



A Witness of One's Own

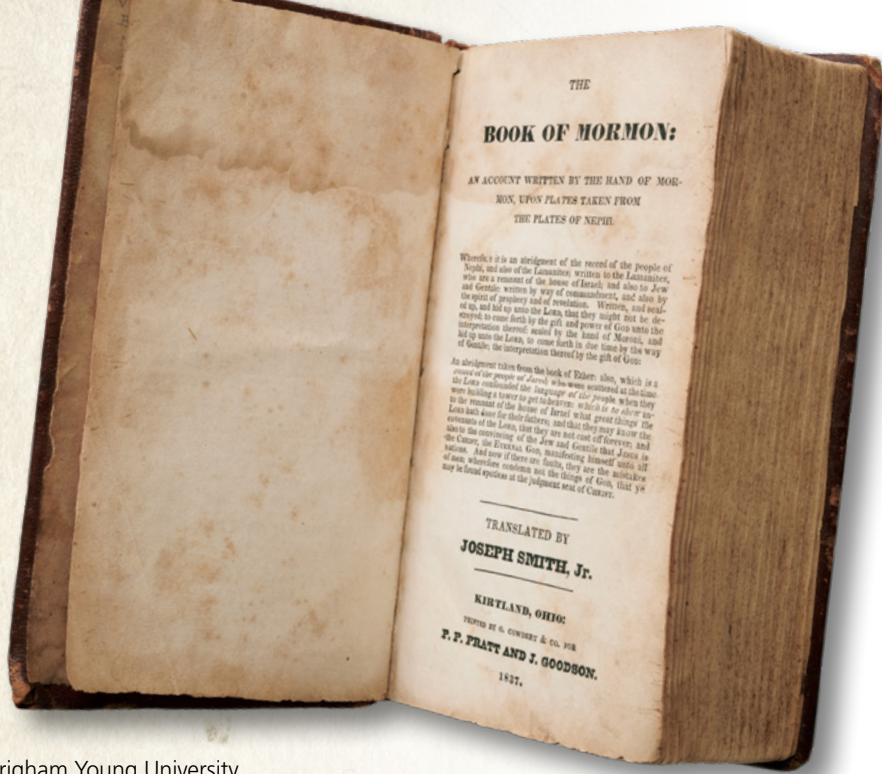
Stories of the early Saints remind us that a testimony of the Book of Mormon can come in many different ways.



Zina D. H. Young



Eliza R. Snow



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Not long ago, President Russell M. Nelson asked us to think about what our lives would be like without the Book of Mormon.¹ The earliest Church members certainly knew life without it—they each had to gain a testimony of this unknown book. As we end this year’s curriculum study of the Book of Mormon and transition to studying Church history together next year, the stories of these early Saints remind us that the path of conversion is personal and individual.

All Are Needed

Consider the two women in the accompanying photographs, Zina D. H. Young and Eliza R. Snow. Dressed in similar dark dresses and with lace gloves and vintage hairstyles, they seem to look alike. Quick biographical summaries also look almost identical: both joined the Church early on, crossed the plains to the Salt Lake Valley, were married to prophets, and served as Relief Society General Presidents. If our comparison ended there, however, we would miss the power of their individual journeys.

Zina said she first “saw the Book of Mormon, that strange, new book, lying on the window sill of our sitting-room” when she was 14 years old. As she picked up the book, a “sweet influence of the Holy Spirit accompanied it to such an extent that I pressed it to my bosom in a rapture of delight, murmuring as I did so, “This is the truth, truth, truth!”²

While Zina’s testimony of the Book of Mormon came quickly, before she had even read a word, conviction did not come as easily for Eliza. Her mother and sister joined the Church first. Eliza met Joseph Smith and thought he had “an honest face.”³ She heard two

of the Three Witnesses—men who saw and handled the golden plates—talk about the book, and “such impressive testimonies” she had never heard before. Even so, she didn’t want to move too quickly and be deceived. Thinking that it all might be just a “flash in the pan,” it took her four years of studying scripture before her “heart was . . . fixed” and she decided to be baptized.⁴

The Church needed the unique experiences and voices of both of these sisters. In the 19th century, Eliza was known as the “head” of the Relief Society and Zina as the “heart.” Eliza was a poet and an intellectual—she taught and testified with power. Zina consistently demonstrated love for others—compassion poured out of her.⁵ Neither of these was the one-and-only right way to be a Relief Society president or Latter-day Saint. There was a place for both of them. More than that, the Church needed both of them.

As Elder Dieter F. Uchtdorf of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught: “We need your unique talents and perspectives. The diversity of persons and peoples all around the globe is a strength of this Church.”⁶ The Church needs all of us. There is a place for all of us.



For most people, reading the Book of Mormon is essential to gaining a testimony of its truth.

