



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

<http://bookofmormoncentral.org/>

The Keystone of Our Religion...And Our Apologetic

Author(s): Neal Rappleye

Last Updated: March 2014.

Abstract: No abstract available.

CHAPTER ONE

THE KEYSTONE OF OUR RELIGION... *AND* OUR APOLOGETIC

I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.

—Joseph Smith¹

Take away the Book of Mormon and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none.

—Joseph Smith²

The Book of Mormon is the Keystone of our Religion... *and* our Apologetic

What did the Prophet Joseph Smith mean by his now infamous quote³ that the Book of Mormon is the “keystone of our religion”? President Ezra Taft Benson expounded on the Prophet’s teaching, “Just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does the all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.”⁴ But why is the Book of Mormon so vital to the truth claims made by Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? Why is it that without the Book of Mormon, and subsequent revelations, we are left with no religion?

On another occasion Joseph Smith taught that “Salvation cannot come without revelation,”⁵ later explaining that, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was founded upon direct revelation.”⁶ Thus, the very basis of our faith is grounded in revelation and our promises of providing a pathway to salvation are not efficacious unless they are firmly founded upon it. After surveying the first few chapters of 1 Nephi to show the consistent pattern of revelation found therein, then President (of BYU) Jeffrey R. Holland made this quite clear.

The restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and its institutional church would have *everything* to do with and everything to say about revelation. Indeed its principal document, the Book of Mormon, was written, watched over, preserved, revealed,

¹ B.H. Roberts, ed., *History of the Church*, second revised edition, seven volumes (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1971), 4:461, also quoted in the Introduction to the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

² *History of the Church*, 2:52.

³ See Scott C. Esplin, “Getting ‘Nearer to God’: A History of Joseph Smith’s Statement,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: “Abiding by its Precepts”*, THE 36TH ANNUAL SYDNEY B. SPERRY SYMPOSIUM, Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift, eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2007), 40–54 for a fascinating study on the origins of the statement and how it came to be so widely known and used.

⁴ Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon—The Keystone of our Religion,” *Ensign* (November 1986): 6.

⁵ *History of the Church*, 3:389.

⁶ *History of the Church*, 6:9.

translated, published, and carried to the world to declare—again—that revelation had not ceased, that the heavens were again open, that God does speak to men. Nothing else that Samuel Smith and those early missionaries would teach could have much impact if that cardinal, fundamental truth about revelation was not accepted by the people they taught.⁷

The Book of Mormon serves as the “keystone” because it is the primary evidence, or as Terryl Givens has explained, it functions as the “sacred sign” that the heavens are again open and that revelation has been received.⁸ Hugh Nibley remarked, “the challenge of the Prophet is to test the possibility of revelation by using the book as evidence,”⁹ something that Nibley observed the critics repeatedly get backwards. It can only properly serve that function, however, if it is actually true—that is, if there really was a Lehi and Nephi who fled Jerusalem with their family and eventually arrived in the New World; if Mormon and Moroni were real descendants of Lehi’s who compiled the records, and so on.¹⁰ No one understands this point better than the critics of the Church. As President Benson has observed:

The enemies of the Church understand this clearly. This is why they go to such great lengths to try to disprove the Book of Mormon, for if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church.¹¹

⁷ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Conclusion and Charge,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, BOOK OF MORMON SYMPOSIUM SERIES: Volume 2, Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate Jr., eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 320. This volume was originally published by the Religious Studies Center at BYU in 1988, and the symposium was originally held at BYU in 1986.

⁸ See Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 62–88.

⁹ Hugh Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF HUGH NIBLEY: Volume 8 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1989), 137. Nibley quotes a number of critics who dismiss the Book of Mormon *because* it came as revelation, hence are assuming that revelation is not real, therefore the book is false. Nibley is pointing out that this is logically the opposite of using the Book of Mormon *as* evidence of revelation.

¹⁰ Louis Midgley has been unrelenting on this subject. See Louis Midgley, “The Current Battle over the Book of Mormon: Is Modernity Itself Somehow Canonical?” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 200–254; Louis Midgely, “‘Inspiring’ but Not True: An Added Glimpse of the RLDS Stance on the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/2 (1997): 218–228; Louis Midgley, “To Remember and Keep: On the Book of Mormon as an Ancient Book,” in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, Andrew H. Hedges, Donald W. Perry, and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 95–137; Louis Midgley, “No Middle Ground: The Debate over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon,” in *Historicity and the Latter-day Saint Scriptures*, Paul Y. Hoskisson, ed. (Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center and BYU Press, 2001), 123–140; Louis C. Midgley, “A Plea for Narrative Theology: Living In and By Stories,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): vii–xxi.

¹¹ Benson, “The Book of Mormon—The Keystone of our Religion,” 6. For a brief overview of efforts to oppose the Book of Mormon, see Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, “Book of Mormon, opposition to,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, Dennis L. Largey et al., eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2003), 129–132. For analysis and critique of the various attempts at explaining the Book of Mormon in naturalistic terms, see Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 155–184; Louis C. Midgely, “Who Really Wrote the Book of Mormon? The Critics and Their Theories,” in *Book of Mormon*

This is why the Book of Mormon *must* play a “keystone” role not only in our faith, but in the defense of our faith. Or, put another way, the Book of Mormon is the keystone of both our religion and our apologetic.

The Three Roles of the “Keystone”

President Benson taught that “there are three ways in which the Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion. It is the keystone in our witness of Christ. It is the keystone of our doctrine. It is the keystone of testimony.”¹² Examining each of these topics shows how the Book of Mormon functions as a “keystone” in each of these respects, both in our religion and in our apologetic.

Witness of Christ

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland wrote, “The Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion primarily because it is the most extended and definitive witness we have of the Lord Jesus Christ,” adding that “Christ is our salvation, and the Book of Mormon declares that message unequivocally to the world.”¹³ Another reader has remarked that “The truly central hero of the Book of Mormon is Jesus Christ... Throughout the book, it is Jesus Christ who lifts, heals, and redeems.”¹⁴ The Book of Mormon is replete with testimonies of Jesus Christ, a fact which led one reader to remark, “the Book of Mormon plays a virtual symphony about Jesus.”¹⁵

The title page, which Joseph Smith said was a “literal translation, taken from the very last leaf,¹⁶ on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates...” and was “not by any means a modern

Authorship Revisited, Noel B. Reynolds, ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 101–139; Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor’s Introduction—‘In the Hope that Something Will Stick’: Changing Explanations for the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): xi–xxxv; Terry L. Givens, “‘Common-Sense’ Meets the Book of Mormon: Source, Substance, and Prophetic Disruption,” *FARMS Review* 20/1 (2008): 33–55. Also see Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, CWHN 8:127–181.

¹² Benson, “The Book of Mormon—The Keystone of our Religion,” 5.

¹³ Jeffrey R. Holland, *Christ and the New Covenant: The Messianic Message of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1997), 10. Holland’s *Christ and the New Covenant*, despite not being a “scholarly work” by his own admission (see the preface), is probably the best and most definitive study on Christ and the Book of Mormon. See John Gee, “A Book of Mormon Christology at Last,” *FARMS Review of Books* 10/2 (1998): 7–8.

¹⁴ Richard Dilworth Rust, “Annual FARMS Lecture: The Book of Mormon, Designed for Our Day,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2 (1990): 5–6.

¹⁵ Robert J. Matthews, “What the Book of Mormon Tells Us About Jesus Christ,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, BOOK OF MORMON SYMPOSIUM SERIES: Volume 1, Paul R. Cheesman, ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 32. This volume was originally published by the Religious Studies Center at BYU in 1988, and the symposium was originally held at BYU on September 27–28, 1985.

¹⁶ While this placement of the title page is counterintuitive to the modern reader, it is exactly what one would expect from a record with roots in the ancient Near East. See William J. Hamblin, “Metal Plates and the Book of Mormon,” in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1999), 21–22.

composition,”¹⁷ states that one of the main purposes of the record is “the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God.” Of the 6,607 verses in the modern editions of the Book of Mormon, 3,925 of them (more than half) make direct reference to Jesus Christ—an average of one reference to Christ every 1.7 verses.¹⁸ No other text offers such extensive testimony of Christ. As Elder Tad R. Callister expressed it in the October 2011 General Conference:

Would you like to have emblazoned on your soul an undeniable witness that the Savior descended beneath your sins and that there is no sin, no mortal plight outside the merciful reach of His Atonement—that for each of your struggles He has a remedy of superior healing power? Then read the Book of Mormon. It will teach you and testify to you that Christ’s Atonement is infinite because it circumscribes and encompasses and transcends every finite frailty known to man.¹⁹

Even the portions of the Book of Mormon that correspond to the Old Testament era are saturated with explicit testimony of Christ. Non-LDS scholar Paul C. Gutjahr noticed, “One of the most distinctive elements of the *Book of Mormon* is its Old Testament historical feel coupled with a distinct focus on Jesus Christ, thereby conflating the Christian Bible’s Old and New Testaments.”²⁰ Two LDS scholars of the Hebrew Bible observe, “This remarkable record [the Book of Mormon] binds the world of ancient Judaism and traditional Christianity by presenting a religious perspective that ultimately transcends the boundaries of these distinct traditions.”²¹ This is accomplished throughout the book by its frequent use of Old Testament imagery with clearly Christ-centered interpretations.²² “One of the greatest abilities demonstrated by Book of Mormon authors includes their capacity to find Christ in the stories of the Old Testament.”²³

Some critics have tried to attack the witness of Christ in the Book of Mormon, insisting that it reflects the Christological teachings of Joseph Smith’s day, and its prophecies of Christ during Old Testament times are too detailed for their era.²⁴ One problem with such an approach is that it seems to rule out, or at least limit, the power of prophecy. More to the point, however, recent research has revealed that much of what are thought of as “Christian” themes were actually taught among pre-

¹⁷ *History of the Church*, 1:71–72.

¹⁸ See Susan Easton Black, *Finding Christ through the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1987), 16–18.

¹⁹ Tad R. Callister, “The Book of Mormon—A Book from God,” *Ensign* (November, 2011): 76.

²⁰ Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 8.

²¹ David E. Bokovoy and John A. Tvedtnes, *Testaments: Links between the Book of Mormon and the Bible* (Tooele, Utah: Heritage Press, 2003), 8.

²² See Bokovoy and Tvedtnes, *Testaments*, 7–21.

²³ Bokovoy and Tvedtnes, *Testaments*, 8.

²⁴ For an example of criticism along these lines, see Melodie Moench Charles, “Book of Mormon Christology,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, Brent Lee Metcalfe, ed. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 1993), 81–114. For a response to Charles, see Robert L. Millet, “By What (Whose) Standards Shall We Judge the Text? A Closer Look at Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 187–199.

Christian Jews, and pre-exilic Jewish Messianic teaching was surprisingly similar to what is found in the Book of Mormon.²⁵

Apologist Michael R. Ash notes that the Book of Mormon “is a unique second witness to the divinity of Christ and the reality of the Resurrection.”²⁶ Ash continues:

In a world where it is popular to brush away Christ’s earthly ministry with naturalistic explanations, the Book of Mormon testifies to the reality of Christ, His earthly mission as recorded in the Bible, and the eschatological teachings associated with Christianity... the Book of Mormon is unique in its power as a spiritual conduit for the Holy Ghost’s testimony of the divinity of Christ and the truthfulness of the Restored Gospel.²⁷

After quoting from the title page of the Book of Mormon, Elder Neal A. Maxwell also expressed this sentiment. “In a day of disbelief and equivocation regarding this preeminent fact [that Jesus is the Christ], this ‘convincing’ effect is so needed!”²⁸ LDS religious educator Robert L. Millet also articulated this same concept:

In a time when men are eager to acknowledge Jesus of Nazareth as a great teacher, as a model of morality and decency, and as the prototype of purity and peaceful living—but who in the same breath deny his divinity—the prophets of the Book of Mormon boldly declare that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God; that he has power to forgive sins, power over life and death, and...[is] the Eternal Judge of both the quick and the dead.²⁹

What makes the Book of Mormon both unique and powerful in dealing with naturalistic explanations about Jesus of Nazareth is that if the Book of Mormon is true, then that means Jesus

²⁵ See Kevin Christensen, “Paradigms Regained: A Survey of Margaret Barker’s Scholarship and its Significance for Mormon Studies,” *Occasional Papers* 2 (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 51–75; Kevin Christensen, “The Temple, the Monarchy, and Wisdom: Lehi’s World and the Scholarship of Margaret Barker,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004), 475–477; Kevin Christensen, “The Deuteronomist De-Christianizing of the Old Testament,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 59–90. Also see John A. Tvedtnes, “Review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, by Brent Lee Metcalf,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 16–18; John A. Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book: Insights from a Book of Mormon Scholar* (Springville, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 2003), 295–307; John A. Tvedtnes, “Ancient Texts in Support of the Book of Mormon,” in *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon*, Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002), 242–246; Brant A. Gardner, “The Historical Setting of 1 Nephi,” and “Excursus: The Nephite Understanding of God,” in *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*, 6 vols. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007–2008), 1:37–40, 214–222.

²⁶ Michael R. Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One’s Testimony in the Face of Criticism and Doubt*, 2nd edition (Redding, California: FairMormon, 2013), 125.

²⁷ Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 125.

²⁸ Neal A. Maxwell, “How Choice a Seer!” *Ensign* (November, 2003): 99.

²⁹ Robert L. Millet, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, BMSS 2:162–163.

Christ appeared to thousands of people somewhere in ancient America (see 3 Nephi 11), which in turn means he was literally resurrected from the grave, and that the atonement is real.³⁰ Hence the Book of Mormon serves as the “keystone” in our witness of Jesus Christ.³¹

Doctrine

The Book of Mormon has been declared to contain the “fulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ” (D&C 20:9; cf. D&C 27:5). The Book of Mormon outlines the “gospel” or “doctrine” of Christ using a six-point formula (see 2 Nephi 31:2–32:6; 3 Nephi 11:23–39; 3 Nephi 27:13–21):

This formula states that if people will (1) believe in Christ, (2) repent of their sins, and (3) submit to baptism in water as a witness of their willingness to take his name upon themselves and keep his commandments, he will (4) pour out his Spirit upon them and cleanse them of their sins. All who receive this baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost and (5) endure to the end in faith, hope, and charity will be found guiltless at the last day and (6) enter God’s kingdom.³²

While this formula does not provide every detail that we might include in our broader use of the terms “gospel” or “doctrine,” it does describe with completeness and clarity the method by which we can return to God. For the Nephite prophet-writers this formula operated like a paradigm upon which to build their sermons and narratives.³³ In addition to this formula, several key Latter-day Saint doctrines and practices are laid out in the Book of Mormon,³⁴ and the Book of Mormon also plays a formative role in the administration of the gospel and the doctrines of the Church.³⁵

Many critics have insisted that because the Book of Mormon does not contain some specific “Mormon” doctrines like the three kingdoms of glory, baptism for the dead, or eternal marriage, it

³⁰ See Matthews, “What the Book of Mormon Tells Us About Jesus Christ,” 30–32.

³¹ For more details, see Gaye Strathearn, “Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 100–104; John W. Welch, “Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon,” in *To All the World: The Book of Mormon Articles from the Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, S. Kent Brown, John W. Welch, and Daniel H. Ludlow, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 147–151.

³² Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel as Taught by Nephite Prophets,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 257.

³³ See Reynolds, “The Gospel as Taught by Nephite Prophets,” 257–259. For an in-depth treatment of the same topic, see Noel B. Reynolds, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ as Taught by the Nephite Prophets,” *BYU Studies* 31/3 (Summer 1991): 31–50.

