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Title Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past: The Book of Mormon, Historicity, and Faith

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Abstract A well-defined trend over the past two hundred years in secular biblical scholarship has been to sunder spiritual from historical, relegating events such as miracles and the resurrection to the category of “sacred stories.” This trend has also crept into some circles of LDS Book of Mormon scholarship, with adherents claiming an “expansionist” view of the Book of Mormon. They contend that the core of the text is historical but that so-called anachronisms in the text—references to the fall, atonement, resurrection, or new birth prior to the time of Christ—are due to Joseph Smith’s own interpolations. Because Book of Mormon writers and Joseph Smith himself clearly state that the text is entirely historical, this logically leaves expansionist advocates in the precarious position of claiming either that Joseph did not know the truth or that he lied. In contrast to this view, certain well-defined truths such as the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, the reality of the First Vision, and the atonement and resurrection of Christ must stand as the foundation of the LDS faith.



Worthy of Another Look:

CLASSICS FROM THE PAST

The Book of Mormon, Historicity, & Faith

This article appeared originally in the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 2/2 (1993): 1–13, and has been slightly revised. The issues of historicity and faith remain significant to this day.

Robert L. Millet

Abstract: The historicity of the Book of Mormon record is crucial. We cannot exercise faith in that which is untrue. Too often the undergirding assumption of those who cast doubt on the historicity of the Book of Mormon, in whole or in part, is a denial of the supernatural and a refusal to admit of revelation and predictive prophecy. Great literature, even religious literature, cannot engage the human soul and transform the human personality like scripture. Only scripture—writings and events and descriptions from real people at a real point in time, people who were moved upon and directed by divine powers—can serve as a revelatory channel, enabling us to hear and feel the word of God.

My memories of the first class I took in a doctoral program in religious studies at an eastern university are still very much intact. It was a course entitled “Seminar in Biblical Studies” and dealt with scripture, canon, interpretation, authorship, eschatology, prophecy, and like subjects. We were

but weeks into the seminar when the professor was confronted by a question from a conservative Baptist student on the reality of miracles among Moses and the children of Israel. The response was polite but brief: “Well,” the professor said, “I’m not going to state my own position on the matter in this class. Let me just say that I feel it doesn’t really matter whether the Israelites crossed the Red Sea as a result of Moses parting that body of water in a miraculous way, or whether they actually tiptoed across the waters of the Red Sea. What matters is that the Israelites then and thereafter saw it as an act of divine intervention, and the event became a foundation for a people’s faith for centuries.”

About a year later I found myself in a similar setting, this time in a seminar entitled “Critical Studies of the New Testament,” the first half of a two-semester encounter with biblical criticism. The composition of the class made for fascinating conversation: a Reformed Jew, two Methodists, two Southern Baptists, a Roman Catholic, a Nazarene, and a Latter-day Saint. By the time we had begun studying

the passion narratives in the Gospels, the question of “historical events” vs. “faith events” had been raised. The professor stressed the importance of “myth” and emphasized that such events as the miracles and bodily resurrection of Jesus—because in them the narrative detaches itself from the ordinary limitations of time and space such that the supernatural “irrupts” into human history—should be relegated to the category of faith events or sacred story. And then came the interesting phrase: “Now whether Jesus of Nazareth came back to life—literally rose from the dead—is immaterial. What matters is that Christians thought he did. And the whole Christian movement is founded upon this faith event.”

Perhaps one can appreciate how I felt when I read an article written by a prominent member of the Church a few years later in which he suggested that we Latter-day Saints tend to concern ourselves with all the wrong things. “Whether or not Joseph Smith actually saw God and Christ in a grove of trees is not really crucial,” he said in essence. “What matters is that young Joseph thought he did.” There was a haunting familiarity about the words and the sentiments. Certain others have described the First Vision as mythical, a vital and significant movement in Mormonism’s past upon which so many things turn, and yet a “faith event,” which may or may not represent an actual historical occurrence. More recently, it seems fashionable by some to doubt and debate the historicity of the Book of Mormon; to question the reality of Book of Mormon personalities or places; or to identify “anachronisms” in the book, specifically doctrines or principles that they feel reflect more of Joseph Smith and the nineteenth century than antiquity. Others go so far as to deny outright the reality of plates, angels, or authentic witnesses. These are interesting times indeed.

