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"Somebody Wrote It:" The Book of Mormon's Missionary Message to a 21st-Century World

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“SOMEBODY WROTE IT:” THE BOOK OF MORMON’S MISSIONARY MESSAGE TO A 21ST-CENTURY WORLD

Jim Bennett

Abstract: *Nathan Oman’s “Welding Another Link in Wonder’s Chain: The Task of Latter-day Saint Intellectuals in the Church’s Third Century” wisely called for “new language in which to celebrate the Restoration.” That new language can be found in understanding the power of the Book of Mormon, which is the tangible miracle at the heart of the Restoration that defies the critics. My father, Senator Robert F. Bennett, devoted his final years to arguing that the Book of Mormon’s existence is a stumbling block to those who try to dismiss it as an obvious fraud. Those who scoff at the Book of Mormon have yet to come up with a plausible secular account of its existence, and this allows the Book of Mormon to endure as the centerpiece of our missionary efforts. But rather than simply use the Book of Mormon to attempt to answer questions people are no longer asking, we need to create a missionary message that uses this sacred scripture to connect people, directly and personally, to Jesus Christ.*

This is a response to Nathan B. Oman’s “Welding Another Link in Wonder’s Chain: The Task of Latter-day Saint Intellectuals in the Church’s Third Century,” published by The Interpreter Foundation on August 9, 2019.¹ In that piece, Professor Oman deftly describes the challenges confronting the 21st-century Church in the face of the rising generation’s mass disaffection with organized religion. In order

1. Nathan B. Oman, “Welding Another Link in Wonder’s Chain: The Task of Latter-day Saint Intellectuals in the Church’s Third Century,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 32 (2019): 141–60, <https://journal.interpreterfoundation.org/welding-another-link-in-wonders-chain-the-task-of-latter-day-saint-intellectuals-in-the-churchs-third-century/>.

to kickstart a stalled missionary effort, Oman suggests that our efforts ought to be focused on “[f]inding new language in which to celebrate the Restoration.”

Oman stated that the Church’s initial missionary message was centered on the idea of a single true, restored church with all the New Testament authority and spiritual gifts. That message held a resonance for a 19th-century populace that waned considerably after the Church’s exhaustive fight with the federal government over plural marriage, and in the early 20th century for a time, convert baptisms, in Oman’s words, “had slowed to a trickle.”² It wasn’t until the post-World War II Church began emphasizing the power of sealing keys and their saliency in creating eternal families that growth began to markedly increase, leading to exuberant predictions about the Church’s future. Sociologist Rodney Stark, a non-believer, announced that “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints ... will soon achieve a worldwide following comparable to that of Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and the other dominant world faiths,” predicting that by 2080, the Church could see more than 265 million members among its ranks.³

While those estimates seemed plausible as the 20th century was coming to a close, they seem ridiculous to many observers today. Stark’s predictions were based on growth rates holding steady between 4 and 5 percent, while independent reports suggest that growth has slowed to a mere 1.47 percent as of 2017.⁴ And even that number masks the reality that previous strongholds of the Church are struggling to hold their ground. The vast majority of convert baptisms are taking place in developing nations, while congregations in the United States and Europe

2. See also Ruder Clawson, “A marvelous work of the Lord – Its wonderful growth – Greatness of the responsibility resting upon the Saints,” *72nd Semi Annual Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (1901): 7, <https://archive.org/details/conferencereport1901sa/page/6>. This report chronicles that the Church only added 20,000 members, including children of record, in 1901.

3. Rodney Stark, “The Rise of a New World Faith,” in *Latter-day Saint Social Life: Social Research on the LDS Church and its Members* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998), 1–8, <https://rsc.byu.edu/es/archived/latter-day-saint-social-life-social-research-lds-church-and-its-members/1-rise-new-world>.

