Susan Easton Balck, ed., *Stories from the Early Saints: Converted by the Book of Mormon*

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Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

This volume represents a decade's of collecting stories concerning people who joined The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in its early days because of the Book of Mormon. Like Eugene England’s fine earlier anthology, Converted to Christ through the Book of Mormon, its completion was inspired by the October 1988 conference address in which President Ezra Taft Benson “challenge[d] our Church writers, teachers, and leaders to tell us more Book of Mormon conversion stories that will strengthen our faith and prepare great missionaries.” Fittingly, each book is dedicated to President Benson, a prominent and prophetic advocate of the Book of Mormon.

Professor Black’s collection differs from that of Professor England in concentrating entirely, as its title indicates, on nineteenth-century conversion narratives. There are marvelous stories here. These first-person accounts are the primary stuff of history, and on at least one level (although the books are very different) the present volume reminds me of Milton V. Backman’s fascinating and valuable collection of Eyewitness Accounts of the Restoration, of Richard Lloyd Anderson’s Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses, and of Hyrum and Helen Mae Andrus’s sadly out-of-print They Knew the Prophet. It is impossible to read any of these books, I think, without being deeply impressed.

Among her sources, Professor Black distinguishes three types of experience with the Book of Mormon (pp. xi-xii). First

1 See Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” Ensign 18 (November 1988): 4-6. Professor England’s volume (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989) was reviewed, as either luck or my inspired editorial direction would have it, by Susan Easton Black in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 2 (1990): 74-76.

comes what she terms "anticipation." "Many early Saints were aware through the gifts of the Spirit that truth was soon to be restored." Second is a direct, joyful confirmation of the book's truth upon reading it. The final type of experience that Professor Black describes is that of defending the Book of Mormon against attack and testifying to its divine origin in the face of persecution and abuse. All three categories of experience are well illustrated in this volume.

Some of the stories gathered here are familiar. Well-known names like Orson Hyde, W. W. Phelps, Wilford Woodruff, John Taylor, David Whitmer, Orson Pratt, and Joseph Smith, Sr., are among those populating the book. Professor Black recounts the story of the spectacular sign witnessed in the sky over Mendon, New York, by Heber C. Kimball, his wife Vilate, and John P. Greene, among others. This occurred during the night of 27 September 1827—on the very day, as they later learned, during which Joseph Smith had obtained the plates from the Hill Cumorah (pp. 7-8). We read again Emma Hale Smith's account of the process by which the Book of Mormon was translated, a labor which, she said, entirely exceeded her husband's natural capacities. (Significantly, this was the evaluation of many, if not all, of those who knew Joseph Smith most intimately. Katharine Smith Salisbury, the Prophet's sister, was convinced that "without God's guidance her brother could not have brought forth such a work" [p. 19].) We read Emma's description of the way the plates felt when handled through the linen cloth in which they lay wrapped on her table, and of their metallic sound when she moved them about (pp. 91-92). We hear again Sidney Rigdon's unequivocal denial of any complicity in writing the Book of Mormon, and his testimony to his son, given twenty-one years after his excommunication from the Church, of the book's truth (pp. 92-93). We read once more the story of Oliver Cowdery's bold testimony before an Elkhorn, Wisconsin, courtroom, when a fellow attorney tried to use his connection with the Book of Mormon as a political weapon against him, and of his emotional return to the Church at Kanesville, Iowa, in 1848 (pp. 93-95). These are, yes, familiar stories, but they easily bear repeating, and each generation of the Saints needs to learn them afresh.

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Many of the stories, however, are little known among the
general membership of the Church, and it is probably here that
Professor Black has performed her greatest service. Few among
today's Latter-day Saints would recognize the names or stories
of Zera Pulsipher, or Lois Huntington Cutler, or David
Pettegrew, or Mary Elizabeth Rollins Lightner, or Vienna
Jacques. Yet their testimonies, and those of others gathered
here, are an inspiring treasure for their spiritual descendants.
(One can't help but wonder what other, similar, riches lie
scattered in attics and basements across the Church. Or—
perhaps worse—what other stories, as yet uncommitted to paper
or computer, live uncertainly on in the memories of living
Saints.)