³⁴ See Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 268–285; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 125; Joseph Fielding McConkie, “A Comparison of Book of Mormon, Bible, and Traditional Teachings on the Doctrines of Salvation,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, BMSS 1:73–90. McConkie’s remarks are overly dogmatic and somewhat naïve in many places, but he does show that a number of essential doctrines are most clearly taught in the Book of Mormon.

³⁵ See John W. Welch, “The Book of Mormon as the Keystone of Church Administration,” *Religious Educator* 12/2 (2011): 83–117.

therefore does not contain the “fullness” of the gospel or doctrine of Christ.³⁶ This, however, presumes that “fullness” means “every little detail” and that “gospel” or “doctrine” is meant to be all-encompassing. As it is, the gospel as defined by the six-point formula is more specific. Still, the formula itself is complete, and a detailed analysis could no doubt reveal that the formula entails many other doctrines.³⁷

Despite not including details about all the specific doctrines which were later revealed to Joseph Smith, as the “sacred sign” or evidence of the restoration, the Book of Mormon is still the “keystone” that holds those doctrines in place. If the Book of Mormon is a sham, then so are the rest of the “revelations” given to Joseph Smith, which outline the doctrines of eternal marriage, the three kingdoms of glory, and salvation for the dead. On the other hand, if the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient text, translated by Joseph Smith via divine aid, then his prophetic claims stand vindicated, and thus the other doctrines revealed to Joseph Smith would also be true.

Testimony

Another observation from Terryl Givens is that not only does the Book of Mormon function as the evidence of divine revelation in the modern day, but it also provides the model to be followed to receive such revelation—and its message is clear that *anyone*, not just the prophets, can receive revelation, even “dialogic revelation,” for the mundane concerns of everyday life.³⁸ This message is made dramatically evident in the final pages, where the reader encounters Moroni’s exhortation to seek revelatory verification of the book and its message (see Moroni 10:3–5). The book thus functions, in effect, as a manual or handbook on how to seek revelation and gain a testimony.

Given the role the Book of Mormon plays as a “sacred sign,” it should be no surprise that the Book of Mormon is the “keystone” to testimony. President Benson noted that “if the Book of Mormon be true... then one must accept the claims of the Restoration and all that accompanies it.”³⁹ What is “all that accompanies it”? In the introduction to the Book of Mormon, it explains:

³⁶ For an example of this criticism, see Bill McKeever and Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101: Examining the Religion of the Latter-day Saints* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 119–121. For a handy response to this criticism, see http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Contains_the_fulness_of_the_gospel (accessed May 21, 2012). Also see Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 265–266; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 121–125.

³⁷ For example, “believing in Christ” could entail following his teachings and commandments, and “repenting of sins” clearly indicates as much, suggesting that there are some laws that can be violated (and thus we can “sin”). Notice that Reynolds included “keeping the commandments” as a part of what is “witnessed” at baptism. Baptism could be viewed as a representative ordinance whereby we make covenants in the name of Christ, which could represent the additional ordinances preformed in the temple; and having his Spirit “poured out” upon you can happen following any such ordinance. “Enduring to the end” is by its very nature an all-encompassing phrase that tends to mean “continuing to live the gospel” or the commandments, but can also mean “doing whatever else you are supposed to for the rest of your life.”

³⁸ See Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 209–239. Also see Terryl L. Givens, “The Book of Mormon and Dialogic Revelation,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 16–27. Also see Holland, “Conclusion and Charge,” 318–320.

³⁹ Benson, “The Book of Mormon—The Keystone of our Religion,” 6.

Those who gain this divine witness from the Holy Spirit will also come to know by the same power that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, that Joseph Smith is his revelator and prophet in these last days, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is the Lord's kingdom once again established on the earth, preparatory to the second coming of the Messiah.⁴⁰

Noel B. Reynolds adds that, “one striking thing about the Book of Mormon is that if... tests confirm its antiquity, we have no plausible alternative to Joseph Smith’s explanation of its existence. And that explanation asserts the existence of God directly.”⁴¹ Daniel C. Peterson likewise affirms “it would be rather difficult to believe the Book to be ancient and authentic and *not* regard it as scripture.”⁴² Elder Holland put it this way: “if we accept Lehi and the Book of Mormon, we surely have to accept Joseph Smith as a prophet of God: the former cannot be seen as an authentic, ancient prophet without acknowledging the divine work of the latter which revealed such a fact to the world.”⁴³ Thus, a testimony in the truth of the Book of Mormon is a testimony in the existence of God, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the calling of Joseph Smith, and the establishment of the Church in the latter days. This is why the Book of Mormon acts as the “keystone” to testimony.

For all these same reasons, evidence for the *antiquity* of the Book of Mormon is also evidence for the *divinity* of the book as well. With all that follows from gaining a testimony of the Book of Mormon, the potency of other attacks on the Church is greatly reduced if we can reinforce one’s testimony in the Book of Mormon.⁴⁴ Hence, the reason the Book of Mormon clearly must play the pivotal “keystone” role in our apologetic efforts. Our entire faith rests upon its veracity, and our effort to defend our faith is hopeless if we cannot defend the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Fortunately, rigorous research has brought forth many evidences of the book’s claims to the ancient world.⁴⁵

Many Witnesses Have Testified of the Book of Mormon

⁴⁰ Introduction to the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

⁴¹ Noel B. Reynolds, “Introduction,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, Noel B. Reynolds, ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS Reprint, 1996), 3.

⁴² Daniel C. Peterson, “Introduction,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1* (1989): vi n.4.

⁴³ Holland, “Conclusion and Charge,” 318.

⁴⁴ This is why missionaries continue to present the Book of Mormon, and encourage others to pray about it, and why missionaries are encouraged to use the Book of Mormon in responding to objections. See *Preach my Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2007), 108–109.

⁴⁵ This will be borne out throughout this commentary, but for those who want additional information, see John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon: Insights you May Have Missed Before* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991); Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: FARMS Reprint, 1996); Noel B. Reynolds, ed., *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997); and Donald W. Parry, Daniel C. Peterson, and John W. Welch, eds., *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002). Apologetic literature on the Book of Mormon is extensive, but these four volumes provide a useful summary and overview of the state of evidence for the Book of Mormon. Also consult the extensive bibliography at the end of this volume for additional resources.

With the ancient record being so vital to the restoration, it should not come as a surprise that God has provided a “built in... proof system of the Book of Mormon,” as President Benson put it.⁴⁶ A major part of that “proof system” is the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses, which provide powerful evidence of the authenticity of the work. The combined testimonies of the three and eight witnesses makes for a well designed system, indeed. As Terryl Givens has expressed it:

Taken together, the two experiences seem calculated to provide an evidentiary spectrum, satisfying a range of criteria for belief. The reality of the plates was now confirmed by both proclamation from heaven and by empirical observation, through a supernatural vision and by simple, tactical experience, by the testimony of passive witnesses to a divine demonstration and by the testimony of a group of men actively engaging in their own unhampered examination of the evidence.⁴⁷

There is also a lot of fascinating information in the various statements they made about the plates and their experience with them that can help enrich understandings of the Book of Mormon. Here we can only briefly explore their testimonies and the information they have provided about the sacred ancient record.

Joseph Smith: The First and the Last Witness of the Book of Mormon

On the night and morning of September 21–22, 1823 Joseph Smith Jr. became the very first witness of the Book of Mormon in these latter days as he had correspondence with Moroni and later that morning went and saw the plates for the first time (see Joseph Smith—History 1:30–52).⁴⁸ Then, on the tragic day of June 27, 1844, Joseph, along with his brother Hyrum, became a martyr—that is, from the Greek, *μάρτυς* (*mártys*), “a witness.” As Elder Holland noted in his October 2009 General Conference address, just prior to his assassination “Joseph the Prophet turned to the guards who held him captive and bore a powerful testimony of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.”⁴⁹ By sealing his testimony with his blood and becoming a martyr, or “witness,” Joseph Smith bore the last witness of the Book of Mormon in this dispensation.⁵⁰

Most Latter-day Saints are familiar with the story of Moroni and the recovery of the plates.⁵¹ Critics argue that this story merely started out as an old money-diggers yarn that only later developed

⁴⁶ Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Ensign* (May 1987): 83.

⁴⁷ Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 40.

⁴⁸ For an abbreviated version, see the “Testimony of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” printed in the front of any 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

⁴⁹ Jeffrey R. Holland, “Safety for the Soul,” *Ensign* (November 2009): 89. Elder Holland cites *History of the Church*, 6:600.

⁵⁰ I realize that several of the Book of Mormon witnesses out lived Joseph and Hyrum and continued to bear witness to what they saw. These, however, were merely echoes of an already borne testimony. By becoming martyrs, Joseph and Hyrum added a new witness (in blood) to the things they had testified of throughout the duration of their lives.

⁵¹ For a brief summary of the account, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Moroni, visits of, to Joseph Smith,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 563–565; also see Richard E. Turley Jr. and William W. Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2011), 1–3. For a longer, but reader friendly account see Matthew B.

into a religious narrative.⁵² This criticism is driven by an understanding of Joseph Smith in light of the “folk magic” of his day, of which he was known to participate in.⁵³ However, the earliest and most reliable sources consistently convey the story in religious terms.⁵⁴ Furthermore, as anthropologist Brant A. Gardner has noted, there exists an important difference in Joseph Smith’s story of Moroni and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and typical “magical” contexts—Joseph Smith provided a *translation* by seeric methods.

This task [of translation] is precisely where attempts to link Joseph’s understanding of magic and his production of the Book of Mormon fail. Although human beings may have been using some method of scrying for about as long as we have been translating from one language to another, the two activities (to my knowledge) have come together only in the case of Joseph Smith. This unusual variation complicates our picture of Joseph Smith.... Nothing in the common world of seers and seer stones predicts a conceptual path from village seer to seeric translator.⁵⁵

Additional facts neglected by the critics are that several elements of Joseph Smith’s story are consistent with ancient traditions.⁵⁶

Angels and Heavenly Books or Hidden Records

Joseph said that when he first tried to recover the record that he “was forbidden by the messenger” (Joseph Smith—History 1: 53), and when he finished the translation of the plates, they were returned to Moroni (see Joseph Smith—History 1:60).⁵⁷ In all of this, it is clear that Moroni functioned as a guardian of the sacred record. Prophets being led to hidden records or given a heavenly book by an angelic messenger who is the guardian of the record is a popular motif in the

Brown, *Plates of Gold: The Book of Mormon Comes Forth* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2003), 3–25. For an informed non-LDS point of view on the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, see Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon*, 11–37. This covers not just the Moroni visits and recovery of the plates, but also the translation, the loss of the 116 pages, the witnesses, and the publication of the Book of Mormon.

⁵² For an example of this criticism, see Ronald V. Huggins, “From Captain Kidd’s Treasure Ghost to the Angel Moroni: Changing *Dramatis Personae* in Early Mormonism,” *Dialogue* 36/4 (2003): 17–42. For a response to Huggins, see Larry E. Morris, “I Should Have an Eye Single to the Glory of God’: Joseph Smith’s Account of the Angel and the Plates,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 11–81.

⁵³ See Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 281–285. For a more detailed discussion, see Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 11–90. Gardner’s treatment of the issue is probably the best to date.

⁵⁴ See Mark Ashurst-McGee, “Moroni as Angel and as Treasure Guardian,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 34–100; also see Morris, “I Should Have an Eye Single,” 11–81.

⁵⁵ Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 261, brackets mine. See below for more on the translation of the Book of Mormon.

⁵⁶ Joseph Smith’s story is particularly similar to the discovery of the *Apocalypse of Paul* as reported in the Tarsus account. See Steven W. Booras, “The Book of Mormon and the Apocalypse of Paul,” in John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: “Out of Darkness Unto to Light”* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 183–194.

⁵⁷ The plates were returned to Moroni as punishment after the loss of the 116 pages, and on other occasions during the process for safe keeping. See Eldin Ricks, “Moroni, Visitations of,” in *To All the World*, 184–186.

ancient Near East.⁵⁸ So while one modern critic of the Book of Mormon announced defiantly that “you don’t get books from angels... it’s just that simple,”⁵⁹ the idea of getting books from angels actually used to be quite popular!

Writing on Metal Plates

Today, many critics have forgotten that Joseph Smith was mocked and ridiculed for his “Golden Bible,” just as Hugh Nibley anticipated.⁶⁰ With such extensive evidence that records were in fact kept on metal plates,⁶¹ critics have diligently sought to demonstrate that writing on metal plates was common knowledge in Joseph Smith’s day.⁶² It is true that that writing on metal plates was known by a few, but since anti-Mormons in Joseph Smith’s lifetime directly criticized the Book of Mormon on this point, it seems unlikely that such information was common knowledge.⁶³ Illustrative of how

⁵⁸ See Brent E. McNeely, “The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 26–28; Michael R. Ash, *Of Faith and Reason: 80 Evidences Supporting the Prophet Joseph Smith* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2008), 75. For a more detailed analysis, see Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 75–107.

⁵⁹ Blake T. Ostler, “An Interview with Sterling McMurrin,” *Dialogue* 17/1 (Spring 1984): 25.

⁶⁰ Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert/The World of the Jaredites/There Were Jaredites*, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF HUGH NIBLEY: Volume 5 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 107: “It will not be long before men forget that in Joseph Smith’s day the prophet was mocked and derided for his description of the plates more than anything else.” Also Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, THE COLLECTED WORKS OF HUGH NIBLEY: Volume 6 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 21 adds, “The main obstacle to a fair and unbiased testing of the Book of Mormon in the past has been the story of the golden plates.” And again, Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, CWHN 8: 245: “Nothing in the Book of Mormon itself has excited greater hilarity and derision than Joseph Smith’s report that the original record was engraved on gold plates... when the idea of sacred records being written on metal plates was thought just too funny for words.” Also see Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 160. On the kinds of writing materials Joseph Smith’s contemporaries expected, see John Gee, “The Wrong Type of Book,” in *Echoes and Evidences*, 317–318.

⁶¹ For various examples of writing on metal plates in the ancient world, see William J. Hamblin, “Sacred Writing on Metal Plates,” *FARMS Review* 19/1 (2007): 37–54; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 145–154; Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 34–35; H. Curtis Wright, “Metallic Documents of Antiquity,” *BYU Studies* 10/4 (Summer 1970): 457–477; H. Curtis Wright, “Metals, ancient writing on,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 537–538; Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, CWHN 5:105–107; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, CWHN 6:21–28; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 86–88. A couple of scattered examples of ancient writing on metal can be found in John Gee, “Egyptian Writing on Gold ‘Plates,’” *Insights* 22/6 (2002): 2; “More Gold Plates,” *Insights* 25/3 (2005): 3; “Another Gold Book Found,” *Insights* 25/6 (2005): 5, cf. “Out of the Dust: Another Gold Book Found,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/2 (2005): 65. The 1970 article by Wright contains a seven-page bibliography. More recently, Wright has expanded that to 211 pages, which is the largest bibliography on ancient metallic epigraphy ever amassed, containing nearly two-thousand references. See H. Curtis Wright and Elizabeth R. Sutton, “Evidence of Ancient Writing on Metal: An Interview with H. Curtis Wright,” *Religious Educator* 9/3 (2008): 161–168. The full bibliography was published in H. Curtis Wright, *Modern Presentism and Ancient Metallic Epigraphy* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Wings of Fire, 2006).