Though not a secular history of the Nephites per se, the Book of Mormon is a sacred chronicle or, to use Elder Boyd K. Packer’s language, “the saga of a message.”²¹ The book claims to be historical. Joseph Smith said it was a history. He even went so far as to suggest that one of the major characters of the story, Moroni, appeared to him and delivered golden plates upon which the Nephite narrative was etched. Now in regard to the historicity of the book, it seems to me that only three possibilities exist: Joseph Smith told the truth, did not know the truth, or told a lie. The latter two alternatives are obviously not very appealing to believers. If Joseph Smith

merely thought there were Nephites and supposed that such persons as Nephi and Jacob and Mormon and Moroni wrote things which they did not, then he was deluded or remarkably imaginative. He is to be pitied, not revered. If, on the other hand, the Prophet was solely responsible for the perpetuation of the Book of Mormon story—if he created the notion of a Moroni, of the golden plates and Urim and Thummim, and of a thousand-year-old story of a people who inhabited ancient America, knowing full well that such things never existed—then he was a deceiver pure and simple. He and the work he set in motion is to be feared, not followed. No matter the intensity of his labor, his own personal magnetism, or the literary value of his embellished epic, the work is a hoax and the word of the New York farm boy is not to be trusted in matters of spiritual certainty any more than Hawthorne or Dostoevsky.

The “expansionist” position of the Book of Mormon history is what some have assumed to be a middle-of-the-road posture. It propounds the view that the Book of Mormon represents an ancient core source mediated through a modern prophet. I feel this is basically an effort to have it both ways, to contend that certain sections of the Nephite record are ancient, while certain identifiable portions are unmistakably nineteenth-century, reflecting the culture, language, and theological worldview of

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Joseph Smith. Any reference to such matters as the fall, atonement, resurrection, new birth, or Godhead before the time of Christ are seen to be anachronistic—evidencing theological perspectives obviously out of place—perspectives which were written into the narrative by the translator but which would not originally have been on the plates themselves. For example, any discussion of resurrection or

atonement through Jesus Christ in the writings of Lehi or Jacob would be classified as expansion text, inasmuch as such notions are not to be found among the preexilic Jews, at least according to the extant materials we have, such as our present Old Testament or other Near Eastern documents. But, as Stephen D. Ricks has observed:

If we use the Bible or other documents from the ancient Near East as the standard, this seems an implied admission that the Book of Mormon has no independent evidentiary value as an ancient document. It also seems to imply that what can be known about preexilic Israelite religion is already to be found in the extant sources, principally the Bible. If this is the case, and nothing not previously known will be accepted, what unique contribution can a new document make? This reminds me of the reply falsely attributed to Umar when asked why he wished to burn the library at Alexandria: “If it is already in the Qur’an, we have no need of the books; if it is not in the Qur’an, then it is suspect of heresy and ought for that reason to be destroyed.” But can we be so certain that what can be known about preexilic Israelite religion is available in the extant sources? . . . Are we authorized to believe that Israelite religion before the exile is given its complete account in the Bible and other available documents? I, for one, am not so certain.²

Nor am I. Nor can I grasp how one can deal with a major inconsistency in the reasoning of such a position. Why is it, for example, that God can reveal to the Lehites how to construct a ship and cross the ocean, but that same God cannot reveal to them the plan of salvation, together with Christian concepts of creation, fall, atonement, and redemption through bodily resurrection? Why is it that God can speak to Abinadi, call him to ministerial service, send him to Noah and his priests, and yet not make known to that same prophet the doctrines of the condescension of Jehovah and the ministry of Christ as the Father and the Son? Why is it that God can raise up a mighty prophet-king like Benjamin, can inspire that holy man to gather his people for a large covenant renewal ceremony (an occasion, by the way, which, according to expansionists, bears the mark of Israelite antiquity), and yet not reveal doctrine to him—doctrine pertaining to the natural man, the coming of the Lord Omnipotent, and the

necessity for the new birth? The selectivity is not even subtle.

We need not jump to interpretive extremes because the language found in the Book of Mormon (including that from the Isaiah sections or the Savior’s sermon in 3 Nephi) reflects Joseph Smith’s language. Well, of course it does! The Book of Mormon is translation literature: practically every word in the book is from the English language. For Joseph Smith to use the English language with which he

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and the people of his day were familiar in recording the translation is historically consistent. On the other hand, to create the doctrine (or to place it in the mouths of Lehi or Benjamin or Abinadi) is unacceptable. The latter is tantamount to deceit and misrepresentation; it is, as we have said, to claim that the doctrines and principles are of ancient date (which the record itself declares) when, in fact, they are a fabrication (albeit an “inspired” fabrication) of a nineteenth-century man. I feel we have every reason to believe that the Book of Mormon came through Joseph Smith, not from him. Because certain theological matters were discussed in the nineteenth century does not preclude their revelation or discussion in antiquity.

Unless. Unless we deny one of the most fundamental principles of the Restoration—Christ’s eternal gospel: the knowledge that Christian prophets have taught Christian doctrine and administered Christian ordinances since the days of Adam. “Taking it for granted that the scriptures say what

they mean, and mean what they say,” Joseph Smith explained in 1842, “we have sufficient grounds to go on and prove from the Bible [that is, by utilizing the supplementary scriptural resources available through the Restoration] that the gospel has always been the same; the ordinances to fulfill its requirements, the same, and the officers to officiate, the same.”³ This is evident in the Book of Mormon, is found throughout the Doctrine and Covenants, and is central to the Pearl of Great Price, especially the Book of Moses. I contend that there is little reference to Christian doctrine in our present Old Testament or other Near Eastern texts, simply because that was a time in ancient Israel of spiritual darkness and apostasy. The Book of Mormon is a report and an account of a restoration, a renewal, a reevaluation of the nature of God and the plan of salvation. Kent P. Jackson has written that in the Book of Mormon “we follow the history of one family of Israelites which proved itself worthy to be blessed with great light and knowledge concerning Christ. . . . Even a superficial comparison of the content of the Book of Mormon with that of the Bible enables one to see that the level of understanding concerning sacred things was greater among Lehi’s descendants than among the people from which they came. With the separation of Lehi and his family from their native society came a revelation—perhaps more accurately a restoration—of gospel principles that were unknown to the mainstream of their countrymen.”⁴

Too often the real issue—the subtle but certain undergirding assumption of those who question the historicity of the Book of Mormon, in whole or in part—is a denial of the supernatural, a refusal to admit of divine intervention, of revelation and miracles and predictive prophecy. It is the tendency, unfortunately, to adopt uncritically the secular presuppositions and methodologies of those who have neither faith nor direction. “It should be noted,” Stephen E. Robinson observed, “that the rejection of predictive prophecy is characteristic of the secular approach to the scriptures, for the exclusion of any supernatural agency (including God) from human affairs is fundamental to the methodology of most biblical scholarship.”

The naturalistic approach gives scholars from different religious backgrounds common controls and perspectives relative to the data and eliminates arguments over subjective beliefs

not verifiable by the historical-critical method. However, there is a cost to using the naturalistic approach, for one can never mention God, revelation, priesthood, prophecy, etc., as having objective existence or as being part of the evidence or as being possible causes of the observable effects.

. . . If one starts with the a priori that the claims of Joseph and the Book of Mormon to predictive prophecy are not to be accepted, then that a priori is bound to force a conclusion that where the Book of Mormon contains predictive prophecy it is not authentic and must therefore be an “expansion.” But clearly, this conclusion flows not from the evidence but from the a priori assumption. If one allows the possibility that God might have revealed future events and doctrines to Nephi, Abinadi, or Samuel the Lamanite, then the so-called anachronisms disappear and this part of the argument for “expansion” collapses.

Naturalistic explanations are often useful in evaluating empirical data, but when the question asked involves empirical categories, such as “Is the Book of Mormon what it purports to be?” it begs the question to adopt a method whose first assumption is that the Book cannot be what it claims to be. This points out a crucial logical difficulty in using this method in either attacking or defending the Church.⁵

I candidly admit to caution rather than eagerness when it comes to applying many of the principles of biblical criticism to the Book of Mormon. The quest for the historical Jesus of Nazareth has led thousands to the demythologization and thus the de-deification of Jesus the Christ. “It would be incredibly naive,” Robinson noted, “to believe that biblical criticism brings us closer to the Christ of faith. After 200 years of refining its methods, biblical scholarship has despaired of knowing the real Jesus, except for a few crumbs, and has declared the Christ pictured in scripture to be a creation of the early church.”⁶ I for one am reluctant to assume that certain scholarly movements represent progress. Change, yes. Progress, not necessarily. Our faith as well as our approaches to the study of the Bible or the Book of Mormon must not be held hostage by the latest trends and fads in biblical scholarship; our testimony of historical events must not be at the mercy of what we know and can read in sources

external to the Book of Mormon. In the words of Elder Orson F. Whitney,

We have no right to take the theories of men, however scholarly, however learned, and set them up as a standard, and try to make the Gospel bow down to them; making of them an iron bedstead upon which God's truth, if not long enough, must be stretched out, or if too long, must be chopped off—anything to make it fit into the system of men's thoughts and theories! On the contrary, we should hold up the Gospel as the standard of truth, and measure thereby the theories and opinions of men.⁷

Professor Paul Hedengren of the Philosophy Department at Brigham Young University made a specific request of those studying the historicity of the Book of Mormon.

