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## Side Lights on the Book of Mormon, I: The Volume An Incident

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## Side Lights on the Book of Mormon

By John Henry Evans

### I—THE VOLUME AN INCIDENT

**D**URING the years lying between 1820 and, say, 1830, two lines of events took place in the history of "Mormonism."

One of these consisted of the revelations and visions connected with the *Book of Mormon*. The other concerned itself with such spiritual manifestations as had for their purpose the creation of a new Church.

And these two lines, necessary as both of them are from any point of view, were almost completely dissociated the one from the other. As a matter of fact, it is rather surprising, when one stops to think about it, how little connection there was between the two sets of occurrences, especially if the large amount of time occupied by the translation of the Nephite Record and related incidents be taken into consideration.

It is instructive to examine these each by itself.

The events associated with the *Book of Mormon* began in September, 1823. Prior to this time there was no hint of the gold plates, of the urim and thummim, of Moroni, of the existence, even, of any civilization on the American continent before the time of Columbus.

In that year, Joseph Smith, now approaching his eighteenth year, received five visits from Moroni. On these occasions he was told that Moroni was a former inhabitant of the American continent, who had died and been raised from the dead; that this land was once occupied by a white race, the ancestors of the red Indians; that a history of the rise and fall of that people was written on some gold plates, buried in a hill not far away from the boy's home; that he, Joseph, was to be given these plates, with an instrument provided for the translation of them, and was to publish their contents to the world. On the last of the five visits the youth, having gone to the hill for the purpose, was shown both the plates and the interpreters.

It was not till September, 1827, however, that Joseph received the gold book. On this occasion Moroni revealed himself and gave the necessary instructions for the preservation of the treasured volume. In the meantime—that is, between 1823 and 1827—the heavenly messenger had made at least three appearances to the young seer. This made not fewer than nine visits in all thus far.

From 1827 till the *Book of Mor-*

*mon* was printed there were other manifestations by the angel of the Record to the youth.

Once the plates and the urim and thummim were taken from Joseph by Moroni, and later restored. And then, at the time of Moroni's appearances to the Prophet and the translation of the Record, the messenger appeared also to three others—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer and Martin Harris. All told, therefore, there were on the lowest count not fewer than seventeen times when the angel of the plates showed himself to and conversed with the Prophet.

Finally, some time in the first half of the year 1830, the Nephite Record was published in the form of a book, and we hear no more of any visions of Moroni, the son of Mormon, in Joseph Smith's *Autobiography*.

**A**LMOST simultaneously with these occurrences there was going on the spiritual events that culminated in the rise of a new institution—the Church.

In 1820, when Joseph Smith was in his fifteenth year, the young seer had an open vision in a grove on his father's farm in Manchester. God the Father and Jesus Christ the Son appeared to him and conversed with him there under the trees.

The purpose of this revelation, it would seem, was to make known the being and character of Deity to the youth, and through him to the world, seeing that to know God the eternal Father and His Son Jesus Christ is life everlasting and that such knowledge had been lost to mankind in the clouds of the Middle Ages.

So far as this line of events is concerned, there is an intermission

of a little more than nine years. In 1829 the young Prophet, who was now in his twenty-fourth year, and his scribe or secretary, Oliver Cowdery, who was his junior by less than a year, received an open vision of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus in ancient Palestine. The event took place on the banks of the beautiful Susquehanna, in Pennsylvania.

On this occasion the heavenly messenger, who evidently was a resurrected being, laid his hands on the heads of the two young men and conferred upon them the Aaronic priesthood. This priesthood gave them authority to perform the ordinance of baptism, but not to lay on hands for the bestowal of the Holy Ghost in confirmation.

Within the next six weeks Joseph and Oliver received an open vision of the ancient apostles of Jesus, Peter and James and John the Beloved. Resurrected beings like the Baptist, they, too, laid their hands on the heads of the young men and conferred upon them the Melchizedek, or higher, priesthood. Also they ordained them apostles.

Thus the Prophet and his scribe were in possession of all the powers of priesthood, or divine authority, necessary to set up a church in this dispensation and to administer in all the ordinances of the gospel of Christ.

Having received the necessary commission and authority, the next step was the organization of the Church. Accordingly, on the sixth of April, 1830, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was organized. This event took place in the home of Peter Whitmer, in Fayette, New York. Probably nine persons, all men, had been baptized by this time, of whom only six con-

stituted the membership of the new organization.

