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## The Book of Mormon and a World of Changing Beliefs

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**Abstract:** In an unbelieving world it is easier to prove a man to be a fraud than a prophet. The proof of a prophet lies in the witness of the Holy Ghost. The witness of the Spirit is more important than external evidences. The enlightened nature of the Book of Mormon startled the Christian world of the nineteenth century by answering numerous concerns. During the century that followed, religions modified their perspectives because of the Book of Mormon.

# The Book of Mormon and A World of Changing Beliefs

By MICHAEL J. BENNETT

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THE Latter-day Saints bear testimony that they know the Book of Mormon is a divinely inspired record, and that Joseph Smith was called of God. But to the unbelieving world, knowledge is based on evidence and proof—not merely testimony. Consequently, evidence has been submitted by Book of Mormon scholars for many years in an effort to furnish “materialistic man” with proof. However, it is much easier to prove a man a fraud than a prophet; if we can find one fault in his teachings, he is undeniably a fraud. But a prophet is quite another thing; evidence is just . . . evidence, not proof. And though we spend a life-time gathering evidence, proof lies only in the witness of the Holy Ghost. Meanwhile, the “wise” and the “prudent” will continue to search in vain for that one fault that will brand Joseph Smith a fraud.

We use the testimonies of men, the discoveries of science, the collaboration of the Bible, and many other pertinent points in an effort to strengthen our claims. But more often than not, we entirely overlook a phase of evidence which surpasses much of the oft-tried approaches to the problem, that of the enlightened nature of the Book of Mormon philosophy which came forth from the hands of an uneducated lad of twenty-three years of age. The fact that this philosophy was completely new to the Christian community in which it was brought forth and yet entirely in accordance with the Bible teachings has caused many to ponder and investigate its divine claims. New meaning was given by it to such doctrines as baptism, the Trinity, the fall of man, the Atonement, death, resurrection, eternal punishment, purpose of life and the sacrament, to mention only a few which had long been a source of controversy in the theological world.

There can be little doubt that Christendom has revised certain of its concepts in the last hundred years to conform with an enlightened era and it is most interesting to compare these beliefs with those of the Book of Mormon. In this short article we will discuss one or two of these concepts.

The unrighteous have an opportunity to repent of their past sins, and in so doing will not be thrust down to Hell at the day of Judgment. Every **man will be resurrected**, and will have to account for his works as recorded in the Book of Life. This concept, it must be remembered, was quite foreign to the faith in the area and the time of the publishing of the Book of Mormon.

Considering another point we might ask, **What is Hell?** This question has incited a great deal of speculation. For one answer we should go back a few decades and listen to the pastors of the “old school” sermonising on the sinner’s inevitable destiny: everlasting, physical torment. The wrath of God was the cry of the day, and we would have heard the promise of flames from the bottomless pit—burning but never consuming. According to the old divines, the man who didn’t quite make the grade—who missed, by a hair’s breadth, the gift of eternal joy—would receive the same as the blackest sinner: eternal anguish in the depths of Hell. Compare the Book of Mormon:

“Therefore, if that man repenteth not . . . the demands of divine justice do awaken his immortal soul to a lively sense of his own guilt, which doth cause him to shrink from the presence of the Lord, and doth fill his breast with guilt, and pain, and

anguish, which is like an unquenchable fire, whose flame ascendeth up forever and ever." (Mosiah 2: 38)

King Benjamin's explanation of the allegorical "fire and brimstone" opens a revolutionary field of thought: Hell . . . a view of man's own guilt which causes him to leave the presence of the Lord, a feeling of anguish because of the realisation of his own imperfections, and the realisation of his inability to attain to the same perfection as his more righteous brother.

**After death, what?** First, let us examine the general Christian belief of a hundred years ago. The average child was taught that **only good children go to heaven**. To an extent this is true, and quite enough for their young minds to receive, but hardly sufficient as they grow older. Yet it was also taught that the righteous are immediately accepted through the gates of heaven into communion with the saints of God, while the wicked are cast down to the realms of Satan without a second chance. Compare the teaching of the Book of Mormon:

" . . . the spirits of all men, as soon as they are departed from this mortal body, yea, the spirits of all men, whether they be good or evil, are taken home to that God who gave them life. And then . . . the spirits of those who are righteous are received into a state of peace, where they shall rest from all their troubles and from all care, and sorrow. And . . . the spirits of the wicked . . . shall be cast out into outer darkness; . . . Now this is the state of the souls of the wicked, yea, in darkness, and a state of awful, fearful looking for the fiery indignation of the wrath of God upon them; thus they remain in this state, as well as the righteous in paradise, until the time of their resurrection." (Alma 40: 11-14)

Alma has given us a marvellous view of our life after death, which consists of three phases: (first) our return to God for a partial judgment: (second) our state of waiting—for the righteous, rest and peace, and for the

wicked, mental misery (note Alma's brilliant allegory); these states will continue until (third) the promised resurrection of **every man**, so foreign to the belief prior to the Book of Mormon era which declared that the righteous alone will be raised.

Let us examine the general attitude of religions on this point today. In a conversation with a protestant minister recently, I was not surprised to learn that this was one of many doctrines which had been "modified" during recent years. He said that upon our deaths, our spirits—wicked and righteous alike—go to a place of rest (compare Alma 40: 12), until the resurrection.

No one will deny the marked change in the attitude of theologians on this subject in the last century, but let us go a step further and examine that change. We see that the love and mercy of God have replaced His wrath as the popular weapon of ministers, and belief in any physical torment represents a decreasing minority. The average Christian today defines Hell as a state of mind, where our misery lies in seeing ourselves as we are, compared with what we might have been had we continued in good works. Some say the mercy of God extends—for the worst sinners—to an absolute painless disintegration. Compare this with the traditional "agonies of the damned."

In reiteration, we find a remarkable change — during the past hundred years—in many of the controversial issues of Christendom. These modifications have produced doctrines which are marvellously similar to solutions offered by the Book of Mormon. For such an enlightened work to come forth in a period of comparative darkness we can only conclude that its message and claim is worthy of our consideration. We submit this evidence to all who are honest in heart, with a plea that until they have honestly and thoroughly investigated the claims of the Book of Mormon, they do not say, "A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible."