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Elder D. Todd Christofferson

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“America Reads” and the Book of Mormon

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From an address at the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, 7 December 2016.

Between 1828 and 1831, the American Bible Society launched an aggressive campaign to put a copy of the Old and New Testament in every American home. During those three years, over 500,000 copies of “the Good Book” were printed and distributed across the country, illustrating just how much Protestant Americans considered themselves to be a God-fearing and Bible-believing people. At the same time of the American Bible Society’s ambitious initiative, a young man named Joseph Smith from upstate New York was translating and printing an additional sacred book of scripture, eventually published as the Book of Mormon.¹

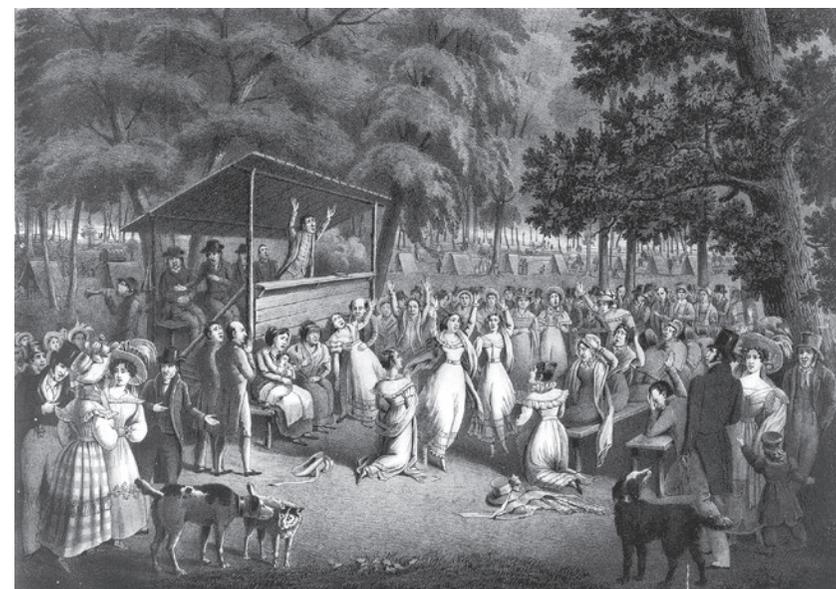
Since its publication in 1830, the Book of Mormon has garnered much attention, good and bad, with no shortage of epithets. It has been called “the gold bible,” “the Mormon bible,” “the great American bible,”² “an extraordinary work,”³ “chloroform in print” (Mark Twain’s contribution),⁴ “the most correct [book] of any book on earth,”⁵ a “safety for the soul,”⁶ and “among the great achievements in American literature.”⁷ In 2013 the Book of Mormon

was added to the Library of Congress's list of "Books That Shaped America."⁸ Most recently the Book of Mormon has been listed fourth on the Library of Congress's "America Reads" list of most influential books in American history.⁹ My comments today focus on this sacred book, the keystone of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Thomas F. O'Dea, a Roman Catholic, once quipped that "the *Book of Mormon* has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."¹⁰ And there have been many critics. Some of those with disparaging opinions of the Book of Mormon give Joseph Smith so little credit that they believe he deceptively stole the manuscript from another author, blatantly plagiarized the text, and falsely claimed it as his own religious work. Other critics give Joseph Smith so much credit as to argue that he, in his early twenties and with little formal education and no experience in writing, was the creative genius behind the Book of Mormon and drew from his own mental faculties the intricate and interweaving storylines, the complex Christian doctrinal treatises, and the thousand-year epic history of warring civilizations and divine interventions. So even the critics cannot agree. Joseph Smith was either a religious genius or cunning fraud. As members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, we believe the firsthand accounts given by Joseph Smith and other eye-witnesses: that the Book of Mormon was literally translated by Joseph Smith from ancient golden plates through the gift and power of God.¹¹

The story of the Book of Mormon can begin in a number of ways. I would like to start in September 1823, seven years prior to its publication in 1830. At this time, Joseph Smith Jr. was a seventeen-year-old boy living in upstate New York, surrounded by the religious excitement and evangelical revivals that characterized the Second Great Awakening. The Smith family had suffered a number of devastating economic losses that left them in dire straits and living on rented land. During this time, some of the Smith family turned to religion, including Joseph's mother and several siblings, who joined the Presbyterian church in Palmyra, New York. Joseph, like his father, believed in God but chose to remain outside of organized religion in his boyhood.¹²

On 21 September 1823, Joseph received a remarkable visit from an angel named Moroni, who said that a set of gold plates lay buried in a nearby hill and that they contained a history of ancient inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere and their dealings with God. The next day Joseph found the golden plates just as the angel had described, along with two stones joined



Alexander Rider, *A Religious Camp Meeting*, Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, LCUSZ62-5818.

