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Janiece Johnson

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Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord

Janiece Johnson

“Pray sir what book have you got?”

“The Book of Mormon, and it is called by some The Golden Bible.”

“Ah sir then it purports to be a revelation from God.”

Yes said he it is revelation from God. I took the book by his request looked at the testimony of the witnesses. Said he “If you will read this book with a prayful heart and ask God to give you a witness, you will know of the truth of this work? I told him I would do so.”

—Phineas Young¹

LEATHER-BOUND COPIES of the first edition of the 586-page Book of Mormon were published and sold beginning March 26, 1830. Before there was a prophet, there was a translator—legally the “author and proprietor” of the Book. The title page told of the plates written “by the

1. Phineas Howe Young, “Life of Phineas Young—Written by Himself,” *Autobiography*, 1838, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University (hereafter, LTPSC BYU). Smith’s evangelizing emulates a textual pattern offered in the last chapter of the Book of Mormon (cf. Moroni 10:3–5). All original punctuation and spelling has been maintained.

spirit of Prophecy and Revelation” from which the Book originated.² Before the publication was complete, Joseph Smith had encouraged Oliver Cowdery that “a great call for our books” had already commenced.³ The Book emerged before there was any church to join. The rest would come later; initially individuals decided how they would respond to this “Golden Bible.”⁴ Was it counterfeit or divine? Was it the “greatest piece of superstition” or a “revelation from God”?⁵ What would it be to them?

Not long after its publication, Samuel Smith—brother of Joseph Smith Jr.—introduced the Book of Mormon to Methodist lay preacher Phineas Young. Young decided to investigate the Book to “make himself aquanited with the erro[r]s.” To his surprise, he felt a conviction that the Book was “true.” For more than a year, he preached from the Book to Methodist congregations until he decided he could not unite the Book of Mormon with Methodism. He resolved that he must “leave one and cleave to the other”; his reliance on the new book had developed to the point where he chose the Book over Methodism.⁶ Newspaper publisher William Phelps similarly dated his own conversion to April 9, 1830, when he first obtained a copy of the Book of Mormon. From that point on, “his heart was there,” though he had not yet met Joseph Smith or been baptized.⁷ Conviction of Smith’s prophetic call and a decision to convert would come later for Phelps; his affinity with the Book was primary. When Mormon elders shared

2. Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon, Upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi* (Palmyra, NY: EB Grandin, 1830), [i], josephsmithpapers.com/paper-summary/book-of-mormon-1830/7.

3. “Letter to Oliver Cowdery, 22 October 1829,” p. 9, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-to-oliver-cowdery-22-october-1829/1>.

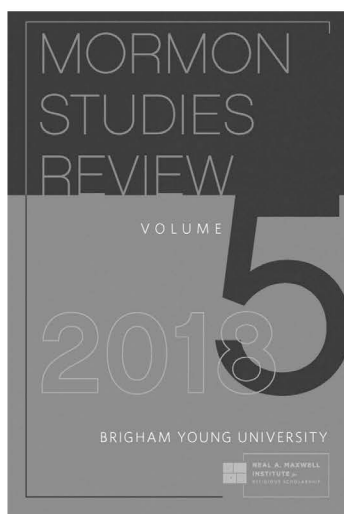
4. [Just about in this particular region], *Wayne Sentinel* (Palmyra, NY), June 26, 1829.

5. “Golden Bible,” *Rochester Advertiser and Daily Telegraph* (New York), August 31, 1829; Young, “Life of Phineas Young.”

6. Young, “Life of Phineas Young.”

7. Phelps would be baptized more than a year-and-a-half later. W. W. Phelps, “Letter No. 6,” February 24, 1835, *Latter-day Saints Messenger and Advocate* (Kirtland, Ohio) 1/7 (April 1835): 97; “Annual Conference,” *Deseret News*, April 11, 1860: 45, 48.

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Since 1989, the *Mormon Studies Review* published review essays to help serious readers make informed choices and judgments about books and other publications on topics related to the Latter-day Saint religious tradition. These publications, originally produced by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), included substantial freestanding essays that made further contributions to the field of Mormon studies. The journal was originally called *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* beginning in 1989, then *FARMS Review of Books in 1996*, followed by *The FARMS Review* in 2003. In 2011 the journal was renamed *Mormon Studies Review*.

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book was the Bible.¹⁰ Before any of these soon-to-be Latter-day Saints heard of Joseph Smith or his “Gold Bible,” they were already a “people of the Book.” Though the Bible continued to act as a locus of authority, the role of the Book of Mormon needs further consideration. This article is a preliminary effort to try to understand early Book of Mormon reception history more completely—a study I am working to expand—and thus revolves around the question, How did the Book of Mormon become scripture for early Mormon converts?

Religious pluralism changes how we think about and define scripture. Without an established church declaring scripture by decree, adherents determine what is scripture to them. And with expanding nineteenth-century religious pluralism under disestablishment, Americans had increasingly imaginative and expansive responses to the question of what constituted scripture. A relationship with a text defines what becomes scripture. Individuals choose what matters to them—what has the potential of offering a connection to the divine. As individuals build a relationship with a new text, the text transforms into scripture; the connection imbues the text with transformative power.¹¹

The relationship formed between a people and a text develops through action—particularly personal practice. Yet lived religion (or practice) is an unwieldy category, and source material is likewise cumbersome. At times, these untamed sources are difficult to locate, hidden in history long before the process of analysis begins. Though Mormon history boasts a remarkable trove of personal writings, some are more useful than others. Many never sat down to write about their initial exposure to the Book of Mormon until decades after the initial event, at a point where memories were necessarily shaped through the passage of time and by a lifetime of experiences. Very few references to the Book of Mormon text include quotation marks or other forms of direct citation,

10. Theodore Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 13.

11. See Laurie Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures: An Anthology of Sacred Writings* (New York: Penguin, 2010), vii–xxi; Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 1–20.

though close reading of personal writings provides considerable evidence of direct connections to the Book's text. Despite the difficulty, personal writings offer a window into the daily lives and practice of individual Mormons, which are inaccessible in any other way. Using a sample of personal writings, this article begins to analyze the use of the Book of Mormon in the lived religion of these early converts to Mormonism. Personal writings reveal how some early Mormons began to develop a relationship with the text—how they transitioned from “a people of the Book” to a people of the Books.¹²

The Sign of the Book

Some Latter-day Saints detail individual otherworldly experiences with the physical Book of Mormon prior to reading its pages. Ezra Thayre was “filled with wrath” when he initially heard of the “Gold Bible” in the Fall of 1830. This attitude changed, however, when he first handled a copy of the Book of Mormon given to him by Hyrum Smith at the Smith family's Manchester, New York, home. Ezra wrote of this moment, “I said, let me see it. I then opened the book, and I received a shock with such exquisite joy that no pen can write and no tongue can express.” He bought the Book for fourteen shillings, and when he opened it again, he said he felt a “double portion of the Spirit”—he was “truly in heaven.”¹³ As a fourteen-year-old girl living in Watertown, New York, in 1835, Zina Huntington came

12. Contemporary Latter-day Saints are familiar with their current canon—it has not been added to since 1978. They use their own title—the Standard Works—and can hold them in their hand or search them on their phone. Yet these books were not always so accessible. Not every convert had her or his own Book. Consistent shortages of Books led Latter-day Saints to pursue more creative avenues that offered access to the text. Some early Mormons converted before ever having a book in their hands—some read galley sheets or signatures from the unbound book, some read excerpts of the text in early LDS periodicals, and others read assessments of the new scripture in tracts and pamphlets that later led them to the Book itself. For the purposes of this paper, I will define “the Book” broadly—as any means of access to the Book of Mormon content.

13. “Testimony of Brother E. Thayre concerning the Latter Day Work,” *True Latter Day Saints' Herald* 3/4 (October 1862): 79–82.

home from school when she saw “the Book of Mormon, that strange, new book, lying on the window sill of our sitting-room.” She later said as she picked it up the “sweet influence of the Holy Spirit accompanied it to such an extent that I pressed it to my bosom in a rapture of delight, murmuring as I did so, “This is the truth, truth, truth!”¹⁴ Upon encountering the Book of Mormon for the first time, some early Mormon converts, like Thayre and Huntington, heard of its miraculous origins, listened, and then believed the Book to be divinely appointed due to their own transcendent talismanic experience—they did not need to read the whole book; holding it was enough. Their experience with the Book as a physical object led them to immediately identify the Book as something important that would lead them to truth.

Living in Providence, Rhode Island, Mary Ann Angell heard of the Book of Mormon through Thomas Marsh, a recent Mormon convert, when he visited the city. She bought a copy of the Book from him. Later, she often testified “that the Spirit bore witness to her when she first took the Book of Mormon in her hands, of the truth of its origin, so strongly that she could never afterwards doubt it.” Her experience with the physical book signaled truth to her, just as it had for Thayre and Huntington. Moreover, it led her to study and work to better understand the Book’s content. Her transcendent experience laid a foundation for a kinship with the Book and later led her to baptism. For two years, she read the Book and believed before traveling to New York and choosing to unite with the Church of Christ. During that time, she shared the Book with whomever she met who wanted to know more. Angell’s prolific Book of Mormon lending was well known, though she limited the borrowing period—she would never be separated from her Book for long. Her personal bond to the Book continued to strengthen.¹⁵

The strength seen in these relationships with the Book itself, while initiated through an actual physical encounter, laid the groundwork for

14. Zina D. H. Young, “How I Gained My Testimony,” *Young Woman’s Journal* 4/7 (April 1893): 318.

15. Emmeline B Wells, “Heroines of the Church: Biography of Mary Ann Angell Young,” *Juvenile Instructor* 26/1 (January 1, 1891): 17.