⁶² For an example of this argument, see Brent Lee Metcalf, “Apologetic and Critical Assumptions about Book of Mormon Historicity,” *Dialogue* 26/3 (Fall 1993): 156–157. More recently, Michael G. Reed, “The Notion of Ancient Metal Records in Joseph’s Day,” a paper presented at the Annual Summer Symposium on Mormon Culture, August 18, 2011, seeks to establish that writing on metal plates anciently was common knowledge in Joseph Smith’s day.

⁶³ See LaRoy Sunderland, “Mormonism,” *Zion’s Watchman* (New York) 3/8 (February 24, 1838). “Ancient Records,” *Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Illinois) 4/12 (May 1843): 185 also indicates that skeptics had scoffed “that anything like plates could have been used anciently,” so apparently the practice was not too well known. While not contemporary to Joseph Smith, John Hyde, *Mormonism: Its Leaders and Designs*, 2nd ed. (New York: WP Fetridge & Co., 1857), 217–218, and M.T. Lamb, *The Golden Bible: Or, the Book of Mormon, Is It From God?* (New York: Ward and Drummond, 1887), 11

unlikely it is that Joseph Smith would have known about the practice in 1830 is the fact that some critics *very recently*—including Thomas J. Finley, an expert in Northwest Semitic languages (such as Hebrew and Aramaic) with a PhD from UCLA who teaches classes on the Old Testament and Semitics—have suggested that writing on metal was either uncommon or not practiced at all in antiquity,⁶⁴ notwithstanding the numerous metal documents that have been unearthed.

Another approach among critics today is to argue that the Book of Mormon text is too lengthy to have been kept on metal plates.⁶⁵ While it is true that most of the examples of writing on metal plates consist of a short text on a single plate, a few have been found bound together in a series of plates much like a book. For example, six gold plates bound together by two rings were found in Bulgaria and date back to 600 BC.⁶⁶ While that is still quite small compared to the Book of Mormon, a longer example, a set of nineteen bound gold plates measuring 14.8 x 13.7 cm (about 5.6 x 5.4 inches), was found in South Korea and dated back to the eighth century AD.⁶⁷ While that example is distant from Lehi in both time and place, an Egyptian chronicle inscribed on a collection of thirteen metal plates dating to the fourth century BC places a relatively longer text on plates much closer to home for Lehi.⁶⁸ These examples serve to illustrate that pre-modern peoples could and did inscribe lengthy texts onto metal plates.⁶⁹

illustrate that this criticism persisted throughout the nineteenth century, suggesting that the practice had not yet become “common knowledge.”

⁶⁴ H. Curtis Wright, “Introduction,” in Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, ix–xii relates the experience of a couple investigating the Church who were bombarded by their daughter with literature attacking the idea of writing on metal plates. For the gaff by Thomas J. Finley see his paper “A Review of Hugh Nibley’s Comparisons between the Book of Mormon and the Lachish Letters” originally delivered to the Society for the Study of Alternate Religions at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on November 19, 1998. Finley appears to have been ignorant of any ancient writing on metal besides the Copper Scroll found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. See Kevin L. Barney, “A Seemingly Strange Story Illuminated,” *FARMS Review of Books* 13/1 (2001): 1–20 for a response to Finley. He has since come to grips with the frequency with which metal was used as a medium in antiquity and changed his argument (see note below). For background information on Finley and his expertise, see http://www.talbot.edu/faculty/profile/thomas_finley/ (accessed May 21, 2012)

⁶⁵ For an example of this criticism, see Thomas J. Finley, “Does the Book of Mormon reflect an Ancient Near Eastern Background?” in *The New Mormon Challenge*, Francis J. Beckwith, Carl Mosser, and Paul Owen, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002): 340–341. For responses to Finley, see Kevin L. Barney, “A More Responsible Critique,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 102–132; John A. Tvedtnes and Matt Roper, “One Small Step,” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 156–195.

⁶⁶ See John A. Tvedtnes, “Etruscan Gold Book from 600 BC Discovered,” *Insights* 23/5 (2003): 1, 6.

⁶⁷ See Bryce Hammond, “Authentic Ancient Metal Plates,” *Temple Study: Sustaining and Defending the LDS Temple*, April 7, 2011, at <http://www.templestudy.com/2011/04/07/authentic-ancient-metal-plates/> (accessed May 21, 2012).

⁶⁸ See Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 35; Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, CWHN 6:25.

⁶⁹ Of course, nobody knows just how many plates the Book of Mormon was translated from. While nineteen plates seems still far too small, bear in mind that the Ether’s Jaredite record consisted of only 24 plates (see Mosiah 8:9). An interesting study conducted back in the 1920s—and verified and reprinted in 2001—suggests that the entire Book of Mormon could have fit on as few as 21 plates, just two more than the book of nineteen gold plates. A second estimate suggests that it may have taken as many as 48 plates, which more than doubles the number. It must be remembered, however, that a sizeable portion (the small plates, about 142 pages from the present edition) were engraved centuries earlier than the rest, and by nine different people. Then from Mormon 8–Moroni 10 (approximately 50 pages of the

Hiding Records in Stone Boxes

Joseph Smith reported that the metal plates, along with other sacred relics,⁷⁰ had been hidden in a stone box buried in the ground on a hill, and covered by a large stone (see Joseph Smith—History 1:51–52).⁷¹ This aspect of Joseph’s testimony has various analogues in the practice of ancient Near Eastern peoples, who frequently hid records (particularly those inscribed on metal and other hard surfaces) and other items by burying them in the earth or hiding them in the hills or mountains, and often used some sort of container—such as a stone box—to help preserve the document being hidden.⁷²

Sealing Records

Both ancient documents and the Book of Mormon are referred to as being “sealed” in the sense of being “hidden.”⁷³ In addition to being “hidden,” Joseph Smith and other witnesses described a portion of the plates as being “sealed” in such a way as to keep Joseph from being able to read and translate that portion.⁷⁴ This is consistent with an ancient legal practice dating back to the time of Lehi and used on documents of both parchment and metal.⁷⁵

present edition), plus the title page were engraved by Moroni. That leaves about 337 pages (Words of Mormon to Mormon 7) for Mormon to engrave, which is less than two-thirds of the total text. If we go with the high estimate of 48 plates for the total Book of Mormon, than Mormon’s portion—the longest portion—would have been no more than 30 to 31 plates. While this is still quite a bit longer than the Korean book of nineteen plates, it is well within reason. If we accept the lower estimate of 21 plates for the whole work, then Mormon’s portion would only be 13–14 plates long. For the earlier mentioned study, which provides the estimates of 21–48 plates, see Janne M. Sjodahl, “The Book of Mormon Plates,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 22–24. Also see John Gee, “Epigraphic Considerations on Janne Sjodahl’s Experiment with Nephite Writing,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 25 which demonstrates that the small writing used by Sjodahl’s scribe to produce the above estimates are consistent with known engravings.

⁷⁰ For details regarding some of the other objects hidden in the box, see Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 151–153.

⁷¹ For details about the stone box, see Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 147–148.

⁷² See H. Curtis Wright, “Stone boxes, burial of documents in,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 744–746; Stephen D. Ricks, “Converging Paths: Language and Cultural Notes on the Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Book of Mormon,” in *Echoes and Evidences*, 406–407; Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 36; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 87. For more detailed treatments, see Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 1–57, 109–143; H. Curtis Wright, “Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes,” in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, 2 vol., John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:273–334.

⁷³ See Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 59–65; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 79–81.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Joseph Smith’s description of the plates in *History of the Church*, 4:537. For information on the sealed portion, see Alexander L. Baugh, “Sealed portion of the gold plates,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 707. Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 120–127 argues that there was no portion literally sealed off. I find Gardner’s reasons for dismissing the eyewitness testimonies unconvincing and I see no reason not to accept the statements of witnesses on the sealed portion at face value. Gardner also fails to take note of the ancient precedent for literally sealing off a portion of documents and how well the Book of Mormon fits this pattern (see note below). This strongly suggests, to me, that part of the volume was literally sealed.

⁷⁵ See John W. Welch, “FARMS Update: Doubled, Sealed, and Witnessed Documents,” *Insights* 21/6 (2001): 2–3; John W. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” in *Echoes and Evidences*, 374–379. For a lengthier treatment of this topic, see John W. Welch, “Doubled, Sealed, Witnessed Documents: From the Ancient World to the Book of

As can be seen, a number of the details in Joseph Smith's story have gone from fantastic to fascinating as find after find sheds further light on ancient antecedents. In the words of Hugh Nibley, "If heavenly books brought by angels and writings on gold plates seem fantastic to modern man, they were perfectly familiar to the ancients."⁷⁶ The story of the books discovery is well-situated within the ancient context from which it claims roots.

The Three Witnesses

The three witnesses—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—testified that they had been shown the plates from which the Book of Mormon had been translated by the angel Moroni, and they heard the voice of God confirm the divinity of the work.⁷⁷

There is little doubt that all three witnesses stood by their testimonies of the Book of Mormon. In addition to various first- and second-hand reports of the witnesses' testimonies from others,⁷⁸ each has left behind personally written or signed documents affirming their testimonies.⁷⁹ With each being disaffected from the Church, the reliability of their statements only improves. The conflicts and disagreements show them to be more than merely duped followers, but headstrong men of independence and individuality. As Richard Lloyd Anderson notes, "The Three Witnesses had seen an angel with Joseph Smith, but later they tended to compete rather than cooperate with his leadership."⁸⁰ Despite their estrangement from Joseph Smith, there is no reliable evidence to suggest they ever denied their testimonies.

Both Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris eventually returned to the Church, while David Whitmer never did.⁸¹ There are numerous examples of both Martin Harris and David Whitmer affirming their testimonies during their period away from the Church, while the record is decidedly silent for Oliver Cowdery during this time.⁸² The popular account of Oliver testifying as a lawyer in a

Mormon," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson*, Davis Bitton, ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998), 391–444. Also see John W. Welch and Kelsey D. Lambert, "Two Ancient Roman Plates," *BYU Studies* 45/2 (2006): 54–76; Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books*, 65–70; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 88–89.

⁷⁶ Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, CWHN 6:28.

⁷⁷ See the "The Testimony of Three Witnesses," as printed in any edition of the Book of Mormon.

⁷⁸ For examples of the various reports of the witnesses' testimonies, see Richard Lloyd Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1981), 51–65 (Oliver Cowdery), 79–92 (David Whitmer), 107–120 (Martin Harris). Also see Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 108–110; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 15–19.

⁷⁹ See Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 42–50; also see "1829 Mormon Discovery Brought to you by... Guest Erin Jennings," *Juvenile Instructor*, August 21, 2012, <http://www.juvenileinstructor.org/1829-mormon-discovery-brought-to-you-by-guest-erin-jennings/> (accessed August 22, 2012).

⁸⁰ Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Cowdery, Oliver," in *To All the World*, 78.

⁸¹ For biographical information on each of the three witnesses, see Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 37–48 (Oliver Cowdery), 68–77 (David Whitmer), 95–105 (Martin Harris) and the following entries from *To All the World*: Anderson, "Cowdery, Oliver," 75–81; Rhett S. James, "Harris, Martin," 115–118; Keith W. Perkins, "Whitmer, David," 309–311.

⁸² See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 57.

courtroom has been question for its authenticity.⁸³ Nonetheless, we can be confident that in that time, Cowdery never denied his testimony of the truth of the Book of Mormon and his experience as a witness. While we don't have any direct reaffirmations from Oliver in this period, all existing documentation, including frequent correspondences with Church leaders, indicates that he remained sympathetic to the Church and its leaders and had an abiding hope of reconciliation and return.⁸⁴ When he finally did rejoin the Saints, he bore powerful testimony of the Book of Mormon and his role as one of the three witnesses.⁸⁵ He continued to testify of the Book of Mormon and of seeing the plates thereafter, including on his deathbed.⁸⁶ His wife, Elizabeth Whitmer Cowdery, was in the best position to know his view on the Book of Mormon at any given time in his life, and in a letter to another of the three witnesses she insisted that Oliver "always without one doubt or shadow of turning affirmed the divinity of the Book of Mormon."⁸⁷ This is so despite having good reason to deny his initial testimony. While campaigning for public office in Wisconsin, Oliver was fiercely attacked for his connection to Mormonism (some things never change). Despite the harsh pressure to distance himself from the Book of Mormon, no retraction of his testimony ever appeared.⁸⁸

Various attempts have been made by critics to dismiss the testimonies of these men by attempting to show them as unreliable witnesses, men of poor reputation, visionary men susceptible to hypnosis or hallucination, and by citing hearsay reports that they only saw with their "spiritual eyes" or the "eye of faith." In some cases, flimsy evidence is advanced to argue that they did deny their testimony. All these arguments have been sufficiently dealt with by competent historians.⁸⁹

⁸³ See Larry E. Morris, "'The Private Character of the Man who Bore That Testimony': Oliver Cowdery and his Critics," *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 330, who questions the story's reliability. On the other hand, Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 57–60 argues that the story is genuine. Regardless, there are indications that Oliver's private law practice was hindered by his association with Mormonism and his status as a Book of Mormon witness. See Scott H. Furling, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," in *The Disciple as Witness: Essays on Latter-day History and Doctrine in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, Andrew H. Hedges, Donald W. Parry, and Stephen D. Ricks, eds. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 122.

⁸⁴ For the most through exploration of his correspondence with Church leaders in this period, see Furling, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," 117–173.

⁸⁵ See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 61–63. For the reliability of the Reuben Miller account see Richard Lloyd Anderson, "Reuben Miller, Recorder of Oliver Cowdery's Reaffirmations," *BYU Studies* 8/3 (Spring 1968): 277–293.

⁸⁶ For a couple of these instances, see Furling, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," 152–153.

⁸⁷ Letter of Elizabeth Cowdery to David Whitmer, March 8, 1887; cited in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 63.

⁸⁸ See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 43–45; Furling, "The Return of Oliver Cowdery," 141–142. Also Anderson, "Cowdery, Oliver," 79: "In his ten years outside the Church, Cowdery never succumbed to the considerable pressure to deny his Book of Mormon testimony."

⁸⁹ See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 151–179; Steven C. Harper, "Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Religious Educator* 11/2 (2010): 37–49; Matthew Roper, "Comments on the Book of Mormon Witnesses: A Response to Jerald and Sandra Tanner," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 164–193; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 127–131; Morris, "The Private Character," 311–351. Also see Daniel C. Peterson, "Tangible Restoration: The Witnesses and What They Experienced," 2006 FAIR Conference Presentation, available online at

The Eight Witnesses

The eight witnesses testified of a rather different kind of experience. These eight men—Christian Whitmer, Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., John Whitmer, Hiram Page, Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel Smith—each insisted that they were handed the set of plates in broad daylight and allowed to examine them with their natural senses.⁹⁰

Only three of the eight witnesses (Hyrum Smith, Hiram Page, and John Whitmer) left behind personal writings affirming their testimony.⁹¹ For that reason, some critics assert that it is an exaggeration to say that all eight stood by their testimony. However, the evidence is not as lacking as it seems. While personal statements only exist for three, first- and second-hand reports of all eight affirming their testimony have been documented by historians.⁹² Five of the eight witnesses—Christian Whitmer, Peter Whitmer Jr., Joseph Smith Sr., Hyrum Smith, and Samuel Smith—all died active in the Church holding high offices, and there can be no serious doubt that these men stood by their testimony of seeing and handling the Book of Mormon plates. Out of the remaining three who apostatized (Jacob Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Hiram Page), two of them left behind personal statements affirming their testimony. So only one could conceivably be questioned, and that is Jacob Whitmer. Jacob Whitmer left little of any kind of writing behind,⁹³ and experienced poor health between 1840–1843, which exhausted his material resources and forced him to focus on his livelihood for much the rest of his life.⁹⁴ Still, his son reported that he “was always faithful and true to his testimony of the Book of Mormon, and confirmed it on his deathbed.”⁹⁵ John Whitmer outlived the other seven by a few decades, and when only he and David remained out of the eleven witnesses, he personally wrote, “I have never heard that any one of the three or eight witnesses ever denied the testimony that they have borne to the Book as published in the first edition of the Book of Mormon.”⁹⁶ This assurance that none of the eight ever denied their testimony surely includes his brother Jacob, and John was in a good position to know the views of his brother on this matter.

