

WHAT JOSEPH SMITH COULD NOT HAVE KNOWN



Human remains wrapped in a leather pouch at the University of Sana'a Museum.

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO IMAGINE how a young man like Joseph Smith could ever have painted a picture as rich as this family and their journey. This came from the Lord. To undertake this great work depicting this family in crisis, with all of their different personalities, and those personalities acting consistently and interacting in consistent ways, and yet growing and developing through the pages of this book, could never be done, unless it were done through the Lord.

Virginia Pearce

It is very doubtful that Joseph Smith had much knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia, let alone Arabia in the sixth- or seventh-century BC. There just was not much available on such topics. There certainly wasn't much available in the area where Joseph Smith lived when the



Foundation stones of the temple at Timna, Yemen.



Burial mound at Nahom.

Book of Mormon was produced. We have records of what was in the Manchester Public Library for example. There wasn't much there. It was also a library that you had to belong to by subscription—you had to pay. The Smith family was generally not in a position to pay, and

we have records showing they were not subscribers. So he didn't have access to that library. There was not much in the library in Harmony, Pennsylvania either. There isn't anything there now. So the idea that Joseph Smith was really well versed on pre-Islamic Arabian geography or customs in the desert seems to me so ludicrous as to simply be beyond belief.

There were some maps that were available in the time of Joseph Smith, that show Nahom on the map in Arabia. Whether they existed in America at the time, is dubious. They did not exist in any known library of the time. That Joseph Smith saw them is most unlikely. Lucy Mack Smith says that of all her children, he was the least inclined to read. He was not a studious kid when he was growing up. She said he thought a lot, but he didn't read. And so, there's no reason to believe he'd even read the Bible, let alone abstruse works on pre-Islamic Arabian geography or customs which would have been uncommon in the Americas in any event in the early nineteenth century. So, it is not theoretically inconceivable that he could have come across one of the rare copies of this very rare map, but it is impossible to imagine that was so.

Daniel Peterson

In trying to understand what Joseph Smith could or could not have known about the events and characteristics found in the Book of Mormon, we have to understand the difference between the body of



knowledge that is available to a society as a whole versus what a particular individual knows. That is to say, in our modern society people know how to make rockets that can fly to the moon. That doesn't mean that I personally know how to do that. In our modern society there are people who can do heart surgery; it doesn't follow that I know how to do that. And what you find when people critique Joseph Smith is that they assume that Joseph Smith knew everything that anyone everywhere in the world knew at that particular time, which is absurd. No one living at any period knows everything that everybody knows. The critics' method is to find any type of source from which Joseph Smith might conceivably have obtained information about Arabia and then to say that because it is in the Book of Mormon, Joseph must have known it. That's a fairly weak and shabby methodology if you want to try to find out what Joseph Smith actually knew versus what someone else somewhere else knew.

Joseph Smith lived in an ecological zone that was completely different than Arabia. What he knew and had experienced in his own life would tell him nothing about what Arabia was like. This is most apparent in the allegory of the olive tree where it describes in intimate detail olive harvesting culture practices that Joseph would have essentially no way of knowing about, or experiencing in his own ecological zone, where olives are not cultivated. The same principle applies with the

Arabia trip. The essence of the problem here is that the most interesting things we find in the Book of Mormon in relationship to travel in Arabia are the incidental details, not the most obvious things of the story, the little side comments that he just threw in. Now if Joseph Smith were attempting to fabricate the Book of Mormon, and he was using these types of sources, the way he would have told the story would have been to emphasize what he had found in the nineteenth-century book, not to include it as incidental detail. And we see exactly the opposite. The incidentals are more revealing of what is going on behind the scenes than are the expressed things—things that are talked about by Nephi and Lehi.

In the case of Nahom, this is an Arabian place name that the Book of Mormon claims is going to be in a certain zone in Arabia at a certain period (1 Nephi 16:34). Now the chances of finding that exact name from that exact time in that exact place by random chance are just astronomical.

Joseph Smith, with a few years of grade school education, is able to produce a book that is so complex that it has attracted the attention of literally hundreds of



Inscribed panel on a votive altar from the Bar'an Temple near Marib, Yemen. The first two letters of Nahom are visible at the left.