an ongoing, sustained belief. The experience with the Book pointed to its importance. Similarly, early LDS periodicals often concentrated on the Book as a signal or an “ensign” that marked Smith’s prophetic call, the opening of the heavens, and preparation for the impending eschaton. From the mid-twentieth century, a handful of academic articles and books have slowly developed an understanding of the Book of Mormon as a sign. When combined with a limited extant record of Smith’s own preaching from the Book of Mormon and the limited attention given to the Book of Mormon in early Church periodicals, these experiences lend support to the contention of some scholars that early Mormons did not extensively use the new scripture for its content—but rather, what it signaled or “enacted” proved its most important function. These scholars argue that the sign of the Book of Mormon was of primary importance and that the Bible was the main theological source in early Mormon history.¹⁶ The personal writings of some Latter-day Saints

16. Amos N. Merrill and Alton D. Merrill, “Changing Thought on the Book of Mormon,” *Improvement Era* 45/9 (September 1942): 568; Alton D. Merrill, “An Analysis of the Papers and Speeches of Those Who Have Written or Spoken about the Book of Mormon Published during the Years of 1830 to 1855 and 1915 to 1940 to Ascertain the Shift in Emphasis” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1940), <http://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4938>. Gordon Irving’s 1983 study of Mormons and the Bible also clearly establishes the frequent use of biblical passages amongst LDS publication. Irving there wonders “whether the frequent use of biblical passages should be viewed as the effort of early LDS leaders to reassure themselves and the world, post facto, as to the validity of Mormon doctrines, or whether the Bible should be seen as the primary source of Latter-day Saint ideas” as a point deserving further examination. Gordon Irving, “The Mormons and the Bible in the 1830s,” *BYU Studies* 13/4 (1973): 1–13. Grant Underwood took up that challenge and was the first to suggest that despite limited usage in LDS periodicals, the Book of Mormon was a critical sign demonstrating where the faithful should gather in preparation for the advent. The Book was “an invaluable prophetic landmark . . . that helped the Saints locate themselves in the eschatological timeline.” Underwood made an attempt to also analyze journals to corroborate his periodical analysis. However, in the broad scope of the personal writings of an industriously literate Mormon population, his sample is minimal. Church periodicals are certainly an element of lived religion—a fruitful and dense source, but one ill-equipped to proffer wide-ranging insight into personal application and religiosity. The analysis of published articles alone does not yield a sense of the surrounding context—or if they affected personal religiosity and practice. Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS

support the general contours of this argument, as they emphasize the Book's function as a sign, replicating the rhetoric utilized by some early Mormon missionaries.

After accusations of delusion and excommunication from her Presbyterian congregation without an opportunity for a personal response, in 1840, new Mormon convert Laura Farnsworth Owen published a tract in her "defence." In the decade since the organization of the Church of Christ, some early LDS missionaries and periodicals emphasized the miraculous sign of the Book. Owen mirrored that pattern as she reasoned that

it has been remarked, that the book of Mormon has nothing to do with our salvation. First, if God sent an angel from heaven, authorizing them to preach the fullness of the Gospel, and has given them the Holy Spirit to accompany it with power, also a record or history of his covenant people, and of his Gospel, which is so plain that it enables the watchman to see after being enlightened on the subject, that it will have something to do with your salvation.

The miraculous coming forth of the Book signaled to the faithful that the Book was important. The Bible prophesied of this coming

Theology," *Dialogue* 17/3 (1984): 35–74. Jan Shipps uses the example of William McLellin's extensive journals to establish LDS patterns of Book of Mormon usage in preaching. For McLellin, the advent of the Book likewise pointed to the impending eschaton. Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 1994), 6–7. Likely the best-known argument comes from Terryl Givens. Givens eloquently applied a theoretical structure to refine this concept in his 2002 *By the Hand of Mormon*. In his analysis, the most important function of the book was "what it *enacts*" rather than "what it *says*." Its mere existence was a persuasive sign that Joseph Smith was a prophet; the Book's miraculous "coming forth" clearly highlighted the sign. Once this claim of authoritative discourse was established, the book did not need to be internally persuasive. The sign was of primary importance—more significant than theological content. Adherents did not actually have to read the text to recognize the sign. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 64, 82–88. See also Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 24–27.

forth—Owen’s defense includes a litany of biblical prophecies fulfilled by the appearance of the Book of Mormon. She does not explicitly preach from the Book’s message in her tract, but points to the spiritual necessity of its existence. She argued that if one wanted “enlightened” sight, they needed the Book’s “plain” and salvific message.¹⁷ Giving others opportunities to recognize the signal was a consistent practice once an individual had followed the sign herself.

Considering the function of the Book of Mormon as a sign remains a significant element of Book of Mormon reception history; nevertheless, it is insufficient in its ability to communicate and explain the full range of the relationships between early converts and the Book of Mormon. Moreover, at times, the argument has been expanded and inflated to claim that early Latter-day Saints “did not readily incorporate the new scripture into their devotions.”¹⁸ When combined with attention to the sign of the book, such assessments make a theological argument concerning the content of the Book of Mormon and a lack of significance for the early Latter-day Saints. This article provides a corrective to such elaborations. Expanding our source material extends our vision of early converts and their relationship with the Book of Mormon.

In the last decade, a number of scholars have pinpointed the influence of the Book of Mormon on early Latter-day Saint practice and have begun to develop a greater understanding regarding Book of Mormon praxis. Mark Ashurst-McGee argues for the pivotal role of the Book of Mormon and other additional revelatory additions in the founding and development of Smith’s social and political thought to the establishment

17. Laura Farnsworth Owen, “Mrs. Laura Owen’s Defence against the Various Charges That Have Gone Abroad,” *Times and Seasons* 2/7 (February 1, 1841): 299–302.

18. Noel Reynolds cites Shipps and Underwood for this claim, though neither makes an explicit assumption about the dearth of devotional Book of Mormon usage. Noel Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 7. Terryl Givens also later identifies “relative neglect by the LDS faithful” as a generally accepted fact. Terryl Givens, foreword to Gerald E. Smith, *Schooling the Prophet: How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith and the Early Restoration* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute Press, 2015), vii.

of Zion.¹⁹ Building upon Scott Faulring's earlier work, Michael MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat thoroughly demonstrate that the Book of Mormon served as the central source for Oliver Cowdery's 1829 *Articles of the Church of Christ* as well as Joseph Smith's *Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ*, which superseded Cowdery's earlier document.²⁰ The Book of Mormon acted as a primer for early efforts at Church organization and theology. More recently, Gerald Smith argued that the Book of Mormon was the major source for Smith's temple theology.²¹ Ryan Tobler addressed the role of the Book of Mormon played specifically in developing the rite of baptism. During translation, the Book of Mormon narrative originally ignited questions regarding issues of authority for Smith and Cowdery; they continued to rely on the Book of Mormon text as they developed the practice of baptism.²² All of these sources point to the Book of Mormon as a wellspring for early Mormon ecclesiology, liturgy, and missiology. While this article does not evaluate these arguments individually, their collective emphasis on the role played by the *content* of the Book of Mormon (rather than its physical existence and associated function as a sign) within the development of the nascent Church leads us to consider the limitations inherent within the Book-as-sign argument. Beyond that, as of yet, none of these approaches addresses the personal role of the Book of Mormon in the

19. Mark Ashurst-McGee, "Zion Rising: Joseph Smith's Early Social and Political Thought" (PhD diss., Arizona State University, 2008).

20. Both versions rely on the same Book of Mormon passages. The content of Cowdery's document is built on by Smith with additional instructions regarding the gift of the Holy Ghost and the priesthood office of elder. See Scott Faulring, "Book of Mormon: A Blueprint for Organizing the Church," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 60–71; Michael Hubbard MacKay, Gerrit Dirkmaat, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Joseph Smith Papers Documents*, Vol. 1: *July 1828–June 1831* (Salt Lake City: Church Historians Press, 2013), 368–70; Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; and Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 147.

21. Smith, *Schooling the Prophet*.

22. Ryan G. Tobler, "The Only Way to Be Saved: Early Mormonism and the Sacrament of Baptism," *Journal of Mormon History*, forthcoming.

daily lives and practice of early Latter-day Saints.²³ What does expanding source material reveal about how the Book of Mormon was incorporated into religious practice?

A People of the Book

Roman Catholics first introduced the Bible on the American continent, but ubiquitous Protestant biblicism soon eclipsed that history. For many Protestants, reliance on the biblical text was absolute—they were clearly a “people of the book.”²⁴ The book centered their lives. After a local minister emphasized revival and resurgence of faith, eighteenth-century evangelical Sarah Osborn narrated her conversion with words from the biblical text—the Book of James. The words turned her away from a battle with her parents and desperate thoughts of suicide to God. Osborn’s prolific writings bleed the biblical text. “Hardly a sentence passed [in her writing] . . . without some biblical phrase, allusion, or reference.”²⁵ Osborn is part of a larger tradition involving the textual integration of scripture into the personal lives and writings of converted individuals. For centuries, British subjects and then new Americans personally relied on the biblical text not only for religious direction, but also for a language of self-understanding—its narrative and lexicon shaped their lives.

In the pre-Revolutionary years as well as into the first half of the nineteenth century, the Bible was a primary source of learning in schools and homes, where memorization of biblical verses functioned as a key to literacy.²⁶ Growing up in Berkshire, Massachusetts, Eliza R. Snow was

23. Women’s voices and experiences are also almost entirely absent from previous studies.

24. Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives*, 13.

25. Mark A. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word: The Bible in American Public Life, 1492–1783* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 192; Catherine Brekus, *Sarah Osborn’s World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 119–23.

26. Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 45–51.

“early taught to respect the Bible.” In Sabbath-School, she memorized long passages of the New Testament—at times “reciting seven of the long chapters in the Gospels, at a lesson.”²⁷ Though the use of the Bible in the public sphere transitioned from a source of political instruction to a mainly rhetorical device during the revolutionary years, personal use persisted.²⁸ The new century’s technological advances produced an explosion of different texts to compete with the grip of the Bible on many American lives, yet the Bible’s popular prevalence not only persevered but actually expanded. In the early nineteenth century, the American Bible Society labored to flood the country with Bibles—their ambitious goal was to have a Bible in each home. This labor, coupled with others’ similar efforts, led to a resurgence of the Bible’s presence and power at the same time that debates concerning the purity and propriety of different biblical forms and translations intensified.²⁹ Noah Webster, shaper of a new distinctive “American” language and translator of one of those new biblical translations published in 1833, understood his two central projects to be joined hand in hand—biblical language had “considerable influence in forming and preserving our national language”—so accuracy mattered.³⁰ Despite a surge of new translations, the English Bible—the King James translation—reigned. The King James provided a “primary cultural ‘anchor’ in the form of a shared national text.”³¹

Americans continued to write personal inscriptions in their Bibles and to see themselves as being in its narrative well into the nineteenth century.³² Like Sarah Osborn a century earlier, biblical language not

27. Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, ed., *The Personal Writings of Eliza R. Snow* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 8.

