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A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon

By Larry E. Morris

New York: Oxford University Press, 2019

Reviewed by John W. Welch

Larry Morris, a veteran researcher of everything related to Oliver Cowdery and early Latter-day Saint history, has provided the world with this fine collection of primary historical sources relevant to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Published by Oxford University Press, this formal presentation of his fascinating compilation will certainly be interesting, convenient, credible, and crucial in the hands of historians (in the rigorous documentary sense of that word) as well as in the hearts of amateurs (in the best Latin sense of that word).

This book fills an important need in Latter-day Saint scholarship. Although other collections of early Latter-day Saint documents have been published, none has focused exclusively on the documents pertaining to the Book of Mormon, beginning with Moroni's first appearance to the seventeen-year-old Joseph Smith in September 1823 and ending in March 1830 with the publication of the Book of Mormon. Having these documents organized, numbered, sourced, introduced, transcribed, edited, typeset, annotated, and indexed adds to the library of early Latter-day Saint research tools. This book belongs on the shelf of every library that is serious about the beginnings of new religious movements in general and Mormon origins in particular. Initial responses to this book's release were rightfully prompt and enthusiastic.¹

1. For examples, see Stephen Smoot, "Book Notice: Read Primary Sources on the Origin of the Book of Mormon in One Volume," *Book of Mormon Central Blog*, February 20, 2019, <https://bookofmormoncentral.org/blog/book-notice-read-primary-sources-on-the-origin-of-the-book-of-mormon-in-one-volume>; and Cheryl L. Bruno, review of *A Documentary History of the Book of Mormon*, by Larry E. Morris, *Dawning of a Brighter Day* (blog), Association for Mormon Letters, February 27, 2019, <http://associationmormonletters.org/blog/reviews/older-reviews/morris-a-documentary-history-of-the-book-of-mormon-reviewed-by-cheryl-l-bruno/>.

Briefly stated, Morris divided this eight-year period into eleven episodes, or chapters, cataloged in a most welcome table of contents that is eleven pages long. For many reasons, this table of contents proves very handy in locating specific documents that are not so conveniently found in the alphabetical index at the end of the book; the index does not distinguish the actual documents included in this volume from mere mentions of the names or subjects that appear variously throughout the volume. Within each of the eleven chapters, the documents are divided into two groups: “First Hand Reminiscences” and “Accounts from Others.” In some cases, a few “Contemporaneous Documents” are added. At the end of the volume is a substantial section of endnotes and an eleven-page bibliography.

If a source, such as the draft of Joseph Smith’s history, written between June 1838 and about 1841, contains material pertinent to more than one of these eleven subdivisions, Morris divided the document among the relevant sections in order to cluster together the materials pertinent to the particular chapters. No indication is given, however, in the source notes or editorial notes where else in the volume one might find the material that precedes or follows each segment of a divided source. This inconvenience is minor, but readers will often want to know what came before or after these segmented texts.

In any event, this volume accomplishes a monumental task of presenting 231 documents (or document segments) in chapters that range from nine documents up to as many as thirty-seven. The greatest numbers of documents per chapter, interestingly, appear in chapters 1–2 (which cover the period from September 1823 to December 1827) and in the final chapters, 9–11 (which cover the time from the completion of the dictation of the original Book of Mormon manuscript at the end of June 1829 and running until books became available for sale in the Grandin bookstore at the end of March 1830).

An introduction appears at the beginning of each chapter, and source and editorial notes are supplied before each of the individual documents, stating their historical context. In these notes, for example, Morris critiques attempts that have been made to see the angel Moroni as a treasure guardian (11–14). He points out that both friends and foes were convinced that Joseph had real plates, whatever the nature of those plates might have been (158–59).

Morris accurately identifies and organizes what is known about each of these primary sources, helpfully pointing out both strengths and shortcomings of accounts coming from all quarters. The number and size of

these documents is amazing. From the very outset of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the sense of its imminent significance alertly captivated participants and observers, and even into their later years they remembered—whether entirely accurately or not—details about the emergence of the Book of Mormon.

The center of the book contains documents relating to the translation and transcription of the Book of Mormon and brief comments overviewing what is known about the translation project. Thus, chapter 5 gives an introductory discussion of the lost 116 pages in the context of Martin Harris and his apparent motivations in taking them (271–72). Chapter 6, which covers the months between autumn 1828 and March 1829, begins with a useful overview of what transpired during this interlude, including the court case involving Lucy Harris (287–91).

Readers may want to read Morris's reference work side-by-side with the recently published biography of Martin Harris² as they study his involvement with the translation of the 116 pages (April to June 1828) and his loss of them (summer 1828). The same applies to chapter 9 on the Three Witnesses (late June 1829) and chapter 11 on Martin Harris's significant financial and legal contributions and role in securing the printing of the first edition of the Book of Mormon.

Regarding the period of translation from April to June 1829, covered in chapters 7 and 8, Morris includes thirty-two documents, eleven of which are revelations now found in the Doctrine and Covenants.³ Leaving all these documents largely to speak for themselves, Morris provides little commentary in these chapters. In addition to wanting information about these eleven revelations and the few other documents relevant to these three months, however, readers may wonder about the confluence of the unprecedented burst of events that occurred during the three months in which almost the full text of the Book of Mormon came forth.⁴ Indeed, the surviving portions of the text of the dictated

2. Susan Easton Black and Larry C. Porter, *Martin Harris: Uncompromising Witness of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2018).

3. Sections 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16, 18.

4. For an analysis of what is known and what can be surmised about the timing of events during these three most prolific months in the history of the Book of Mormon, see John W. Welch, "Timing the Translation of the Book of Mormon: 'Days [and Hours] Never to be Forgotten,'" *BYU Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 4 (2018): 10–50. The word count for the Book of Mormon is 269,510 words, and the number of words in the revelations given during those three months found in the Doctrine and Covenants total another 6,124 words.