If someone wishes to consider the Book of Mormon as other than historical, do not make subtle this deviation from its obvious historical structure as some have done to the Bible. Make the deviation bold so that it is clear and unmistakable. Do not take the book Joseph Smith had printed in 1830 and say that its truths are not historical but are of some other type, for the simple logical structure of the sentences in it falsifies this claim. Instead create from the Book of Mormon another book which asserts what the Book of Mormon simply reports to have asserted. If someone claims that actually no one said what the Book of Mormon claims someone to have said, but these actually unspoken utterances are true, let them compose a book of these sentences without the historical reports of these sentences being said. Do not say in this new book, "Jesus said to some Nephites, 'Blessed are the meek.'" Simply say in this new book, "Blessed are the meek." In doing this the person will not have to overlook or ignore the historical claims taken to be either false or inessential. . . .

If we deny the historicity of the Book of Mormon or consider it inessential, let us compose a book in which claims are not inherently historical and attend to whatever truths we may find there. But in no case, let us say of the new book we compose that it is either the book Joseph Smith had printed in 1830 or that it is the Book of Mormon, for it is neither.⁸

When it comes to faith (and thus faithfulness and adherence to a cause), it matters very much whether there is an actual event, an objective occurrence toward which we look and upon which we build our faith. One cannot exercise saving faith in something untrue (Alma 32:21) or that did not happen, no matter how sweet the story, how sincere the originator or author, or how committed the followers. Though it is true that great literature, whether historically true or untrue, may lift and strengthen in its own way and even contain great moral lessons, such works cannot result in the spiritual transformation of the soul as only scripture can do. Scripture becomes a divine channel by which personal revelation comes, a significant means by which we may hear the voice of the Lord (see D&C 18:34–36). The power of the word, whether spoken or written, is in its source—God our Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. We are able to exercise faith in a principle or doctrine taught by real people who were moved upon by the power of the Holy Ghost, actual persons in time and space whose interactions with the Lord and his Spirit were genuine and true and whose spiritual growth we may imitate. Huck Finn may have given the world some sage advice, but his words cannot sanctify. Even the sweet testimonies of Demetrius the slave and Marcellus the Roman centurion from *The Robe* cannot enliven the soul in the same way that the teachings of Alma to Corianton or the letters of Mormon to Moroni do. There is a difference, a big difference.

In regard to the resurrection of Jesus—and the principle surely applies to the First Vision or the Book of Mormon—one non-Latter-day Saint theologian has observed:

There is an excellent objective ground to which to tie the religion that Jesus sets forth. Final validation of this can only come experientially [as Latter-day Saints would say, by personal revelation]. But it is desperately important not to put ourselves in such a position that the event-nature of the resurrection depends wholly upon "the faith." It's the other way around. The faith has its starting point in the event, the objective event, and only by the appropriation of this objective event do we discover the final validity of it.

The Christian faith is built upon the Gospel that is "good news," and there is no news, good or bad, of something that didn't happen. I personally am much disturbed by certain contemporary

movements in theology which seem to imply that we can have the faith regardless of whether anything happened or not. I believe absolutely that the whole Christian faith is premised upon the fact that at a certain point of time under Pontius Pilate a certain man died and was buried and three days later rose from the dead. If in some way you could demonstrate to me that Jesus never lived, died, or rose again, then I would have to say I have no right to my faith.⁹

Faith in Jesus as a type of timeless Galilean guru is at best deficient and at worst perverse. Faith in his moral teachings or in a Christian ethical code alone produces lovely terrestrial labors but superficial and fleeting commitment. As C. S. Lewis observed:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.¹⁰

Our faith in Christ is grounded in the work of redemption that was accomplished in a specific garden and on a designated cross in a particular moment in our earth's history. It is not the exact site that matters so much as it is that there was such a site. If Jesus did not in reality suffer and bleed and die and rise from the tomb, then we are spiritually doomed, no matter how committed we may be to the "faith event" celebrated by the first-century Christians. And so it is in regard to the occasion in Palmyra. It matters very much that the Eternal Father and His Only Begotten did appear to a young boy in a grove of trees in New York State. Exactly where the Sacred Grove is, as well as what specific trees or ground were hallowed by the theophany, is much less significant. If Joseph Smith did not see in vision the Father and the Son, if the First Vision was only the "sweet dreams" of a naive boy, then no amount of goodness and civility on the part of

the Latter-day Saints will save us. And so it is in regard to the people and events and teachings of the Book of Mormon. That there was a Nephi and an Alma and a Gidgiddoni is vital to the story, and, in my view, to the relevance and truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. That the prophetic oracles from Lehi to Samuel preached and prophesied of Christ and taught and administered his gospel is vital in establishing the dispensational concept restored through Joseph Smith; these items reveal far more about the way things are and have been among the

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people of God in all ages than they do about the way things were in the nineteenth century. Joseph Smith the Seer, in harmony with the principle taught by Ammon to Limhi (Mosiah 8:17), may well have restored as much knowledge of things past as of things future.