28. Noll, *In the Beginning Was the Word*, 289–303.

29. Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 89–93; Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures*, vii–xii.

30. Noah Webster, *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments, In the Common Version* (New Haven, CT: Durrie and Peck, 1833), iv; Joshua Kendall, *The Forgotten Founding Father: Noah Webster’s Obsession and the Creation of an American Culture* (New York: Berkley Books, 2012), 73.

31. Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 111.

32. Gutjahr, *An American Bible*, 146.

only pervaded many Americans' writings but shaped how they found meaning in their lives. Philip Barlow demonstrates the dominant nature of the biblical text in the nineteenth century when comparing the experience of the prominent Second Great Awakening revivalist Charles Finney and the mother of Joseph Smith, Lucy Mack Smith.³³ Finney heard words he recognized as scripture for the first time during his conversion. As Lucy Smith recounted a bout with a dire illness, she paraphrased scripture as she pleaded with God. The King James text narrated their lives—it was their “mother tongue.”³⁴

Like most Americans, those who would become Mormons were steeped in biblical grammar as were Osborn, Smith, and Finney; they were first “a people of the book.” These early converts demonstrated high levels of biblical literacy before they ever heard of Joseph Smith’s “Gold Bible.” As Reform Baptists, Elizabeth and Newel Whitney sought biblical truth, and this search brought them into an increasingly familiar relationship with the biblical text. Elizabeth wrote that one night “the spirit rested upon us and a cloud overshadowed the house.” Like the Children of Israel or those gathered at the baptism of Jesus, the cloud offered them a visible sign of divine presence. A celestial messenger spoke to them from the cloud and told them “to prepare to receive the word of the Lord, for it was coming.”³⁵ The biblical narrative provided the symbols that guided the interpretation of their experience and ultimately led them to follow Joseph Smith. For a recent Latter-day Saint convert in a chaotic 1837 Kirtland, Ohio, the biblical text similarly provided a parallel to her own present situation. For Mary Fielding, the “circumstances of Korah and his company when they rose up against Moses and Aaron” in Numbers 16 “exactly described” the predicament

33. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11; Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World*, 119–23.

34. Lavina Fielding Anderson, “Mother Tongue: KJV Language in Smith Family Discourse,” presented at the Mormon History Association Conference, Springfield, IL, May 22, 2009; manuscript in author’s possession.

35. Elizabeth Ann Whitney, quoted in Edward Tullidge, *The Women of Mormondom* (New York: Tullidge and Crandall, 1877), 41–43.

of the Latter-day Saints. She seriously pondered “whether the Lord [would] come out in a similar way or not”—she “could not tell.”³⁶ (For those of us not so wholly submersed in the biblical text—in Numbers 16, the earth opened up and swallowed the apostates.) Fielding considered the apostasy in Kirtland so dire that she anticipated a grand manifestation of God’s power to intervene on behalf of the faithful. These early Latter-day Saints “likened” scriptural text to their lives before a Book of Mormon prophet ever pleaded with them to do so (see 2 Nephi 6:5; 1 Nephi 19:23).³⁷

For descendants of a Reformation standard of *sola scriptura*, adding more books to the scriptural canon was a significant choice. However, in the post-revolutionary period, many Americans “engage[d] scripture through emendation and addition.” Early Mormons were not alone in what Laurie Maffly-Kipp has called “devotional creativity” with the biblical text.³⁸ This was not necessarily revolutionary in itself; complete sovereignty over the word escaped them even within the Protestant agreement of *sola scriptura*. Different translations, designs, formats, and interpretations unleashed a cacophony of understanding and ultimately promoted pluralism. In the nineteenth century, this pluralism resulted in a variety of different writings that could be classified as American scripture.³⁹ Rather than writing a biblical commentary or a direct emendation of the biblical text, in a striking prophetic act, Joseph Smith produced a whole book. His Book internally connected itself to the Bible.

For many, the Bible, specifically the King James translation, played an essential role in leading them to accept new scripture. Eliza R. Snow’s mother and sister were baptized in 1831 while the family lived

36. Mary Fielding Smith to Mercy Fielding Thompson, August–September 1837, Mary Fielding Collection, CHL.

37. All Book of Mormon references are modern. Though paragraphs were numbered by Franklin D. Richards for the 1852 edition, shorter chapter divisions and versification came with Orson Pratt’s changes to the 1879 edition. Joseph Smith Jr., trans. *The Book of Mormon*, 3rd European ed. (Liverpool: F. D. Richards, 1852); Joseph Smith Jr., trans., *The Book of Mormon* (Liverpool: William Budge, 1879).

38. Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures*, vii.

39. Gutjahr, *American Bible*, 89–93; Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures*, vii–xii.

in Mantua, Ohio. The Snows often visited the recent gathering place of the Latter-day Saints in Kirtland. It was there that Eliza heard the testimony of two of the Three Witnesses—“such impressive testimonies I had never before heard”; she also met Joseph Smith and believed he had “an honest face.”⁴⁰ However, none of these things was enough to convince her—she worried that it was a “hoax” or a “flash in the pan.” It took her four years of concentrated “study of the ancient Prophets” before her “heart was . . . fixed.”⁴¹ The biblical text concretized her initial positive reaction and moved her to be baptized. Similarly, for Louisa Barnes Pratt, the Bible played a central role in her belief in the Book of Mormon and the Restoration. She attempted to read the Book of Mormon more than once, but she was “so immersed in worldly cares” that she never progressed. Later, it was her reading of the Bible that confirmed to her the truth of the Book of Mormon.⁴² Just as had Snow and Pratt, many early converts saw a critical connection between the Book of Mormon and the Bible. While Latter-day Saints chose to transgress the border of biblical canonicity by adding additional books, they also further supported the authority of the biblical text. Mormons, like many other Americans, would not leave behind their Bibles in favor of the next book; their Bibles led them to expand their view. So, while “the cadences of the King James echoed throughout the land,” how did early Mormons move to accept a new book?⁴³

40. Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom*, 63–64.

41. Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, “A Wary Heart Becomes ‘Fixed Unalterably’: Eliza R. Snow’s Conversion to Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History* 30/2 (Fall 2004): 117.

42. S. George Ellsworth, ed., *The History of Louisa Barnes Pratt: Being the Autobiography of a Mormon Missionary Widow and Pioneer* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), 56.

43. David Holland most thoroughly places the early Latter-day Saints in their American context of searching for authority. He examines both those who would breach the border of the biblical canon and those who would defend it. As Latter-day Saints transgressed the border of biblical canonicity by adding additional books, they also further supported the authority of the biblical text. See David Holland, *Sacred Borders: Continuing Revelation and Canonical Restraint in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 145–56.

Reading the Book

The process of accepting the Book of Mormon as scripture proceeded in different ways. Some followers had a transcendent experience with the book before reading a word, as discussed earlier. Yet for many, an initial experience was not enough; further study had to support a preliminary positive response. This caution indicates that many early converts were aware that such initial impressions could potentially deceive. Steven Harper compellingly argues that there was a pervasive fear of false prophets among many early Mormon converts.⁴⁴ A charismatic leader was not a divine guarantee. For that guarantee, they relied on their Bibles. Acceptance of this new Book could take place in hours, in days, or over years. There was no singular formula or timeline, but for a myriad of early converts, significant reading of the new text along with their Bibles began to develop a relationship with the Book and led to conversion. This general pattern was consistent enough to become an important trope as Latter-day Saints later crafted their conversion narratives.

As John Murdock learned of the Book of Mormon in the Fall of 1830, he felt an impulse to immediately know of its truth. An avid Bible reader, he had moved from church to church for more than a decade—Lutheran Dutch to Presbyterian Seceder to Baptist and then reformed Baptist.⁴⁵ As he later detailed, he was seeking a return to primitive Christianity when he was impressed with what he heard of “four men arrived in Kirtland from the state of New York.” They were “preaching, baptizing, and building up the church after the ancient order.” He made his way to Kirtland to “see for [him]self.” Three things would prove to him that these men were of God: “their walk [would] agree with their profession, and the Holy Ghost would attend their ministration of the ordinances, and the Book of Mormon would contain the same plan of salvation as the

44. Steven C. Harper, “Infallible Proofs Both Human and Divine: The Persuasiveness of Mormonism for Early Converts,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 10/1 (Winter 2000): 99–118.

45. “John Murdock,” Biography, Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/person/john-murdock>.

Bible.”⁴⁶ After obtaining a copy of the Book of Mormon, he declined to observe a Mormon confirmation meeting, choosing rather to immediately delve into the Book. His conversion narrative revealed urgency—“This night must prove it to be true, or false.” He “stayed alone, and read the Book of Mormon.” Reading the Book confirmed truth to him. He was ready to unite with the Church of Christ the next day. After his baptism, he shared the new Book reading with his friends and family. As a missionary, he preached of the Book and encouraged others to read for themselves. The content was a critical part of Murdock’s personal evaluation of the Book, both for his conversion as well as for his subsequent missionary service, and it provided a significant pattern for his future life.⁴⁷

That same fall, reformed Baptist Parley Pratt noted that he “felt a strange interest” in the Book before he read it. Demonstrating a common pattern to approaching the Book, he “opened it with eagerness” and “read its title page. [He] then read the testimony of several witnesses in relation to the manner of its being found and translated.” Although Pratt’s initial positive assessment of the Book related to the signs of authenticity from the coming forth of the Book, that was not enough. Suddenly, reading eclipsed all other needs. He described his continued study in words now familiar to many Latter-day Saints: “After this I commenced its contents by course. I read all day; eating was a burden,

46. Using the term “plan of salvation” could be an example of his immersion in Restoration scripture—however, it is not unique to the Book of Mormon. The phrase was used in theological sources that predate Smith. See also Jarom 1:2; Alma 24:14, 42:5; Moses 6:62.

