



By Tad R. Callister
Sunday School General President

God's Compelling Witness: The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon is God's compelling witness of the divinity of Jesus Christ, the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, and the absolute truth of this Church.

The Book of Mormon is not only the keystone of our religion, but it can also become the keystone of our testimonies so that when trials or unanswered questions confront us, it can hold our testimonies securely in place. This book is the one weight on the scales of truth that exceeds the combined weight of all the critics' arguments. Why? Because if it is true, then Joseph Smith was a prophet and this is the restored Church of Jesus Christ, regardless of any historical or other arguments to the contrary. For this reason, the critics are intent on disproving the Book of Mormon, but the obstacles they face are insurmountable because this book is true.

First, the critics must explain how Joseph Smith, a 23-year-old farm boy with limited education, created a book with hundreds of unique names and places, as well as detailed stories and events. Accordingly, many critics propose that he was a creative genius who relied upon numerous books

and other local resources to create the historical content of the Book of Mormon. But contrary to their assertion, there is not a solitary witness who claims to have seen Joseph with any of these alleged resources before the translation began.

Even if this argument were true, it is woefully insufficient to explain the Book of Mormon's existence. One must also answer the question: how did Joseph read all of these alleged resources, winnow out the irrelevant, keep the intricate facts straight as to who was in what place and when, and then dictate it by perfect memory? For when Joseph Smith translated, he had no notes whatsoever. In fact, his wife Emma recalled: "He had neither manuscript nor book to read from. . . . If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me."¹

So how did Joseph perform this remarkable feat of dictating a 500-plus-page book without any notes? To do so, he must not only have been a creative genius but also have had a photographic memory of prodigious proportions. But if that is true, why did his critics not call attention to this remarkable talent?

But there is more. These arguments account only for the book's historical content. The real issues still remain: how did Joseph produce a book that





radiates with the Spirit, and where did he get such profound doctrine, much of which clarifies or contradicts the Christian beliefs of his time?

For example, the Book of Mormon teaches, contrary to most Christian beliefs, that the Fall of Adam was a positive step forward. It reveals the covenants made at baptism, which are not addressed in the Bible.

In addition, one might ask: where did Joseph get the powerful insight that because of Christ's Atonement, He can not only cleanse us but also perfect us? Where did he get the stunning sermon on faith in Alma 32? Or King Benjamin's sermon on the Savior's Atonement, perhaps the most remarkable sermon on this subject in all scripture? Or the allegory of the olive tree with all its complexity and doctrinal richness? When I read this allegory, I have to map it out to follow its intricacies. Are we now supposed to believe that Joseph Smith just dictated these sermons off the top of his head with no notes whatsoever?

Contrary to such a conclusion, God's fingerprints are all over the Book of Mormon, as evidenced by its majestic doctrinal truths, particularly its masterful sermons on the Atonement of Jesus Christ.

If Joseph were not a prophet, then in order to account for these and many other remarkable doctrinal insights, the critics must make the argument that he was also a theological genius. But if that were the case, one might ask: why was Joseph the only one in the 1,800 years following Christ's ministry to produce such a breadth of unique and clarifying doctrines? Because it was revelation, not brilliance, that was the source of this book.

But even if we suppose that Joseph were a creative and theological genius with a photographic memory—these talents alone do not make him a skilled writer. To explain the Book of Mormon's existence, the critics must also make the claim that Joseph was a naturally gifted writer at age 23. Otherwise, how did he interweave scores of names, places, and events into a harmonious whole without inconsistencies? How did he pen detailed war strategies, compose eloquent sermons, and coin phrases that are highlighted, memorized, quoted, and placed on refrigerator doors by millions of people, phrases such as, "When ye are in the service of your fellow beings ye are only in the service of your God" (Mosiah 2:17) or "Men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25). These are messages

with a heartbeat—messages that live and breathe and inspire. To suggest that Joseph Smith at age 23 possessed the skills necessary to write this monumental work in a single draft in approximately 65 working days is simply counter to the realities of life.