The ordinances in the Church at this time were: (1) baptism by immersion for the remission of sins; (2) confirmation, or the "laying on of hands for the reception of the Holy Ghost;" (3) the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, a sign of fellowship and of a willingness to assume the name of Christ and keep his commandments; and (4) ordination to the priesthood, which admitted one, not indeed into a select circle in the sense the word is usually employed, but rather into brotherhood as large as the responsible male membership of the communion.

Meanwhile, also, revelations were received by the Prophet. So far as we know now, twenty-two of these pronouncements were received by him during the years between 1823 and 1830, including two received in April of this last year. Of these, ten relate, or grow out of, the *Book of Mormon*, either directly or indirectly, and twelve to matters not connected with the Nephite Record.

The revelations connected in one way or another with the *Book of Mormon* are: the "words of Moroni to Joseph concerning Elijah," in section two; instructions about what to do touching the manuscript lost by Martin Harris, in sections three and nineteen; something about witnesses to the *Book of Mormon*, in section five; revelations to Oliver Cowdery through the Prophet concerning his work as scribe, in sections six, seven, eight, and nine; and various paragraphs throughout most of the revelations in this period in relation to the coming forth of the Record.

Of the revelations connected with the rise of the Church distinctively some are personal to Hyrum Smith, to Father Smith, to Joseph Knight,

to members of the Whitmer family. These include sections four, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. Others are about the witnesses, the calling of apostles in this dispensation, and, especially, the organization of the Church, with the officers and ordinances and principles thereof.

As already stated, these two lines of events—the incidents grouped around the idea of the *Book of Mormon* on the one hand and those related to the rise of the modern religious movement on the other hand—go along, for the most part, side by side, almost without connection. There is, however, a slight relation between them—two slight points of contact, in fact—which requires brief notice.

One of these threads of connection lies in the fact that constant reference is made in the one set of spiritual pronouncements to what is the main thread of events in the other set.

Thus, for instance, Oliver Cowdery, who wrote the *Book of Mormon* as it was dictated by his companion, the seer, is told (section 6) that "a great and marvelous work is about to come forth unto the children of men," in obvious allusion to the organization of the Church and the efforts to redeem mankind. Others are told the same thing in revelations to them through the Prophet. In one of these the nature of the new movement is indicated. The Prophet, Oliver, and David are informed (section 18, verse 44) that this "marvelous work" consists in the "convincing of many of their sins that they may come unto repentance and that they may come unto the kingdom of the Father"—perhaps the greatest of all miracles.

In the revelations that concern the setting up of a church organization

reference also is made to the *Book of Mormon*. Says the Lord, in a revelation in which Martin Harris is told that he shall have a "testimony," through the Prophet: "Whosoever believeth on my words, them will I visit with the manifestation of my Spirit; and they shall be born of me, even of water and of the Spirit."

But there is a direct connection between the two sets of events in one of the incidents that occurred during the course of translation.

It happened that one day the young seer came upon a reference to baptism for the remission of sins. This started an inquiry in the minds of both the translator and his scribe. Just what the nature of the question was, we are not informed. At all events, it was so grave that they decided to pray about it.

Accordingly, as we have seen, they went out into the woods on the banks of the Susquehanna river near Harmony, where they were staying at the time, to pray for light on the subject. In answer to their petition

John the Baptist appeared to them in a vision. He conferred upon them the Aaronic Priesthood, which gave them authority to baptize for the remission of sins, and promised that they should receive the higher priesthood later, which would empower them to set up the Church of Christ.

In course of time this promise was realized in the appearing of the ancient apostles Peter, James and John the Beloved disciple. Following this event, as already stated, an organization of the Church was effected, with the necessary ordinances.

It will be observed, that the coming forth of the *Book of Mormon* was an incident in the wide sweep of events that led to the New Christianity.

What was the purpose in making known the *Book of Mormon* at this particular time in the rise of "Mormonism?" Indeed, we might very properly ask, For what specific purpose did that volume appear at all in this dispensation?

*To be Continued*

## My Baby

*By Winona F. Thomas*

I've a tiny boy—all ginger—  
Turning up his toes,  
Trying hard to eat them  
As I'm pulling on his hose.

Fat round baby tummy,  
Dimples in his knees.  
Tiny brain that's learning  
Nice new ways to please.

Coaxing for his bottle  
Long before it's due;  
Cross because he wants a nap  
To rest those eyes of blue.

God, who sent this tiny boy  
As part of your great plan,  
Guard my boy and keep him yours,  
When he is a man.