47. Givens argues that Murdock “expected” the Book of Mormon to “contain the same plan of salvation as the Bible.” The complete quote is essential: his expectation was that if the Book of Mormon was divine, its message would align with the Bible. He wanted to know if it was divine, and this was dependent in part on the content of the Book. He expeditiously explored the new Book and would continue to develop his trust in the content of the book. Book of Mormon intertextuality permeates Murdock’s larger record; he even names his journal “an abridged record,” patterning its structure after Mormon’s own abridgement. Conspicuously imitating Mormon’s son Moroni, Murdock’s own son picks up the record and finishes it after his father’s death. Immersion in the text was a family affair. John Murdock, *Journal and Autobiography*, 1867, LTPSC BYU; and Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 85.

I had no desire for food; sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep.”⁴⁸ Pratt continued to demonstrate his obsession with the content of the Book—its “discovery greatly enlarged my heart, and filled my soul with joy and gladness. I esteemed the Book, or the information contained in it, more than all the riches of the world.”⁴⁹ The content of the Book obtained through an experience of personal reading and study of the text led to his initiation into the Church of Christ and immediate exertions as a new member. Pratt was not the only one for whom the Book propelled sleepless nights.

The immediacy of the need to examine the Book personally compelled action in many early Latter-day Saints. As Mormonism was beginning to establish itself in Ohio, Methodists Elsa and John Johnson “sat up all night reading [the Book], and were very much exercised over it”; they then desired to meet Joseph Smith.⁵⁰ A few months earlier in the Fall of 1830, Mary Elizabeth Rollins was a thirteen-year-old girl who had recently moved to Kirtland. John Whitmer, one of the first missionaries, brought a Book of Mormon to Isaac Morley, and the young Mary Rollins asked to see the Book. She detailed, “When he put it in my hand I felt such a great desire to read it that I could not refrain from asking him to let me take it home and read it.” Morley had not yet read it himself, but the pleading thirteen-year-old convinced him to let her borrow it for the night. Though her aunt and uncle initially reprimanded Mary for her presumption, they joined with her and “all took turns reading until very late.” Early the next morning, she memorized the first paragraph. When she returned the Book to Morley, he was surprised at how much she had read and her dedication to “outline of the history of Nephi,” so he decided to let her finish reading it.⁵¹ Rollins’s experience here demonstrates several key elements under

48. Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1874), 38.

49. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 40.

50. Mark Lyman Staker, *Hearken O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith’s Ohio Revelations* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford, 2009), 282.

51. Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, *Diary of Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, 1960* typescript, LTPSC BYU.

discussion: an intense reaction to the presentation of the physical book itself, committed reading and study of the text, and then clear evidence that this reading had produced some sort of textual “grip” within the reader, who shares not only her reaction to the Book and interaction with the Book, but also her absorption of the content of the Book itself. For many, interest in the Book would expand as they continued to read.

For others, initial positive responses motivated serious and lengthy study before action. Caroline Barnes met “an elderly gentleman from V[ermon]t” who taught her of the Book of Mormon shortly after moving to Kirtland in 1834. Though she “was soon convinced of the truth,” she “considered it best to read the Book of Mormon, and search the scriptures until [she] was thoroughly convinced that it was the work of the Lord.” After studying the Bible and the Book of Mormon for several months, she was baptized as a member of the Church of Christ.⁵² The miraculous means of bringing the Book to light remained significant, but converts like Caroline Barnes did not leave the Book after their initial interest was satiated. It compelled continued work to build their relationship with the Book.

Sharing the Book

Accepting a new Book as scripture for one’s self was the first step toward conversion, yet few kept their conviction to themselves. Missionary work would become a hallmark of the fledgling church, but an official call to proselytize was not essential; finding value in the Book of Mormon led many to ask their familiars to consider the content of the Book themselves. After hearing of a “Golden Book,” the first galley sheet of sixteen Book of Mormon pages encouraged Thomas Marsh to learn more. He immediately gave it to his wife, Elizabeth, who also read and

52. Caroline Barnes Crosby, *Reminiscences*, CHL, in Caroline Barnes Crosby, *No Place to Call Home: The 1807–1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby, Chronicler of Outlying Mormon Communities*, ed. Edward Leo Lyman, Susan Ward Payne, and S. George Ellsworth, *Life Writings of Frontier Women* 7 (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005), 32.

believed “it to be the work of God.” He continued to ask others to consider the Book—family, friends, and strangers.⁵³ His sister Ann Marsh Abbott and her husband, Lewis, were among those who also believed after Thomas shared the Book with them. Ann, in turn, pleaded that their oldest brother Nathan would “read the Book of Mormon without prejudice” so he could know “the plan of salvation” for himself.⁵⁴

Lucy Mack Smith likewise desired to share the Book of Mormon with her brother and sister-in-law. An early 1831 letter concentrated on the content of the new Book—“This revelation is called the book of Mormon.” She summarized the narrative of the first two books—“a people which were led out of Jerusalem six hundred years before the coming of Christ in the flesh.” She then moved on to the coming forth of the record, somewhat minimizing Joseph’s role in the process. Echoing the plea of the final Book of Mormon prophet, she pleaded: “Entreating you as one that feels for your souls to seek an interest in Christ and when you have an opportunity to receive this work do not reject it but read it and examine for yourselves.”⁵⁵ Reading the Book, as Lucy had, was central to gaining a personal witness of the Restoration, and those who believed desired that others might likewise know for themselves.

A decade later, Charlotte Haven was visiting her brother in Nauvoo. In contrast with other accounts, Haven was on the receiving end of the evangelizing. Not a Latter-day Saint herself, she offers a glimpse of Mormon practice as she experienced it. Writing to her family, she mentioned, “The saints take an interest in our spiritual welfare, by sending us to read the Book of Mormon, The Voice of Warning, and the Book of Covenants, and invite us to attend prayer meetings.”⁵⁶ Sharing the books

53. Thomas B. Marsh, “History of Thos. Baldwin Marsh, Written by himself in Great Salt Lake City, November, 1857,” *Deseret News*, 8/3 (March 24, 1858): 18.

54. Ann Marsh Abbott to Nathan Marsh, June 20, 1843, copy in author’s possession; Janiece Johnson, “Give It All Up and Follow Your Lord”: *Mormon Female Religiosity, 1831–1843* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2008), 90.

55. Lucy Mack Smith to Solomon Mack, July 1, 1830, CHL. Cf. Moroni 10:4.

56. Quoted in Carol Cornwall Madsen, *In Their Own Words: Women and the Story of Nauvoo* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book), 124.

of the Restoration and encouraging reading was standard practice—it had not changed considerably in the intervening decade. If the content of the Book of Mormon and Restoration scripture played a significant role in one’s own conversion, then Latter-day Saints worked to share that possibility with others.

The Book as Key

Early periodical research illuminated how the Book of Mormon functioned as a support to the Bible for many early converts. The Book of Mormon sustained the importance of the Bible as well as acting as a key to help them better understand perplexing parts of the biblical text. Personal writings confirm and expand this understanding. Joseph Holbrook was open to the possibility of new revelation and wanted a Book of Mormon from the first time he heard of it in 1833. He was willing to walk fifty miles in any direction to get one. When he finally received a Book of Mormon, he ignored all else and read the Book through in two days. After finishing the Book, he “believed it was true and that God was at the bottom of the work.” His continued study opened his mind to the new record: he saw it as “a key to the Bible” such that the Bible “was now a new book, having the seals broken, light and life and salvation on its pages.”⁵⁷ The Book of Mormon was not just valuable on its own; for some, such as Holbrook, its value increased in tandem with the biblical text. In a late interview, William Kelly noted that initially a great appeal of the “Golden Bible” was its ability to unlock all manner of biblical things: perplexing sealed books, sticks, sheep, and angels flying in the midst of heaven.⁵⁸ The Book of Mormon text was likewise understood to unlock various

57. Joseph Holbrook, *Autobiography*, 1846, LTPSC BYU.

58. See Isaiah 29, Ezekiel 37, John 10, and Revelation 14. William H. Kelley, “The Hill Cumorah and the Book of Mormon,” *Saints’ Herald* (Plano, Illinois), June 1, 1881, in [Various authors] *Writings of Early Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Bookshelf, 2016), 163–64.

other biblical chapters. The unleashing of the Bible prepared the way for the final eschaton.⁵⁹

Joseph Smith saw the publication of the Book as a fulfillment of both Book of Mormon prophecy and biblical prophecy. As Paul Gutjahr points out, the leather binding of the first edition 1830 Book of Mormon was strikingly similar to the 1828 American Bible Society Bibles—they looked like they belonged together. More than just appearances, for Latter-day Saints, this aesthetic familiarity strategically fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel 37 that the stick of Judah (the Bible) and the stick of Joseph (the Book of Mormon) would be joined together and “become one in thine hand.” The first British Books of Mormon were also bound in a manner that corresponded to the portable Bibles printed by the Queen’s official Bible publisher.⁶⁰ Internal references to the miraculous coming forth of the Book illustrated the prophetic possibility of the Book. Some missionaries used a pattern of drawing on biblical prophecy to convince listeners that the heavens had opened.⁶¹ This pattern continued in distinct Church periodicals; they built on the familiarity of the biblical text and unveiled prophecies. Biblical prophecies and their fulfillment called to and caught the attention of potential converts. Once people listened, they could then expand their source material for such prophecies to the Book of Mormon. Though the rationale to focus proselytizing efforts on the Bible over the Book of Mormon initially is multifarious, as Gutjahr maintains, it “can, in part, be tied to the fact that the Bible was a well-established and widely revered sacred text. Those who taught from it were instantly credentialed by centuries of

59. Both journals and Church periodicals demonstrate a “definite preoccupation” with millennial expectations; however, continuing to examine personal writings establishes tension between a solitary focus on the sign of the Book and its actual content.