The straightforward testimony of these eight men complicates efforts to dismiss the objective existence of the plates. As such, some critics have tried hard to cast the experience into a

http://fairlds.org/FAIR_Conferences/2006-Daniel-Peterson.pdf (accessed May 21, 2012); Daniel C. Peterson, “Not Joseph’s and Not Modern,” in *Echoes and Evidences*, 203–210.

⁹⁰ See “The Testimony of Eight Witnesses,” as printed in any edition of the Book of Mormon.

⁹¹ See Anderson, “Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” 50–57.

⁹² See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 123–134 (Whitmers and Hiram Page), 137–149 (Smiths). Also see Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 110–114.

⁹³ See Anderson, “Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” 42.

⁹⁴ See Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 129.

⁹⁵ Letter of Andrew Jenson to *Deseret News*, September 13, 1888, reported in the *Deseret News* September 17, 1888, cited in Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 129.

⁹⁶ John Whitmer to Mark H. Forscutt, March 5, 1876, cited in Anderson, “Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” 55–56.

supernatural light by utilizing hearsay reports.⁹⁷ The best sources, including all the personal writings from three of the eight, insist on the natural and sober experience of seeing and hefting the plates.⁹⁸

Combined, the two sets of witnesses (the three and the eight) create a challenging roadblock for anyone who would dismiss the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Richard Lloyd Anderson has noted:

The testimonies of the Three and Eight Witnesses balance the supernatural and the natural, the one stressing the angel and heavenly voice, the other the existence of a tangible record on gold plates. To the end of their lives, each of the Three said he had seen the plates, and each of the Eight insisted that he had handled them.⁹⁹

Other Witnesses

While the average Latter-day Saint is quite familiar with the testimonies of the three and eight witnesses, most do not realize that there are a number of others who help verify and confirm the objective existence of the metal plates. These are people who are sometimes called the “informal witnesses” of the Book of Mormon, and they include Joseph Smith’s brother William, his sister Katharine, his mother Lucy, and his wife Emma, along with (very probably) the rest of the Smith family (including those who later became official witnesses). Also among them are Alvah Beman, Josiah Stowell, Joseph Knight Sr. and also Martin Harris, although he later became an official witness.¹⁰⁰ Although most of these people never actually *saw* the plates, they can attest that Joseph Smith really did have a tangible object. They felt, lifted, and moved this object around. They could feel the weight, contours, and shape of the object, well enough to discern that it was not blocks of wood, or stones.¹⁰¹ They could lift the individual pages (or plates), hear them make a metallic rustling sound as they moved,¹⁰² and feel that they were bound by three rings.¹⁰³ It doesn’t seem that much of anything besides metal plates could fit this description.

⁹⁷ For examples of this criticism, see Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider’s View of Mormon Origins* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2002), 175–176, 206–207 and Dan Vogel, “Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2002), 79–121.

⁹⁸ See Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 18–31; Harper, “Evaluating the Book of Mormon Witnesses,” 37–49; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 131–142.

⁹⁹ Richard Lloyd Anderson, “Witnesses of the Book of Mormon,” in *To All the World*, 314.

¹⁰⁰ For summaries of the experiences of these individuals, see Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 21–34; Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 48, 78 n.83; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 13–15. For Alvah Beman, see William J. Hamblin, “An Apologist for the Critics: Brent Lee Metcalfe’s Assumptions and Methodologies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 519.

¹⁰¹ William Smith, “Sermon in the Saints Chapel,” *The Saints’ Herald* 31 (1884): 643–644.

¹⁰² Emma Smith, Interview between February 4–10, 1879, *The Saints’ Herald* 26 (1879): 290; William Smith, “Sermon in the Saints Chapel,” 643–644; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 14.

These experiences are so straight forward they cannot be dismissed. Emma moved the plates around the house as she did her daily work,¹⁰⁴ and Martin let them sit on his knee for sometime as he talked with Joseph in the woods while they were preparing to hide the plates from a mob.¹⁰⁵ These are mundane, ordinary, day-to-day experiences. “The safety of the plates,” notes non-Mormon Paul Gutjahr, “was a primary concern for Joseph from the moment he unearthed them.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, as Richard Lloyd Anderson has observed, “the plates figured in the regular life of Joseph Smith for over a year and a half... He worried about obtaining them, [and] guarded them carefully during this period.... This meant that those nearest him shared in his strategies for preserving and using them. So a larger circle than the official witnesses had some contact with the ancient record in their daily affairs.”¹⁰⁷ Four others—Mary Whitmer, Lyman Johnson, Harrison Burgess, and Lucy Harris (Martin’s wife)—are reported to have actually been shown the plates by the angel Moroni, independent of Joseph Smith.¹⁰⁸ These kinds of experiences make the plates very hard to remove from objective reality.

Description and Dimensions of the Plates

When studying the testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses one detects a remarkable consistency in the way they describe both the experience of seeing the plates, and the plates themselves. This is impressive because all of those descriptions came after the three witnesses and some of the eight witnesses had been alienated from Joseph Smith and the main body of the Saints. As Richard Lloyd Anderson observes, “Throughout their lives, each witness freely answered questions about his firsthand experience with the angel and the plates. Obviously not relying on Joseph Smith’s account, which was not written until the months following their excommunication, each spoke spontaneously and independently; yet the details harmonized with each other and with Joseph Smith’s history.”¹⁰⁹

While there are some minor variations, which is to be expected when dealing with independent witnesses, the general picture that emerges is that the plates were golden in color, 6 in. x 8 in. x 6 in., between 40–60 lbs., and bound by three D-shaped rings; while each individual plate was about 1/8–1/16 of an inch thick with a portion of them sealed so tight they could not be read.¹¹⁰ Some critics

¹⁰³ Interview of William Smith by E.C. Briggs and J. W. Peterson, *Zion’s Ensign* (January 13, 1894): 6; Lucy Mack Smith, reported in Henry Caswall, *The City of the Mormons; or, Three Days at Nauvoo, in 1842*, 2nd ed., revised and enlarged, (London: J. G. F. & J. Rivington, 1843), 26.

¹⁰⁴ Emma Smith, *The Saints’ Herald* 26:290.

¹⁰⁵ “Testimonies of Oliver Cowdery and Martin Harris,” *Millennial Star* 21 (August 20, 1859): 545.

¹⁰⁶ Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon*, 16.

¹⁰⁷ Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 21, brackets mine.

¹⁰⁸ See Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 52–53, 119–120 n.57. Anderson, *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses*, 31–32 adds a corroborating account on the Mary Whitmer story from her son David.

¹⁰⁹ Anderson, “Witnesses of the Book of Mormon,” 313.

¹¹⁰ For various descriptions of the plates, see Kirk B. Henrichsen, “What Did the Golden Plates Look Like?” *New Era* (July 2007): 28–33; Kirk B. Henrichsen, “How Witnesses Described the ‘Gold Plates,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*

have scoffed at these dimensions, insisting that plates made of pure gold of that size would be much heavier than the above description. However, plates made of an alloy of copper and gold common to Mesoamerica, called tumbaga, which was often treated with acid to give the surface a “pure gold” appearance, would have weighed just a few pounds more than fifty, right within the described range.¹¹¹ Interestingly, the earliest specimen of tumbaga found in Mesoamerica dates to the same time period as the Book of Mormon plates, and was made from a thin, hammered sheet (or plate) of the alloy.¹¹²

Some have been compelled by this consistency to posit a theory that Joseph Smith manufactured a fake set of plates from tin or some other cheap metal.¹¹³ Some even appeal to known forgeries of metal plates, like the Voree and Kinderhook plates, as an analogue.¹¹⁴ This strikes me as wholly inadequate for a few reasons: (a) it is desperately *ad hoc*. That is, there is no historical evidence for a forged set of plates; the theory is posited as an explanation out of necessity rather than genuine examination of the historical evidence, because for the naturalist any real plates *must* be fake; (b) Joseph Smith seems to lack the skills necessary to manufacture a convincing set of plates.¹¹⁵ Appealing to the crudely manufactured Voree and Kinderhook plates is not sufficient. The Book of Mormon plates were much larger than these simple, exposed forgeries, and even modern efforts to produce a replica that fits the descriptions of the Book of Mormon plates are fraught with difficulties, and require several people (some with professional training) to pull-off.¹¹⁶ Finally, this is compounded by (c) the additional artifacts, such as the Liahona, Sword of Laban, the breastplate, and Urim and Thummim which witnesses also attested to. As historian Steven C. Harper observes,

10/1 (2001): 16–21. Also see Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 148–151; Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 1–10; and the online repository of descriptions of the plates at http://fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Translation/Description_of_the_plates (accessed May 21, 2012).

¹¹¹ See Robert F. Smith, “The ‘Golden’ Plates,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 275–277; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 110–112; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 159–160.

¹¹² See David M. Penderdast, “Tumbaga Object from the Early Classic Period, Found at Altun Ha, British Honduras (Belize),” *Science* 168 (April 3, 1970): 116–118.

¹¹³ For an example of this theory, see Vogel, “Validity of the Witnesses’ Testimonies,” 108. Ironically, even Vogel himself has confessed, “I find it difficult to believe that [Joseph Smith] could create a set of plates that could pass visual inspection.” (Quoted in Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 131). Hence Vogel is among those who have tried to recast the eight witnesses experience as a supernatural event, rather than the straight forward experience more strongly suggested by the best evidence.

¹¹⁴ For example, see Jon Adams, “Did the Gold Plates Exist?” *USU REASON Blog*, August 6, 2011, at <http://usureason.com/2011/did-the-gold-plates-exist/> (accessed May 21, 2012).

¹¹⁵ As just one example, the fact that the plates had *three* rings, which were D-shaped makes it highly unlikely someone like Joseph Smith manufactured them. Three rings provide the most stability, and the D-shape provides the optimum utility, facts that were unrealized when ringed-binders were first developed in 1854. Whoever manufactured the plates had knowledge and experience in binding-technology, something no one in upstate New York had, but which some ancient peoples were aware of, as confirmed by recent discoveries of the last decade. See Warren P. Aston, “The Rings That Bound the Gold Plates Together,” *Insights* 26/3 (2006): 3–4.

¹¹⁶ See Henrichsen, “What Did the Golden Plates Look Like?” 32; also Shanna Butler, “A Golden Opportunity,” *New Era* (February 2006): 34–37.

Such evidence proves more than the fact that Joseph had plates. Witnesses of Lehi's miraculous compass, Laban's sword, and the brother of Jared's seer stones [i.e., the interpreters or Urim and Thummim] know that the plates are inscribed with ancient writing about actual people who received revelations, knew the Lord, were directed to a promised land, and committed their testimonies of Christ to writing that has been translated by Joseph Smith.¹¹⁷

The critics' position would have one believe Joseph Smith somehow made convincing props for each of these artifacts.¹¹⁸

Translating the Book of Mormon

“In addition to the Three and Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon, a steady stream of individuals viewed the plates, observed the translation process, and consistently described that process: members of Joseph's family, members of Emma's family, even newcomers and strangers.”¹¹⁹ Through their testimonies and the corroborating evidence from the original Book of Mormon manuscript, historians have been able to learn a great deal about this process and the events that surrounded it.¹²⁰

Careful research has shown that the bulk of the translation of the Book of Mormon text took place between April to June 1829, in a period only a little longer than two months—a rate of about eight pages per day.¹²¹ That this rapid pace was maintained is even more astounding when one remembers the observation of Elder Neal A. Maxwell, that this all happened “amid numerous interruptions, bitter persecutions, and even the ‘most strenuous exertions’ to wrest the actual plates from him. [Joseph's] was not the tranquil life of a detached scholar in some sheltered sanctuary

¹¹⁷ Steven C. Harper, *Makings Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants: A Guided Tour through Modern Revelations* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2008), 62–63.

¹¹⁸ For another response to this argument, see Daniel C. Peterson, “Editor's Introduction—Not So Easily Dismissed: Some Facts for Which Counterexplanations of the Book of Mormon Will Need to Account,” *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): xxii–xxiv. On the comparison to the Voree plates, see http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Witnesses/Strangite_parallels (accessed May 21, 2012).

¹¹⁹ Ricks, “Converging Paths,” 407.

¹²⁰ For brief summaries, see Milton V. Backman Jr., “Book of Mormon, translation of,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 157–160; John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “Translation of the Book of Mormon by Joseph Smith,” in *To All the World*, 282–286; Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 13–23.

¹²¹ See John W. Welch and Tim Rathbone, “How Long Did it take to Translate the Book of Mormon?” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 1–8; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 20. For a much longer and thorough examination, see John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820–1844*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Studies, 2005), 77–117. Immediately following the article, from pages 118–213 is a printing of the relevant statements regarding the translation process, from a total of 202 documents.

where he could work at his uninterrupted leisure. Chores had to be done. His family had to be cared for.”¹²² Elder Russell M. Nelson also makes this point:

Such a pace is even more remarkable considering the circumstances under which the Prophet labored. In that same period, while enduring constant distractions and incessant hostility, Joseph Smith moved more than 100 miles from Harmony, Pennsylvania, to Fayette, New York. He applied for a copyright. He received revelations comprising 12 sections of the Doctrine and Covenants. Heavenly beings restored the holy priesthood. Yet he completed the translation in less than three months.¹²³

Based on D&C 10:41, it seems that a portion of what was translated with Martin Harris as scribe was retained, though precisely how much is uncertain.¹²⁴ It is most likely that Joseph and Oliver picked-up where Joseph had left off after the loss of the 116 pages,¹²⁵ thus in our modern Book of Mormon the order of translation was Mosiah 1–Moroni 10, then the title page, then 1 Nephi–Words of Mormon.¹²⁶

From the witnesses, it can be learned that the text was dictated without any reference to a pre-written book or manuscript,¹²⁷ yet Joseph could somehow see the English text because at times he would have his scribe read it back to him to verify it had been transcribed correctly.¹²⁸ All the more impressive is the fact that after countless interruptions, Joseph always started back right where he

¹²² Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” in *Echoes and Evidences*, 3, brackets mine. Parenthetical reference to Joseph Smith—History 1:60 silently omitted. For various examples of the interruptions and distractions Joseph faced while translating, see the detailed chronology laid out in Welch, “The Miraculous Translation,” 82–97.

¹²³ Russell M. Nelson, “A Testimony of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (November 1999): 71.

¹²⁴ See Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 57–59. Tvedtnes speculates, on the basis of word similarities, that as far as Alma 8 may have been translated before the loss of the 116 pages. On this point I disagree. I think such similarities can be explained by Joseph Smith’s utilization of similar phrases when both receiving revelation and providing inspired translation. He makes a similar argument regarding Mosiah 4 (before extending it all the way to Alma 8). While it is possible that Joseph may have been as far as Mosiah 4, I still don’t find Tvedtnes’ reasoning persuasive. I suspect that any part left over from the portion not taken by Harris was not much further than the present Mosiah 1.