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together like old-fashioned spectacles. With his family's grim economic outlook in mind, Joseph was tempted to obtain the plates for financial gain. As he reached into the stone box in which the golden plates were buried, he was thrown back by some unknown force. The angel Moroni then reappeared and instructed Joseph that the plates were to be used for God's sacred purposes, not to make money. Over the next four years, Joseph received annual visitations from the angel each September, preparing him to obtain the golden plates in 1827 and then begin its remarkable translation from ancient characters into English.¹³

Translation of the Plates

Joseph never explained the precise mechanics of translating of the Book of Mormon and gave only two public statements regarding the process. The first statement comes from the first edition of the Book of Mormon, published in 1830. In the preface Joseph simply wrote that he translated the golden plates "by the gift and power of God."¹⁴ The second statement came two years later when he was pressed by his brother to tell a group of followers about the story of the Book of Mormon. On that occasion Joseph noted that "it was

not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the book of Mormon.”¹⁵

For Latter-day Saints, the translation of the Book of Mormon was a miracle. Joseph dictated the entire 250,000-word, 600-page manuscript in no more than ninety and perhaps as few as sixty-five working days between April and June 1829. This was done in a single draft with very few strikeouts or corrections. It is an especially remarkable feat given Joseph’s educational background. His wife Emma, who served as a scribe and witnessed the translation process, explained: “Joseph . . . could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. . . . [He] would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him.”¹⁶

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints owns most of the 28 percent of the surviving original manuscript of the Book of Mormon, pages of which are publicly displayed in the Church History Museum and the Church History Library in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. There are plans to publish high-resolution images of the fragments of the original manuscript in a forthcoming volume of *The Joseph Smith Papers*. I also understand that a page of the original manuscript is being loaned to the Smithsonian Institution for an exhibit in 2017.

After the translation of the Book of Mormon and before its printing, two groups were shown the golden plates at different times. Up to this point several individuals had lifted the plates, which were kept either in a wooden box or under a cloth during the translation process, but no one besides Joseph had actually seen them. Joseph received a revelation from God in June 1829 informing him that his associates Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris “shall have a view of the plates.”¹⁷ The three men then retired to the woods in prayer, and an angel appeared and showed them the golden plates. They also testified that they heard a voice from heaven confirm that Joseph had translated the plates “by the gift and power of God.”¹⁸

Eight additional witnesses experienced a similar event, except that Joseph, rather than an angel, showed them the plates and allowed them to leaf through them. These witnesses wrote, “[Joseph] has shown unto us the plates . . . , which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon.” The “Testimony of the Three Witnesses” and the



An angel appeared and showed Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris the golden plates.

“Testimony of the Eight Witnesses” have been printed in every edition of the Book of Mormon since 1830. While all three of the Three Witnesses and five of the Eight Witnesses later left the Church for a time, none of them ever denied their sworn statements about seeing the plates.

A copyright was applied for on 11 June 1829, and several print shops in the region were approached about publishing the book. Securing a printer was no easy task. Martin Harris first approached a printer named Egbert B. Grandin in Palmyra, New York, to negotiate a contract, but Grandin initially rejected the offer. Grandin, who ridiculed Joseph Smith’s claims of visions and golden plates, eventually agreed to print the Book of Mormon but set the cost to print 5,000 copies at an inflated price of \$3,000. This was a huge amount of money in 1829, and Harris eventually mortgaged his 150-acre farm to finance the printing. The process of typesetting, printing, trimming, and binding the three million pages required to produce 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon began in the late summer of 1829 and was not completed

until March 1830. The chief typesetter, John Gilbert, had the laborious task of imposing punctuation and paragraphing as he set the type from the raw manuscript. During the translation, scribes of the Book of Mormon inserted almost no punctuation or paragraph breaks in the text. They simply recorded the words as quickly as Joseph Smith dictated them.¹⁹