60. Compare *The Book of Mormon* (Liverpool: J. Tompkins, 1841) and *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, According to the Authorized Version* (Edinburgh: Blackie and Sons, 1844) as in the image on the opposite page.

61. William McLellin and Orson Pratt Journals. However, these were not the only patterns for teaching. In Kirtland, missionary preaching centered on the Book of Mormon and the visit of the risen Christ to the Americas. See Staker, *Hearken O Ye People*, 57.

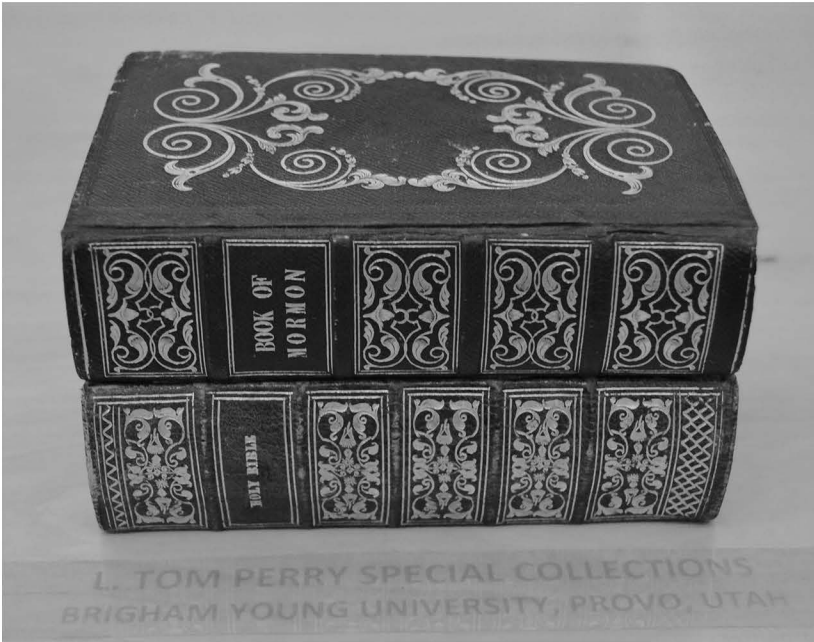


Figure 1. Compare the first European edition Book of Mormon published in 1841 with a pocket-sized Edinburgh authorized version of the Holy Bible published in 1844. Later British and other European editions continued this similarity in gold-embossed leather binding and comparable size. Courtesy LTPSC BYU and author's personal collection.

biblically centered Christian tradition.”⁶² Here, Mormons followed an established pattern of the American religious marketplace.⁶³

Beyond this pattern, Joseph Smith presented an explicitly interactive relationship between the two texts. His 1830 *Articles and Covenants* declared that the Book of Mormon and the Bible worked together in reciprocal fashion. The new Book further ratified the Bible, “proving that the holy scriptures are true.”⁶⁴ This reciprocity played a role in

62. Paul Gutjahr, *Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 25.

63. Maffly-Kipp, *American Scriptures*, ix.

64. “Articles and Covenants, circa April 1830 [D&C 20],” p. [4], The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/articles-and-covenants-circa-april-1830-dc-20/1>.

early conversions as well. A former Baptist, in 1831, Joel Hills Johnson heard Mormon missionaries preach “the first discourse that [he] had ever heard that corresponded with the New Testament,” and he was intrigued. Nevertheless, Joseph Smith’s followers made the Book of Mormon “equal to the Bible,” which disconcerted Johnson. As he continued to read, study, and pray about the Book of Mormon and the Bible in conjunction, he believed the Book of Mormon helped him better understand the biblical text.⁶⁵ The complementary relationship between the Book of Mormon and the Bible could become symbiotic.

In 1840, not far from the Mormons’ new settlement in Nauvoo, Laura Farnsworth Owen’s husband suggested she would like the message of a Mormon missionary—“the smartest man he ever heard.” She snapped in response, “It was a greater pity if he was so smart to be wasting time preaching up a golde [*sic*] bible.” Nevertheless, her husband persuaded her to listen and to her surprise, “instead of a gold *Bible*,” the missionary “took our good old Bible (which had always been a precious book to me) and commenced with the fall of the Apostolic Church and its restoration again in the latter days and the preparatory work for the second Advent of the Son of God.” Laura Owen repented her earlier assessment: “How sweet to my hungry soul were the precious words as they fell from his lips.” Laura later recounted, “I then began to live the Bible (which had been my comfort in all my trials) was now an unsealed book and doubly precious to me and truly I felt that I had now something to live for.” Owen quickly moved to be baptized. The advent of the Book of Mormon fulfilled biblical prophecy that enabled her to unlock biblical truth and to live out the biblical narrative of conversion to Christ. She shared her new understanding very vocally—she now had “priests and people to contend with, but the Lord was with me to mightily confound them and they soon became very shy of me.”⁶⁶ A follower of God with an unlocked Bible was a formidable opponent, yet Owen’s wish was not remarkable.

65. Joel Hills Johnson, “A Journal or Sketch of the Life of Joel Hills Johnson,” 1858, http://www.boap.org/LDS/Early-Saints/Joel_Johnson_vol-1.html.

66. Laura Farnsworth Owen, *Autobiography*, 1868, CHL; emphasis in original.

While sequestered in a hospital bed in England in 1842, eighteen-year-old Sarah Layton repeatedly conversed with a minister visiting the hospital “telling him what there was in the Bible”—there were “a great many things that he had never seen in his Bible.” She requested to borrow his book and she marked it for him “so he could read it.” She detailed, “I had lost the use of my lower limbs, but not of my hands so I procured a pencil and set to work marking passages and by the time he returned I had about fifty marked for him.” Thirty other hospital “inmates” attentively listened as she further revealed a book they thought they knew. Layton had recently converted to Mormonism against the wishes of her parents; despite her youth, her increased knowledge and understanding of the Bible obtained through her conversion emboldened her to offer others access to the same.⁶⁷ Neither Owen nor Layton stood alone in their desire to unlock the biblical text, and any number of nineteenth-century religionists claimed to have the same skill. Though Mormons had a tangible Book to support their claims, the claim that they had special knowledge to unlock the Bible was not in and of itself peculiar.

A Relationship with the Book

The Latter-day Saints’ most common contemporary epithet reflects a relationship to their Book; today many Mormons are more conversant with their Books of Mormon than their Bibles. Understanding how the Book of Mormon became scripture for the first generation of converts means uncovering scraps of evidence that establish their relationship to the Book. Barring the presence of specific scripture journals or extensive sermon notes, establishing an understanding of textual reception is knotty. Published in 1835 and 1841, early Book of Mormon indexes were prepared to help individuals use the Book. Though they were geared in specific ways, their creation assumed significance of the

67. Sarah B. Layton, “Autobiography of Sarah B. Layton,” *Woman’s Exponent* 29/10, 29/11 (October 15, 1900; November 1, 1900): 43.

Book's narrative.⁶⁸ Some individual members noted consequential or meaningful passages by tracking page numbers on the flyleaves of their own Books.⁶⁹ Though there was not yet a consistent formal structure of worship, in Kirtland, Latter-day Saints established the practice of reading from the Book of Mormon in the temple during weekly worship meetings, as they also continued to do with the Bible.⁷⁰ Wilford Woodruff's Kirtland diary yields brief insight into public devotional Book of Mormon use. In early 1837, Woodruff recorded David Whitmer warning the Seventies that they were in "days of prosperity," yet all was not well. Without "great repentance immediately," their "pride and many sins" would lead them to destruction as pride had led the "ancient Nephites." On another occasion, Patriarch Joseph Smith Sr. asked Woodruff to share a devotional with his fellow Latter-day Saints on their fast day. He read all of the current Jacob 5—the longest chapter in the current Book of Mormon. Length was clearly not a hindrance to reading. He then offered his interpretation.⁷¹ Woodruff does not single these sermons out as extraordinary. Rather, they are recorded in a way that indicates such practices were established and accepted—the Book had become a part of their devotions.

Longtime Kirtland resident Rebecca Swain Williams could have attended those meetings in the temple; she and her husband were active congregants from the time they joined with the Mormons in 1830. An

68. Underwood, "Book of Mormon Usage," 37–38; Grant Underwood, "The Earliest Reference Guides to the Book of Mormon: Windows into the Past," *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 69–89.

69. Though more interested in collecting pristine copies, both the L. Tom Perry Special Collections at BYU and the LDS Church History Library have a number of examples in their collections.

70. Jonathan Stapley points to the informal nature of early LDS liturgy in *The Power of Godliness: Mormon Liturgy and Cosmology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 5–23, 57–78, 79–104.

71. Four references to scripture usage in Kirtland Church meetings are not the complete record of Kirtland Church meetings, but out of the four references Woodruff takes the time to record, three were from the Book of Mormon. Woodruff also makes a number of biblical and Book of Mormon allusions. See Dean C. Jessee, ed., "The Kirtland Diary of Wilford Woodruff," *BYU Studies* 12/4 (1972): 1–28.

incomplete remnant of a letter to her father offers a fragment regarding Rebecca's connection to the Book. With news of her baptism, Rebecca's father threatened to disown her, though he never followed through with the threat completely. After he read one of Ezra Booth's oft-published newspaper critiques of the Mormons, in 1834, he once again renewed his attack on the Church of Christ. In a letter to her father, Williams defended the Three Witnesses of the Book of Mormon along with its content. She laid out her textual evidence: "There is no disagreement in the Book between the Author and the witnesses. The Book plainly shows for itself, [on page] 547 and 548: 'and unto three shall be shown by the power of God.'⁷² There is no contradiction." Clearly, Williams was familiar with her first edition Book of Mormon and the prophecies of the book of Ether. She did not just rely on the testimony of the witnesses in the front matter of the Book in order to defend the Church from her father's attacks. She also turned to the larger prophetic narrative of the Book. The Book itself prophesied, and Williams believed the Three Witnesses fulfilled the prophecy. She then bolstered the prophecy with her own experiential witness: "I heard them declare in public meeting that they saw an Holy Angel come down from heaven and brought the plates."⁷³ She heard for herself and received divine assurance that the witnesses spoke truth. Her own experience reinforced the prophetic capability of the Book, and she would continue to rely on its promises. An affinity for the Book and a more comprehensive understanding of its larger narrative patterns, prophecies, and teachings were not formed in one manner in an instant but developed over time through experience and practice.