The grand staircase and entry at the Temple of Ba'alan at Marib, Yemen.

scholars over the course of 200 years who still can not fully explain how this book was produced. When the Book of Mormon was originally written, there was no confirming linguistic, archaeological, or geographical evidence of any sort that could confirm it. Since the production of the Book of Mormon, we have come up with literary, linguistic, religious, archaeological, geographical, and other sorts of elements that point to its authenticity. For a forged book, you would expect the exact opposite to happen. The more time that passes, the less evidence we would find to confirm it. Since that has not occurred, it would indicate that the Book of Mormon is authentic, because the more time that passes the more evidence we have for it.

William Hamblin

Joseph Smith knew better than anyone else that he was not the author of the Book of Mormon. It was something that was given to him; the translation was given to him. If he had been asked to translate things from the same passage the day after he finished, he would not have been able to do it. The English words were given to him as he translated. Joseph understood very well that he did not know much about the actual history reflected in the Book of Mormon. Throughout his life he was known to ask questions about aspects of the Book of Mormon, to speculate on where it might have occurred. In the 1840s in Nauvoo, Joseph and others were speculating that maybe the Mayan ruins in the Mexican and Guatemalan



Noel B. Reynolds.

jungles were cities from the Nephite times. They had, at other times, speculated about other locations. So Joseph does not claim to know the answers to these questions. What he did claim was that this was given to him by God. For whatever reason he had been selected and this was God's book. He and others who associated with him in bringing that book forth consistently bore that testimony throughout their lives. It was the message of the book about the salvation of man that was most important to him. And today, as we see this book gaining and growing in its historical, cultural, and linguistic plausibility, we can appreciate better the importance of taking the religious claims of the book seriously.

Noel Reynolds





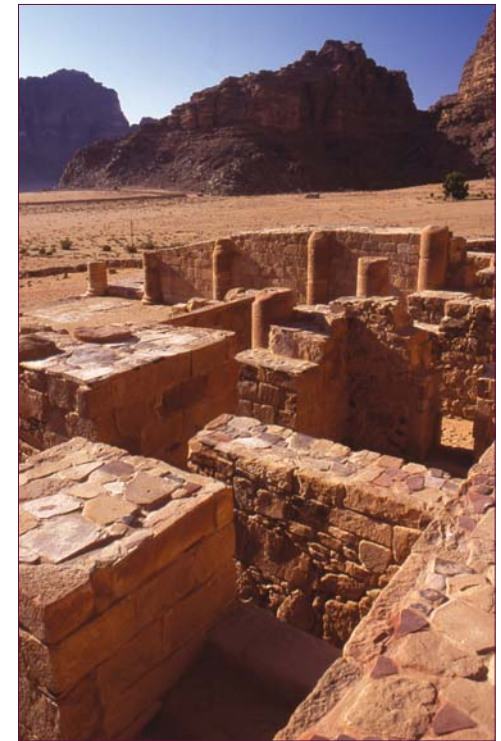
John W. Welch.

Joseph Smith was a seer raised up who could see and understand things far beyond his own cognition. Things that he put into the Book of Mormon as translator are things that were virtually unknown or unknowable to him in upstate New York. The most amazing thing to me is the way in which he was able to translate this book in an incredibly short time. I calculate approximately 63 translating days were available for him to translate from 1 Nephi to the end of the book of Moroni. During the time of translation there was no opportunity for Joseph Smith to go to libraries, to do research, to even review

or revise things that he had translated. The words were written word after word, as they fell from his lips by dictation. Those who were close to the process testify that he did not even have any notes in front of him as he performed the translation. This is an amazing, miraculous accomplishment. Isaiah said that the Book of Mormon would come forth as “a marvelous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14), those words can be translated “a miraculous work and a miracle.” It was a real big miracle.

I like to think that Joseph Smith is quite amused at the things that people are now finding about the Book of Mormon. I imagine that he may be aware of some of these new insights and discoveries that have come about through archaeology and historical and literary research. He must be amused. “Did I really put that into the Book of Mormon?” I doubt he ever noticed these things. He would have had no reason to ever notice them, and he certainly never said anything indicating that he had seen that or any of these other details. The witnesses tell us that Joseph did not even know that the city of Jerusalem had walls around it. Well if he did not know that there was a wall around Jerusalem, he certainly did not know that there was a city or a site out in Yemen called Nahom.

John Welch



Remains of the Temple at Wadi Rum.