There is room in the Church for all types and shapes and sizes of people, and certainly all of us are at differing stages of intellectual development and spiritual maturity. Further, there are a myriad of doctrinal issues over which discussion and

debate may lead to diverse conclusions, particularly in matters which have not been fully clarified in scripture or by prophets. At the same time, there are certain well-defined truths—matters pertaining to the divine Sonship of Christ, the reality of the atonement, the appearance of the Father and the Son in 1820, and the truthfulness of the Book

At a time of intellectual explosion but of spiritual and moral corrosion, I am persuaded that no Latter-day Saint needs to surrender cherished values to live in a modern world . . . and that one can have implicit trust in the Church and its leaders without sacrificing or compromising anything.

of Mormon—which, in the uncompromising language of President J. Reuben Clark, “must stand, unchanged, unmodified, without dilution, excuse, apology, or avoidance; they may not be explained away or submerged. Without these two great beliefs [the reality of the resurrection and atonement and the divine call of Joseph Smith] the Church would cease to be the Church.” Further, “any individual who does not accept the fulness of these doctrines as to Jesus of Nazareth or as to the restoration of the Gospel and Holy Priesthood, is not a Latter-day Saint.”¹¹

I have often sensed that ours is not the task to shift the Church about with its history, practices, and beliefs—as though the divine institution was on casters—in order to get it into the path of moving persons who desire a religion that conforms with their own private beliefs or attends to their own misgivings or doubts. At a time of intellectual explosion but of spiritual and moral corrosion, I am persuaded that no Latter-day Saint needs to sur-

render cherished values to live in a modern world; that a member of the Church need not fall prey to the growing “alternate voices” offering alternative explanations for our foundational events and institutions; and that one can have implicit trust in the Church and its leaders without sacrificing or compromising anything. In the end, as we have been counseled repeatedly, the reality of golden plates and Cumorah and angels may be known only by an independent and individual revelation. Such an experience, as well as the reinforcing and renewing ones thereafter, comes to those who demonstrate patience and faith. “The finished mosaic of the history of the Restoration,” Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “will be larger and more varied as more pieces of tile emerge, adjusting a sequence here or enlarging there a sector of our understanding. . . . There may even be,” he added, “a few pieces of the tile which, for the moment, do not seem to fit. We can wait, as we must.” One day, he promised, “the final mosaic of the Restoration will be resplendent, reflecting divine design. . . . At the perfect day, we will see that we have been a part of things too wonderful for us. Part of the marvel and the wonder of God’s ‘marvelous work and a wonder’ will be how perfect Divinity mercifully used us—imperfect humanity. Meanwhile, amid the human dissonance, those with ears to hear will follow the beckoning sounds of a certain trumpet.”¹² ■

Notes

1. Boyd K. Packer, “The Things of My Soul,” *Ensign*, April 1986, 59.
2. Stephen D. Ricks, “Historicity of the Book of Mormon: Perspectives and Problems,” remarks at a Sunstone panel discussion on the historicity of the Book of Mormon, December 1988, unpublished manuscript.
3. Joseph Smith, *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 September 1843): 904; see also *History of the Church*, 2:15–18; 4:208.
4. Kent P. Jackson, “The Beginnings of Christianity in the Book of Mormon,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 92.
5. Stephen E. Robinson, “The Expanded Book of Mormon?” in *Second Nephi: The Doctrinal Structure*, ed. Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1989), 393–94.
6. Robinson, “Expanded Book of Mormon?” 395.
7. Orson F. Whitney, in *Conference Report* (April 1915): 100.
8. Paul Hedengren, “The Book of Mormon as an Ancient Document,” unpublished manuscript, 20 September 1986.
9. John W. Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (San Bernardino, CA: Here’s Life Publishers, 1983), 107–8.
10. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 56.
11. J. Reuben Clark, “The Charted Course of the Church in Education,” in *J. Reuben Clark, Selected Papers*, ed. David H. Yarn Jr. (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Press, 1984), 245.
12. Neal A. Maxwell, “Out of Obscurity,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 11.