1852.

Translating the Book of Mormon into Italian

In January 1851 Elder Snow returned to England, where he planned the third and most important phase of the Italian Mission. Because the Waldensians comprised less than 1 percent of the total population of the Italian peninsula, Elder Snow believed that an Italian translation of the Book of Mormon and other missionary pamphlets would help facilitate an expansion of the mission to Turin, Genoa, Nice, and other cities in the Kingdom of Sardinia. Surprisingly, we know almost nothing about that translation effort.

In March 1851 Elder Snow retained a scholar in England to translate the Book of Mormon into Italian. To this day, the identity of this person remains unknown, for it appears in none of the records—private or ecclesiastical—from that era. In August, Elder Snow reported, “I am getting forward very well with the translation of the ‘Book of Mormon.’ I shall commence with the printing shortly, and will soon be able to present it to the people of Italy in their own language.” The translation was completed by October, and in December William Bowden, a London printer, began printing *Il Libro di Mormon.* In April 1852 Bowden finished printing 1,000 copies of *Il Libro di Mormon.* Out of this print run 167 copies were bound in the same type of green, blue, and brown sheep binding that was used for the third English edition of the Book of Mormon published in Liverpool during the same year, and 25 copies were bound in blue-purple morocco binding as presentation copies for the First Presidency, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, Deseret University, and the Territorial Recorders Office.

When Elder Snow returned to Italy in March 1852, he carried the unbound signatures for the first 400 pages of *Il Libro di Mormon.* On his way, while he was visiting Elder Stenhouse in Switzerland, he showed these signatures to Costantino Reta, a former member of the Subalpine Parliament (the House of Deputies in the Kingdom of Sardinia) who was forced into exile in 1849 because he had participated in the attempt to establish a republican government in Genoa. Reta, who taught Italian in Geneva and Lausanne, assured Elder Snow that it was “a correct and admirable translation, and a very appropriate style of language.” Before returning to Italy, Elder Snow also commissioned an Italian translation of *The Only Way to be Saved,* which was retitled *Restaurazione dell’antico Evangelio, ossia esposizione dei primi principii della dottrina della Chiesa di Gesù dei santi degli ultimi giorni* (Ancient Gospel Restored: An Explanation of the First Principles of the Doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints). This pamphlet was published, apparently without the name of the printer, when Elder Snow returned to Italy.

Missionary Work in the Catholic Cities

After Elder Snow returned to the Waldensian valleys, he encouraged his missionaries to proselytize in the largest Italian-speaking cities in the Kingdom of Sardinia: Turin, Nice, and Genoa. Shortly thereafter, two missionaries took lodgings in Turin. They published announcements, placed in cafes and on the streets, in which they stated they were “authorized to give all necessary information” concerning their church and that they would be present “every-day from 7 to 9 in the evening, in via della Chiesa, n. 9 bis, left staircase, at the end of the courtyard, first floor” to explain to the public “information concerning their doctrines and emigration program which
they have established to the United States.” Although it is unclear whether these missionaries had copies of *Il Libro di Mormon*, they did distribute copies of *Restaurazione dell’antico Evangelio*. At least one Catholic newspaper was offended by the presence of Mormon missionaries in the capital city of the Kingdom of Sardinia.

*L’Armonia* was one of many newspapers founded in Turin in 1848 after the Albertine constitution was granted. It was not an official organ of the Catholic Church and in fact was considered ultraconservative by other more moderate Catholic newspapers. On 1 August 1853 *L’Armonia* published a supplement with a headline for its lead story that announced “Mormons in Torino [Turin].” The article discussed, for the first time in an Italian newspaper, the history and contents of the Book of Mormon. It also provided information on church history and doctrines. The article argued that both Mormons and Waldensians were conducting missionary work and publishing religious pamphlets contrary to the law of the Kingdom of Sardinia and that the government was ignoring this and, as a result, undermining the Catholic Church.

One week later the headline of the lead article in *L’Armonia* asked, “Who is better off in Torino? The Catholics or the Mormons?” The newspaper complained that “unfortunately the Mormons, about whom we wrote last Sunday, are in Torino beginning their mission in the shadow of liberty, under the beneficial influence of the three-colored flag, protected by those great and spastic Catholics who are our state ministers.” The article discussed Elder Snow’s *Restaurazione dell’antico Evangelio* and warned readers not to be surprised if the missionaries began publishing a newspaper in Turin, or even built a temple, because the government’s ministers might allow such activities with a “nod of the head” because of their “agreed upon love of liberty.” In fact, the Waldensians were publishing a paper and building a temple in Turin at the time the article was published. The article then complained of what it characterized as the government’s shabby treatment of the Catholic Church while the Mormon missionaries were being allowed to conduct their activities without fear of legal action. Eventually the government prosecuted the owners of *L’Armonia* for its dogged opposition to the Risorgimento (the movement to unify Italy) and for its continued criticisms of government ministers.