Contents of the Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon recounts the history of a group of Israelites who lived in Jerusalem around the time of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah in 600 BC (with a much smaller portion of the book devoted to a group known as the Jaredites, which had migrated earlier to the Americas). The group of Israelites, led by a prophet named Lehi, was commanded by God to leave their homeland because of the impending destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. They were directed to build a ship and sail across the sea, eventually landing in the Americas. Lehi's four sons separated into two rival nations: a Christian group called Nephites and a non-believing group known as the Lamanites. For nearly 1,000 years the Nephites and Lamanites engaged in frequent warfare and followed cycles of righteousness and unrighteousness until the Nephites wholly apostatized from or rejected the teachings of Christ and were destroyed by the Lamanites in a long genocidal war. Throughout their history, a number of prophets and historians recorded major events and teachings among the people. The title of the Book of Mormon stems from its primary author, a prophet named Mormon, who compiled and abridged the writings of his predecessors on golden plates. Mormon's son, Moroni, the last surviving Nephite prophet and record keeper, buried the plates in about AD 400 and later appeared to Joseph Smith as a resurrected angel in 1823, directing him to the hill in which they were buried.²⁰

Latter-day Saints look to the Book of Mormon as a companion and witness to the authenticity of the Bible, equal in significance and authority. The book is written in language similar to that of the Bible and contains both traditional and unique Christian teachings. It references Jesus Christ 4,000 times by more than 100 different titles, including "Lord," "the Eternal Judge," "Savior," and "the Holy One of Israel." One of the book's earliest prophets, named Nephi, wrote, "We talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that our children may know to what source they may look for a remission of their sins."²¹ The pinnacle of the Book of Mormon, moreover, recounts

the visit and ministry of Jesus Christ to these ancient American inhabitants shortly after His Resurrection in the Old World. He taught and prayed with the Nephite people, introduced communion (which we call the sacrament), and healed their sick. With so much focus on the Savior and His teachings throughout the Book of Mormon, it is no wonder the Church added the subtitle "Another Testament of Jesus Christ" in 1982.²²

The Book of Mormon contains a variety of themes and teachings. It stresses the importance of faith, repentance, baptism, and the guidance of the Holy Ghost in our lives. It focuses on prayer and personal revelation from God. It instructs readers to study the scriptures and apply their sacred truths in our lives. It encourages readers to find peace and happiness by keeping God's commandments. It expands on teachings in the Bible, such as premortal life, our purpose in mortality, the Atonement of Jesus Christ, a universal resurrection, and life after death. The Book of Mormon serves as a critical source of inspiration and guidance for Latter-day Saints, with stories and messages that apply to contemporary life.²³

However, the Book of Mormon was severely misunderstood when it was first published. Those critical of Joseph Smith were less concerned with the content of the book than with what it represented. The Book of Mormon was seen as a departure from traditional Christianity at the time of publication. As Terryl Givens has said, "The significance of the Book of Mormon has been almost entirely bound up not with its content but rather its manner of appearing; it has typically been judged not on the merits of what it *says*, but what it *enacts*."²⁴

The first wave of critical reviews of the Book of Mormon began even before its publication in 1830. A man by the name of Abner Cole, a newspaper editor who published under the pen name Obadiah Dogberry, took some of the earliest page proofs of the Book of Mormon from E. B. Grandin's printing shop in Palmyra, New York, and published excerpts in his local newspaper, the *Reflector*, with his own crude commentary. Cole called the Book of Mormon "a mummery" that Joseph Smith had concocted to swindle gullible victims like Martin Harris out of money. You can imagine the tasteless satire of the Book of Mormon under Cole's derisive title "The Book of Pukei."²⁵ Many other disparaging appraisals soon emerged and challenged the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's account of its coming forth.

Persecution and Religious Freedom

The Book of Mormon drove a wedge between the Latter-day Saints and the rest of Protestant America, which defended the Bible as the sole word of God. Not long after the Book of Mormon was published in 1830, Latter-day Saints began to gather in Jackson County, Missouri, where they hoped to build a community in which they could worship freely. Non-Mormon residents, however, feared that a Mormon majority would assume control of the economic, political, and social affairs of the county. The tension between the two groups resulted in conflict and violence. Anti-Mormon mobs burned homes, harassed families, and robbed the Latter-day Saints of their religious freedom in the state of Missouri.

