



Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel

Volume 17 | Number 1

Article 7

2-24-2016

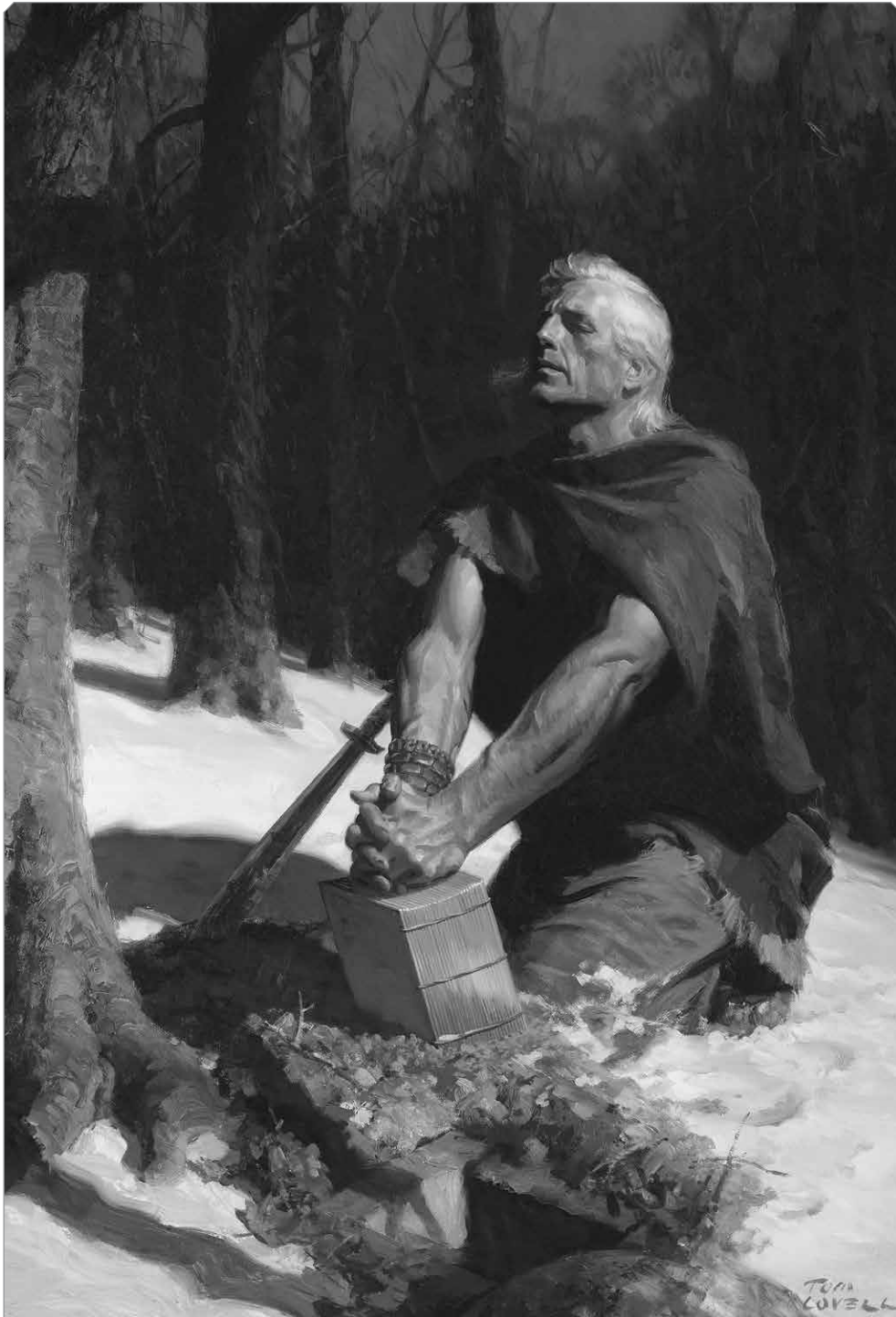
Reading and Receiving: An Interpretation of Moroni's Promise(s)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

"Reading and Receiving: An Interpretation of Moroni's Promise(s)." *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 17, no. 1 (2016): 83-91. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/re/vol17/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



Tom Lovell, *Moroni Burying the Plates*. © Intellectual Reserve, Inc.