¹²⁵ While it is impossible to know what, exactly, was on the 116 pages, various scholars have attempted to piece it together through later allusions in the text to things not found earlier in the text. See, for example, Tvedtnes, *The Most Correct Book*, 44–56. For the most thorough of such investigations to date, see Don Bradley, *The Lost 116 Pages: Rediscovering the Book of Lehi* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, forthcoming). For some background on the loss of this manuscript, see Susan Easton Black, “Book of Mormon, lost manuscript of (116 pages),” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 123–124; William J. Critchlow III, “Manuscript, Lost 116 Pages,” in *To All the World*, 177–178. Also see David E. Sloan, “The Book of Lehi and the Plates of Lehi,” in *Pressing Forward*, 59–62.

¹²⁶ See Welch, “The Miraculous Translation,” 115–117 n.111.

¹²⁷ See Peterson, “Not So Easily Dismissed,” xiv–xvi for quotation and citation of the relevant eyewitness testimonies.

¹²⁸ See Edward Stevenson to the Editor (reporting an interview with Martin Harris) November 30, 1881, *Deseret Evening News* (December 13, 1881), interview occurred in 1870; Eri B. Mullen, “Letter to the Editor,” (reporting an interview with David Whitmer) *The Saints’ Herald* 27 (March 1, 1880): 76; Interview of David Whitmer reported in *Kansas City Journal* (June 5, 1881); documents 52, 83, 84 in *Opening the Heavens*, 135, 147, 148.

left off, without ever checking with his scribe to see what was last dictated.¹²⁹ Sometimes Joseph had trouble pronouncing the names of the various characters in the narrative,¹³⁰ while at other times he seemed unsure of whether he was at the end of a chapter or the end of a book.¹³¹ There is even at least one instance in which the content of the text—claiming that there were walls around Jerusalem—seemed to surprise him so much that he asked those present to go get a Bible and verify the fact.¹³²

Use of a Seer Stone in a Hat to Translate

Another detail learned from the various eye-witness statements is that Joseph translated at least a large portion of the Book of Mormon with a seer stone, which he placed in a hat and buried his face in it to exclude the light.¹³³ While this mode of translation is unfamiliar to most members of the Church, it has been talked about in official Church publications.¹³⁴ It has only received sparse attention in such venues, however; perhaps because, as Elder Maxwell says, it is “looking beyond the mark” to be “too fascinated by the light-shielding hat reportedly used by Joseph Smith during some of the translating of the Book of Mormon,”¹³⁵ and therefore neglect the important and powerful teachings of the Book of Mormon prophets.

Some Latter-day Saints experience a discomfort that stems from the unfamiliarity of this method. However, this method is not really distinguishable from the more familiar story of Joseph Smith using the “Urim and Thummim”—that is, the Nephite interpreters—to translate the record. These interpreters are “two stones” and “these stones,” said the Lord to the brother of Jared, “shall magnify to the eyes of men these things which ye shall write” (Ether 3:23–24; cf. vv. 23–28, 4:5). To Alma, the Lord said he would prepare “a stone, which shall shine forth in darkness unto light.”

¹²⁹ See Joseph Smith III, “Last Testimony of Sister Emma,” *The Saints’ Herald* (1 October 1879): 290; document 41 in *Opening the Heavens*, 131.

¹³⁰ See Edmund C. Briggs (reporting an interview with Emma Smith), “A Visit to Nauvoo in 1856,” *Journal of History* 9 (October 1916): 454; E. C. Briggs (reporting an interview with David Whitmer), “Letter to the Editor,” *The Saints’ Herald* 31 (June 21, 1884): 396–397; “The Book of Mormon,” (reporting an interview with David Whitmer) *Chicago Tribune* (December 17, 1885): 3; documents 38, 88, 93 in *Opening the Heavens*, 129, 151, 154.

¹³¹ See Peterson, “Not So Easily Dismissed,” xx

¹³² See documents 38, 40, 93, 95 in *Opening the Heavens*, 129, 130, 154, 156.

¹³³ See documents 39, 41, 52, 55, 57, 81, 85, 86, 89, 90, 92, 96, 98, 108, 114, 142, 147, 148, 176, 181, 182, and 196 in *Opening the Heavens*, 129–196.

¹³⁴ See, for instance, “A Peaceful Heart,” *Friend* (September 1974): 7; Richard Lloyd Anderson, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign* (September 1977): 80–81; Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Alvin Smith Story: Fact and Fiction,” *Ensign* (August 1987): 58–72; Kenneth W. Godfrey, “A New Prophet and a New Scripture: The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (January 1988): 11; Russell M. Nelson, “A Treasured Testament,” *Ensign* (July 1993): 61; “Highlights in the Prophet’s Life,” *Ensign* (June 1994): 24; Neal A. Maxwell, “By the Gift and Power of God,” *Ensign* (January 1997): 39; Gerrit Dirkmaat, “Great and Marvelous Are the Revelations of God,” *Ensign* (January 2013): 45–46; “Translating the Book of Mormon,” Gospel Topics, online at <http://www.lds.org/topics/book-of-mormon-translation?lang=eng> (accessed December 30, 2013). It is also mentioned in Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 13, a popular coffee table book for Latter-day Saints, just published in 2011.

¹³⁵ Neal A. Maxwell, “The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer to ‘The Great Question,’” in *First Nephi: The Doctrinal Foundation*, BMSS 2:5.

Alma associated this stone with the interpreters, which he told his son “were prepared that the word of God might be fulfilled, which he spake, saying: I will bring forth out of darkness unto light” (Alma 37: 23–24). Ammon says that those who look into the interpreters, “the same is called a seer,” and seers “can look [into the interpreters, or seer stones] and translate all records that are of ancient date” (Mosiah 8:13). In his own history, Joseph Smith described the interpreters as “two stones in silver bows... and the possession and use of these stones were what constituted ‘seers’ in ancient or former times” (Joseph Smith—History 1:35). Regardless of whether Joseph used this Jaredite/Nephite instrument, or his own personal stone, the process was the same—by looking into a seer stone(s) “in darkness unto light” (in the bottom of his hat), Joseph was able to *see as a seer* and “translate... records that are of ancient date.” The only material difference is whether he used two seer stones (the interpreters) or one (his personal stone).¹³⁶

The question could fairly be raised, “How does looking into a rock produce a translation of an ancient text?” Anthropologist Brant A. Gardner has attempted to answer that question by drawing on a mass of research related to what could be called the “science of sight” as well as the “science of thought.” Gardner hypothesizes that God inspired Joseph with the pre-language understanding of the plate text (called “mentalese” by scientists studying thought), which he then formulated into words, which he was able to powerfully visualize by obscuring the light and focusing on the stone. Thus he saw and read the words to his scribe.¹³⁷

While Gardner’s theory is the most advanced and well-researched to date, it is important to recognize that, “No matter how closely we examine the process, no matter how well we might understand the human aspect, Joseph’s description really remains the best.”¹³⁸ And that description is the short and simple statement that it was “by the gift and power of God.” Michael R. Ash poses the question, “If Joseph Smith was a prophet, and if the translation came by the gift and power of

¹³⁶ See Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 285–287. For a very detailed treatment of the translation method, exploring both the use of the interpreters and the seer stone (and showing that both were employed in the same manner—as seer stones in a hat), see Roger Nicholson, “The Spectacles, the Stone, the Hat, and the Book: A Twenty-First Century Believer’s View of the Book of Mormon Translation,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 5 (2013): 121–190.

¹³⁷ See Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 251–315. I differ slightly in my opinion from that of Gardner. I suspect that God first provided a vision of the plate text to Joseph Smith, which he was able to see clearly by excluding the light and focusing on the stone. God then provided, through revelation, the “mentalese” understanding of the text, word-by-word (*not* word-for-word). Joseph Smith then articulated it into English, the words of which he visualized as the light was excluded and he was focusing on the stone. This has the added explanatory power of accounting for the Hebraisms in the text as occasionally occurring when Joseph’s thoughts formulated into English adhered more literally to the linguistic structure of original plate text. Gardner dismisses Hebraisms (p. 165–176) as merely echoes of the KJV, but others with expertise in Hebrew insist that genuine Hebraisms are present. Ultimately I suspect Gardner rejects Hebraisms because his hypothesis cannot account for them, since he doesn’t have Joseph ever dealing with the plate text directly. As I said, my revision of this hypothesis makes it possible for such literalist equivalences to occur. I would also simply note, that this process (from plate text/to mentalese/to English) would have happened rather rapidly and mostly on the subconscious level. Thus, Joseph may not have been fully aware of how he was translating—just that he saw the plate text and then he saw the English translation.

¹³⁸ Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 321.

God does the method of translation matter?”¹³⁹ Elder Quentin L. Cook hints at the answer to such a question in his April 2012 General Conference address. “Obsessive focus on things not yet fully revealed, such as... exactly how Joseph Smith translated our scriptures, will not be efficacious or yield spiritual progress. These are matters of faith.”¹⁴⁰

Implications of the Eyewitness and Manuscript Evidence

Each of the details derived from the eyewitness statements is supported by the careful examination of the original manuscript.¹⁴¹ What all of this means is that when translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph had some sort of source text from which he was reading, but no book or manuscript to read from; the text was not completely his own or something he was making up (who can’t pronounce the names that they make up?), and was apparently as new to him as it was to those listening to him dictate it. These details are consistent with Joseph’s claims to be translating a new text by inspiration, but hard to square with the theory that Joseph Smith was just making it all up; a notion that is even more difficult to maintain when the information regarding the rapid dictation of the text by Joseph Smith is juxtaposed with the evidence of intricate and complex literary forms (such as chiasmus and other parallelisms) and statistical studies indicating multiple authors (none of whom appear to be Joseph Smith).¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 286.

¹⁴⁰ Quentin L. Cook, “In Tune with the Music of Faith,” *Ensign* (May 2012): 43.

¹⁴¹ See Royal Skousen, “Translating the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 61–93; or see Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 22–26 for a short summary.

¹⁴² For textual complexity, see Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 20–22. John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 32–37 concludes: “Considering the way Joseph dictated the book to scribes, for the most part in a matter of weeks without revising what he had dictated, we should realize that he could not himself have come up with this complicated set of prefaces and summaries. It is unlikely that he would go to the trouble to insert anything like them (they are not required to move the story along). It is also most unlikely that, while dictating, he could keep in mind what he had promised in the prefaces and then remember to close off so many sections neatly with summaries. Much more believable are the claims in the Book of Mormon itself that the record was done by ancient writers working with written materials over long periods of time.” (p. 37) For chiasmus specifically (and textual complexity generally), convenient summaries are John W. Welch, “Chiasmus,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 182–186; Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 32–34. For more details, see John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10/1 (Autumn 1969): 69–84; revised and reprinted in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, 33–52 and in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981; reprinted, Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999), 198–210. Also see John W. Welch, “What Does Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon Prove?” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 199–224. To see chiasms and other parallelisms within the Book of Mormon itself, see Donald W. Parry, *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2007). Some critics argue that Joseph Smith could have made up the chiasms or that they occur by chance. For responses to these arguments, see John W. Welch, “Criteria for Identifying and Evaluating the Presence of Chiasmus,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 1–14; similar criteria can be found in John W. Welch and Daniel B. McKinlay, eds., *Chiasmus Bibliography* (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1999), 157–174; John W. Welch, “How Much Was Known About Chiasmus in 1829 When the Book of Mormon Was Translated?” *FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003): 47–80; Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “Does Chiasmus Appear in the Book of Mormon by Chance?” *BYU Studies* 43/2 (2004): 103–130; Boyd F. Edwards and W. Farrell Edwards, “When Are Chiasms Admissible as Evidence?” *BYU Studies* 49/4 (2010): 131–154. Given how quickly the book was dictated, it is hard to imagine Joseph Smith had the time (or the skill) to compose the beautiful chiasms found in the Book of Mormon. For the statistical “wordprint” studies

While all of this information is difficult for the naturalist to explain, and thus makes for good evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon,¹⁴³ the real value in learning about the translation process is developing a greater appreciation for the miraculous events which transpired to bring forth this “marvelous work and a wonder” (Isaiah 29:14). The same can, and should, be said of the witnesses’ testimonies regarding the metal plates, discussed above. Not only are their testimonies great evidence of the truth of this work, but studying the experiences they had with the sacred Nephite record and how their lives were influenced by those profound spiritual moments helps develop greater appreciation for the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon was Written *for our Day*... but not *in our Day*

On this point, the Gospel Doctrine teacher’s manual aptly points out that “although the Book of Mormon is an ancient document, it was written and preserved for our day.”¹⁴⁴ Understanding this is of course important. Knowing that Moroni was shown the future generation when the Book of Mormon was to come (see Mormon 8:35) gives the assurance that the book was edited with a modern audience in mind. Other prophets also knew their record was to come forth to future generations (see 2 Nephi 25:21–22; 27:22; Enos 1:13–16). This knowledge no doubt affected how they wrote, what they wrote, and probably guided Mormon and Moroni in their selection of materials for inclusion. Nephi gives the individual license to apply what he wrote to their own circumstances, a method he called “likening” (see 1 Nephi 19:23).

Caution must be taken, however, to remember that “likening” is a tool for practical application, not a method of scriptural exegesis. LDS historian Steven C. Harper notes that likening is “best done by individuals in the Light of the Holy Ghost.”¹⁴⁵ That is to say, the meaning that is derived from any certain passage due to one’s “likening” it to their present circumstances should not be confused for *the* meaning of the text, as it was intended to be understood by Mormon, or Alma, or Nephi, or even God himself. In order to understand this original context, one must stop projecting their modern view on to the text and start doing what Brigham Young said was a “privilege”:

indicating multiple authorship, a brief summary can be found in Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 31–32. For full details, see Wayne A. Larson and Alvin C. Rencher, “Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship*, 157–188; John L. Hilton, “Wordprints and the Book of Mormon,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 221–226; John L. Hilton, “On Verifying Wordprint Studies: Book of Mormon Authorship,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 225–253. For detailed summaries of such statistical studies along with responses to critiques and counter studies, see Paul J. Fields, G. Bruce Schaale, and Matthew Roper, “Examining a Misapplication of Nearest Shrunken Centroid Classification to Investigate Book of Mormon Authorship,” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 87–111; Matthew Roper, Paul J. Fields, and G. Bruce Schaale, “Stylometric Analyses of the Book of Mormon: A Short History,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 21/1 (2012): 28–45.

¹⁴³ See Peterson, “Not So Easily Dismissed,” xii–xxii for a good case made for the Book of Mormon using this information.

¹⁴⁴ “Lesson 1: ‘The Keystone of Our Religion,’” *Book of Mormon: Gospel Doctrine Teacher’s Manual* (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), 3.

¹⁴⁵ Steven C. Harper, *Makings Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, xx.

Do you read the scriptures... as though you were writing them a thousand, two thousand, or five thousand years ago? Do you read them as though you stood in the place of the men who wrote them? If you do not... it is your privilege to do so.¹⁴⁶

In order to do this, one must try and understand the ancient cultures that the authors of the ancient text participated in. Anthropologist and Book of Mormon scholar John L. Sorenson explained:

The Book of Mormon text, like all scripture, is subtle; full understanding of it demands extensive and intensive study that uses all the tools at our disposal. Relying on our own ethnocentric interpretations is not an approach to be recommended.¹⁴⁷

Contemporary LDS philosopher Blake Ostler adds, “We Latter-day Saints are entitled to read the text in light of the best scientific evidence we have available.”¹⁴⁸ The venerable LDS scholar Hugh Nibley wrote in an earlier Church manual on the Book of Mormon: “The Book of Mormon must be read as an ancient [text], not as a modern book.”¹⁴⁹

In other words, while I agree whole heartily with the importance of likening, and understanding that the book was written for our day, there is also another, equally important way to read the text. This way can be expressed concisely as the inverse of the statement made in the manual: “although the Book of Mormon was written and preserved for our day, it is an ancient book.” Book of Mormon scholar Brant A. Gardner has expressed a similar sentiment:

It is popular (and theologically appropriate) to claim that the Book of Mormon was written for our day. This statement emphasizes the modern value of the Book of Mormon.... [But] regardless of the value for our day and the obvious fact that it came forth in our day, it was not written in our day, nor in our language, nor in our culture.¹⁵⁰

John Gee and Matthew Roper likewise explain, “As latter-day readers of the scriptures, we rightly apply the scriptures to our own contemporary situation. In our quest for greater understanding of the scriptures, it may also at times be helpful to put ourselves in the position of those who wrote the scriptures and first listened to their messages.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Brigham Young, “Knowledge in Progress, &c.,” in *Journal of Discourses*, 7:333.