Even concise nods to practice can help us develop a better understanding. Twenty-three-year-old Mary Haskin Parker Richards recorded this journal entry: December, 1846 "Sunday 27th. . . . Came home and read a while in the book of mormon, and helped mother

72. In the first edition Book of Mormon (1830), these pages are in Ether 2, where Moroni prophesied of the three witnesses; Ether 5:3 in the current edition.

73. Rebecca Swain Williams to Isaac Swain, 1834, CHL.

get supper, after w[h]ich Elcy Snyder called to go to singing Sc[h]ool with me.”⁷⁴ Though certainly not an effusive account offering detailed exegesis, Richards’s nonchalant mention of her reading in the Book of Mormon before helping her mother yields insight into the normalcy of the moment. This reading was not something extraordinary; it was the ordinary course of things. Just as we understand Richards’s reference to helping her mother prepare supper to be a regular, if not daily, occurrence, we can likewise understand her reference to reading the Book of Mormon to reflect another regular practice within her life.

Once an individual initiated a bond with the Book, it could continue to develop. Orson Pratt learned of the Book from an older brother, Parley, when he was nineteen and living in upstate New York. Years later he described his own consistent reading of the Book of Mormon: “I had, for the two years during my first acquaintance with the book, read it so much that I could repeat over chapter after chapter, page after page, of many portions . . . and could do it just as well with the Book closed or laid to one side.”⁷⁵ Pratt clearly wants to demonstrate the centrality of the Book in his life: his point is not necessarily the memorization but rather the shift from familiarity to intimacy. The Book itself—its very textual combination of cadence and content—had, in a certain way, become a part of Pratt’s own capacity for communication.

Certainly not all possessed Pratt’s proficiency in memorization (or hyperbole); they might actually have to bring their own Book with them. The Book of Mormon was rendered more portable with the second pocket-size edition in 1837. In response to “pressing calls” for more books and “the vast importance attached to their contents,” the editors—Parley Pratt and John Goodsell—decided on a “condensed form” so as to render “greater convenience to elders, and others, who convey

74. Quoted in Kenneth W. Godfrey, Audrey M. Godfrey, and Jill Mulvay Derr, eds., *Women’s Voices: An Untold History of the Latter-day Saints, 1830–1900* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1982), 173.

75. Orson Pratt, “Discourse by Elder Orson Pratt, The Book of Mormon an Authentic Record,” *Journal of Discourses* 21 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1881), 172.

the same to different parts.”⁷⁶ Improved accessibility to the second edition encouraged and facilitated more use with greater ease.

In 1839, portability was useful when Laura Clark Phelps shared a Book of Mormon with the Richards family in Columbia, Missouri. This event was not exceptional—sharing the Book was a consistent practice. However, Phelps did not go to Columbia as a missionary. Instead, she was on a mission to help her husband escape from prison. Her husband, Morris, was imprisoned in the Boone County Jail in Columbia, Missouri, along with King Follett and Parley Pratt—they had languished there for almost nine months. Parley Pratt and his brother Orson, along with others in church leadership, were focusing attention on the Book of Mormon in their writings in LDS newspapers, yet those writings do not capture just how thoroughly the Book had become a part of their lives and the lives of other Latter-day Saints. The intersection of Laura Phelps’ life with the Pratts at a jail in Missouri offers valuable insight into how their relationships with the Book developed over time. Laura came to visit the jail with a plan for escape that came to her in a dream; Parley dreamt the same escape plan. Orson also soon arrived at the jail “with a firm impression that [the prisoners] were about to be delivered.” As the group talked of their shared visions, Orson opened the Book of Mormon to a random page. Parley described the event:

The first sentence that caught his eye was the words of Ammon to King Lamoni: “Behold my brother and my brethren are in prison, in the land of Middoni, and I go to deliver them” [Alma 20:2]. This was indeed a similar instance to ours. Ammon, on that occasion had an own brother in prison, and also brethren in the ministry, and did deliver them. Our case was exactly similar, not in Middoni, but in Missouri. And what was still more strange, in a book of six hundred pages, this was the only sentence which would have fitted our case.⁷⁷

76. Joseph Smith Jr., trans., *The Book of Mormon* (Kirtland, OH: P. Pratt and J. Goodson, 1837), v.

77. P. P. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 267.

From the second century, using the *Sortes Virgilianae* (Virgilian Lots), individuals of learning would arbitrarily open a work of Virgil and use the text found on the page to foretell future events. In this practice, the book became a talisman capable of predicting the future—a textual casting of lots. The practice continued with other books then considered “the primary book” of an age. Though some religionists and church councils disputed the practice, there are believers who have practiced bibliomancy (or *sortes Biblicae*) with the biblical text ever since they had access to their own Bibles. John Wesley viewed this as an appropriate and useful use of scripture “when reason fails.” In 1738, he evinced his trust in the capability of God to “direct our paths’ by lot or other means which he knoweth.” In times of peril, many a believer has turned to a text she believed was imbued with divine power.⁷⁸

Orson Pratt haphazardly opened the Book and divined a prophetic parallel to their current circumstances. The manner in which he used the Book demonstrates his reliance on it and his faith in its divine capabilities. Parley Pratt’s later assertion that the Book did not contain another sentence that so perfectly fit their circumstances likewise indicates his own belief in his comprehensive knowledge of the content of the Book. Often bibliomancy will divorce the text from its context: Orson ignores a portion of the context—it did not matter to him that the prisoners were jailed for their actions during the Mormon Missouri War rather than for proselytizing as missionaries, as were Ammon and his brothers in the text. A Book of Mormon brother in jail with a promise of deliverance was more than specific enough. For these believers in the power of the Book, they understood not only the specific words, but the context of the Book as being perfectly

78. Bibliomancy is a somewhat tame totemic use of a text. By way of comparison, in the seventeenth century, people ate the biblical text, lifted it on poles as Moses’s healing snake, and placed pages of the text on ailing body parts. See David Cressy, “Books as Totems in Seventeenth-Century England and New England,” *Journal of Library History* 21/1 (1986): 99–106; Mark L. Weeter, *John Wesley’s View and Use of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007), 152–54.

aligned with their own current context. They found comfort in the heavenly answer received.

Implementing the shared dream on the Fourth of July, the plotters even further highlighted their attention on reliving the Book of Mormon's story. They hoisted a flag made from a torn white shirt with red stripes, an eagle, and the word "Liberty."⁷⁹ Like the Book of Alma's Captain Moroni, they lifted their own "title of liberty" (Alma 51:20). Though the townspeople mocked the Mormon prisoners' apparent Fourth of July celebration from jail, the banner illustrated the Mormons' belief that they would be successful as the Book seemed to portend.

The prisoners initially escaped successfully.⁸⁰ But the plan had not included what would happen to Laura Phelps, who was left with an angry group of Missourians in the moment they learned of the Mormon prisoners' escape. As the crowd became unruly and abusive, a young boy came to her rescue. His family sheltered and cared for her for the next two weeks. She "preached Mormonism to them," sang hymns with them, and gave them a hymnal as well as the Book of Mormon. The Book had first captivated Laura Phelps in 1831, and she was baptized after several weeks of reading the Book. Through those eight years, Laura's devotion to the Book flourished. She offered the family of Missourians who provided her shelter and protection that which she valued—a Book of Mormon.⁸¹ The Book permeates this tale of prison escape. These Latter-day Saints had already developed a relationship with the Book—it was scripture to them and was not to be discarded in calamity. Alongside the Bible, the Book of Mormon became a divine conduit of peace and confidence in a time of crisis.

79. Mary A. Phelps Rich, "The Life of Mary A. Rich," manuscript, LTPSC BYU; Pratt, *Autobiography*, 269.

80. King Follet was shortly captured. He would be released not long thereafter.

81. This could have been Laura's own Book of Mormon or her husband's. The day after the jailbreak, the Richardson family accompanied Laura to the jail to recover her husband's belongings. See Johnson, *Give It All Up*, 73–78; Rich, "Life of Mary A. Rich."

Echoing the Book

Before early converts had ever heard of Joseph Smith and his “Gold Bible,” they read their own Bible and saw its applicability to their lives. Their lives became holy as echoes and allusions of the King James text shaped their own narratives. American religion historian David Hall called this practice “patchwork quoting”—Bible readers would incorporate language, phrases, and allusions from the biblical text into their own writings.⁸² Very quickly, some early Latter-day Saints placed their new Books alongside their Bibles and began to read their Books of Mormon in the same manner they had read the Bible. Though mastery of another 588 pages of scripture might take considerable time, for some, engagement with the new narrative happened posthaste. Their growing bond to the text of the Book demonstrated its earned place as scripture as well as the way in which that new scripture began to narrate these Latter-day Saints’ lives in their own holy present. At times, personal writings divulge reading practices. Some use the Book’s text as a narrative through which to construct and understand their own present, as did the Mormon prisoners in Columbia, Missouri. Yet the depth of Book of Mormon usage is illustrated most thoroughly through intertextuality—the pervasive echoes, allusions, and expansions on the Book of Mormon text that appear in the early converts’ own writings.

Smith’s new scriptural additions were awash with biblical themes and passages. Just as the New Testament often echoes or alludes to the Hebrew Bible in both obvious and intricate ways, the Book of Mormon as well as the new revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants also indicate a complex connection to the biblical text. Nicholas Frederick’s precise work on the allusivity of Restoration scripture demonstrates the intimate association of Smith’s text with the Johannine text through echoes, allusions, expansions, and inversions. An echo references a phrase from the biblical text without transferring the meaning. An allusion appropriates both a phrase and the context (or at least a portion of the context) of

82. David Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 28.

the reference within the biblical text. An expansion builds on an idea or theme introduced in the biblical text, and an inversion overturns the original meaning.⁸³ Though not nearly as meticulous, in an extension of that pattern, the writings of many early Mormons are littered with the Book of Mormon text through the use of echoes, allusions, and expansions.⁸⁴ The new Book of Mormon text became a part of life's narration just as the biblical text had. Now converts had two books that could shape their lives. Of course, to identify source material with surety, the allusions must be unique to the Book of Mormon text, something demonstrable through specific words and phrases found only within the Book of Mormon. In this instance, shared biblical language will not serve.