One of the devastating events that occurred during this time of conflict was the destruction of the Church's printing press in Independence, Missouri. In July 1833 a mob broke into the printing office, scattered the type, threw unbound manuscripts into the street, and leveled the building. The editors at the office had been employed in printing another treasured book among the early members of the Church, called the Book of Commandments, which contained copies of Joseph Smith's revelations. Prior to the chaos at the printing office, none of the copies of the Book of Commandments had been completed in full, and only twenty-nine known copies exist today, making the 1833 Book of Commandments one of the rarest and most valuable books in America. One of those copies is on display here today. Additional revelations were added to the content of the Book of Commandments and published two years later as the Doctrine and Covenants, which remains part of the scriptural canon of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today.

The very principles of liberty and free exercise of religion that allowed the Church to organize and to print the Book of Mormon in a predominantly Protestant nation were under attack in Missouri. Latter-day Saints were driven from county to county, denied the right to vote in local elections, and suffered physical abuse and even sexual assault. The governor of Missouri eventually issued an executive order, better known as the "Extermination Order," that gave Missourians state support "to treat the Mormons as enemies." After fleeing Missouri as religious refugees, the Latter-day Saints flourished for a time in Illinois before facing similar obstacles.

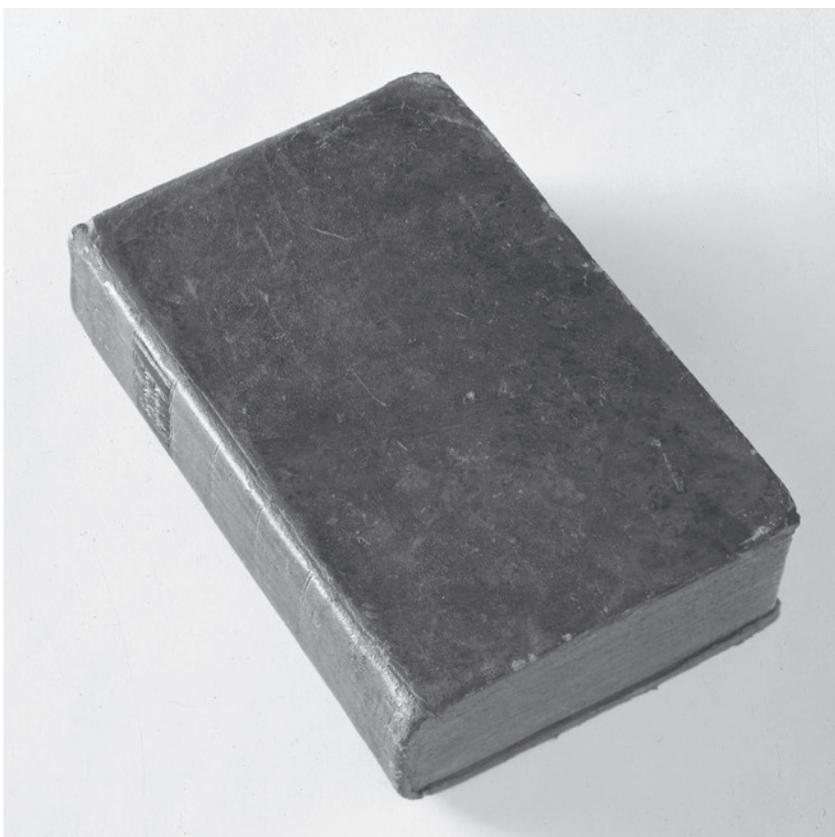
Even today in the twenty-first century, when religious freedom remains the ideal in America, we still see some of this same sense of intolerance and

hostility toward religion. Like our pioneer ancestors, we (and other religious communities across the country) continue to receive our share of suspicion and resentment for our beliefs and practices. People are increasingly questioning the value of religion in public life, forgetting that some of our most fundamental moral values, like honesty, integrity, and love and respect for all people, are promoted and passed on to the next generation in religious settings. Religion is not simply being marginalized; it is under attack. "There are . . . efforts [made] to shame and intimidate believers who have traditional moral values and to suppress religious viewpoints and practices. . . . Worst of all, government sometimes joins in these efforts."²⁶ Today we fight for religious freedom through civil discourse. For our nineteenth-century ancestors, however, it took a cross-continent migration to the Salt Lake Valley beyond the national borders of America at the time to find space and refuge to practice their religion freely.²⁷

