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KnoWhy #288 - What Role Does The Book Of Mormon Play In Missionary Work?

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Abstract: Nephi prophesied that after the Book of Mormon would come forth unto the Gentiles, there would be many who would believe the “words which are written.” For many early Church members, the Book of Mormon was a key factor in their conversion, and through the inspired teachings of modern prophets, it now plays an unprecedented role in missionary work through the world. It functions not only as a sign of the restoration, but as a guide to sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ. President Ezra Taft Benson taught that the “time is long overdue for a massive flooding of the earth with the Book of Mormon.” This statement is more relevant today than ever, for modern technology is providing an ever-increasing capacity to share this life-changing scripture with the world.



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WHAT ROLE DOES THE BOOK OF MORMON PLAY IN MISSIONARY WORK?

“For after the book of which I have spoken shall come forth, and be written unto the Gentiles, ... there shall be many which shall believe the words which are written.”

2 Nephi 30:3

THE KNOW

Nephi prophesied that after the Book of Mormon would come forth unto the Gentiles, “there shall be many which shall believe the words which are written” (2 Nephi 30:3). This prophecy began to be fulfilled almost immediately after the Book of Mormon was published and missionaries began to distribute it throughout the world.

In June 1830, Joseph Smith set apart his younger brother, Samuel, as the “Church’s first officially called missionary.”¹ As a teenager, Samuel had gathered with his family to hear Joseph’s stories about the gold plates and the angel Moroni.² He later became one of the Eight Witnesses to the Book of Mormon and was privileged to see the plates and heft them for himself (see Testimony of Eight Witnesses).

With this background in mind, it’s not surprising that Samuel’s testimony and distribution of the Book of Mormon played a key role in his success as a missionary.³

Although Samuel “baptized no one and shared only a few copies of the Book of Mormon,” those few copies led to the conversions of future Church leaders, such as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball. In turn, these men were instrumental in the conversion of thousands.⁴

What was it about the Book of Mormon that so moved these early converts? Parley P. Pratt, one of the original twelve apostles in this dispensation, recalled, “As I read, the spirit of the Lord was upon me, and I knew and comprehended that the book was true, as plainly and manifestly as a man comprehends and knows that he exists.”⁵ Ezra Thayer, who was at first quite skeptical toward the book, remembered that when he first opened its pages he received “a shock with such exquisite joy that no pen can write and no tongue can express.”⁶

Many other early converts expressed similar sentiments.⁷ For them, the book conveyed the Spirit of the Lord and acted as a sign of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling. As Casey P. Griffiths has explained, “It is not an

overstatement to say that for the early Saints the coming forth of the book transcended theology; its existence was a testimony of the existence of God and proof of new revelation in modern times.”⁸

Yet the Book of Mormon had more to offer than many early Church members realized. In 1832, Joseph Smith received Doctrine and Covenants 84, which declared that the members of the Church would remain under condemnation until they repented and “remember[ed] the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon ... to do according to that which I have written” (v. 57). Implied in this divine rebuke is the truth that the content of the Book of Mormon is foundationally important to the Church in several ways.⁹

In the twentieth century, Church leaders steadily increased their focus and emphasis on the Book of Mormon in the realms of Church education, spiritual edification, and missionary work.¹⁰ However, it was largely through the inspired teachings of President Ezra Taft Benson that the book has achieved the level of priority that it currently holds among Latter-day Saints. According to Griffiths, through President Benson’s efforts, “the Book of Mormon reemerged as the primary tool for conversion.”¹¹ This effort has been continued by President Benson’s prophetic successors,¹² and today the Book of Mormon plays an unprecedented role in bringing people unto Christ and His restored Church.

THE WHY

Understanding this historical backdrop can help today’s readers better appreciate and utilize the Book of Mormon as a missionary tool. *Preach My Gospel*, the Church’s official manual pertaining to missionary work, states that an “essential part of conversion is receiving a witness from the Holy Ghost that the Book of Mormon is true.”¹³ It further declares that the “Book of Mormon, combined with the Spirit, is [the] most powerful resource in conversion” and that it should be the “main source for teaching the restored gospel.”¹⁴

Although its miraculous translation is an important sign of the Restoration, the Book of Mormon itself contains a wealth of information regarding missionary work.¹⁵ It outlines inspired patterns of missionary service,¹⁶ it shows how missionaries should prepare for their service,¹⁷ and it depicts divinely called messengers effectively testifying in companionships.¹⁸ Its inspired

messages help Latter-day Saints know what to teach, how to teach, and why they should teach the gospel of Jesus Christ.¹⁹ Moreover, it adds narrative contexts, powerful righteous examples,²⁰ and additional truths to the missionary mandates found in the Doctrine and Covenants.²¹

In 1988 President Benson declared, “The time is long overdue for a massive flooding of the earth with the Book of Mormon We have the Book of Mormon, we have the members, we have the missionaries, we have the resources, and the world has the need. The time is now!”²²

This statement should resonate stronger today than ever before, for the resources to share this sacred volume are now almost unlimited.²³ For many readers, the entire text of the Book of Mormon can easily fit on the electronic device in their pocket. It can travel with them wherever they go, and they can promote its sacred truths through a growing number of social media applications.²⁴

When Samuel Smith started out on his mission, there was no missionary training center to teach him, no mission president to direct him, and no senior companion to tutor him. All he had, as “he walked alone into towns near Palmyra, New York,” was a “knapsack full of copies of the recently printed Book of Mormon.”²⁵ Yet, the converting power of only a few shared copies of the Book of Mormon led thousands to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

In light of the ever-increasing capacity to share this life-changing scripture with the world, President Benson declared, “If the early Saints were rebuked for treating the Book of Mormon lightly, are we under any less condemnation if we do the same?”²⁶ In another address he taught that “God will hold us accountable if we do not now move the Book of Mormon in a monumental way.”²⁷ Considering the great missionary responsibility that attends a testimony of the Book of Mormon, it is imperative “that each of us ... take full advantage of [its transformative] power.”²⁸

FURTHER READING

Casey Paul Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints: Evolving Use of the Keystone Scripture,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 199–226.

Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 103–114, online at lds.org.

Ryan Carr, “The First Latter-day Missionary,” *Ensign*, September 2004, online at lds.org.

Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, November 1988, online at lds.org.

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NOTES

1. Ryan Carr, “The First Latter-day Missionary,” *Ensign*, September 2004, online at lds.org.

2. These events were recalled in detail by William Smith, a younger sibling to both Joseph and Samuel. See Richard Lloyd Anderson, “The Trustworthiness of Young Joseph Smith,” *Improvement Era* 73, no. 10 (1970): 83–84; Kyle R. Walker, *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015), 41–62.

3. When Samuel gave the Book of Mormon as a gift to Rhoda Young Green (Brigham Young’s sister), he explained that she should “ask God, when she read it, for a testimony of the truth of what she had read, and she would receive the Spirit of God, which would enable her to discern the things of God.” History, 1838–1856, 1 May 1844–8 August 1844, p. 289, online at josephsmithpapers.org.

4. See Carr, “The First Latter-day Missionary,” online at lds.org. For further information about Samuel Smith, see, LaRene Porter Gaunt and Robert A. Smith, “Samuel H. Smith: Faithful Brother of Joseph and Hyrum,” *Ensign*, August 2008, 44–51, online at lds.org.

5. Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt*, ed. Parley Parker Pratt (New York, NY: Russell Brothers, 1874), 38. For more on the role of the Book of Mormon in Parley P. Pratt’s conversion, see Terryl L. Givens and Matthew J. Grow, *Parley P. Pratt: The Apostle Paul of Mormonism* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 27–29.

6. “Testimony of Brother E. Thayre Concerning the Latter Day Work,” *True Latter Day Saints’ Herald* 3, no. 4 (1862): 79–80. See also, Matthew McBride, “Ezra Thayer: From Skeptic to Believer,” *Revelations in Context*, December 12, 2012, online at history.lds.org.

7. See Casey Paul Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints: Evolving Use of the Keystone Scripture,” in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, ed. Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2015), 202; Lisa Olsen Tait, “‘I Quit Other Business’: Early Missionaries,” *Revelations in Context*, April 10, 2015, online at history.lds.org.

8. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 207.

9. See Book of Mormon Central, “Was the Book of Mormon Used as the First Church Administrative Handbook?”

(3 Nephi 27:21–22),” *KnoWhy* 72 (April 6, 2016); Book of Mormon Central, “Why Did the Lord Quote the Book of Mormon When Reestablishing the Church? (3 Nephi 11:24),” *KnoWhy* 282 (March 3, 2017).

10. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 210–216. See also, Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 6–47.

11. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 218.

12. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 218–219.

13. *Preach My Gospel: A Guide to Missionary Service* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2004), 103, online at lds.org.

14. *Preach My Gospel*, 104.

15. See C. Robert Line, “With Power and Authority of God’: Principles of Missionary Success,” in *Living the Book of Mormon: Abiding by Its Precepts*, ed. Gaye Strathearn and Charles Swift (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2007), 211–222.

16. See Mosiah 11; 18; Alma 4–15; 31–34; Helaman 6; 3 Nephi 27:1.

17. See Jacob 1:17; Alma 5:46; Alma 8:26; Alma 17:2–4, 19.

18. See 2 Nephi 1:1; Alma 10:12; Helaman 5:17–52.

19. See Book of Mormon Central, “What is the Doctrine of Christ? (2 Nephi 31:21),” *KnoWhy* 58 (March 21, 2016).

20. For a discussion of the text’s emphasis on narrative theology, see Book of Mormon Central, “What Was Mormon’s Purpose in Writing the Book of Mormon? (Mormon 5:14),” *KnoWhy* 230 (November 14, 2016).

21. See Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants,” *Ensign*, November 1987, online at lds.org.

22. Ezra Taft Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, November 1988, online at lds.org.

23. See Dieter F. Uchtdorf, “Waiting on the Road to Damascus,” *Ensign*, May 2011, 76, online at lds.org: “With so many social media resources and a multitude of more or less useful gadgets at our disposal, sharing the good news of the gospel is easier and the effects more far-reaching than ever before.”

24. See “Sharing via Social Media,” online at lds.org.

25. Carr, “The First Latter-day Missionary,” online at lds.org.

26. Ezra Taft Benson, “The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion,” *Ensign*, November 1986, online at lds.org.

27. Benson, “Flooding the Earth with the Book of Mormon,” online at lds.org.

28. LeGrand R. Curtis Jr., “There Is Power in the Book,” *Ensign*, November 2016, 71, online at lds.org.