Moroni promises that if we read the Book of Mormon, we will have an understanding of God's mercy.

Reading *and* Receiving: *An Interpretation of Moroni's Promise(s)*

GREG WILKINSON

Greg Wilkinson (gregory_wilkinson@byu.edu) is an assistant professor of Church history and doctrine at BYU.

Moroni's promise, found in Moroni 10:3–5, may be one of the most well-known and often-read passages of the Book of Mormon. It is often presented as a singular promise for engaging with the text, knowing the Book of Mormon is true, and thus becoming converted to the LDS Church. This article argues that verses 3 and 4 are distinct methods for engaging scripture, each verse with a unique promise. Further, verse 4 represents an initial, independent, and fundamental step for gaining a scriptural testimony, as well as for canonizing a text.

Moroni's instructions can represent two distinct scriptural engagements, which he distinguishes as reading and receiving, each carrying a distinct promise. Moroni 10:3 reads, "Behold, I would exhort you that when ye shall *read* these things, if it be wisdom in God that ye should read them, that ye would remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time that ye shall *receive* these things, and ponder it in your hearts" (emphasis added).

Although he expresses doubts about the potential opportunities, Moroni invites the reader to study the text and ponder its words in an intellectual

process for engaging the Book of Mormon. The promise offered is that if an individual will read and learn from the text, his or her reward will be an understanding of God's mercy. As Moroni asserts the potential of an increase in testimony through the intellectual engagement of the Book of Mormon, he warns against the overintellectualism of scripture. He insists that all who proceed to realize truth through academic pursuit remember that God's mercy is a gift and that the greatest knowledge can be obtained only through his good graces.

This becomes even more relevant considering that the original language on the plates was unknown to even Moroni's contemporaries, let alone those who would discover the plates later. In contrast to many religious traditions where the original language of scriptures is sacrosanct,¹ Moroni has nothing but trepidation about the original language of the Book of Mormon, seeing it as inferior to other spoken languages, such as Hebrew (see Mormon 9:32–33). Without the possibility of linguistic engagement and oral traditions to interpret the book, "reading" and "pondering" are distinct in comparison to the scriptural engagement found in other religious traditions, where original languages as well as exegetical texts and traditions have been preserved.

Therefore, Moroni beckons the reader to engage the scripture through veneration.² He writes in verse 4, "And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost."

In this way, we are not necessarily *reading* scripture but *receiving* it.³ Receiving could be interpreted as a simpler task. However, receiving has its distinct qualification; it could be interpreted to mean that a conviction of the authenticity of the text may be gained through simply receiving or accepting the record accompanied by an experience, or a manifestation, of its truth through the power of the Holy Ghost.⁴

Some may have reservations about receiving a testimony of a book they have not read, but that is the implication of Moroni's choice of the word *receive*—and it was, indeed, a conscious choice. The term *read* could easily have been used in place of *receive* in this verse if Moroni explicitly wanted verses 3 and 4 to be interpreted as a single process. But experiencing a witness of the book's divine authenticity, through the Holy Ghost, may be more complex than just *reading* the text, because of the specific qualifications

Moroni places on the ritual process. He explains how veneration of the record by receiving can engender spiritual experiences and confirmation of truth through the Holy Ghost. Through reading, we can understand the value of the book by its contents and message; through receiving, we have to rely on what we feel in order to learn the truth.

It is important, then, that we pay close attention to what is essential to the experience of receiving: a proper disposition (a sincere heart, real intent, and faith) and a correct ritual process (asking God in the name of Jesus Christ). When receiving is the initial, independent, and foundational method for engaging scripture, it significantly changes the reading process as the book is transformed from a text with possible ethical and theological value to holy writ.