¹⁴⁷ John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 81.

¹⁴⁸ Blake T. Ostler, “Yea, Yea; Nay, Nay: DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon,” *Sunstone* 137 (May 2005): 69.

¹⁴⁹ Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, CWHN 6:3, brackets mine. The original version of this book was used as the priesthood manual in 1957. I thank Stephen Smoot for drawing my attention to this quotation.

¹⁵⁰ Brant A. Gardner, “Multiple Perspectives on the Text,” in *Second Witness*, 1:viii, brackets mine.

¹⁵¹ John Gee and Matthew Roper, “I Did Liken All Scriptures Unto Us’: Early Nephite Understandings of Isaiah and Implications for ‘Others’ in the Land,” in *The Fulness of the Gospel: Foundational Teachings from the Book of Mormon*, THE 32ND ANNUAL SIDNEY B. SPERRY SYMPOSIUM, Camille Fronk, Brain M. Hauglid, Patty A. Smith, Thomas A. Wayment, eds. (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and BYU Religious Studies Center, 2003), 51.

Modern Assumptions That Need to be Examined

Most members are probably already familiar and comfortable with reading the Book of Mormon as a text written for our day, but few are trained in reading it as an ancient text.¹⁵² Just as the manual asks, “How might knowing that the Book of Mormon was written for our day influence the way we study it?”¹⁵³ it might also be asked: “How does remembering that the Book of Mormon was written in ancient times influence the way we study it?” Here are five assumptions Latter-day Saints tend to make when reading the text that might be changed if we keep the antiquity of the text in mind.

Joseph Smith’s Knowledge of the Text

There is a tendency among believers and skeptics alike to treat Joseph Smith as the end all authority on the Book of Mormon. However, doing so treats Joseph as the author of the book, something he never claimed to be. When examined closely, it becomes clear that sometimes Joseph didn’t know the text as well as some might think he did. John E. Clark notes that “the most compelling evidence of the book’s authenticity” is “Joseph’s unfamiliarity with its contents.”¹⁵⁴ Michael R. Ash makes a similar observation. “The fact that Joseph had opinions that were contrary to what we find in the Book of Mormon is a strong indication that he *translated* rather than *wrote* the text. At times, he was no better than his friends and neighbors at understanding the book he published.”¹⁵⁵ The final authority on the Book of Mormon needs to be the book itself, while any non-revelatory views on the book expressed by Joseph Smith (or anyone else) need to be treated as hypotheses to be tested, not the final conclusion.

The Book of Mormon as History

The common description of the Book of Mormon as a “history of the ancient Americas” is overly simplistic, and according to Hugh Nibley, “the first rule of historical criticism in dealing with the Book of Mormon or any other historical text is, never oversimplify.”¹⁵⁶ Large portions of the text consist of sermons, lectures, discourses, visions, prophecy, and lengthy scriptural quotations. Nowhere does Mormon or Moroni or any other Book of Mormon author ever state that full and accurate historical reporting is part of their agenda. To the contrary, they frequently explain that they must skim through the details of the history (see Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6; Ether 15:33), and Nephi deliberately says that he is writing with spiritual, not historical, intent. As such, Nephi says that the greater portion of the historical details must be spared, and the historical details that are included are there to facilitate his spiritual purposes (see 1

¹⁵² For discussion on reading the Book of Mormon as an ancient text, and the importance that cultural context plays in understanding its meaning, see Brant A. Gardner, “Text and Context,” in *Second Witness*, 1:2–9.

¹⁵³ “Lesson 1: ‘The Keystone of Our Religion,’” 4.

¹⁵⁴ John E. Clark, “Archaeological Trends and the Book of Mormon Origins,” in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress*, John W. Welch, ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2006), 85.

¹⁵⁵ Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 189.

¹⁵⁶ Nibley, *The World of the Jaredites*, CWHN 5:237.

Nephi 9:1–6; 10:1; 2 Nephi 4:14–15; 5:29–33).¹⁵⁷ As Edwin Brown Firmage has put it, “The express desire of the authors is not so much to chronicle history for its own sake, for they ignore the vast majority of their history, but to preserve a record of their doings for posterity—a testament to their faith and an insistent, but loving warning to our own society.”¹⁵⁸

Furthermore, the *kind* of history that the Book of Mormon represents is not the kind of history modern readers are accustomed to. Blake Ostler makes the astute observation that, “We must remember that those who wrote anciently did not follow (or even know) modern canons of historical scholarship.”¹⁵⁹ To that John L. Sorenson adds, “Mormon and Moroni present their ‘brief’ record to their future readers as a unique kind of interpretative history. They conferred it on the ages to come not as a historian’s history but as a powerful moral message intended to school readers in the lessons the two men had learned in long, arduous service to their people and to their God.”¹⁶⁰ Ancient peoples wrote a very different kind of history than what is described in a textbook. They typically wrote what can be called “lineage history” or “tribal narrative,” which tends to exaggerate the prestige of the group controlling the narrative, and diminish, or even ignore, the role of other groups. Interestingly, the Book of Mormon bears all the marks of a lineage history.¹⁶¹

The Book of Mormon Peoples as the Exclusive Ancestors of Native Americans

With the oversimplification of the Book of Mormon as history comes the assumption that the Book of Mormon peoples were the only ones in America during that time period. Thus, the long held popular assumption that they are the exclusive, or at very least the “principle” ancestors of all Native American tribes. When the Book of Mormon is read carefully, however, a number of instances which suggest that there were indeed others within the America’s during Book of Mormon times can be found.¹⁶² It is also important to point out that although it was not the “mainstream”

¹⁵⁷ See the various sub-articles under “Book of Mormon, selected purposes of,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 140–145 for further discussion of the reasons given by the ancient authors for making their record.

¹⁵⁸ Edwin Brown Firmage, “Violence and the Gospel: The Teachings of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 25/1 (Winter 1985): 42.

¹⁵⁹ Ostler, “DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon,” 66.

¹⁶⁰ John L. Sorenson, “Mormon’s Sources,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20/2 (2011): 15.

¹⁶¹ See John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 418–429; John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 50–56; John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book and the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 104–108, 198–218; D. Michael Quinn, “The Ancient Book of Mormon as Tribal Narrative,” *Sunstone* 137 (May 2005): 67. Ostler, “DNA Strands in the Book of Mormon,” 66 describes it as a “dynastic history” with seemingly the same thing in mind as Sorenson’s “lineage history” or Quinn’s “tribal narrative.”

¹⁶² See John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, “Before DNA,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, Daniel C. Peterson, ed. (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2008), 42–45; Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 83–86; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 288–291. For more in-depth treatment of the topic, see John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1 (1992): 1–34, reprinted in John L. Sorenson, *Nephite Culture and Society: Selected Papers* (Salt Lake City, Utah: New Sage Books, 1997), 65–104; Gee and Roper, “I Did Liken All Scriptures Unto Us,” 51–65; Matthew Roper, “Nephi’s

view, prominent members of the Church—including prophets, apostles, and other general authorities—have allowed for the possibility of others throughout the twentieth century and even back into the nineteenth century (with at least one example from Joseph Smith’s lifetime), and this view is not in conflict with any known revelation.¹⁶³

A Hemispheric Scope for Book of Mormon Geography

Another related oversimplification is that the events in the Book of Mormon spanned across the entire hemisphere. Careful analysis shows that the distances from place-to-place described in the text are fairly tight and limited.¹⁶⁴ While critics have tried to dispute this, the text is pretty clear and unambiguous on the point.¹⁶⁵ Although the hemispheric view has long been popular, just as with “others” discussed above, this was not an exclusive view, nor has any revelation defining Book of Mormon geography ever been given.¹⁶⁶ In fact, arguably Joseph Smith himself advised “that the approach to Book of Mormon geography must be primarily of an intellectual nature... [and] that we should make Book of Mormon geography the object of study rather than waiting for a revelation.”¹⁶⁷ A more limited view of Book of Mormon geography was held by prominent members early on in the twentieth century, with some antecedents from the nineteenth century, a few going back to as early as Joseph Smith’s day.¹⁶⁸

Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 205–218. Also see Brant A. Gardner, “Excursus: Ethnohistory and the Book of Mormon,” in *Second Witness*, 1:351–356; Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 185–194.

¹⁶³ See Sorenson and Roper, “Before DNA,” 39–41. For more detailed treatment, see Roper, “Nephi’s Neighbors,” 185–204.

¹⁶⁴ See Sorenson and Roper, “Before DNA,” 29–31. For more detailed discussions, see Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, especially chapter 5, “Distances and Directions,” 55–81; Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 8–23; John L. Sorenson, “Appendix B: The Problem of Establishing Distances,” in *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 393–397; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 17–23, 120–123. Also see Brant A. Gardner, “Excursus: Geography and the Book of Mormon,” in *Second Witness*, 1:327–334; John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20–70, revised and reprinted as “Revisiting ‘A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,’” *Mormon Studies Review* 23/1 (2011): 13–43; Sidney B. Sperry, “Were There Two Cumorahs?,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 260–268.

¹⁶⁵ For responses to efforts made by critics to discredit the limited geography theory (LGT), see Brant A. Gardner, “An Exploration in Critical Methodology: Critiquing a Critique,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 173–223; and Kevin Christensen, “Truth and Method: Reflections on Dan Vogel’s Approach to the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 321–332. Also see Matthew P. Roper, “Plausibility, Probability, and the Cumorah Question,” *Religious Educator* 10/2 (2009): 135–158. I note that Andrew H. Hedges, whom Roper is responding to, is not a Book of Mormon critic (in fact, is a believing member), but a critic of the LGT.

¹⁶⁶ See Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 171–174.

¹⁶⁷ David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Springville, Utah: Horizon Publishers, 1999), 21–22. This point is “arguable” because the *Times and Seasons* articles used by Palmer to make this point are of disputed authorship. More recently, however, statistical studies provide evidence that Joseph Smith was the author of, or at least a contributor to, the articles in question. See Paul Fields, Matthew Roper, and Atul Nepal, “Wordprint Analysis and Joseph Smith’s Role as Editor of the *Times and Seasons*,” *Insights* 30/6 (2010): 1–2.

¹⁶⁸ See Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–276. Also see Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 7–35 (historical overview of LDS views on Book of Mormon geography and the different views which developed over time),

The Nature of the Translation

People frequently assume that because the translation was done “by the gift and power of God,” it must be an absolutely perfect, word-for-word translation. This, however, is a huge assumption which should not go unexamined. For starters, such a precise correlation from one language to another rarely exists. In addition to that, it is debatable as to whether such a literal translation is truly the ideal or “best” method of expressing the meaning of the original. Some scholars have argued that looser or “freer” translations are a better means of communicating the full meaning of a text in a new language.¹⁶⁹ If the assumption is granted that there was no human element in the translation and God would have inspired only the very “best”, “clearest”, or “most complete” translation (an assumption that is by no means a given), then the argument could be made that such a translation would be less-than-literal.

Joseph Smith never provided any details on how the process worked, and if anyone knew, it was him. Because the actual source from which our English Book of Mormon was translated from (i.e., the golden plates) is not accessible at present, the particular relationship between the translation and the original text cannot be known.¹⁷⁰ Different scholars have offered a variety of theories, with no definitive answer.¹⁷¹ This can be a major barrier to understanding the meaning or intent of the original authors.

Two Ways to Read

Regardless of how the translated text relates to the original source text found on the golden plates, Latter-day Saints can be confident that the Book of Mormon as we have it is an inspired document, written for our day by prophets of God. As Hugh Nibley explains, “It was translated

38–206 (summary of different models for Book of Mormon geography), 371–390 (various statements by leaders of the Church relevant to Book of Mormon geography). For brief discussions on Book of Mormon geography, see Dennis L. Largey et al., “Geography,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 288–291 and John E. Clark, “Geography,” in *To All the World*, 97–101. For a more involved discussion of Book of Mormon geography with additional sources, see Chapter 5.

¹⁶⁹ For a good discussion of this issue see Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 137–146.

¹⁷⁰ Dallin D. Oaks, “Book of Mormon, language of translation,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 116–119 discusses some of the difficulties involved in understanding the relationship between the two texts (source text and translated text).

¹⁷¹ For various theories, see Royal Skousen, “How Joseph Smith Translated the Book of Mormon: Evidence from the Original Manuscript,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 22–31; Stephen D. Ricks, “Translation of the Book of Mormon: Interpreting the Evidence,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 201–206; Blake T. Ostler, “The Book of Mormon as Modern Expansion of an Ancient Source,” *Dialogue* 20/1 (Spring 1987): 66–123; Brown, *Plates of Gold*, 159–174; and most recently, Gardner, *The Gift and Power*, 147–243. These provide a range of ideas from a relatively close (tight, or literal) relationship between the translation and the original (Skousen, Brown), to a more interpretive or conceptual relationship (Ostler), to a functional relationship somewhere in between the two extremes (Gardner, Ricks).

directly by the gift and power of God. There is no need to argue about it. It is in words of exceeding plainness, in a very small vocabulary.”¹⁷²

While the emphasis I have placed on reading the Book of Mormon as ancient text may seem at odds with the “likening” members of the Church are more accustomed to, in truth they are two different ways of reading a text, each with its own purposes and merits. When reading the Book of Mormon as a text for our day, the reader is seeking to find how the text can speak to them and the problems and crises that they are facing. This kind of reading can be useful for both practical and spiritual pursuits in our own lives. On the other hand, when reading the Book of Mormon as an ancient text, the reader is seeking to understand the authors and the people they describe. This kind of reading can enhance and deepen understanding of the text and provide a more profound appreciation of its depth and meaning. This can, in turn, improve our ability to “liken” the scriptures to our own circumstances. It can unlock layers of intended meaning otherwise lost to the modern reader. Steven C. Harper compares these two ways of reading to a guided tour through at a museum. “A guide can help viewers appreciate a masterpiece, but it is left to individual viewers to decide finally what significance they will discover in the master’s work.”¹⁷³

So the two ways of reading the text can actually work hand-in-hand in creating a more productive experience for the reader willing to put in the effort. They are not mutually exclusive concepts. Hugh Nibley, one of the master’s of reading the text in its ancient setting, taught his students, “Where do you research in the Book of Mormon? This is the point: you must research in yourself. I’m not talking in the abstract sense; I’m talking in the historical sense here. Actually, you must see yourself in the book.”¹⁷⁴ This commentary will employ both approaches in an effort to generate greater understanding and deeper appreciation of the text, as well as to facilitate effective practical and spiritual application.

DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Modern Misreading

For most Latter-day Saints, these modern assumptions are not problematic. Despite making (or at least not thinking about) these assumptions, they have no problem feeling the spirit and gaining a testimony, they have no difficulty making sensible applications of the morals and teachings in the book, nor do they struggle to gain inspiration and meaning from its pages. As Marilyn Arnold has argued, “anyone who can read, and is willing to be guided by the Spirit, can access and understand this book... and arrive at a new and deeper testimony of its truth with each reading.”¹⁷⁵ For most

¹⁷² Hugh W. Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon: Transcripts of Lectures Presented to an Honors Book of Mormon Class at Brigham Young University, 1988–1990*, four volumes (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications and FARMS, 2004), 1:2.

¹⁷³ Harper, *Makings Sense of the Doctrine and Covenants*, xx.

¹⁷⁴ Nibley, *Teachings of the Book of Mormon*, 1:36.

¹⁷⁵ Marilyn Arnold, “‘Words Words Words’: Hugh Nibley on the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture* 19/2 (2010): 9.

people, these assumptions really don't matter that much. But when these assumptions drive a person's expectations of science or archeology, they can become a challenging stumbling block. Critics who have done so tend to "criticize the Book of Mormon for not being what it was never intended to be, as if one could justifiably criticize the phone directory for lack of a plot!"¹⁷⁶ This is why it is important to recognize that these assumptions are there.

DNA is one example of something that has caused some Latter-day Saints to be troubled, or doubt the veracity of the Book of Mormon, and even become embittered critics of the Church, as a result of these assumptions.¹⁷⁷ For others, one or more of these assumptions have led to a manipulation of science in misguided zeal to defend the faith.¹⁷⁸ Both of these extremes can be damaging to a person's faith.

DNA and the Critics

If the Book of Mormon is assumed to be a comprehensive history of all the peoples who ever came to the Western Hemisphere prior to Columbus, then the natural expectation is that the DNA of Native Americans would show some strong affinities with the DNA of Middle Eastern peoples. With those kinds of expectations, it is easy to be let down upon finding out that Native American DNA is overwhelmingly Asian. But the fact is, none of those assumptions hold up well with the text when placed under close scrutiny. On the other hand, if one presumes, as Elder Maxwell does, that the "peoples of the Book of Mormon were not on the center stage of secular history. Instead, theirs was a comparatively little theater,"¹⁷⁹ then DNA studies pose very little threat to the Book of Mormon.

The process of mixing with native populations would have introduced a number of complicating factors which must be considered when comparing DNA studies to the Book of Mormon. Most genetic ancestry studies are based on specific genetic markers that are easy to trace back hundreds of

¹⁷⁶ Maxwell, "The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer," 12.

¹⁷⁷ For examples of Saints who have now become critics of the faith through DNA, see Thomas W. Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha*, 47–77; Simon G. Southerton, *Losing a Lost Tribe: Native Americans, DNA, and the Mormon Church* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2004).

¹⁷⁸ For example, see Rod L. Meldrum, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon Remnant through DNA* (Mendon, New York: Digital Legend Press, 2009). I want to be clear that although I disagree with Brother Meldrum's theories regarding Book of Mormon geography, it is not for his choice of lands for the Book of Mormon, but his faulty use of science and flawed arguments, along with the (what I feel are) unfair methods and tactics which he uses to promote his views while accusing those who disagree of being less than faithful Saints, for which I am critical. I do not have any problems with Brother Meldrum believing in his "heartland" model, finding and sharing whatever *legitimate* evidence may support it, letting it shed whatever light it may on his understanding of the Book of Mormon, and even properly engaging and debating those who disagree. For a long and thorough review of some of Meldrum's more problematic claims, see "Review of *DNA Evidence for Book of Mormon Geography*," at http://www.fairlds.org/DNA_Evidence_for_Book_of_Mormon_Geography/index.html (accessed May 21, 2012).

¹⁷⁹ Maxwell, "The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer," 9. Elder Maxwell adds that despite their minor role in secular history, their "little theater," as he put it, "featured history's largest message" (p. 9), thus making it clear that this does not diminish the importance of the Book of Mormon's message.

generations because they follow matrilineal (mother to offspring)¹⁸⁰ and partilineal (father to son) lines, without going through the recombining process that the rest of DNA does.¹⁸¹ This, however, has its limitations. For starters, these markers only represent 0.01% of an individual's DNA.¹⁸² The rest of the genome (the other 99.9%) consists of DNA that recombines every generation, making it difficult to trace its origins. Everyone has about 1,024 ancestors who lived just few hundred years ago. Go back another couple hundred years and the number of ancestor slots goes up to 1,048,576. Go back a thousand years, and an individual living today has about 10,737,417,000 ancestor slots from that generation (many of these slots would be filled by the same person). But the genetic markers would only be able to detect two (if you are male, one for females) of these ancestors.¹⁸³ The rest of them may be undetectable, and some may not have even contributed to the modern gene pool—despite having living descendants today.

Looking specifically at the genetic markers used by scientists, studies have shown that these can disappear fairly quickly. Within twenty generations, only two out of every eighteen of these genetic markers will have survived to the then-current population.¹⁸⁴ This, however, does not mean that those who carried the now lost genetic markers do not have living descendants. John M. Butler, a forensic DNA scientist, explained that a study conducted in Iceland revealed that “the majority of the people living today in Iceland had ancestors living only 150 years ago that could not be detected based on the Y-chromosome [patrilineal] and mitochondrial [matrilineal] DNA tests being performed and yet the genealogical records exist showing that these people lived and were real ancestors.”¹⁸⁵ If Lehi and his family migrated to the America's in 600 BC, he and his wife Sariah would only be two of the millions of people that a Native American descended from, so it is unlikely that their DNA would be detectable, despite the fact that, based on the dynamics of population genetics, they are probably a common ancestor to all, or nearly all, Native Americans.¹⁸⁶

Approaching this from another angle, not only are modern assumptions about the Book of Mormon problematic, but there are several assumptions (known as the Hardy-Weinberg assumptions) that apply to population genetics, which must hold for the projections into the past

¹⁸⁰ Women pass on their mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) to all of their offspring (male and female) but only the females will pass it on to the next generation.

¹⁸¹ See John M. Butler, “Addressing Questions Surrounding the Book of Mormon and DNA Research,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 71. For a more thorough, yet still reader friendly introduction to DNA, see D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, *Who Are the Children of Lehi? DNA and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 31–40.

¹⁸² Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex*, 249.

¹⁸³ See D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, “Who Are the Children of Lehi?” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 168–172, or the book version (more fully cited above) Meldrum and Stephens, *Who Are the Children of Lehi?*, 85–91.

¹⁸⁴ See Ryan Parr, “Missing the Boat to Ancient America... Just Plain Missing the Boat,” *FARMS Review* 17/1 (2005): 87.

¹⁸⁵ John M. Butler, “Addressing Questions,” 75, brackets mine.

¹⁸⁶ See Matthew Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 253–256; Brain D. Stubbs, “Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 263–281.

made by geneticists to be valid. If the Book of Mormon narrative is true, however, then nearly every single one of these assumptions was violated among the descendants of Lehi, making it difficult, if not impossible, to reach any meaningful conclusions regarding the Book of Mormon based on DNA research.¹⁸⁷ The occurrence of genetic drift, founder effect, genetic bottlenecks, genetic swamp out and other like phenomena may have completely eliminated Lehi's genetic marker.¹⁸⁸

Assuming for the sake of argument that Lehi's (or Ishmael's, or Mulek's, or Sariah's, or Zoram's, etc.) DNA *did* survive, how is it to be recognized? Researchers have no idea what Lehi's DNA (or that of any other founder mentioned in the Book of Mormon) looked like—there is no reference sample.¹⁸⁹ Using modern Middle-Eastern populations or “Jewish” DNA for comparison with Native American genetic markers is fraught with its own set of problems,¹⁹⁰ and more recent European admixture could very well be masking corresponding genetic markers which are actually pre-Columbian.¹⁹¹ All of this is why Michael F. Whiting, director of BYU's DNA Sequencing Center, stated, “It would be the pinnacle of foolishness to base one's testimony on the results of a DNA analysis.”¹⁹²

It should be clear that DNA and the Book of Mormon is a complicated subject. Much more could be said about it than what is discussed above.¹⁹³ Suffice to say, DNA is only one limited tool

¹⁸⁷ See David A. McClellan, “Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 99–155.

¹⁸⁸ See Michael F. Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 79–97; Meldrum and Stephens, *Who Are the Children of Lehi?*, 41–52, 105–115. McClellan (cited above) also discusses some of these phenomena as they pertain to the violation of the Hardy-Weinberg assumptions.

¹⁸⁹ See John M. Butler, “A Few Thoughts from a Believing DNA Scientist,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 23–24.

¹⁹⁰ See David G. Stewart Jr., “DNA and the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 18/1 (2006): 110–113; Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool,” 225–261.

¹⁹¹ Ugo A. Perego, “The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans from a Maternally Inherited DNA Standpoint,” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 216: “Based on the molecular clocks currently used by the scientific community, it would be nearly impossible to distinguish a Eurasian lineage that arrived 2,600 years ago from those brought by Europeans after the discovery of America's double continent, simply because there would not have been enough time for these lineages to differentiate enough to allow discernment of pre-Columbian from post-Columbian admixture.” And again: “I also explain that it is not possible to distinguish those lineages from post-Columbian admixture, simply because 2,600 years is not enough time for Book of Mormon mtDNA to differentiate Lehi's descendants from their Eurasian counterparts.” (p. 225–226.) In contrast to Perego is McClellan, “Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature,” 134–135: “genetic lineages diverge quickly in small populations... such that a molecular clock cannot be invoked.” The migratory groups from the Book of Mormon represent just such small populations and, in McClellan's view, “most definitely would have violated the assumption of a molecular clock,” (p. 146) leading McClellan to conclude that if there is any surviving genetic data left from Book of Mormon founders, it would “appear to be older—perhaps much older—than 2,600 years.” (p. 147) In any event, the DNA would be masked by other categories.

¹⁹² Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon,” 96.

¹⁹³ Readers would do well to peruse the articles found in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research* (most of which have been cited here) along with the other articles and books mentioned in the above footnotes. Most of the articles in the already mentioned volume can also be found in either *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003) or *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003), and the previously cited Perego, “The Book of Mormon and the Origin of Native Americans,” has been

that has its productive uses in unraveling human population history, but which must be used in context with other, likewise limited but useful tools.¹⁹⁴

DNA and the Defenders

Defenders of the Book of Mormon who try to make a stronger case than can be made for the book based on DNA evidence are just as dangerous for the faith of the Saints. When people latch onto bad “evidence” they are vulnerable to experiencing a crisis of faith when a critic comes and easily exposes the faulty arguments upon which it rests. If our faith (and our apologetic) is to withstand such attacks, it must rest on a sure foundation (see Helaman 5:12; Matthew 7:24–27).

Believers who have tried to provide evidence for the Book of Mormon through the DNA haplogroup X have misrepresented the science, and made arguments based on misguided assumptions (including some of the assumptions discussed above) about both genetics and the Book of Mormon. When others have pointed out these flaws, they have only compounded the problem by making unfair accusations about alleged “conspiracies” and even questioned the faithfulness of those who disagree.¹⁹⁵ They insist that the statements of Joseph Smith should be taken as authoritative on the subject of Book of Mormon geography (the first assumption discussed above), but are then selective on which statements they use, and misrepresent those selected few to make them mean more than they do.¹⁹⁶

They also make another assumption: that the prophecies about the “seed” or “remnant” of Book of Mormon peoples means that there will be traceable DNA markers. In light of the above discussion, noting that one can be a descendant, or the “seed,” of a person without having their DNA markers, or even any of their DNA at all, if traced back far enough, this assumption is absurd. Not only that, but it should be obvious that the concepts of modern genetics were unknown to both Nephi and Joseph Smith, so there is no way they could have intended the word “seed” to mean discernable strands of DNA. Taking this view to the extreme, they insist that only those Native American’s who have DNA haplogroup X are Lehi’s descendants and are therefore the only ones entitled the great blessings promised to the future remnant of Lehi’s seed in the Book of Mormon. Not only is this view completely inaccurate, but it is entirely unfair to the many other Native

reprinted and updated in *No Weapon Shall Prosper: New Light on Sensitive Issues*, Robert L. Millet, ed. (Provo, Utah: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2011), 171–216. Also see Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 195–207 for a summary of the research.

¹⁹⁴ See John L. Sorenson, “The Problematic Role of DNA Testing in Unraveling Human History,” in *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, 1–21; Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 247–254. It is important to note that a number of these other tools support the presence of other Old World peoples in the America’s in pre-Columbian times that have not been detected by DNA testing. These will be brought up and discussed at various times throughout this commentary as discussion of relevant and related topics warrant.

¹⁹⁵ See Gregory L. Smith, “Often in Error, Seldom in Doubt: Rod Meldrum and Book of Mormon DNA,” *FARMS Review* 22/1 (2010): 17–161.

¹⁹⁶ See Matthew Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 15–85.

American's throughout North, Central, and South America who are faithful Latter-day Saints, and are also very likely "Lamanites."¹⁹⁷

Any effort to defend the faith should avoid these kinds of extreme positions, and should always be cautious, acknowledging the ever tentative and incomplete nature of our scientific (and in some respects, revelatory) knowledge; recognizing sometimes our arguments must change. It also must strive to properly represent the science and scholarship upon which it draws for support. Arguments that DNA offers favorable evidence of the Book of Mormon do not meet these standards.

The Book of Mormon can Bring us Nearer to God

Coming full circle, consider once again the quote by the Prophet Joseph Smith: "the Book of Mormon [is] the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."

The clause "keystone of our religion" has already been discussed. Critics would like to put emphasis on the clause "most correct book," and tend to extrapolate from that the idea that it should therefore be perfect and error free. After providing this out-of-context interpretation, they go on to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon has had nearly four thousand textual changes made, and therefore is not and cannot be the "most correct book," nor can it be "translated by the gift and power of God," since such a translation would presumably be error-free.¹⁹⁸

The Most Correct Book

As already discussed, the actual nature of the translation is not known, so it is not accurate to simply assume an error-free translation. Nonetheless, from the actual translation to the printing of the very first copy of the Book of Mormon, there are several steps where error could be introduced, so it cannot be presumed that errors or changes are evidence of translation error. As Daniel C. Peterson explained,

Even if the mental process of translation were inerrant and infallible, this would by no means imply that the manuscript or the printed versions of the Book of Mormon should be inerrant, for, by all accounts, Joseph Smith orally translated the Book of Mormon which was then written down by Oliver Cowdery and the other scribes. Thereafter a printer's manuscript was prepared (inserting a variety of changes) and the book finally printed. Thus any grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors in the

¹⁹⁷ See Matthew Roper, "Losing the Remnant: The New Exclusivist 'Movement' and the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 87–124.

¹⁹⁸ For an example of this criticism, see Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago, Illinois: Moody Press, 1979), 128–129, 131, 183. Critics also frequently take offence to the fact that the Bible is apparently not an exception on this point, and thus complain that the Book of Mormon is considered better than the Bible for Latter-day Saints.

text could theoretically be accounted for as errors of transmission by scribes and the printer.¹⁹⁹

Even still, the authors of the text made it repeatedly clear that it was not going to be an “error free” document (see the title page, 1 Nephi 19:6; 2 Nephi 33:4; Mormon 8:17; 9:31–33; Ether 12:23–26).²⁰⁰ This would only disqualify it as scripture for people who hold an inerrantist view, something not held by Latter-day Saints.²⁰¹ The warning of the title page is apt for making this point: “And now if there be fault, it be the mistake of men. Wherefore condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment seat of Christ.”²⁰² It could also be added that “most correct” is not the same as “perfectly correct,” but is rather a position of relativity. A “most correct” answer out of four choices still may be less than wholly accurate. Therefore, there is no reason to infer that “most correct” equals error-free.