Impact and Reach of the Book of Mormon

From the Rocky Mountains, the Book of Mormon continues to "flood the earth." It is a miracle to see that what began with 5,000 copies in a small print shop in Palmyra, New York, in 1830 has resulted in millions of copies available in multiple languages around the globe. As of today, over 176 million copies of the Book of Mormon have been printed since 1830. To date, the Book of Mormon has been translated into 110 languages—89 full translations, with selections of the book in another 21 languages. The first non-English translation was published in 1851 in Danish. Other major translations include Spanish, French, German, Italian, Portuguese, Japanese, and Russian. However, the array of translations is evidence of the Church's growing international presence and includes languages as diverse as Amharic, Kekchi, Mongolian, Quichua, Swahili, Tok Pisin, Igbo, Pangsasinan, and Yapese.²⁸

The Book of Mormon has undergone thirteen major English editions in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, adding versification, chapter introductions, double columns, doctrinal commentary, study guides, photographs, and cross-references to other books in the Church's scriptural canon, including the Holy Bible. The Book of Mormon has also been digitized and published on LDS.org, as well as on the Church's mobile applications and some third-party mobile applications. What took months to print in 1830 can now be downloaded in seconds in nearly any major language around the



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world. As scholar Terryl Givens has summarized, “The Bible alone excepted, the Book of Mormon is by far the most widely printed and circulated book in the history of the Western Hemisphere.”²⁹

The Book of Mormon has left a lasting legacy on American culture. It has spawned pageants and plays, appeared in films, inspired musical lyrics, and received 4 out of 5 stars on the Apple Store. It has been illustrated in comic strips, displayed in paintings, told through historical fiction, and imprinted on clothing.³⁰ A copy of the Book of Mormon was even checked out to President Abraham Lincoln at the Library of Congress on 18 November 1861. It was not returned until 29 July 1862.

Many critics and apologists have moved away from debates about the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and have come to appreciate the text for

its literary qualities. A number of literary analyses of the Book of Mormon by both LDS and non-LDS scholars have been published in recent years by some of the most respected academic presses in the world, and these scholarly treatises have been civil and productive.³¹ There have been and continue to be literary readings of the Book of Mormon in university-level English courses across the country. These publications and classes do their best to allow the text of the Book of Mormon to speak for itself rather than debating its historical accuracy of ancient America or questioning Joseph Smith’s account of its nineteenth-century translation from golden plates. As scholar David Bokovoy said, “You don’t have to believe in its historic claims to appreciate [the Book of Mormon] as literature.”³²

Beyond its impact on American literature and culture, for Latter-day Saints the Book of Mormon remains “the keystone of our religion.”³³ It brings peace and comfort, counsel and guidance, inspiration and encouragement to over fifteen million members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints worldwide. The Book of Mormon is invaluable to believers, which is illustrated by an address given by Gordon B. Hinckley, former President of the Church, in October 2007. In his remarks, President Hinckley noted that a first edition of the Book of Mormon had recently sold for over \$100,000 at a private auction. He then said that despite this steep price, “the cheapest paperback edition [of the Book of Mormon] is as valuable to the reader who loves its language and message.”³⁴

On a personal note, let me say that my study of the Book of Mormon has given me an enhanced appreciation of the Bible. I have always loved the Bible; at age twelve, I asked my parents for a leather-bound copy for Christmas, since Santa Claus had never come up with one for me, and they were happy to respond. It took me a long time to get through it, but that copy is still a treasured possession. One of the principal authors of the Book of Mormon, Nephi, prophesied that the Bible and Book of Mormon would “grow together, unto the confounding of false doctrines and laying down of contentions, and establishing peace.”³⁵ That has certainly been true for me.

My own witness of Jesus Christ is rooted in both the Book of Mormon and the Bible. Quoting Nephi once again regarding this special book, “Hearken unto these words and believe in Christ; and if ye believe not in these words believe in Christ. And if ye shall believe in Christ ye will believe in these words, for they are the words of Christ, . . . and they teach all men that they should do good.”³⁶ It is through an ongoing study of the Book of

Mormon that my knowledge and understanding of the Savior continue to expand and deepen.