In the nineteenth century, as in the twentieth, the majority of
conversions came about quietly. Conviction of the truthfulness
of the restoration and of the Book of Mormon, conveyed
through the gentle witness of the Spirit, was perhaps
incommunicable to others but was virtually undeniable to those
who had experienced it themselves. Professor Black has
gathered a number of such accounts. Some of her stories,
however, are quite spectacular. Thus, for example, as the time
drew near which had been appointed for the Restoration, it is
evident that the Lord was working with a number of others
besides Joseph Smith and his immediate family to prepare
spiritual soil for planting. "Many early Latter-day Saints were
prepared for the Book of Mormon through revelations, visions,
dreams, and interpretation of dreams. Angels and heavenly
manifestations emphasized the promise of restored truth" (p. 1).

Solomon Chamberlain, for instance, had a vision, in or
about the year 1807, of three heavens, graded hierarchically
according to their differing degrees of glory.4 In another vision,
in 1816, he learned that the true church was not upon the earth,
but that it soon would be, and that its arrival would be connected
with the publication of another book of scripture, much like the
Bible. At about the time that the Book of Mormon was being
printed, but before he had yet heard of it, Solomon was divinely
led to the Smiths' neighborhood in upstate New York.

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4 This account appears indirectly to conflict with the notion,
advanced by some, that Joseph Smith got his idea of the three degrees of
glory—an idea, incidentally, with roots deep in antiquity—not by revelation
from the Lord, but by reading speculative books of the 1830s.
I was a stranger in that part of the country, a town where I never before had set my foot, and knew no one in the town. It was now about sundown, and my guide [the Spirit of the Lord] directed me to put up for the night, which I did to a farm house. In the morning, the people of the house asked me if I had heard of the Gold Bible. When they said Gold Bible, there was a power like electricity went from the top of my head to the end of my toes.

He went to the Smiths’ home, where he met Joseph Smith’s brother Hyrum and found that the revelations he had received agreed in precise detail with those granted to the Prophet. He was baptized by Joseph Smith in the waters of Seneca Lake shortly after the establishment of the Church (pp. 34-37).

Within a few days of obtaining a copy of the Book of Mormon, Sidney Rigdon knew, by direct revelation, that it was true. “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto me, but my Father which is in heaven” (p. 68). Luman Shurtliff “heard a sweet melodious voice” testify to the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith and the truth of the Book of Mormon (pp. 71-72). Harrison Burgess testified that “a glorious personage clothed in white” came to him and showed him the plates from which the Book of Mormon had been translated (p. 27). Benjamin Brown found himself strongly rebuked by two of the Three Nephites for his lack of faith in the Book of Mormon, and then heard “the Spirit of the Lord” say to him, “Now, you know for yourself! You have seen and heard! If you now fall away, there is no forgiveness for you” (p. 31). The angel Moroni appeared to Oliver Granger and testified to him of the truthfulness of the book (p. 10).

Impressive as these accounts are, many of the less spectacular conversion stories are in their own way no less compelling. George Cannon, father of the George Q. Cannon who later served as a counselor to four presidents of the Church, was converted in Liverpool in 1840 by his brother-in-law, Elder John Taylor of the Council of the Twelve. Elder Taylor left a

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5 This experience was clearly not limited only to the Three Witnesses. Brigham Young tells of one of the original twelve apostles—he does not name him—who likewise saw the angel and saw and handled the plates, but who later apostatized. See JD 7:164. Even the wife of Martin Harris seems to have received the same witness. See Anderson, Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses, 162.
copy of the Book of Mormon with the family. George read the book through twice, and then remarked, “No wicked man could write such a book as this; and no good man would write it, unless it were true and he were commanded of God to do so” (p. 26). His statement succinctly expresses the verdict of tens of thousands, before and since. Willard Richards came to essentially the same conclusion, but more quickly. When he first received the book, he opened it to an arbitrarily chosen passage and began to read. Before completing half a page, he declared that, “God or the devil has had a hand in that book, for man never wrote it” (p. 66).