Following the appearance of these articles in 1852, *L’Armonia* did not report specific Mormon missionary activity in Turin. The missionaries were unsuccessful in their quest to convert Catholic investigators, and this failure probably explains the lack of continued newspaper coverage. One Mormon missionary speculated that the “Catholics have been much more civil to us than the Protestants for some time, perhaps it has been because we have not menaced their positions heretofore.” But *L’Armonia* did continue to report on Mormonism in general, including political events in Utah. Meanwhile, supplied with copies of *Il Libro di Mormon* and *Restaurazione dell’antico Evangelio*, Mormon missionaries repeated their attempts to find converts in Turin and other cities in the Kingdom of Sardinia. Without exception, their visits were brief because of the city’s hostile environment. In July 1853 Thomas Margetts reported: “On my arrival in Turin I found that I was well known....Finding I could not remain there more than a few days, I was compelled to return to the vallies [sic] of the Waldenses.”

In March 1854 Elder Stenhouse reported that because of “the many difficulties and much suffering attending open circulation of our publications in...
Italy, I have been led to change tactics, and have sent two young Geneva Elders to Turin and Nice, to labor at their occupations, and to seek out opportunities of distributing the printed word, and of doing as much more as circumstances and the Spirit of the Lord may direct.” In June 1856 Elder Samuel Francis reported that he was determined to establish “a Turin Branch, of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, before the close of 1856.” He attempted to proselytize not only among the Catholics but also among the Protestants who held services in the city. He reported that he had “a good supply of the Only Way to be Saved, in Italian (the only work we have in that language, except the Book of Mormon),” which he distributed “at the church doors, and along the public walks and gardens.” But he also complained that there continued to be negative articles about the church in the local press.

Ultimately Il Libro di Mormon did not have a major impact in Italy during the 19th century. One of the only remaining testaments to Il Libro di Mormon in Italy during the 19th century is a copy that remains in the collection of the Biblioteca Comunale di Pinerolo. All but one of the 171 Mormon converts were French-speaking Waldensians. The first introduction that most of these converts had to the Book of Mormon was the explanation given by Lorenzo Snow in La Voix de Joseph. One of the first Mormon converts in Italy was described as a “firm believer in The Voice of Joseph.” The church was unable to distribute Il Libro di Mormon in the Catholic cities because the constitution and laws of the Kingdom of Sardinia did not guarantee religious liberty. The Catholic Church was the state religion under the “Statuto.” No minority religion was authorized to assemble, to publish religious propaganda, or to seek converts among the Catholic population. Even the Waldensian Moderator (the highest church official) complained to his representative in Parliament that Mormon missionaries were breaking the law by proselyting in the Protestant valleys. Although the government refused to expel Mormon missionaries from the valleys, preferring to tolerate them in a rural “ghetto,” it would not allow them to establish congregations in the rest of the kingdom. Prime Minister Camillo Cavour’s proclamation that there would be “a free church in a free state,” that the state had the right to dismantle many of the prerogatives of the Catholic Church, and that non-Catholic religions should be allowed to worship was conditioned by his observation that “the King’s government cannot tolerate proselytism or public acts in locations where they could produce popular tumult and disorder.”

The first Italian converts, including Joseph Toronto and Vincenzo di Francesca, read the Book of Mormon in English. Most of the print run from Il Libro di Mormon was not bound during the 19th century, and after the Italian Mission was closed in 1867, those signatures were shipped to Salt Lake City. The surviving signatures were eventually bound in variant cloth bindings during the early 20th century. In 1929 the Church of Jesus Christ (Bickertonites) published another Italian edition of the Book of Mormon for distribution to its Italian-speaking investigators. In 1964 the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints published a new Italian translation of the Book of Mormon shortly before the Italian Mission was rededicated in November 1966 by Elder Ezra Taft Benson in the Waldensian valleys. Since that time, many thousands of copies of Il Libro di Mormon have been distributed in Italy. It has become the key to the conversion of the core membership, which is now concentrated in the Italian-speaking metropolitan areas of not only Turin and Genoa but also Florence, Milan, Rome, and many other cities throughout the Republic of Italy.
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2. See Millennial Star, 15 March 1848, 90; 1 April 1848, 103–4; 15 April 1848, 119–20; 1 June 1848, 169; 15 July 1848, 209–11; 1 October 1849, 297–300; 1 February 1850, 57–39. William Howell was called to open the French Mission on 13 August 1848 (see Millennial Star, 1 September 1849, 263–64; 1 October 1849, 294–97; 1 January 1850, 11–14; 15 March 1850, 91–2; 15 May 1850, 157–59. The first church branch in France was organized in Boulogne-sur-Mer on 6 April 1850. John Taylor arrived there on 18 June 1850. The Swiss Mission was also opened in 1850 when Lorenzo Snow sent T. B. H. Stenhouse to Lausanne, and the Prussian Mission was opened in 1853 by Danish missionaries. The Italian peninsula was still a patchwork of separate kingdoms, duchies, and states. With the exception of the Kingdom of Sardinia and the Papal States, all of the regions—including the Grand Duchy of Tuscany, the Duchy of Parma, the Duchy of Modena and Duchy of Massa, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and the Kingdom of Lombardy-Veneto—were dominated by, controlled by, or allied with foreign governments that were opposed to Italian unification (see Dennis Mack Smith, Modern Italy: A Political History [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997]).

3. See, generally, Giorgio Tourn, The Waldensians: The First 800 Years (Turin: Claudiana, 1980), 180–200. Similar concessions were granted to members of