4. Jana Riess, “Mormon growth continues to slow, especially in the US,” *Religion News Service*, April 13, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/04/13/mormon-growth-continues-to-slow-especially-in-the-u-s/>.

show signs of contraction rather than expansion.⁵ This has led many critics to exult that the Church's best days are behind it.

Professor Oman insists this is not true, and I agree. This is a topic the two of us have discussed in family settings — in the interest of full disclosure, Nate is my brother-in-law, married to my sister Heather — and Nate's call for a gospel message tailored to inspire millennials has led me to ponder the possibilities of what that message might be. I believe the Book of Mormon provides the keys to crafting that new message for two compelling reasons:

1. It defies any and all secular explanations for its origins, which compels even skeptics to take the truth claims of the Restoration seriously.
2. It is a divine catalyst that initiates the kind of personal connection to the Divine that so many millennials are seeking outside the boundaries of organized religion.

I will address each of these in turn.

The Explanation-Defying Book of Mormon ("Somebody Wrote It")

Shortly after the Book of Mormon was first published, this was typical of the reaction it evoked:

Book of Mormon. — Most of our readers, we presume, have heard of this *pretended revelation*. ... A ridiculous story was told about its discovery, *golden plates* were found in a stone box, a Mr. Somebody who could neither *read* nor write, was found able to translate them, and somebody else, equally ignorant, to transcribe them, and a worthy, honest but credulous farmer was found willing to be *ruined* by defraying the expense of publishing ... the Book of Mormon. ... This matter must be the *ne plus ultra* of fanaticism and delusion. If men will go beyond this in belief, verily there can be no end to their credulity.⁶

These days, if you ask a critic of the Book of Mormon where it came from, it's likely the answer you get won't be much different. The conventional wisdom, both then and now, is that it needs no explanation,

5. Peggy Fletcher, "Mormon growth rate falls to lowest level in 80 years, but ups and downs vary by region," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 7, 2017, <https://archive.sltrib.com/article.php?id=5381411&itype=CMSID>.

6. *Rochester Republican* (Rochester, NY), December 28, 1830.

as it's too ridiculous to merit further discussion. In 1831, the *Brockport Free Press* called the Book of Mormon "a fiction of hobgoblins and bugbears."⁷ In 2011, comedian Bill Maher likened the characters of the Book of Mormon to leprechauns.⁸ When it comes to sneering dismissals of the Book of Mormon, not much has changed over the centuries.

While the Book of Mormon does have some cureloms and cumoms, it contains precisely zero hobgoblins, bugbears, or leprechauns, which is obvious upon even a cursory examination of its contents. It's clear, then, that many (if not most) people making fun of it haven't bothered to read it. As Catholic sociologist Thomas O'Dea observed in 1957, "[T]he Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to to have an opinion of it."⁹

If asked to provide an alternative explanation for its existence, it's not likely that Bill Maher would have one at the ready. If pressed, Maher would likely insist he has no responsibility to do so because the burden of proof for the Book of Mormon's extraordinary claims lie entirely with the Mormons.

This is Maher's line of attack when it comes to religion in general, not just the Book of Mormon.

"There is a growing trend in this country that needs to be called out, and that is to label any evidence-based belief a religion," Maher said in February 2012. "We are not two sides of the same coin, and you don't get to put your unreason up on the same shelf as my reason. Your stuff has to go over there, on the shelf with Zeus and Thor and the Kraken, with the stuff that is not evidence-based, stuff that religious people never change their mind about, no matter what happens. I'm open to anything for which there's evidence. Show me a god, and I will believe in him."¹⁰

This approach shifts the discussion back to the believer and absolves the skeptic of any responsibility whatsoever. But such an approach presumes there's only one question on the table. If the question is, "Is there a God?" then, yes, the burden of proof is on the theists. But if the question is, "Where did the universe come from?" the discussion gets much more interesting.

7. "Mormon Bible," *Brockport Free Press* (Brockport, NY), April 6, 1831, 1.

