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William E. McLellan's Testimony of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: In 1880 James T. Cobb, a graduate of Dartmouth and Amherst colleges and a resident of Salt Lake City, was making an attempt to establish the falsity of the Book of Mormon through an extensive examination of its origins. Among those to whom he directed letters of inquiry was William E. McLellan, whose close association with Joseph Smith and the witnesses of the Book of Mormon in the early years of the Church made him an appropriate subject for correspondence. William E. McLellan joined the Church in 1831. Although he became an early critic of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, he nevertheless progressed to top leadership positions and on February 15, 1835, he was ordained as one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve. Yet due to his criticism of Church leadership he was excommunicated in 1838. The testimony reproduced in this article, written in reply to James T. Cobb's inquiry, is significant because despite McLellan's disillusionment with Joseph Smith, he nevertheless was unable to deny his conviction that the Book of Mormon was what it claimed to be.



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Larry C. Porter

In 1880 James T. Cobb, a graduate of Dartmouth and Amherst colleges and a resident of Salt Lake City, was making an attempt to establish the falsity of the *Book of Mormon* through an extensive examination of its origins. Among those to whom he directed letters of inquiry was William E. McLellan, whose close association with Joseph Smith and the witnesses of the *Book of Mormon* in the early years of the Church made him an appropriate subject for correspondence.

William E. McLellan joined the Church in 1831. Although he became an early critic of Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, he nevertheless progressed to top leadership positions and on February 15, 1835, he was ordained as one of the original members of the Quorum of the Twelve. He later wrote a letter criticizing the Prophet, was suspended from fellowship and then restored. He again lost confidence in Church leadership, not, apparently, from what he had seen but from what he had heard, and soon stopped praying and keeping the commandments. On May 11, 1838, he was excommunicated. Later he tried to start a church of his own, which failed, after which he took up the practice of medicine. He died in Missouri in 1883.¹

The following testimony was written in reply to James T. Cobb's inquiry. Its significance lies in the fact that even though McLellan was disillusioned with Joseph Smith and other Church leaders, as the letter makes clear, he nevertheless was unable to deny his conviction that the *Book of Mormon* was what it claimed to be. The original of this letter is located in the New York Public Library, New York City.

Independence Mo. Aug. 14th 1880.

Mr. J. T. Cobb.

Yours of Aug. 9th lies before me, and has been carefully read and considered. I did not answer your former letter because I did not think I could do any good by it, add I now have doubts as to any good resulting, but I'll comply with your request.

I am "*opinionated*." When I thoroughly examine a subject and settle my mind, then higher evidence must be introduced before I change. I have set to my seal that the Book of Mormon is a true, divine record and it will require more evidence than I have ever seen to ever shake me relative to its purity. I have read many "Exposes." I have seen all their arguments. But my evidences

are above them all!

I have no faith in Mormonism, as an ism, even from its start, neither have I in Latter day Saintism from its start—through all its developments. I have no confidence that the church organized by J. Smith and O. Cowdery was set up or established as it ought to have been. And the further its run its run still farther from the true way—farther from the plain simplicity of that Divine record, the Book of M. I don't know that I am surprised at a thinking man for rejecting L.D.S.ism at its now developed *in any and all* branches of what is called Mormonism. But when a man goes at the Book of M. he touches the apple of my eye. He fights against truth—against purity—against light—against the purist, or one of the truest, purist books on earth. I have more confidence in the Book of Mormon than any book of this wide earth! And its not became I don't know its contents, for I have probably read it through 20 times. I have read it carefully through within a year, and made many notes on it. It must be that a man does not love purity when he finds fault [*sic*] with the Book of Mormon!! Fight the wrongs of L.D.S.ism as much as you please, but let that unique, that inimitable book alone. I have but little confidence in the purity of a man's life or in his principles of action after becoming acquainted with that Book, and then fight or oppose its divine excellency! Hence, you may know what I think of your course!!

When I first joined the church in 1831, soon I became acquainted with all the Smith family and the Whitmer family, heard all their testimonies, which agreed in the main points; and I believed them then and I believe them yet. But don't believe the many stories (contradictory) got up since, for I individually know many of them are false.

My advice to you is cease your opposition and strife against the Book, and fight against wrong doing in professors: for you might just as well fight against the rocky mountains as the Book!!

David Whitmer has lost his thumb on his right hand several years ago, and cannot write. And he would not be willing *to* write much to a man who fights the Book of M. which he knows to be *true*. I saw him June 1879, and heard him bear his solemn testimony to the truth of the book—as sincerely and solemnly as when he bore it to me in Paris, Ill. in July 1831. I believed him then and still believe him. You seem to think he and I ought to come out and tell something—some darkness relative to that book. We should lie if we did, for we know *nothing* against its credibility or divine truth.

I can but hope you will alter your course and use your talents, energy and all your exertions in behalf of the truthfulness of that glorious volume!!

With profound respect for truth, purity & holiness I subscribe myself a lover of all that is true and wholesome.

I as ever.

W. E. McLelland M.D.

P.S. Like you I want to add a few words. I never had but one letter from you until this one. You seem to think S. Rigdon the bottom of all M.ism. Many people know better. He never heard of the work of Smith & Cowdery, until C. and P. P. Pratt brought the Book to him in Mentor, O. True enough, I have but little confidence in S. Rigdon, but I know he was more the tool

of J. Smith than his teacher and director. He was docile in J. S. hands to my knowledge.

I left the church in Aug. 1836, not because I disbelieved the Book or the (then) doctrines preached or held by the Church, but because the *Leading men* to a great extent left their religion and run into and after speculation, pride, and popularity! Just like the Israelites and the Nephites often did. I quit because I could not uphold the Presidency as men of God; and I never united with Joseph and party afterward!! I have often examined all the *reasons you* assign, but they have but little bearing on my mind. I know a man can sit down and find crookedness in almost any thing by prying closely with it. In that light you are to work at the Book, and M.ism. Your life like all other *exposers* will be spent in vain, and worse than in vain. Then spend your time and energy at something more worthy of a lover of truth. Great events are just a little ahead of us. Great things are on hand today, but they will increase. Again I say I have no faith in any party or faction of L.D.S.ism any where in the world. I live alone outside all churches. I most firmly believe that the Lord will *establish* the *Church of Christ* shortly, and then if they will accept me, I'll unite with them!!! Thus I look for power from God to be displayed among his ministers. And then the Book of M. will be a kind of *standard* for faithful. But I'll close hoping you may yet come to see the truth.

Give my respects to J. F. Smith. W. E. M.

1. Andrew Jenson, *Latter-day Saint Biographical Encyclopedia* (Salt Lake City, 1901), Vol. I, pp. 82–83.