May I conclude with an invitation we have put in the playbill for the Broadway musical *The Book of Mormon* (which, of course, has absolutely nothing to do with the Book of Mormon): “You’ve seen the play; now read the book. The book is always better.” By all means, read the book. **RE**

Notes

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3. Gordon S. Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” *New York History* 61, no. 4 (October 1980): 381.
4. Mark Twain, *Roughing It* (New York: American Publishing, 1872), 127.
5. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of Presidents of the Church: Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 64.
6. Jeffrey R. Holland, “Safety for the Soul,” *Ensign* or *Liabona*, November 2009, 90.
7. Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.
8. See “Library of Congress ‘Books That Shaped America’ Available on Amazon: Twelve New Titles Join Original List,” 22 January 2013, loc.gov/today/pr/2013/13-005.html.
9. See “America Reads’ Exhibition to Open June 16,” loc.gov/item/prn-16-088/america-reads-exhibition-to-open-june-16/2016-05-26/.
10. Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.
11. See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 3–7; Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3–12.
12. See Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling: A Cultural Biography of Mormonism’s Founder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 8–56; Matthew Bowman, *The Mormon People: The Making of an American Faith* (New York: Random House, 2012), 3–31.
13. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling*, 8–56; Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 3–31.
14. In Book of Mormon, “Introduction.”
15. “Minute Book 2,” October 25–26, 1831, Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.
16. Emma Smith, in Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *Saints’ Herald*, 1 October 1879, 290.
17. Doctrine and Covenants 17:1; see also verses 2–3.
18. Book of Mormon, “The Testimony of the Three Witnesses.”
19. Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith’s Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, 2015), 163–75.
20. See Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 3–12.

21. 2 Nephi 25:26.
22. See Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2011), 118.
23. See Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 13–82.
24. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 105.
25. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling*, 81–97; Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 94–95.
26. D. Todd Christofferson, “Religious Freedom—a Cherished Heritage to Defend,” MormonNewsroom.org, 26 June 2016; see also “Transcript of Elder Dallin H. Oaks’ Speech Given at Chapman University School of Law,” MormonNewsroom.org, 4 February 2011; “Why Religious Freedom Matters to Mormons,” MormonNewsroom.org, 20 February 2012.
27. See Bushman, *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling*, 322–402; Bowman, *The Mormon People*, 32–62.
28. Full translations are available in the following languages: Afrikaans, Albanian, American Sign, Amharic, Arabic, Armenian, Aymara, Bislama, Bulgarian, Cambodian, Catalan, Cebuano, Chinese (simplified characters), Chinese (traditional characters), Chuukese, Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dutch, English, Estonian, Fante, Fijian, Finnish, French, German, Greek, Guarani, Haitian, Hawaiian, Hiligaynon, Hindi, Hmong, Hungarian, Icelandic, Igbo, Ilokano, Indonesian, Italian, Japanese, Kekchi, Kiribati, Korean, Kosraean, Lao, Latvian, Lingala, Lithuanian, Malagasy, Malay, Maori, Marshallese, Mongolian, Norwegian, Pangasinan, Persian, Polish, Portuguese, Quichua (Ecuador), Rarotongan, Romanian, Russian, Samoan, Serbian, Setswana, Shona, Sinhala, Slovak, Slovenian, Spanish, Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Tahitian, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Tok Pisin, Tongan, Turkish, Twi, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Welsh, Xhosa, Yapese, Yoruba, and Zulu. Selections are available in Armenian (Western), Bengali, Bikolano, Cakchiquel, Chamorro, Efik, Kisii, Kuna, Mam, Maya, Navajo, Niuean, Palauan, Pampango, Papiamentu, Pohnpeian, Quechua (Bolivia), Quechua (Peru), Quiche, Tzotzil, and Waray.
29. Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 4; Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 39–116.
30. See J. Michael Hunter, ed. *Mormons and Popular Culture: The Global Influence of an American Phenomenon* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2013).
31. For example, see Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Givens, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction*, 1–12; Paul Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton University Press, 2012); Avi Steinberg, *The Lost Book of Mormon: A Quest for the Book That Just Might Be the Great American Novel* (New York: Random House, 2014).
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34. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Stone Cut Out of the Mountain,” *Ensign* or *Liabona*, November 2007, 85.
35. 2 Nephi 3:12.
36. 2 Nephi 33:10.