LEFT PHOTOGRAPH BY JANNAE BINGHAM

Everyone's Path Is Different

For some converts—both in the early Church and today—their first opinion of the Book of Mormon is not a positive one. For example, a neighbor of the Smith family named Ezra Thayre first heard about the “Golden Bible” in 1830. He didn’t believe that Joseph, a familiar farm boy, could help produce a divine book. The thought, he said, “filled [me] with wrath.” But his anger melted away when he touched a copy of the Book of Mormon. Ezra said that in that moment, he “received a shock with such exquisite joy that no pen can write and no tongue can express.” He bought a copy of the book, and when he began to read, he “felt a double portion of the Spirit.” He was “truly in heaven.”⁷

For most people, reading the Book of Mormon is essential to gaining a testimony of its truth. An early member of the Church named Sarah D. Pea wrote about the day missionaries first shared the book with her family. “I felt anxious to see the Book of Mormon,” she said, and asked to be excused so she could read. She spent most of the night reading and was “greatly astonished” at what the book taught. “It left an impression upon my mind not to be forgotten,” she wrote. “For in fact the book appeared to be open before my eyes for weeks.”⁸

For many early converts, reading the Bible helped them develop a relationship with the Book of Mormon. After learning about the new book of scripture, an early Saint named Caroline B. Crosby said that she “was soon convinced of the truth.” However, she “considered it

best to read the Book of Mormon, and search the scriptures until I was thoroughly convinced that it was the work of the Lord.” After months of studying, she chose baptism.⁹ Her sister, Louisa B. Pratt, attempted to read the Book of Mormon more than once but never progressed. It was reading the Bible that eventually confirmed to her the truth of the Book of Mormon and allowed her to develop a relationship with that book too.¹⁰

We All Have Our Own Timeline

In 1830, an early missionary named Samuel Smith introduced the Book of Mormon to a preacher named Phineas Young. Using the now-familiar pattern that Moroni gave, Samuel promised, “If you will read this book with a prayerful heart and ask God to give you a witness, you will know of the truth of this work.”

Phineas agreed to the invitation—although later he admitted that he opened the book only to “make [himself] acquainted with the errors.” To his surprise, as he read and studied he was

persuaded of its truth. He preached from it for more than a year, until he decided he could no longer reconcile his current religion and the Book of Mormon. He determined that he must “leave one and cleave to the other”¹¹ and was baptized as a Latter-day Saint.

Although several siblings quickly shared his new beliefs, his brother Brigham did not. Brigham decided to wait a little while and—as he described it—“apply my heart” to the teachings. After studying for two years, Brigham “made up [his] mind to receive” the Book of Mormon and decided to be baptized. He later testified, “I knew it was true, as well as I knew I could see with my eyes, or feel by the touch of my fingers.”¹²

Each of the Youngs received a witness of the Book of Mormon in their own time and in their own way, just as we may. Brigham later became the second prophet and President of the Church, and his words have been called to mind by our living prophet today, who said, “I might paraphrase President Brigham Young in saying, ‘I wish I had the voice of seven thunders to wake up the people’ to the truth and power of the Book of Mormon.”¹³

A Promise for Everyone

God speaks to each of His children “after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding” (Doctrine and

Covenants 1:24). For us, that promise could mean that we will have the chance to read the Book of Mormon in our native language—something increasingly possible as the Church spreads across the globe. But this promise also refers to the individual way God speaks to each one of us. President Nelson has invited us on multiple occasions to make an effort to become familiar with that voice. “God gives us the pattern for success, happiness, and joy in this life,” he testified. “We are to *hear* the words of the Lord, *hearken* to them, and *heed* what He has told us!”¹⁴

As we follow this prophetic advice, we—like the early Saints—can receive a witness all our own. ■

NOTES

1. Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like without It?” *Ensign*, Nov. 2017, 60–63.
2. Zina D. H. Young, “How I Gained My Testimony of the Truth,” *Young Woman's Journal*, April 1893, 318.
3. See Jill Mulvay Derr and Karen Lynn Davidson, “A Wary Heart Becomes ‘Fixed Unalterably’: Eliza R. Snow’s Conversion to Mormonism,” *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Fall 2004), 116.
4. See Edward Tullidge, *Women of Mormondom* (1877), 63–64.
5. See Susa Young Gates, *History of the Young Ladies’ Mutual Improvement Association* (1911), 21.
6. Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Come, Join with Us,” *Ensign*, Nov. 2013, 23.
7. “Testimony of Brother E. Thayre,” *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald*, Oct. 1862, 79–80.
8. Sarah De Armon Pea Rich, *Autobiography*, typescript, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University (hereafter LTPSC BYU).
9. See *No Place to Call Home: The 1807–1857 Life Writings of Caroline Barnes Crosby, Chronicler of Outlying Mormon Communities*, ed. Edward Leo Lyman and others (2005), 32–33; spelling and capitalization standardized.
10. See *The History of Louisa Barnes Pratt: Being the Autobiography of a Mormon Missionary Widow and Pioneer*, ed. S. George Ellsworth (1998), 55–56.
11. See Phineas Howe Young, “Life of Phineas Young—Written by Himself,” 1838, LTPSC BYU.
12. Brigham Young, “A Discourse,” Aug. 8, 1852, *Deseret News—Extra*, Sept. 14, 1852, 36.
13. Russell M. Nelson, “The Book of Mormon: What Would Your Life Be Like without It?” 63.
14. Russell M. Nelson, “Hear Him,” *Ensign*, May 2020, 89.