8. ReligionMASSillusion, "Bill Maher on MORMON RELIGION SHIT," YouTube video, 2:04, October 27, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QH608TuO29A>.

9. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

10. Stallion Cornell, "Why Is There Bill Maher?" *Stallion Cornell* (blog), February 6, 2012, <http://stallioncornell.com/blog/why-is-there-bill-maher/>.

If Bill Maher and his fellow atheists address the origins of the universe simply by denying that God was involved, they sidestep the question. To be intellectually consistent, they would need to provide an alternative theory that accounts for a universe that came into being with no divine involvement. If they're confident enough to dismiss God as a possibility, they have to have another explanation.

Suppose, for instance, that in the middle of the night, Bill Maher's pick-up truck suddenly appears in my living room, leaving a path of destruction in its wake. If I take Maher to court to hold him accountable, I have the burden to prove that Maher purposely drove it into the side of my house. Maher can argue that's not how the truck got there. But Maher can't credibly argue that there is no pickup truck. He has to come up with his own account of how his truck ended up in my living room.

The Book of Mormon takes a similar approach to the burden of proof. As Alma replied to the Bill Maher-esque Korihor in Alma 30: 40–41:

And now what evidence have ye that there is no God, or that Christ cometh not? I say unto you that ye have none, save it be your word only. But, behold, I have all things as a testimony that these things are true; and ye also have all things as a testimony unto you that they are true; and will ye deny them?

Like the pick-up truck and the universe, the Book of Mormon exists. If the only question is, "Is it true?" then only the faithful need to answer. But if the question is, "Where did it come from?" then both sides have to make their case. So far, the critics don't really have a conclusive (let alone convincing) one to make. Or, more accurately, they have too many cases to make.

I saw this firsthand when I was writing my line-by-line reply to *The CES Letter*,¹¹ which devotes over a quarter of its entire text to attacks on the Book of Mormon.¹² In his attempt to account for the Book of Mormon's origins, Jeremy Runnells argues, in turn, that the Book of Mormon was:

- a) Plagiarized from the King James Bible.
- b) Lifted from maps and place names from a 2,000-square-mile area he describes as the "lands of Joseph Smith's youth."
- c) Plagiarized from pirate stories about Captain Kidd.
- d) Plagiarized from Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.

11. Jim Bennett, "A Faithful Reply to the CES Letter from a Former CES Employee," Canonizer, September 2018, <https://canonizer.com/files/reply.pdf>.

12. Jeremy T. Runnells, *CES Letter: My Search for Answers to My Mormon Doubts* (Las Vegas, NV: CES Letter Foundation, 2017), <https://cesletter.org>.

e) Plagiarized from the book *The Late War Between the United States and Great Britain*.

f) Plagiarized from the book *The First Book of Napoleon*.¹³

Some see the sheer volume of arguments against the Book of Mormon's authenticity as persuasive evidence against it, but the opposite as true.

For example, to prepare my line-by-line response to the CES Letter,¹⁴ I took it upon myself to read the entirety of *View of the Hebrews* — available for free online at BYU's website,¹⁵ which would be a curious place to hide the source material for Joseph Smith's alleged plagiarism. Like the Book of Mormon, *View of the Hebrews* is a book often cited without being read. Five minutes with the text of *View of the Hebrews* is enough to disabuse anyone of the notion that it has anything to do with the Book of Mormon.

View of the Hebrews is a polemical essay, not a narrative story, and none of its arguments make their way into the Book of Mormon's pages. It is written in contemporary English rather than the King James/Middle English language found in the Book of Mormon, and it is a much shorter work — roughly 44,000 words in total, compared to the 265,000 words in the Book of Mormon. If there were any lengthy passages of plagiarism, they would come up with a simple Google search.

For those who understand how flimsy the charges of *View of the Hebrews* plagiarism really are, the theory shifts to how Joseph stole a handful of phrases and words from a number different sources and somehow cobbled all these together into an internally consistent, theologically complex, and Semitically-influenced tome markedly different from any and all of his supposed source materials. For an uneducated 23-year-old farmer in the 18th century, that would be a process every bit as miraculous as gold plates and an angel, if not more so.