In February 1842, Jacob Hamblin heard a Latter-day Saint missionary preach. “I shall never forget the feeling that came over me when I saw his face and heard his voice. He preached that which I had long been seeking for; I felt that it was indeed the gospel” (pp. 40-41). “Oh,” Rachel Ridgeway Ivins recalled, “what joy filled my being! I could sing all the day long and rejoice in the glorious promises of the gospel” (p. 40). The Book of Mormon, and the restored gospel that it heralded, satisfied a deep hunger and yearning felt by thousands of those who discovered it. “I read all day,” recalled Parley Pratt, “eating was a burden, I had no desire for food; sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep” (p. 64). “Many times,” Katharine Smith Salisbury testified in 1886, “when I have read its sacred pages, I have wept like a child, while the Spirit has borne witness with my spirit of its truth” (p. 19).

Such joy, however, was not always the immediate reaction of those who came to know the truth of the Book of Mormon. The case of Daniel Spencer, Jr., illustrates this well. In 1840, he was a highly successful businessman in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Then the missionaries arrived. He listened to their message and gave it serious consideration. One day, while his son was with him in his study, he suddenly burst into tears and cried out, “My God, the thing is true, and as an honest man I must embrace it; but it will cost me all I have got on earth.” Nevertheless, he accepted baptism and moved to Nauvoo, where he eventually succeeded Joseph Smith as mayor of the city. He accompanied the smitten Saints in their enforced exodus into the wilderness beyond the Mississippi and, from 1849 to his death in 1868, presided over the Salt Lake Stake (pp. 74-76).

(Whole-hearted acceptance of the gospel guarantees eternal joy, but—although, even here, its track record far exceeds would-be
substitutes—it has never promised immediate gratification.) Jacob Hamblin, too, his long spiritual search completed, wavered just before baptism because of the sacrifices he knew such a step would require of him. Then he felt himself encouraged by his dead grandfather to go forward. (Soon thereafter, he learned of the saving work for the dead, and understood the interest that his grandfather had in his baptism [p. 42].)

And the costs were not imaginary. In December 1839, Hyrum Smith sent a letter to the still-scattered Saints, exiled from their homes in Missouri under the infamous “Extermination Order” of Governor Lilburn W. Boggs. In it, he recounted some of his own sufferings in captivity at Liberty Jail, where his life was several times in direct danger, and bore witness, once more, to the Book of Mormon. “I thank God,” Hyrum wrote, “that I felt a determination to die, rather than deny the things which my eyes had seen, which my hands had handled, and which I had borne testimony to . . . ; and I can assure my beloved brethren that I was enabled to bear as strong a testimony, when nothing but death presented itself, as ever I did in my life” (p. 96). Less than five years later, of course, Hyrum did offer up his life, with his brother, at Carthage Jail. In the fullest sense of the Greek word, Joseph and Hyrum Smith were martyrloi, “witnesses,” to the Book of Mormon and to the faith of which it is the keystone.

These narratives have far more than mere historical interest. It is inconceivable to me that any believing Latter-day Saint could read such testimonies without experiencing a desire to recommit to the gospel and to the Book of Mormon, which “cost the best blood of the nineteenth century to bring [it] forth for the salvation of a ruined world” (D&C 135:6). I hope they will find wide distribution and readership.

Professor Black herself recognizes the demand for commitment that these early stories make upon those who encounter them today, and she takes her stand forthrightly with the nineteenth-century Saints whose testimonies she has gathered, as well as with their modern heirs. Her efforts at collection have been motivated by much more than mere antiquarian curiosity. “I wish,” she says,
to link myself with those of you who are willing to stand and testify of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. I have read and studied the Book of
Mormon; I have pondered, prayed, and fasted concerning it. I have sought since my youth to know and understand its contents. Day after day I have searched it as an earnest inquirer after truth. I have found truth! I have discovered my greatest find, truly my pearl of great price. I testify that the Book of Mormon is a powerful, profound witness that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Eternal God. (p. xii)

Such modern testimony, shared in common with tens and hundreds of thousands of others, joined with the testimonies of early Saints in and out of Professor Black’s collection, itself constitutes a powerful argument for taking the Book of Mormon with the utmost seriousness. That so many people, of various eras and widely differing backgrounds, have found and continue to find the Book of Mormon spiritually and intellectually satisfying, is persuasive evidence that it did not issue from the mind of a shallow charlatan like the Joseph Smith portrayed by certain critics of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. For those who have themselves received a witness of the Book of Mormon, such stories reinforce their own solemnly joyous conviction that it is true, and its origin divine.