The Book of Mormon maintains a sophisticated balance of advocating the methods of reading and receiving. Certainly many Book of Mormon verses advocate reading the scriptures in order to gain doctrinal knowledge (2 Nephi 25:3; 3 Nephi 27:5; Mormon 9:8) as well as the need to search the scriptures (1 Nephi 5:10, 21; 2 Nephi 5:33; Jacob 7:23; Alma 33:2). However, several Book of Mormon narratives show an initial, independent, and foundational method of receiving rather than reading. In 1 Nephi 16, Lehi's family receives a ball of curious workmanship later called the Liahona (verse 10). The object is believed to be of God and is even prayed over (verses 24–25), as Moroni directs in Moroni 10:4. Unlike the Book of Mormon, the Liahona must be venerated through devotion and obedience for one to even have the opportunity to read God's counsel, because words appear on the ball only when the owners are obedient (verses 26–27).

In Mosiah 8, King Limhi shows Ammon twenty-four gold plates from the Jaredite civilization (verse 9). While Limhi cannot read the plates he has received, he is anxious to have them translated (verse 12), which Mosiah later does (Mosiah 28) and which Moroni adds to the end of the Book of Mormon record (Ether 1–15). The plates are scripture for Limhi and his people; they have received them, revered them, and preserved them. But they have not read and cannot read the plates.

Terryl L. Givens has suggested that in the early Church, the Book of Mormon was authoritative discourse that did not need to be read widely or engaged intellectually in order to be believed as true.⁵ Grant Hardy argues that Moroni especially was disposed to emphasize veneration over inquiry. He argues, "Mormon exhibited a keen interest in evidence and argumentation.

. . . Moroni, by contrast, appears to have given up on the idea that readers could be persuaded through historical evidence. . . . Moroni seems to believe that only God can convince skeptical latter-day readers of the truth of his account.⁶ It can be safely argued that receiving can be interpreted as distinct from reading, especially when we take into account Moroni's apprehension about the prospects for interpreting the text's language. Hardy also argues that verse 4 is often applied as the initial, independent, and foundational method of testimony building by contemporary followers. He states:

For many Latter-day Saints, careful scrutiny of the volumes' contents is secondary to the direct relationship with God that the book makes possible. Those investigating the faith are encouraged to pray about the Book of Mormon, in accordance with the promise that God "will manifest the truth of it . . . by the power of the Holy Ghost" to those who "ask with a sincere heart, with real intent" (Moroni 10:4). Individuals who feel they have received such a spiritual witness are often content to redirect their energies from textual analysis toward living the wholesome sort of lifestyle that Mormonism advocates.⁷

Rather than being unique to Latter-day Saint believers, what Hardy describes is a common, even dominant, method of scriptural engagement and testimony building. Before vernacular translations became common and literacy rates among the masses increased, engagement of scripture through veneration rather than inquiry was often the exclusive method. This was not necessarily a problem to be overcome, but a characteristic that preserved canonical and ecclesiastical stability.⁸

Moroni's promise as two distinct testimony-gaining processes can be seen in the historical records of the Book of Mormon's translation and publication. The combined process of realizing the value of the text through receiving and then reading is especially illustrated by the experiences of Solomon Chamberlain. When Chamberlain first received word of the "Gold Bible," he claimed to have "felt a shock of the power of God go from head to foot."⁹ This was his initial testimony-establishing experience—one of receiving. Chamberlain placed reading and studying the text as the necessary culmination of testimony. He went to Palmyra and gained instruction from Hyrum Smith on the manuscripts of the Book of Mormon and was later given a sixteen-page proof sheet from Grandin's press so that he could build testimony through reading, pondering, and study and also use it as an evangelical tool.¹⁰

The testimonies of the eleven men recorded in the front matter of the Book of Mormon focuses on verse 4's initial and independent method of

testimony. Neither statement ("The Testimony of Three Witnesses" nor "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses") mentions any content of the Book of Mormon, but only that Joseph Smith had received the plates. Thus, the testimony they record is an experience of receiving rather than reading.¹¹

Both the Book of Mormon's introduction and Joseph Smith's testimony¹² claim the text was translated by the "gift and power of God." Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit Dirkmaat's in-depth analysis establishes a translation process where Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon from a record he certainly received but could not and did not read.¹³ This places the veracity of the Book of Mormon translation upon an interpretation of Mormon 10, where verse 4 is the initial, independent, and foundational process of engaging scripture and establishing a testimony of the Book of Mormon, because the process described in verse 4 alone accounts for the book's translation and modern production.