Hugh Nibley, in his classic work *The Myth Makers*, highlighted how multiple arguments against Joseph Smith ended up defeating each other:

First, as to our witnesses — their quality and their quantity. The latter was excessive, the former defective. There were altogether

13. Ibid.

14. Bennett, "A Faithful Reply to the CES Letter from a Former CES Employee," 79, 85.

15. Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews* (Provo, UT: BYU Religions Studies Center, 1996), <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/view-hebrews>.

too many witnesses. . . . All of which might be forgiven if their stories were not intrinsically absurd and thoroughly conflicting.¹⁶

Such is the case with the proliferating alternatives for the supposed source of the Book of Mormon. The book still stands as the tangible miracle at the heart of the Restoration. That is the heart of the testimony of millions of believers. It was also the final message my own father gave in a fireside he delivered three weeks before his death. And, if you will indulge me as I recount some personal, family reminiscences, I would like to share how that final fireside cuts to the heart of why the Book of Mormon is vital to fashioning a new missionary message for a 21st-century audience.

My father is the late Senator Robert F. Bennett, who was instrumental in bringing the Olympics to Salt Lake City in 2002. During that timeframe, he expressed his frustration with media coverage of the Church, specifically with regard to the Book of Mormon. He lamented that “publications that discussed the Book of Mormon in any degree of detail almost universally treated it as an obvious fabrication, one whose claims and history were so bizarre that no one with any common sense could believe it to be authentic.”¹⁷

That led Dad to begin writing what would become his book *Leap of Faith: Confronting the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, the production of which took him the better part of seven years. Its release raised the eyebrows of a number of political pundits who thought it nothing more than a campaign gimmick, as Dad, at the time, was engaged in a very tough race he eventually lost. But time has been quite kind to the book, and many now recognize it as a sober and valuable work.¹⁸

Six years after his book was published, Dad discovered that he had pancreatic cancer. Prior to his diagnosis, Dad had planned to move from his townhouse in Arlington, Virginia, to his childhood home in Salt Lake City, which he had purchased more than a decade earlier with the intent of living in Salt Lake City full time. But the cancer changed his plans, and he decided to seek treatment at John Hopkins University Hospital,

16. Hugh Nibley, *The Myth Makers* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1961), 189.

17. Bob Bennett, *Leap of Faith: Confronting the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2009), ix.

18. Daniel Peterson, “Taking a ‘Leap of Faith’ in Bennett’s book on the origins of the Book of Mormon,” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City), April 28, 2016, <https://www.deseret.com/2016/4/28/20587425/taking-a-leap-of-faith-in-bennett-s-book-on-the-origins-of-the-book-of-mormon#leap-of-faith-confronting-the-origins-of-the-book-of-mormon-by-bob-bennett-was-published-in-2009>.

which had a global reputation as the best place to receive treatment for pancreatic cancer. The cancer had not spread, but the tumor was impinging on an artery, which made it impossible to remove. The goal, then, was to shrink the tumor by means of chemotherapy and then, by means of surgery, slice it out of his body.

It seemed a good plan at the time, but the tumor remained stubborn, and while the chemo kept it from growing, it wasn't shrinking, either. The goal shifted. The new plan was to kill the tumor and just leave it there. After another round of chemo and a new round of radiation, this was the presumed outcome. Dad came back to Utah for Christmas, and all seemed to be well. He had survived for a year after his diagnosis, and the idea that he had more years to come seemed like a real possibility.

Alas, no. The last day of February 2016, we learned the cancer had spread, and spread aggressively. He had only a few months left to live. Maybe weeks. It was time to get his affairs in order.

Since leaving the Senate, Dad had been extraordinarily active, and he had no interest in slowing down. Cancer had caused him to streamline his activities — he resigned from all the corporate boards he said he “didn't want to be on anyway” — but he still wasn't willing to retire. He focused only on the things that truly mattered to him.