All of this, however, is moot, since the full context makes it clear that Joseph was calling it the “most correct book” in terms of the “precepts” taught therein, not in terms of accuracy of recording historical fact, grammatical usage, or punctuation.²⁰³ George A. Horton Jr. explains:

When Joseph Smith said “the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth,” it seems evident that he was not talking about grammar, punctuation, or

¹⁹⁹ Daniel C. Peterson, “Chattanooga Cheapshot, or The Gall of Bitterness,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 5 (1993): 43. Here is each step from the initial translation to the publishing of the text, with how errors could have crept in at that step in parenthesis: (1) Joseph Smith dictates translation (Joseph could make a mistake while reading from the seer stone); (2) Scribe writes down what he thinks he heard Joseph read (scribe could mishear, or simply make a mistake while transcribing); (3) Original manuscript is copied onto the printer’s manuscript (copyist could have made mistakes or changes); (4) Typesetting is prepared from printer’s manuscript (typesetter could have made mistakes or changes). We have documentation of each of these kinds of mistakes, except for (1), which would be impossible to document since we don’t know what words Joseph saw on the seer stone. In other words, we know that errors were made in steps 2–4. For a technical discussion which highlights examples the different types of errors that did occur, see George A. Horton Jr., “Book of Mormon Transmission from Translator to Printed Text,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, BMSS 1:255–237. Also see Ash, *Shaken Faith Syndrome*, 209–211. It is also noteworthy that the majority of changes made were to the punctuation, which was added later and not part of the inspired translation.

²⁰⁰ See McConkie, “A Comparison,” 85–86 for a discussion of scriptural inerrancy and the significance of the Book of Mormon statements in that regard.

²⁰¹ It is also worth pointing out that most of modern scholarship is problematic for the inerrantist. The Bible is demonstrably not an inerrant document, so the view is quite problematic for its own adherents and not a stance to be recommended when striving to build faith upon a sure foundation. For an example of scholarship that makes the inerrantist view problematic, see Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament* (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Bart D. Ehrman, *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why* (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 2005). While I do not necessarily agree with all of Ehrman’s conclusions, he demonstrates conclusively that the Bible is *not* inerrant.

²⁰² Book of Mormon title page, in Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2009), 3. In the future, when a passage from the Book of Mormon is cited out of Skousen’s *Earliest Text* edition, it will be referenced using parenthetical citation, followed by the initials *ET* and then the page number. For example (Mosiah 27:9, *ET* 266).

²⁰³ See Monte Stephen Nyman, “Book of Mormon, as most correct book,” in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion*, 128–129. Also see Esplin, “Getting ‘Nearer to God,’” 46–47.

spelling. He was referring to the clarity and depth of doctrine, to the mission and message of the book, to the spirit of inspiration that it fosters, to the divine desire that it sparks in the soul to make the “mighty change,” and to the abiding love of the Lord that it brings into our hearts. All of these correct things help make the Book of Mormon just exactly what the Prophet said it was: “The most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.”²⁰⁴

Brian Hauglid offers a particularly insightful comment on this concept: “Joseph Smith’s statement, therefore, is a concise declaration that the Book of Mormon is the ‘most correct of any book’ because it has the power to change individuals into more correct (Christlike) people. This change can only come because of better understanding Christ as the ‘keystone’ figure of the Book of Mormon, and by applying the atonement, which embraces all of the ‘precepts’ that bring one nearer to God.”²⁰⁵ In other words, it is the “most correct book” because it has the greatest power of bringing people to Christ. Of course, whether or not one actually accepts that claim as true depends in large measure on whether or not one accepts the book as divine, and the man (Joseph Smith) as a prophet.

Hand in hand with this allegation is the charge that the Church is trying to cover up these changes. This is utter nonsense.²⁰⁶ The 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon issued by the Church provides the following disclaimer:

About this edition: Some minor errors in the text have been perpetuated in past editions of the Book of Mormon. This edition contains corrections that seem appropriate to bring the material into conformity with prepublication manuscripts and early editions edited by the Prophet Joseph Smith.²⁰⁷

When additional changes were made for the 2013 edition, the Church highly publicized the news and highlighted the changes made.²⁰⁸ Discussion of the Book of Mormon variants has been printed in the *Ensign* on more than one occasion.²⁰⁹ For more than two decades, Royal Skousen, an internationally renowned linguistic theorist, BYU professor, and faithful Latter-day Saint,

²⁰⁴ Horton, “Book of Mormon Transmission,” 251.

²⁰⁵ Brian M. Hauglid, “Review of *The Most Correct Book: Why the Book of Mormon is the Keystone Scripture*, by Monte Nyman,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 158.

²⁰⁶ See Daniel C. Peterson, “Is the Book of Mormon True? Notes on the Debate,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, 142–143 for a response similar to the one I’ve presented here.

²⁰⁷ At the bottom of the page which provides “A Brief Explanation About the Book of Mormon,” in the 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon.

²⁰⁸ See “Summary of Approved Adjustments for the 2013 Edition of the Scriptures,” 4–5, online at http://www.lds.org/bc/content/shared/content/english/pdf/scriptures/approved-adjustments_eng.pdf (accessed May 3, 2013).

²⁰⁹ See Stan Larson, “Changes in Early Texts of the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (September 1976): 77–82; George Horton, “Understanding Textual Changes in the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (December 1983): 24–28.

meticulously studied and published the variants in the Book of Mormon. This research was largely funded and published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship (formerly known as the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, or FARMS), which was made a part of BYU in the late-1990s.²¹⁰ As a part of this effort, Skousen documented a number of previously unknown variants, and suggested hundreds of *additional* changes as conjectural emendations. This effort culminated in the publishing of *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text*, a critical text edition of the Book of Mormon, published by the prestigious Yale University Press. Furthermore, other Latter-day Saints have also published independent editions of the Book of Mormon using older editions of the text, including replicas of the original 1830 printing, without reprimand.²¹¹ All of this has made the changes over time quite transparent.²¹²

Nearer to God

Getting past all the tangential topics, the ultimate importance of the Book of Mormon is that it can bring the reader “nearer to God,” so long as they let it. Elder Russell M. Nelson said of the book, “There is a power in this book that can touch the hearts and lift the lives of honest seekers of truth.”²¹³ Speaking of the first time he ever read the book, Elder Walter F. González testified, “It was as if the book was permeated with the Spirit of the Lord and made me feel closer to God.”²¹⁴

²¹⁰ For the fruits of this effort, see Skousen’s multi-volume work on the CRITICAL TEXT PROJECT, including *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimiles of the Extent Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); *The Printers Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Entire Text*, two parts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001); *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon*, six parts (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2004–2009). For additional information on the CRITICAL TEXT PROJECT, see M. Gerald Bradford and Alison V.P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: History and Findings of the Critical Text Project* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2002); M. Gerald Bradford, “Recovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon: An Interim Review,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/1 (2006): 30–31. The articles which follow were contributions to this “interim review” in the same issue of the *JBMS*: Terry L. Givens, “The Book of Mormon Critical Text Project,” 32–35; Robert J. Matthews, “Joseph Smith and the Text of the Book of Mormon,” 38–42; Grant R. Hardy, “Scholarship for the Ages,” 43–53; Kevin L. Barney, “Seeking Joseph Smith’s Voice,” 54–59; Kerry Muhlestein, “Insights Available as We Approach the Original Text,” 60–65.

²¹¹ Grant Hardy’s *The Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Edition* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2003), for example, uses the 1920 edition, while Robert A. Rees and Eugene England’s *The Reader’s Book of Mormon*, seven volumes (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2008) uses the 1830 edition. Electronic facsimiles of all major editions of the Book of Mormon can be found at <http://bookofmormononline.net/#/fax> (accessed May 21, 2012). For further evidence of the transparency of the Book of Mormon’s textual tradition, see the following in *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* (BMRC) and *To All the World* (TAW): Royal Jon Skousen, “Book of Mormon, editions of,” *BMRC*, 112–114; Royal Skousen, “Editions (1830-1981),” *TAW*, 88–90; Royal Jon Skousen, “Book of Mormon, manuscripts of,” *BMRC*, 124–128; Royal Skousen, “Manuscripts of the Book of Mormon,” *TAW*, 178–180; Larry C. Porter, “Book of Mormon, printing and publication of,” *BMRC*, 134–139. That there have been changes is also mentioned in Turley and Slaughter, *How We Got the Book of Mormon*, 43–44 and 58–59, a popular coffee table book for Latter-day Saints, just published in 2011.

²¹² Another component of this criticism is that some of the changes have had theological implications, thus suggesting that Joseph was changing his own ideas and subsequently editing the Book of Mormon to reflect his new theology. There is no room for a case-by-case analysis here, but some of these will be dealt with later in this commentary, as necessary. For a general response to these examples, see http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Textual_changes (accessed May 21, 2012).

²¹³ Russell M. Nelson, “Be Thou an Example of the Believers,” *Ensign* (November, 2010): 48.

²¹⁴ Walter F. González, “Becoming More Powerful Priesthood Holders,” *Ensign* (November, 2009): 51.

That power can especially be felt while thoughtfully reading and applying Alma’s great sermon on faith (see Alma 32), King Benjamin’s powerful discourse (see Mosiah 2–5), or the Savior’s personal post-resurrection ministry to the people of the Book of Mormon (see 3 Nephi 11–18). This power comes from “abiding by its precepts.” After providing some analysis of the key words in that phrase, Elder Joe J. Christensen, an emeritus Seventy, explained, “The Book of Mormon is filled with precepts—directions, rules, and commandments—that if applied in our lives will help draw us closer to God than the precepts we will find in any other book.”²¹⁵

The key is getting people to open their minds and hearts to the book so that it can accomplish this task—people will not follow its teachings or feel of its power if they are closed off to taking the book seriously. For many, this will only require the proper invitation and urging from their friends and family who have already gained a testimony of the book, as was the case in Elder Nelson’s experience.²¹⁶ “If, however, one... is too preoccupied with the process of the book’s emergence, such transcendent truths... can easily be overlooked.”²¹⁷ For some, concerns about textual variants, DNA studies, critical approaches to Joseph Smith and the other witnesses, and a host of other concerns brought up in anti-Mormon books and websites, along with other critical literature, can become a stumbling block that keeps people from reading with a humble heart, if they even read it at all.

To believers, such may seem to be putting “things that matter the most...at the mercy of things that matter least,” as Daniel H. Ludlow put it.²¹⁸ To some extent, this is certainly true. However, as Grant Hardy has noticed, “not all readers come to the text wanting to be converted; many are simply curious, perhaps from a general interest in religion and culture or because they have Latter-day Saint friends and neighbors. Such readers are naturally concerned with the more publically accessible, tangible matters of history, evidence, and rational argument.”²¹⁹ People who can never overcome those challenges will forever miss out on the power and blessings the Book of Mormon has to offer.

It is the mission of apologetics to clear away those stumbling blocks and show readers that many good reasons to take the book seriously exist. Ludlow explains this using a scriptural paraphrase:

Before ye seek for the physical evidences of the Book of Mormon, seek ye for a spiritual testimony of its truthfulness. And after ye have obtained a testimony of its truthfulness by the power of the Holy Ghost, the physical evidences shall be made manifest unto you if ye seek them, for ye will seek them for the intent to do good—

²¹⁵ Joe J. Christensen, “Abiding by its Precepts,” in *Living the Book of Mormon*, 3.

²¹⁶ See the story told in Nelson, “Be Thou an Example,” 48–49.

²¹⁷ Maxwell, “The Book of Mormon: A Great Answer,” 8.

²¹⁸ Daniel H. Ludlow, “The Challenge of the Book of Mormon,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, BMSS 1:15. Ludlow is borrowing the concept and the quoted language from Elder Robert L. Backman, “To the Young Men,” *Ensign* (November 1980): 42.

²¹⁹ Grant Hardy, “Introduction,” in *The Book of Mormon: A Readers Edition*, viii.

to interest the non-believer, to strengthen the believer, to liberate those bound down with false traditions, to free the honest in heart from incorrect teachings and doctrines, and to strengthen the believer and those wavering from the pressures of ridicule and persecution.²²⁰

Having already gained a testimony, apologists seek to help those who are wavering, preoccupied, or “bound down” and unable to seek a testimony themselves overcome the objections that prevent them from feeling the Spirit and gaining a testimony of the book’s truth and spiritual value.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion and has greater power to bring people closer to God than any other book. As such, it is absolutely essential that the book be defended against the myriad of criticisms it is subjected to; not only because with it goes all the claims of the Church, but also because of the potential impact it can have on every individual person if the obstacles that keep them from reading it can be removed.

The Book of Mormon plays the role of keystone in our witness of Christ, our doctrine, and our testimony. Given the important role the book plays, it is no surprise that God has provided witnesses to its authenticity. As these witnesses and the details they can provide about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon are studied, not only does powerful evidence for the book emerge, but also greater appreciation is developed for the miracle that the book really is.

The Book of Mormon was written for the modern day, but equally important is the fact that it is an ancient book, and as such should be read with an ancient context in mind. Modern assumptions about the book must be examined and tested. Sometimes failure to do this can make one susceptible to criticisms, such as the DNA attack on the Book of Mormon, which are really the result of modern misreading. Criticisms revolving around the textual variants in the Book of Mormon are likewise the product of faulty assumptions which should be avoided.

In the end, the most important point is that by reading and living by the teachings of the Book of Mormon, a person can get nearer to God. Consider, in closing, these words from President Ezra Taft Benson:

It is not just that the Book of Mormon teaches us truth, though it indeed does that. It is not just that the Book of Mormon bears testimony of Christ, though it indeed does that, too. But there is something more. There is a power in the book which will begin to flow into your lives the moment you begin a serious study of the book. You will find greater power to resist temptation. You will find the power to avoid

²²⁰ Ludlow, “The Challenge of the Book of Mormon,” 16, loosely paraphrased from Jacob 2:18–19.

deception. You will find the power to stay on the strait and narrow path. The scriptures are called “the words of life” (D&C 84:85), and nowhere is that more true than it is of the Book of Mormon. When you begin to hunger and thirst after those words, you will find life in greater and greater abundance.²²¹

The ultimate goal of this commentary is to assist others in engaging in the kind of “serious study” of the Book of Mormon that can deepen their understanding and appreciation for the Book of Mormon, and help them unlock that power described by President Benson, along with Elders Nelson and González. That will frequently mean taking time to address criticisms. While for many these issues may seem peripheral and unimportant compared to the great and powerful truths of the Book of Mormon, for those who have experienced the inner discord that comes when presented with a vast array of new “facts” which directly challenge ones faith, these issues are of the utmost importance. Finding satisfactory answers is crucial to their being able to once again feel the powerful spirit which accompanies a prayerful reading of the Book of Mormon. Yet all too often, such answers are too hard to find. Too many Latter-day Saints brush off these concerns too casually without ever really engaging them.

On the other hand, facilitating the reader’s “serious study” will also involve using scholarship to bolster faith in the Book of Mormon through evidence, as well as using it to shed new and greater light on the text, to unlock deeper meaning, and ultimately enhance ones experience while reading the Book of Mormon. It is my hope that all of this will help readers feel the power of the Book of Mormon, draw nearer to God, and enjoy life in “greater abundance.”

²²¹ Ezra Taft Benson, “The Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign* (January 1992): 7.