President Russell M. Nelson, an experienced and skilled writer, shared that he had over 40 rewrites of a recent general conference talk. Are we now to believe that Joseph Smith, on his own, dictated the entire Book of Mormon in a single draft with mainly minor grammatical changes made thereafter?

Joseph's wife Emma confirmed the impossibility of such an undertaking: "Joseph Smith [as a young man] could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter; let alone dictat[e] a book like the Book of Mormon."²

And finally, even if one accepts all of the foregoing arguments, dubious as they may be, the critics still face another looming obstacle. Joseph claimed that the Book of Mormon was written on golden plates. This claim received unrelenting criticism in his day—for "everyone" knew that ancient histories were written on papyrus or parchment, until years later, when metal plates with ancient writings were discovered. In addition, the critics claimed that the use of cement, as described in the Book of Mormon, was beyond the technical expertise of these early Americans—until cement structures were found in ancient America. How do the critics now account for these and similar unlikely discoveries? Joseph, you see, must also have been a very, very lucky guesser. Somehow, in spite of all the odds against him, against all existing scientific and academic knowledge, he guessed right when all the others were wrong.

When all is said and done, one might wonder how someone could believe that all these alleged factors and forces, as proposed by the critics, fortuitously combined in such a way that enabled Joseph to write the Book of Mormon and thus foster a satanic hoax. But how does this make sense? In direct opposition to such an assertion, this book has inspired millions to reject Satan and to live more Christlike lives.

While someone might choose to believe the critics' line of reasoning, it is, for me, an intellectual and spiritual dead end. To believe such, I would have to accept one unproven assumption after another. In addition, I would have to disregard the testimony of every one of the 11 witnesses,³ even

though each remained true to his testimony to the very end; I would have to reject the divine doctrine that fills page after page of this sacred book with its supernal truths; I would have to ignore the fact that multitudes, including myself, have come closer to God by reading this book than any other; and above all, I would have to deny the confirming whisperings of the Holy Spirit. This would be contrary to everything I know to be true.

One of my good and bright friends left the Church for a time. He recently wrote to me of his return: "Initially, I wanted the Book of Mormon to be proven to me historically, geographically, linguistically, and culturally. But when I changed my focus to what it teaches

about the gospel of Jesus Christ and His saving mission, I began to gain a testimony of its truthfulness. One day while reading the Book of Mormon in my room, I paused, knelt down, and gave a heartfelt prayer and felt resoundingly that Heavenly Father whispered to my spirit that the Church and the Book of Mormon were definitely true. My three-and-a-half-year period of reinvestigating the Church led me back wholeheartedly and convincingly to its truthfulness."

If one will take the time to humbly read and ponder the Book of Mormon, as did my friend, and give ear to the sweet fruits of the Spirit, then he or she will eventually receive the desired witness.

The Book of Mormon is one of God's priceless gifts to us. It is both sword and shield—it sends the word of God into battle to fight for the hearts of the just and serves as an arch defender of the truth. As Saints, we have not only the privilege to defend the Book of Mormon but also the opportunity to take the offense—to preach with power its divine doctrine and bear testimony of its crowning witness of Jesus Christ.

I bear my solemn testimony that the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God. It is God's compelling witness of the divinity of Jesus Christ, the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, and the absolute truth of this Church. May it become the keystone of our testimonies, so it may be said of us, as it was of the converted Lamanites, they "never did fall away" (Alma 23:6). In the name of Jesus Christ, amen. ■

NOTES

1. Emma Smith, in "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," *Saints' Herald*, Oct. 1, 1879, 289, 290.
2. Emma Smith, in "Last Testimony of Sister Emma," 290.
3. See "The Testimony of Three Witnesses" and "The Testimony of Eight Witnesses," Book of Mormon.