Learning that his days were definitely numbered, even more things fell by the wayside. There were only a handful of projects that remained high priority, and his scheduled April 10, 2016, fireside on the Book of Mormon was at the top of his list.

The assignment to give a fireside on the subject of the Book of Mormon came from the bishop of the Arlington Ward, and Dad saw this as more than just another speaking opportunity. He felt this was a calling from God, and he prepared accordingly. When he was told the cancer had spread, he almost immediately said, “I've got to stay alive for the fireside.” He repeated this over and over again, and the mantra worked.

On the night of April 10, 2016, my father sat on a stool in the Arlington Chapel's cultural hall and delivered a 50-minute sermon on the Book of Mormon. Weakened by cancer, he stayed seated much of the time, but he repeatedly stood to write on a blackboard, diagramming much of the book's complexity for the gathered congregation. He spoke, as was his custom, without ever referring to notes. He spoke clearly and forcefully, and all who attended knew they were seeing something remarkable. You can listen to a rough recording of the fireside and read a transcript on my personal website.¹⁹

19. Stallion Cornell, “My Father's Final Sermon,” *Stallion Cornell* (blog), June 19, 2016, <http://stallioncornell.com/blog/my-fathers-final-sermon/>.

That was Sunday. On Monday morning, he suffered a severe stroke that left him paralyzed and confined to a hospital bed. He died three weeks later.

To his family, this seemed clear evidence that the Lord was sustaining my father specifically to share this one, simple message. After the fireside, Dad's work was done, and he was called home. Whatever this message was seemed likely to be a pretty big deal.

So what was the message for which the Lord kept him alive to deliver? This is how he described it: "The Book of Mormon exists," he said. "That means somebody wrote it. . . . Somebody created it before 1829. You have to explain who wrote it. It's here. It's physical. It cannot be waved away the way some of the descriptions of visions and other things could be waved away. . . . You can't get around that question. You can't avoid it. Who wrote it?"

Who, indeed? That's not a simple question to answer, nor was it designed to be. Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared,

For 179 years this book has been examined and attacked, denied and deconstructed, targeted and torn apart like perhaps no other book in modern religious history — perhaps like no other book in any religious history. And still it stands. Failed theories about its origins have been born and parroted and have died — from Ethan Smith to Solomon Spaulding to deranged paranoid to cunning genius. None of these frankly pathetic answers for this book has ever withstood examination because there is no other answer than the one Joseph gave as its young unlearned translator.²⁰

A Divine Catalyst — The Book of Mormon's Missionary Message to a 21st-Century World

The Book of Mormon's miraculous origins make it impossible to dismiss by anyone who examines it with any degree of seriousness. But that miracle is only the beginning of the journey, not the end. Secular evidence is not sufficient to produce faith that leads to baptism, temple covenants, and a lifetime of consecration to the Kingdom of God. The miracle of its production can open the door to a deeper discussion, but ultimately, the Book of Mormon's salience is in the effect it has on those who read and ponder its contents.

20. Jeffery R. Holland, "Safety for the Soul," *Ensign* (November 2009), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2009/10/safety-for-the-soul?lang=eng>.

When I was serving as a young missionary in Scotland from 1987 to 1989, President Ezra Taft Benson spoke of the importance of “flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon.”²¹ My mission president, Joseph Fielding McConkie, insisted that the Book of Mormon was the key to all missionary success. He wrote:

Our instruction is to use the Book of Mormon to prove the Bible true, not the Bible to prove the Book of Mormon true. When this truth is pointed out, the usual response is, Well, the Bible is common ground — we need to begin our discussion on common ground.