In late 1829, as Oliver Cowdery worked to complete the printer's manuscript of the Book of Mormon and oversee the Book's publication in Palmyra, he incorporated echoes of the Book's text as he updated Joseph Smith on their progress. In his November 6 letter, Cowdery waxed personal, considering his position before God and "the goodness of Christ" and desiring nothing but to be an "instrument in his hands"—a Book of Mormon phrase.⁸⁵ In his strident declaration of his reliance on Christ, he weaves the Book's distinct text narrating his own continuing conversion. "Conditions of repentance,"⁸⁶ the "great and last sacrifice,"⁸⁷ "infinite atonement,"⁸⁸ "endless torment,"⁸⁹ and "eternal father of heaven and earth"⁹⁰ are all specific Book of Mormon language

83. Nicholas J. Frederick, *The Bible, Mormon Scripture, and the Rhetoric of Allusivity* (Teaneck, NJ: Farleigh Dickenson University Press, 2016).

84. Though readers often ignore scriptural context, I have yet to find an inversion of the Book of Mormon text. An inversion might require a significant level of confidence to flip a scriptural story, and perhaps readers are hesitant to reverse the word of God.

85. Mosiah 23:10; Alma 26:15.

86. Alma 17:15; 42:13; also later in Helaman 5:11; 14:11; and a recent revelation to Oliver, specifically: Doctrine and Covenants 18:12.

87. Alma 34:10, 13.

88. Alma 34:12.

89. 2 Nephi 9:19, 26; 28:23; Jacob 6:10; Mosiah 3:25; 28:3; also later in Moroni 8:21; and a Summer 1829 revelation to Martin Harris: Doctrine and Covenants 19:6.

90. Mosiah 15:4; cf. Alma 11:38.

included in the half of the printer's manuscript that he had already completed by November.⁹¹ Cowdery seamlessly incorporates the Book's text as he recounts his own spiritual journey before the words have all been printed on the page. The Book was not yet official scripture to anyone, but it spoke to Cowdery personally and illuminated his relationship with God. It was already scripture to him.

Another significant example of allusive practices, Lucy Mack Smith's aforementioned letter to her brother and sister-in-law extensively described the initial narrative of the "revelation called the Book of Mormon." Her detailed encapsulation of the Book is notable, yet even more so is the intertextuality. Lavina Fielding Anderson referred to the prevalence of biblical language in the oral practices of the Smith family—the King James text was clearly their "mother tongue."⁹² What's more, Lucy's letter also abounds in Book of Mormon phraseology. The letter was written in January 1831—just nine months after the Book of Mormon's publication. Upward of 49 percent of the letter is made up of unique Book of Mormon language. Though many of her allusions originate in the first three books of the Book of Mormon, she echoes almost every book (excepting Enos, Jarom, and Mormon) as well as her son's new revelations. In a similar manner to which the Book of Mormon echoes the biblical text, Lucy Smith incorporated the language of new scripture into her own lexicon as she endeavored to witness her faith to her extended family.⁹³

Lucy Smith's scripturalism is striking; moreover, this is not a singular instance. Lucy's son, Joseph Smith, channeled Nephi as he began to write his history for the first time in 1832; he was "born . . . of goodly

91. The Joseph Smith Paper editors estimate that Oliver was through Alma 35 at the time of the November letter. "Letter from Oliver Cowdery, 6 November 1829," p. 7, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-oliver-cowdery-6-november-1829/2>. The December 28 letter also echoes language from the books of Enos and Alma. "Letter from Oliver Cowdery, 28 December 1829," p. 5, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/letter-from-oliver-cowdery-28-december-1829>.

92. Anderson, "Mother Tongue."

93. Lucy Mack to Solomon Mack, January 1831, CHL.

parents.”⁹⁴ Numerous other early Latter-day Saints begin their own personal writings in the same manner.⁹⁵ Conceivably the single most-read Latter-day Saint woman’s writing, Lucy Smith’s history of her son also mimics the same allusive practice. Though the cue of “goodly parents” is missing from her account—perhaps the result of an absentee father, she likewise begins with a Book of Mormon pattern: “Having attained my 69 year, and being afflicted with a complication of diseases and infirmities⁹⁶ . . . [I] give as my last testimony to a world from whence I must soon take my departure.”⁹⁷ Mirroring words and content, she amalgamates the beginning of Nephi’s record with Lehi’s final teachings to his children. Like Nephi, she has evaluated her life and, like Lehi, she wants to share things of importance before she takes her “departure.” Whereas Lucy Smith may have carefully crafted the earlier letter to her brother, she dictates her history beginning in 1846. The oral transmission highlights the expansion of her “mother tongue” to include new scripture. Smith not only directly and pervasively alludes to the Book of Mormon text; she also organizes the structure of her record after the Book. Channeling Nephi, she details divisions within her words—she denotes both a “spiritual and a temporal record.”⁹⁸ As Lucy Smith incorporated the Book of Mormon text into her own record, she sacralized the Smith family history and tacitly acknowledged the earned place of the Book of Mormon as scripture. She became a new prophetic narrator engraving her own book of sacred history.

94. See 1 Nephi 1:1. “History, circa Summer 1832,” p. 1, The Joseph Smith Papers, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/history-circa-summer-1832/1>.

95. A few other examples of Latter-day Saints beginning their personal histories with Nephi’s description of “being born of goodly parents” include Erastus Snow, *Autobiography, 1818–1837*, CHL; Archibald Gardner, *Autobiography, 1857*, LTPSC BYU, 3; Solomon Chamberlain, *Autobiography of Solomon Chamberlain*, LTPSC BYU, 1. Similar to Lucy Mack Smith, Louisa Barnes Pratt begins her personal history mirroring Nephi’s words, minus “goodly parents.” Ellsworth, *History of Louisa Barnes Pratt*, 220.

96. Cf. 1 Nephi 1:1.

97. Cf. 2 Nephi 1:14. Lavina Fielding Anderson, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 220.

98. Anderson, *Lucy’s Book*, 281; cf. 1 Nephi 9:4.

Smith signs off on the original draft of her record with a composite of the concluding words of Nephi, Mormon, and Moroni in addition to other echoes and allusions from the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and the new revelations. It is difficult to quantify the intense scripturalism of her account, but by including the references within the quotation below, we can see the visual density of her allusive practice. An initial draft of her conclusion reads:

I have now given a history of My life as far as I intend carrying at this time. I leave the world at liberty to pass judgment upon what I have written as seemeth them good [cf. 2 Nephi 33:3, 11; 3 Nephi 26:4; Moroni 10:1] but this much I will say that all that I have written is true [1 Nephi 1:3] and will stand forever, yes it will stand before God at that hour when I shall end and great I shall appear to answer to answer at his bar [cf. 2 Nephi 33:11; Moroni 10:27] for the deeds done in the body [Alma 5:15] whether they by good or evil [Alma 40:11 and Mormon 3:20]—there I will meet the persecutors of my family who are the enemies of the church and declare with a voice that shall penetrate the ears [cf. Doctrine and Covenants 1:2] of every intelligence [Doctrine and Covenants 93:29] which shall be present on that momentous occasion. . . . Let me leave the tombs of bones of my fathers and brothers and the bones of my Martyred children and go to a land where never man dwelt fare well my country. Thou that killest the prophets [Matthew 23:27] and hath exiled them that were sent unto thee once thou wert fair once thou werste lovely <fair ye pure> wert pure and lovely [cf. Mormon 6:17].⁹⁹

Echoes and allusions to the Book of Mormon text ascribe value to the content and the power of the Book to Lucy Smith. The words have become her own; the Book has become her own.

Other individuals encounter narrative parallels to their lives in the Book of Mormon text and, in this manner, expand on the original text. As Solomon Chamberlain chronicled his search for divine mercy, he

99. Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 745.

detailed, “I cried unto the Lord night and day for forgiveness of my sins, like Enos of old, till at length the Lord said ‘Solomon, thy sins are forgiven thee, go in peace and sin no more.’”¹⁰⁰ Though illustrating an experience prior to reading the Book of Mormon, and though an Enos is included in biblical genealogies, here, Chamberlain specifically alludes to the Enos in the Book of Mormon who “cried unto God . . . all day long . . . and into the night” when a voice said, “Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee” (Enos 1:4–5). Chamberlain fuses the Book’s text with prevalent biblical phrases to narrate his own sacred experience and simultaneously substantiates his immersion in the new Book. In her autobiographical sketch, Drusilla Hendricks gauged the role of scripture in her life during the Missouri period: “We read considerable, mainly the Bible, Book of Mormon, and Doctrine and Covenants.” Moreover, she provided evidence of her personal interpretative practice. She commented, “I often made myself feel like the old Nephite women while they were traveling in the wilderness, for they became strong like unto the men”—Hendricks had been reading First Nephi 17.¹⁰¹ The Book offered the promise that God would intercede in her life, just as God intervened on behalf of ancient Nephite women. Though historically and culturally distinct, the fact that an early Mormon convert identified with the experiences of the Nephite women illustrates the degree to which the Book had been adopted as scripture. In other words, just as nineteenth-century American Christians sought to identify with the culturally and historically remote biblical text, early Latter-day Saints merged this practice with their own relationship with the Book of Mormon. The text offered Hendricks a path to a holy life—a path to sainthood. Through narrative expansions of the Book of Mormon text, early Latter-day Saints revealed their affinity for the text—a text that had become scripture for them.