Some may argue that Joseph Smith and the other Book of Mormon witnesses were able to gain a testimony through simply receiving because, rather than the Book of Mormon manuscript or publication, they received the gold plates—and thus some may argue that those who do not receive (encounter, see, experience) the gold plates cannot completely realize the promise. This is certainly worthy of discussion.¹⁴ However, Moroni ends his promise with a statement of support for the power of veneration and spiritual experiences despite the perceived limitations of the material context. Moroni's promise ends with this statement in verse 5: "And by the power of the Holy Ghost ye may know the truth of all things."

This verse places a positive qualification for the engagement of scripture through ritual and experience that is described in verse 4. Moroni emphasizes that truth is known just as much through how we feel as what we think, and that acts of veneration, most importantly prayer, play an integral role in engaging scripture in order to understand and appreciate its sacrality.¹⁵ Thus, whether through reading or through receiving "these things," the promised result is the same: "And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true" (Moroni 10:29). And Moroni provides not only a process to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon, but a process to test all scripture, even a process for the formation and preservation of the canon itself.

The veracity of receiving scripture is clear from the counsel of Latter-day Saint leaders, who often share stories of the purity and efficacy in the testimonies of less-literate or illiterate members. Recently, President Henry B.

Eyring related a story about the wife of a temple worker who could not read nor write. He stated, “I told her that God had revealed things to her beyond all earthly education.”¹⁶ The oral history of the Church is replete with testimonies of members who assert that they knew the book was true from the moment they received it.

We find examples of veneration of physical objects leading to testimony, where texts become artifacts that signify much more than their content. In the October 2009 session of general conference, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland extended the meaning of veneration to another experience with the Book of Mormon. He held up a nineteenth-century copy of the book that was read by Hyrum Smith shortly before his martyrdom. He related how appropriate it was that the final words read from the book were these from Ether 12:38: “And now I, Moroni, bid farewell . . . until we shall meet before the judgment-seat of Christ.” However, Elder Holland went further by testifying that the book itself, despite its similar content to many other extant copies, is singularly significant because its provenance provides further evidence for the text’s authenticity as a sacred sign or ritual object. From that book, Elder Holland more significantly understands Joseph and Hyrum’s commitment to the Book of Mormon and the religious movement it spurred, and that makes it an object worthy of veneration.¹⁷

In time’s meridian, there was no book to help followers of Christ read of him; they could only receive. There was no text to explain that the law of Moses had been fulfilled and the law of the gospel was now the way. And still, many believed.

We should embrace the discrete and balanced promises of Moroni 10:3–4 and the testimonies that result from them for a number of reasons. First, these verses can bring about a great streamlining of missionary tactics by allowing verse 4 to be an initial, independent, and foundational method for engaging the Book of Mormon and establishing it as scripture. Second, the verses clarify advantages and disadvantages of using digital or physical copies of the Book of Mormon. Specifically, digitization of scripture has advanced testimony building through reading by improving the text’s accessibility; however, testimony building through receiving may be difficult through digital texts, as material mediums may be essential to receiving the text and to venerating the text as a sacred sign or ritual object. This is especially significant for Latter-day Saint scriptures, which have few liturgical traditions¹⁸ outside of the temple. Third, the verses provide a more mature and balanced

view of scriptural engagement. This balance is not only seen in Moroni 10 but in the title page of the Book of Mormon, which explains its purpose is really twofold, including (1) “to show unto the remnant of the house of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers” (in other words, historical knowledge), and (2) “to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD” (in other words, spiritual conversion). A balanced approach of scriptural engagement will best fulfill these twofold purposes of the text. Even if this reinterpretation is textually incorrect in regards to the original intent of the title page, it is essential for realization of the global evangelical promise of the Church, because literacy for nearly half of the world’s population falls well below an ability to read a text as complex as the Book of Mormon.