In fact, as we have shown, the Bible is not common ground; it is battleground and has been from long before the time of Christ. . . . Bruce R. McConkie stated it well when he said, “It is easier to convert people to the Book of Mormon than it is to convince them of what the Bible is really saying.”²²

Herein, however, lies the challenge for modern Latter-day Saint missionary work. We have long recognized that the Book of Mormon is the “keystone of our religion,” but we have not always used it as the focus of our missionary efforts. In the 1950s, Elder LeGrand Richards’s book *A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* provided the template for missionary discussions, despite the fact that it was a collection of biblical proof texts that scarcely referenced any Book of Mormon passages at all.²³ Thankfully, when President Benson became the President of the Church, the Book of Mormon rightly took center stage where it belongs.

Even at center stage, what role should the Book of Mormon rightly play as we introduce it to a 21st-century world? This cuts to the heart of Nathan Oman’s initial question about using new language to celebrate the restoration. I’m convinced that to revitalize our missionary efforts, we need to make the Book of Mormon the heart of a revitalized message that directly, personally, and intimately connects them with the divine. People do not join the Church or remain faithful in the Church because they have compiled an adequate list of evidences that defy secular

21. Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign* (November 1988).

22. Joseph Fielding McConkie, *Here We Stand* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 88.

23. LeGrand Richards, “What the Gospel Teaches,” *Ensign* (May 1982), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1982/05/what-the-gospel-teaches?lang=eng>.

explanation and link the Book of Mormon to the ancient world. Those evidences are important and even essential to some, but they sustain pre-existent faith rather than create it anew.

People don't join the Church when the Book of Mormon proves that Latter-day Saints are reading the Bible correctly or that our theology is the most accurate or logical. Again, such discussions are helpful to many Latter-day Saints, but they do not carry with them the power of conversion to those not of our faith.

People join the Church because they feel the Spirit when they read the Book of Mormon. That is a personal, intimate encounter that has the potential to bring them to Christ.

A personalized Book of Mormon message would be a notable shift in our missionary focus. Religion reporter Jana Riess framed the problem this way:

We are still behaving as though "Which church is true?" is the question most people are asking. ... More Americans, especially young adults, are opting out of religion altogether. As one of them said to me recently, "Why do I even need religion? Like, at all?"

Why, indeed?

... Missionary efforts that begin with a promise of propositional truth (which millennials don't care about) and end with an assurance of exclusive priestly authority (which they also don't care about) are going to go over like a lead balloon. Those approaches are asking the wrong question for this people in this age.

What, then, are better questions?

... We need to listen to the questions that people are actually concerned about.²⁴

If the question, then, is not "Which church is true?" but rather, "Why do I even need a religion at all?" we are blessed indeed, because the Book of Mormon is the answer to both questions. And since it is the second question people are currently asking, our message ought to be tailor made to respond to it.

The Book of Mormon is the catalyst that allows us direct access to heaven in a way nothing else does or can. It does so through a means that

24. Jana Riess, "Commentary: For Latter-day Saints, 'which church is true?' isn't the right question anymore," *The Salt Lake Tribune*, July 12, 2019, <https://www.sltrib.com/religion/2019/07/12/commentary-latter-day/>.

defies the critics and provides the kind of direct, firsthand encounters with God that people of every generation crave.

The 20th section of the Doctrine and Covenants anticipates the variety of messages that accompany the Book of Mormon. That revelation cites the Book of Mormon not just as evidence, but as proof of a number of different assertions. The Book of Mormon is in the business of “[p]roving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever” (D&C 20:11–12).

In the days of Joseph Smith, it seems likely that more people were interested in proof of the truthfulness of the Bible and of God’s willingness to call prophets than is the rising generation today. But people in all generations are hungry for a God who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The Book of Mormon provides needed evidence that such a God exists and loves us beyond measure. It not only demonstrates that God speaks to prophets, it also gives assurance that God can speak to each of us individually. And that personal component — the one-on-one encounter with the Spirit of God that is facilitated and inspired by the Book of Mormon’s message — is the answer to the questions so many people are asking in the 21st century.