The examples of missionaries in the Book of Mormon narrative often offered miraculous precedents, prophecies, and encouragement to early missionaries in a similar manner. As Mark Ashurst-McGee

100. Solomon Chamberlain, *Life Sketch of Solomon Chamberlain*, LTPSC BYU.

101. Quoted in Godfrey, Godfrey, and Derr, *Women’s Voices*, 88.

observed, when Oliver Cowdery and the others prepared to leave New York to share the Book of Mormon with Native Americans in the Fall of 1830, they saw the Book of Mormon narrative as inspiration. The great Lamanite mission of Ammon and the other sons of King Mosiah in the Book of Alma provided a pattern for their plan. The ancient missionaries were “taken and bound with strong cords, and cast into prison,” but through the “power and wisdom of God,” they were “delivered” (Alma 26:29). The modern missionaries documented their covenant that they would support Cowdery and ever pray for “deliverance from bonds, and imprisonments, and whatsoever may come upon us, with all patience and faith” (Alma 37:19)—hoping to live out the experience of those ancient missionaries. They likewise saw the possibility that they could be those of whom the Book of Mormon prophesied who would demonstrate the power of God “to future generations” of Lamanites.¹⁰² Cowdery continued to use the Book as a guide when he later instructed the first quorum of the Twelve “concerning their duty and the way the great work ought to be done.”¹⁰³

A member of that first quorum of the Twelve, Methodist Brigham Young began to read the Book of Mormon in 1830. In contrast to members of his family who accepted the Book as “revelation” quickly, Young read for two years before choosing baptism. Young’s most recent biographer, John Turner, maintains that though it took time, by the 1840s, Young was more comfortable with citing both the Bible and the Book of Mormon in his preaching.¹⁰⁴ His 1840s British missionary letters to his wife Mary Ann illustrate this transition, as they include echoes and allusions to the Book’s text. At one point, he relates: “I never have witnessed the hand of the Lord so visible in all my life as I have since

102. Ashurst-McGee, “Zion Rising,” 188–89. Nineteenth-century Mormons consistently considered modern Native Americans descendants of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon. Native Americans receiving the Book of Mormon would fulfill internal prophecy.

103. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 131.

104. John Turner, *Brigham Young: Pioneer Prophet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012), 25–27.

I left home this time. My heart is like the charit[y] of Aminadab.”¹⁰⁵ Though an Aminadab is referenced in both synoptic biblical genealogies of Jesus, in the Book of Mormon, a repentant Aminadab became a great missionary among the Lamanites as he testified to the miraculous work and love of God (see Helaman 5:35–52). Despite its obscurity, Young saw a missionary example in the text to which he likened his own experience. And his identification required no explanation for Mary Ann; he assumed she knew the reference as a result of her own connection with the Book.¹⁰⁶ Once regarded as scripture, the narrative of the Book could reach into their lives and unify them in their own holy narrative.

In another extension of allusive practices and expanding a common practice of biblical nomenclature, some of the earliest converts wanted their children to pattern their lives after the Book of Mormon characters. While it is a common historical practice for parents to name their children from the Bible, naming children after prophets is also a frequent practice in the Book of Mormon itself. Some name duplications within the Book’s text are familial, and other name duplications suggest a desire that the child live a life of faith following the one for whom the child is named (see Helaman 5:6–7). For some nineteenth-century Mormon converts, conversion meant alienation or geographic separation from biological families. Naming children after those in the Book of Mormon narrative further established new familial construction bounded by spiritual loyalties. Naming could likewise strengthen current familial bonds with shared spiritual commitments. Tamma Durfee Miner “believed the first time” she heard a Mormon preach in 1831 “that the Book of Mormon was true.” Four years later, she named her second son Moroni. Joseph Smith blessed the child that “he should be as great as Moroni of old, and the people would flee unto him and call him blessed.” Smith extended the role of the

105. Ronald O. Barney, “Missionary Letters of Brigham Young to His Wife,” *BYU Studies* 38/2 (1999): 157–201; see January 14, 1840; February 14, 1840; and April 6, 1840 as examples.

106. Young’s Nauvoo journal also records some of his questions for Joseph regarding his study of the Book—including “Did you see one of the 3 Nephites in 1840?” Turner, *Brigham Young*, 98–100.

biblical patriarch through the use of the new scripture.¹⁰⁷ Shortly thereafter, Miner's mother, Magdelana Durfee, intersected fertility spans and naming patterns when she gave birth to a son and named him Nephi. Miner continued the practice and called her next two sons Mormon and Alma.¹⁰⁸ Miner's experience yields insight into scriptural naming practices as well as the united familial attachment to the Book of Mormon.

Beginning in the Kirtland period, this practice would expand over time. Nancy Alexander Tracy unequivocally explained her rationale as she named her second son. She detailed, "We wanted him to have a big name out of the Book of Mormon, so we called him Lachoneus Moroni, after two great men. He was a beautiful child." Obviously, Tracy had read through to the last third of the Book of Mormon—the books of Third Nephi and Moroni. She also named her third son Moses Mosiah—unifying the stick of Judah with the stick of Joseph and individually fulfilling biblical prophecy. Before uniting with the Church of Christ, Tracy called her first son Eli—Samuel's mentor in the temple and the name of her oldest brother. With her conversion, she suddenly had more books from which to find inspirational examples for her children that they might live out their own lives in sacred time.¹⁰⁹

Both Isaac Morley and Lyman Wight named sons after the converted Lamanite King Lamoni. Mark Staker noted that in Kirtland, there were also children named after Lehi, Ammon, Alma, Moroni, and Nephi.¹¹⁰ After 1844, Parley Pratt and his wives would name all of his sons after Book of Mormon figures—Moroni (twice—with wives Mary Ann Frost and Ann Agatha Walker), Alma (with Hannahette Snively), Nephi, Abinadi, Lehi (with Belinda Marden), Helaman, Mathoni (with Mary Wood), Ether (with Martha Monks), Mormon, Teancum (with Sarah

107. Stapley, *Power of Godliness*, 59–63.

108. Tamma Durfee Miner Curtis, *Autobiography*, 1881, CHL. Though Alma was a popular English name in the nineteenth century, it was, as a rule, a feminine name. Miner's Book of Mormon reading offered a male inspiration for the name. Caroline Barnes Crosby and Amanda Barnes Smith also named sons Alma.

109. Nancy Naomi Alexander Tracy, "Reminiscences and Diary," typescript, 1846, CHL.

110. Staker, *Hearken O Ye People*, 76.

Huston), Mosiah, and Omner (with Phoebe Soper)—thirteen sons with Nephite names. Mary Ann Brotherton and Pratt adopted a Native American daughter and called her Abish—after the only faithful Lamanite woman named in the Book’s text.¹¹¹ The 1850 US Census records sixty-three Nephis who could live out their own holy narrative. Naming practices demonstrate a convincing familiarity with the text as well as the extent to which the Book of Mormon narrative became a part of their lives. Allusive practices including naming conventions played a significant role in the developing interactions of many early Latter-day Saints with the Book of Mormon text. The new text became scripture to them. In choosing the Book, they imbued it with power to shape their lives.

Conclusion

Elizabeth Terry Heward chose baptism as a Latter-day Saint in 1838 and lived through some turbulent personal years before she gathered with the Latter-day Saints in Nauvoo. In early 1843, she recorded a poignant experience with the Book of Mormon. She noted, “My mind had been somewhat down for some time and on the 25th of January I was reading in the Book of Mormon where it says: ‘Thy watchmen shall lift of their voices and with the voice together shall they sing for they shall see eye to eye when the Lord shall bring again Zion. Break forth into joy, sing together ye waste places of Jerusalem, for the Lord hath comforted His people’” (cf. Mosiah 12:22–23; 15:29). Of course, she could have read those words in Isaiah, but she was reading the new Book. “When I read these words, my whole soul was filled with joy and hope in the great mercy and goodness of God in the redemption of the human family. I began immediately to sing in tongues and sang several verses; this was the first time I had that gift, so I truly rejoiced in the Spirit and praised the Lord.”¹¹² Despite Elizabeth’s unsettled present,

111. Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 401–03.

112. Quoted in Madsen, *In Their Own Words*, 178–79.

through the practice of reading, she experienced charismatic joy and comfort in the eschatological promise of the Book of Mormon. This did not happen in an instant. It took time to incorporate Joseph Smith's new textual expansions into an individual's knowledge base and life. Yet as converts read, they developed an alliance with the text, just as they had previously with the biblical narrative. Over time, echoes and allusions would mark their new relationship as well.

There remains much to learn about the role of the Book of Mormon in early Latter-day Saint practice. However, an initial examination of these personal writings helps us to encounter early Book of Mormon reception as a more complete whole. The writings of Mormon converts begin to illustrate the personal value of the Book beyond that of a sign of the new prophetic dispensation and a holy marker of the impending eschaton. Though early Mormons, like most Americans, were a people of the Bible, their attachment to the biblical text did not negate their acceptance of a new Book—it reinforced it. For many Mormons, the Bible played an essential role in leading them to accept the Book of Mormon as scripture. Reciprocally, the Book of Mormon also helped them to better understand biblical text.

Reading the Book became a part of both community and individual devotional practice over time. We need not assume that the Book instantly became a focal point for all—practice is individual and transitions over time. No one mastered almost six hundred pages instantaneously. For those whose personal practice included reading the Book, the text played a significant narrative function through which many early Mormons began to order and understand their lives in their own holy time. The text offered them patterns of divine intervention that they could apply to their own lives and exemplars to emulate. The Book had the power to do the same for their familiars if they, too, would develop a relationship with the Book. Accepting the Book as scripture gave the text power to narrate their lives. Book of Mormon language and characters began to enter their lives and sacralized their present, choosing to live as Latter-day Saints. They were a “people of the Book” who became a people of the books. No single book was now entirely sufficient.

Janiece Johnson has master's degrees in American Religious History and Theology from Brigham Young University and Vanderbilt University, respectively, and a doctorate from the University of Leicester in England. She is general editor (with co-editors Richard L. Turley Jr. and LaJean Purcell Carruth) of the *Mountain Meadows Massacre: Complete Legal Papers* (2017) and co-author (with Jennifer Reeder) of *The Witness of Women: Firsthand Experiences and Testimonies of the Restoration* (2016). She is currently the Laura F. Willis faculty research associate at the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University.