Original Manuscript should be included, or at least described in some detail, in order to create a more complete picture of the documentary history of the Book of Mormon. Thus, in chapters 7 and 8, Morris should have brought more than just Mosiah 1, given as document 7.8 (323–24), into the documentary calendar for those three months, at least by reference.⁵

Chapters 9 and 10 meticulously introduce and present seventy documents relating to the Three and the Eight Witnesses. Morris questions Dan Vogel’s casting of Martin Harris’s testimony as purely “subjective” (370) and discusses whether the testimony of the Three Witnesses can be evaluated on purely historical terms, given that supernatural agents were involved and that observers themselves found it impossible to describe the event as a “part of normal human life” (371). In his presentation of documents relating to the Eight Witnesses, Morris argues that “the historical value of the eight’s testimony can hardly [be] overstated” (416), pushing back against much scholarly opinion (417–421) and inviting readers to evaluate the testimonies of each witness of the Book of Mormon individually, not collectively as a collusive or amalgamated whole: “Each of them must speak for himself” (421).

Finally, readers may wonder, by way of comparison, how Morris’s work compares with other documentary resources available in this field. How much overlap is there between the documents they include, and how do they compare in terms of their organization of these sources?

First, the Joseph Smith Papers. While some of the documents included in Morris’s *Documentary History of the Book of Mormon* are found in the Joseph Smith Papers—either in print or online at <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org>—many are not. In order to be included among the papers of Joseph Smith proper, documents must meet certain limited criteria: they must have been “created by Joseph Smith, whether written or dictated by him or created by others under his direction, or . . . owned by Smith, that is, received by him and kept in his

5. Morris mentions the work of Royal Skousen in passing (309) and lists in the bibliography Skousen’s 2001 publication of the Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon. Readers should consider consulting that 2001 volume especially in order to add all of the known portions (28 percent) of the Original Manuscript to the number of “contemporaneous documents” belonging to the months of April, May, and June 1829. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, Brigham Young University, 2001).

office.”⁶ Thus, many of the documents that are rightly included by Morris because they are pertinent to the Book of Mormon are not found in the Joseph Smith Papers simply because they do not fall within the criteria of Smith authorship and ownership. Both collections are important, and they often overlap where the Book of Mormon is involved.

Second, Dan Vogel’s series. His five volumes of *Early Mormon Documents*⁷ (published between 1996 and 2003) contain 450 documents, almost twice as many as Morris’s 231. This is because Vogel’s volumes cover a much wider variety of events, ranging far beyond the Book of Mormon. Most of those events, however, occurred around the same places and timespans covered by Morris’s documents. Thus, there is considerable overlap. Unlike the organization of Morris’s book, which clusters the documents by certain events and timeframes, about half of Vogel’s documents fall into collections that he assembled himself. Vogel groups his documents by main individuals involved in each document: for example, the Joseph Smith Jr. Collection (in volume 1), the Martin Harris Collection, the Oliver Cowdery Collection, and the John H. Gilbert Collection (in volume 2), and the David and John Whitmer Collections (in volume 5). Vogel clustered the other half of his documents under “miscellaneous collection” headings.

Third, *Opening the Heavens*.⁸ This volume presents an even wider array of documents pertinent to six main events in the early history of the Church, including Joseph Smith’s First Vision; the translation of the Book of Mormon, particularly its timing; the restoration of the priesthood; and manifestations of numerous visions. Most relevant to Morris’s *Documentary History* is this book’s lengthy narrative chapter about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. *Opening the Heavens* makes use of 206 documents to tell the timing of the translation of the Book of Mormon and then presents relevant parts of each of those documents in a lengthy appendix. There, the first 119 texts come from firsthand participants or witnesses, while the other 87 are arranged chronologically based on the date when each statement was made, ranging from 1829 to 1898. About 64 of the documents included in *Opening the Heavens* are

6. “Editorial Method,” The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed November 4, 2019, <https://www.josephsmithpapers.org/articles/editorial-method>.

7. Dan Vogel, ed., *Early Mormon Documents*, 5 vols. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1996–2003).

8. John W. Welch, ed., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, 2d ed. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017).

also found in Morris's volume. So again, there is a fair degree of overlap with different grouping, labels, and arrangement.

Each mode of organizing, introducing, and presenting the original texts of these documents has logical advantages but also limitations. Thus, being conversant with all these sources and being aware of how these collections can each be used is advisable to accomplish the purposes any reader or researcher wishes to pursue.

Someday, a master union catalogue may well be developed, listing in one place the totality of the documents relevant to the history of the Book of Mormon and clarifying everywhere each text can be found. Harmonious with the spirit of the Joseph Smith Papers Project, such a master catalogue could present the text of all of these important documents for free online.

In whatever format one encounters these voices from the past, reading eyewitness reports is critical for understanding key events related to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Such diligent study allows readers to construct a realistic image of what transpired. In connection with Larry Morris's latest superb publication, I can certainly reassert a statement I made in the introduction to *Opening the Heavens*:

Although only a verbal shadow of greater realities, and although inevitably some reporters were more observant, better informed, or more articulate than others, the words of close participants offer us the feeling of almost being there.

The impact of these documents is cumulative. . . . As these accounts become more and more familiar . . . , [one comes] closer to hearing the individual voices of these original writers. I recommend reading these crucial accounts slowly, thoughtfully, and at times even out loud. Listen as these numerous witnesses offer their own testimonies.⁹

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9. Welch, *Opening the Heavens*, viii.