Personalizing the Book of Mormon message does not mean we need to abandon the institutional Church, our unique truth claims, priesthood authority, or any of the things essential to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It means, rather, that we should use the Book of Mormon to connect people to heaven and, once so connected, to have faith that God, having answered their first and most pressing question, will answer those they’re not asking, too. There is a spirit and a power to the book that ensures that the Restored Gospel will continue to grow and flourish in preparation for the second coming of the Lord.

My father’s final sermon concluded with a similar theme.

“Well, the time is gone,” he said about 45 minutes into his presentation, “but I need to end with the main point.” He recognized this was an odd way to structure a sermon. “You say, ‘Gee, you’ve been rambling for 45 minutes. Get to the main point.’”²⁵

Prior to the “main point,” Dad had spent all his time recounting the various compelling evidences for the Book of Mormon’s authenticity as a historical document. He cited the existence of Nahom, a burial site mentioned in the Book of Mormon that was discovered years after

25. Cornell, “My Father’s Final Sermon.”

Joseph Smith had died. He talked about all the metal plates that had been dug up since Joseph Smith's time, noting that people mocked Joseph for his "Gold Bible," yet history has shown that writing sacred records on plates and burying them for future generations was a practice rooted in antiquity. He also highlighted the use of ancient Egyptian names in the Book of Mormon that were unknown at the time of the book's publication.

"All of this is interesting," he said, "and it's fun, and it's important for us to know as we get attacked by those who are leaving the Church by telling Joseph Smith was a fraud, the Book of Mormon is a forgery, and so on — important for us to have the tools [to address these issues.]" But he insisted that "it's not the main point."

"You don't need to know about the location of Nahom," he said. "You don't need to know about the proliferation of plates. You don't need to understand about ancient names in order to live a more successful and worthwhile life. You need to know about the Lord Jesus Christ."

He recounted an experience from his mission in Scotland more than 60 years earlier, in which he met Bill and Marian Proctor. "When we called on Bill and Marian Proctor for the first meeting, we had left a Book of Mormon with Marian," he said. "We had gone tracting that morning, came back that night. He was reading it — Bill Proctor was reading the book by the fire, which I took as a good sign. And then he stood up and came to me, and he said, 'Look, lads, I know why you're here, and you're wasting your time. I have no intention of joining your church. But this is an interesting book you have. So I'll tell you what let's do. I'll buy your book, and you go on your way, and we'll both save time. Agreed?'"

"I said, 'Agreed. Yep. But as long as we're here ...'"

"Okay, so as long as we're here, we sat down, and we gave them the first discussion of the Book of Mormon. And then we asked the magic question — when would be a good time for us to come back? And he gave us an appointment back, and there's much more to the story, but very powerfully, before I left Scotland ..."

Then Dad started to tear up. "Excuse me," he said. "I get dewy-eyed at the dedication of a parking lot."

After regaining his composure, he continued. "Before I left Scotland, I said to him, 'When did you know? Bill, when did it happen [that you knew] the Book of Mormon was true?' And he said, 'Oh, that first night.' He said, 'The Spirit was there overwhelmingly, telling me it was true.'"

Bill Proctor "didn't need any internal or external validations, or any intellectual analysis. All he needed was an open heart and the presence of the Holy Ghost, and he knew. The Book of Mormon can survive any

attack by any enemy of the Church because the Proctor example has been repeated millions of times, in every culture, in every country, all around the world.”

Dad was absolutely right.

Jim Bennett *is the author of A Faithful Reply to the CES Letter and a founding partner of Canonizer.com, a website designed to build consensus on controversial issues. He is also one of the founders of the United Utah Party and ran for Congress in 2017 as its first candidate. He is a former columnist and editorial writer for the Deseret News, as well as the former Marketing and Artistic Director for the Tuacahn Center for the Arts in Southern Utah. He and his wife, Laurel, are the parents of five children, two of whom are currently serving full-time missions in Argentina.*