As religious educators, we must be careful that in our zeal to teach, we do not solely emphasize transmission of information, which increases intellectual acumen but not always spiritual maturity. Reading the Book of Mormon has become the dominant testimony building process. Is this process intrinsically superior, or is it possibly a modern cultural anomaly built upon vernacular translations and increasing literacy rates? This interpretation of Moroni’s promises can preserve scriptural texts from undue reductionism through intellectual skepticism and literary hermeneutics. The act of veneration thus becomes essential to the believer for distinguishing canonical writings from all other forms of literature. **RE**

Notes

1. In many religious traditions, the original language of scripture (Arabic in Islam, Hebrew in Judaism, and Gurmukhi in Sikhism) is seen as uniquely authentic, as liturgically essential, and, some even argue, as a direct link to the revelatory source. See Walter H. Wagner, *Opening the Qur’an: Introducing Islam’s Holy Book* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 92–94; Adele Berlin and Mark Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), ix–xi.

2. *Veneration* is used in this context to denote deep respect or reverence directed toward an object, while not going so far as to make the Book of Mormon a central object of worship that might be affiliated by some as idolatrous.

3. I am defining *receive* in verse 4 as the main action verb and in verse 3 as more of a chronological qualification.

4. Royal Skousen has argued that the *not* in “if these things are not true” is significant in that that it implies that the Book of Mormon is an independent verity regardless of the position taken by the reader. Moroni’s invitation is to accept the established truth that is the Book of Mormon. See Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part Six* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2009), 3950.

5. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 240–6.

6. Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 223–4.

7. Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, xiii.

8. For support of this fairly broad claim, see Philip R. Davies, “The Jewish Scriptural Canon in Cultural Perspective,” in *The Canon Debate*, ed. Lee Martin McDonald and James A. Sanders (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 37–41. For analysis of the same phenomena in Buddhism, see William M. Bodiford, “The Medieval Period,” in *Nanzan Guide to Japanese Religions*, ed. Paul L. Swanson and Clark Chilson (Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii Press, 2006), 170.

9. 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; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2015), 200–202.

10. See Larry C. Porter, “Solomon Chamberlain—Early Missionary,” *BYU Studies* 12, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 314–17. Early Church leader Thomas B. Marsh had similar experiences in 1830, in which a foundation for his testimony was solidified through receiving and reading Book of Mormon proof sheets from Grandin Press in early 1830. See Michael Hubbard MacKay et al., eds., *Documents, Volume 1: July 1828–June 1831*, vol. 1 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 26–7.

11. See the Book of Mormon, ii; Stephen C. Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” *Religious Educator* 11, no. 2 (2010): 37–50; see also Richard L. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Shadow Mountain, 2000).

12. See the Book of Mormon, i, iii–v.

13. See MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 34–5, 79–84, for Joseph Smith's attempts to translate the characters on the gold plates, and see 61–71 for accounts of Joseph Smith's translation process through the use of seer stones.

14. Recent studies suggest that the power of the gold plates was conferred on the Book of Mormon text because of the miraculous process of translation (see MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, xiv–xvi). Also, recent studies on scripture and canonization argue that for the Book of Mormon manuscript or publication to gain this power or authority as an object of veneration like Moroni 10:4 suggests, it was necessary for the gold plates to “die,” i.e., not be publically or readily available. See Kristina Myrvold, *Death of Sacred Texts in World Religions* (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 1–11. In fact, Moroni makes this argument in Moroni 10:27, where he states, “The Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?” I suggest that this refers to both Moroni, who is long dead by the time the Book of Mormon is translated and published, and to the record, which is resurrected from its earthly burial and then returns, providing its power and transferring its authority to the manuscript and subsequent publication.

15. This argument is similar to Terryl Givens's analysis that in the early Church, the Book of Mormon was more of a sacred symbol than theological primer. Givens states, “Except for its abiding centrality in the conversion experience, . . . the Book of Mormon has been virtually invisible throughout most of the Church's history.” I attempt to argue that simply because the Book of Mormon is a sacred sign or ritual object, this does not preclude

its central importance, just as my analysis of Moroni 10:3–5 infers. See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 240.

16. Henry B. Eyring, “Continuing Revelation,” *Ensign*, November 2014, 73.

17. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Safety for the Soul,” *Ensign*, November 2009, 88–90.

18. *Liturgical* is used here to denote systemized and public forms of worship or ritual.

Specifically in this paper, scriptural liturgies would be forms of engagement beyond reading and studying. While individuals may have their own ritual practices, the Church does not emphasize or enforce any liturgical practices with scripture.