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Schooling the Prophet: How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith and the Early Restoration

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Gerald E. Smith. *Schooling the Prophet:
How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith
and the Early Restoration.*

Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, BYU, 2016.

Reviewed by Mark L. Staker

Scholars studying Mormonism have documented Joseph Smith's preference for citing the Bible rather than the Book of Mormon in his sermons and writings. Terryl Givens asserts in his influential study of the book that Joseph Smith only made "brief allusions to the Book of Mormon" in his teachings.¹ While it is easy to see confirmation of these conclusions in statistical studies of the number of references Joseph Smith made to biblical verses in comparison to the number he drew from the Book of Mormon, the meaning of these statistics has been less obvious. The general academic consensus, however, has been that Joseph Smith spent most of his time reading and pondering the Bible rather than the Book of Mormon. Philip Barlow, an exceptional scholar who has studied this issue carefully, notes that "compared to the Bible, the Book of Mormon was used surprisingly little. . . . There is little evidence that he [Joseph Smith] ever took time to study its contents as he did the Bible's." Barlow asserts, "The Book of Mormon was valued by its adherents, but it did not become the basis for early Church doctrine and practice—Smith's day-to-day revelations did that."²

Conclusions such as this have contributed to a perception that the Book of Mormon exerted little influence on early Mormon thought or practice other than as a manifestation of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling. Grant Hardy offers a typical assessment when he argues that the Book of Mormon "contributes little to LDS ritual (aside from the

1. Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 85.

2. Philip L. Barlow, *Mormons and the Bible: The Place of the Latter-day Saints in American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 44.

wording of sacramental prayers).”³ These arguments have led scholars to consider the idea that the Book of Mormon played an insignificant role in shaping doctrine, teachings, or practices in the early Church.

Gerald E. Smith provides much new information in his thoughtful book *Schooling the Prophet: How the Book of Mormon Influenced Joseph Smith and the Early Restoration* by asking if the demonstrable lack of frequent public reference to the Book of Mormon in Joseph Smith’s work is adequate evidence that the book had no influence on him. His answer is a carefully reasoned analysis of the relationship between Joseph Smith and the book he translated, which concludes that the Book of Mormon influenced Joseph Smith’s thinking on a number of significant subjects. The author finds ample evidence that the Book of Mormon was “not merely *derivative* from the Prophet, but actually may have been *formative* on his life and work as a prophet” (3), which seems reasonable considering the Book of Mormon translation was both his first and most sizable endeavor as a seer.

Givens points out in his brief introduction to *Schooling the Prophet* the appropriateness of Grant Hardy’s suggestion that, if the Book of Mormon’s purpose was only to serve as evidence that Joseph Smith was a prophet, a pamphlet would have accomplished the task. But no one has produced a serious, book-length study until now that explores in detail the formative role the Book of Mormon played in Joseph Smith’s thinking. Gerald Smith explores how the Book of Mormon influenced Joseph Smith in issues ranging from his organization of the new church—drawing its formal name of “the Church of Christ” from the text (46)—to shaping its ecclesiastical structure and priesthood offices (180–86). He argues the Book of Mormon was critical in establishing Joseph Smith’s early theology and doctrine, and influential in his introduction of rituals such as the sacrament and baptism.

One compelling avenue of study the author pursues is the role the Book of Mormon played in developing ideas of temple and temple theology. He observes “many Mormon and non-Mormon observers believe [Joseph Smith’s concept of temple worship] happened spontaneously by revelation to the Prophet in 1842” (4). *Schooling the Prophet* outlines a temple theology and the genesis of a Latter-day Saint temple-building program shaped by the Book of Mormon. He asserts that although temple worship was no longer part of the practice of Jews or Christians

3. Grant Hardy, introduction to Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), xxvii.

when the Book of Mormon was published, this volume of scripture included an account of postresurrection Christian temple worship in America that suggested temples were to continue playing a role within Christianity (145), and it was the Book of Mormon that generated Joseph Smith's interest in temple building.

Gerald Smith concludes his work noting:

Scholars have studied the impact of the Book of Mormon as a sign of Smith's prophethood—the miraculous account of ancient gold plates recovered from the ground by divine assistance from an angel. We now fill in an important space on an incomplete canvas that has been missing for nearly two centuries. To conclude that the Book of Mormon did indeed influence the Prophet is a beneficial contribution, but this would be an understatement. The Book of Mormon—with its depth and breadth—influenced the theological DNA for the church's first formal statement of doctrine (the 'Mormon Creed') articulated in the 'Articles and Covenants of the Church of Christ' in 1830. It provided a tangible vision and theology of Zion with an American New Jerusalem and a scriptural heritage anchored in the New World. It defined the meaning of Christ-centered temple worship in a postresurrection world where altar sacrifice was replaced with endowed instruction and communion with Christ as seen in the Nephite endowment. (210)

As Joseph Smith neared the end of his life's work while in Carthage jail the evening before he was murdered, he read with his brother Hyrum passages from the Book of Mormon about disciples experiencing divine rescue. Apparently aware no divine rescue would come, Joseph's brother Hyrum carefully folded down a page marking the prophet Moroni's farewell "unto my brethren whom I love" that his friends also took to be Hyrum's final farewell (Ether 12:38). Certainly Joseph Smith considered the Book of Mormon more than just a sign of his prophetic call. "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion," he once said, and he turned to it for solutions to the last.⁴

While Gerald Smith's academic training is in business—he has a Harvard Business School MBA and a PhD from Boston University and is a business professor at Boston College—he also teaches religion courses

4. "History, 1838, volume C-1 [November 2, 1838–July 31, 1842]," p. 255, on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, <http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-c-1-2-november-1838-31-july-1842?p=427>.

for the Boston LDS Institute of Religion and has clearly thought seriously about the Book of Mormon for many years. He draws heavily on the scholarship of others who have contributed to the field to build his work. Gerald Smith's thesis is a useful starting point for further study about the influence of the Book of Mormon on other early Latter-day Saints. While Parley P. Pratt's influential *Voice of Warning* includes heavy reference to the Book of Mormon in its concluding chapters, for example, the earlier chapters addressing dual priesthoods and other doctrinal topics also fit nicely with *Schooling the Prophet's* identification of the Book of Mormon as a major source of thinking on priesthood and related subjects. Although Gerald Smith's primary audience is scholars who study the Book of Mormon or early Latter-day Saint history and are interested in the role the book played in the formative Church, it is also a useful volume in helping anyone who reads the Book of Mormon appreciate its role in influencing Joseph Smith's thinking and in developing Latter-day Saint doctrine. It contributes toward a greater understanding of those doctrines.

Mark L. Staker received his PhD at the University of Florida and is a master curator in the Historic Sites Division of the LDS Church History Department. Mark is the author of the award-winning book *Hearken, O Ye People: The Historical Setting of Joseph Smith's Ohio Revelations* and has published extensively on early Latter-day Saint history. He is the author of several articles in *BYU Studies*, including "Thou Art the Man: Newel K. Whitney in Ohio," vol. 42, no. 1 (2003): 74–138; and, with Robin S. Jensen, "David Hale's Store Ledger: New Details about Joseph and Emma Smith, the Hale Family, and the Book of Mormon," vol. 53, no. 3 (2014): 77–112.