



Type: Magazine Article

Side Lights on the Book of Mormon, II: How the Book of Mormon Educated Joseph Smith

Author(s): John Henry Evans

Source: *Relief Society Magazine*, Vol. 18, No. 11 (November 1931),
pp. 606–610

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Abstract: No abstract available.

Side Lights on the Book of Mormon

By John Henry Evans

II HOW THE BOOK OF MORMON EDUCATED JOSEPH SMITH

FROM the year 1820, when Joseph Smith received his vision of the Father and the Son, to the year 1830, when the *Book of Mormon* was printed, is nine years.

Moreover, Joseph Smith was a little past fourteen years old at the time of the first vision and not yet twenty-five that spring when the Nephite Record appeared in printed form. These would be among the years when he was shaping his character—the adolescent period.

These two facts—the impressionable time of youth and that period of nine years—give us a clew to the reason for the appearance of the *Book of Mormon* at this particular moment in the founding of “Mormonism” and under the particular circumstances of its appearance.

That Joseph Smith required spiritual training goes without saying. Any one with the Prophet’s work before him stood in such need, no matter what his education or attainments otherwise might have been.

Mere book learning was not necessary in a situation like this. If it were, God would most likely have chosen a man with a college degree. There was no lack of men with degrees in the United States. But God did not do that. Instead he selected an uneducated farm boy, the son of a farmer.

Sometimes his followers have been inclined to apologize for Joseph Smith’s lack of schooling. No apology is necessary. Books give only second-hand information, as also do the schools, for the most part. But what was required here was

first-hand knowledge, the knowledge that comes from contact with persons, with things—in short, with life in its farthest reaches. Besides, the facts that come from lore are insecure as compared with the facts that come from fresh contact with life.

At fourteen Joseph Smith knew but little, either of books or of life. He could read and write and cipher. His contacts were only with farm folk like himself and his father and brothers, and with the land and the domestic animals with which it was tilled or that were otherwise useful on the farm. Of the great world outside he knew nothing, except as echoes might reach him through the weekly paper and uncertain rumor.

In essential nature, of course, he was the same at fourteen as he was at thirty-eight, when he died. That is, he was highly spiritual—“psychic,” as we would say nowadays.

Furthermore, the work that was to be required of the modern seer and prophet would demand exceptional knowledge in religion and theology, knowledge that was both deep and extensive. And how was any one to extract from the barren atmosphere of a backwoods town such theological and religious knowledge?

We shall see, in another article, just how meager young Smith’s theological lore was at first and how vast and deep it became before his work of translating the Nephite scriptures was completed.

Joseph Smith, then, to begin with, had only the plastic nature and the instrumentalities, his “psychic” soul,

as a preparation for his work in life. And the incidents connected with the *Book of Mormon* and the effort necessary in the translation of it furnished the required knowledge and training for that work.

YOUTH does not take greatly to abstractions. It prefers concreteness. Persons, things, events—these constitute the materials out of which the young man manufactures his thoughts. As a matter of fact, the grown-up too can generally understand an idea best when it is embodied in some material form. This is one of the deepest principles of the art of teaching.

Now, the circumstances connected with the *Book of Mormon* furnished just this necessary materialization of ideas for the youthful mind of the Prophet. There was Moroni, an objective reality, in spite of his resurrected state; there was the tangible book of gold plates, with the equally tangible urim and thummim, or interpreters; and there were the events, or spiritual happenings, in connection with the revelation of the Record—the numerous visits of the angel, the translation of the strange language on the plates, and the rest.

Joseph Smith got three things from his experiences with the *Book of Mormon* events: (1) information concerning the dealings of God with his children on the earth and the general principles of salvation; (2) spiritual certitude through actual contacts with spiritual persons and truth; and (3) training in spiritual processes through concentration of mind on spiritual matters.

Let us look into each of these separately.

In another article we shall take up in some detail the Prophet's familiarity with theological truth,

but something must be said here on the subject, although from a slightly different angle.

GOD'S dealings with man are essentially the same, whether man lives in the first or the last dispensation of the world's history, whether in Europe or America. At least, the principles involved in those dealings are about the same in all cases, with perhaps such variations in detail as may be necessary to suit varying conditions of time and place. That is to say, God requires about the same general lines of conduct on the part of all mankind, and his methods of dealing with them are similar in all ages and nations. Hence, when Joseph Smith studied the particulars of Nephite religious history, he necessarily became familiar with the religious ideas and ideals of every people that have ever had any special divine contacts. And these religious ideals are, for some reason, clearer in the Nephite Record than in the record of the Jews.

Moreover, the intensive work of translation would tax the mind to its utmost to understand—something that a mere reading, however intent, could not do. Is it any wonder, then, that the young seer, when the translation was finished, showed a knowledge of theology and religion that was rare even in the trained theologian of the period?

Finally, there is the matter of those interviews with Moroni. These we are sometimes inclined to underestimate in importance, so far as the Prophet's education is concerned.

Take, for instance, that first night—September 21, 1823. There were three interviews. All of them together occupied the entire night. If we think of the young man as

retiring at nine and of daylight as coming on at six o'clock the next morning, the three interviews occupied about nine hours. Since the second and the third interviews were, in the main, a repetition of the first, the angel's message would therefore be about three hours in length. If cut down the whole period by, say, an hour and a half, this would give us a continuous discourse by Moroni on new matter of two and a half hours.

What did he say during that time? One can say a great deal in two hours and a half or three hours. And there were at least seventeen interviews between Moroni and Joseph, longer or shorter than these, which were not mere repetitions. Mother Smith tells us that of an evening during these years, after the house work was done and the outside chores, the entire family would sit round the hearth while Joseph told them about the ancient Nephites—their customs, their dress, their houses, their domestic animals, with as much detail as if he had lived among them. Is it too much to suppose that most of this came from the angel Moroni?

AND then, there is the matter of spiritual certitude, the second point.

There is no source of knowledge like experience. Books are no comparison. What we get from reading is but information, and second-hand at that. Indeed, experience is the ultimate fountain of all knowledge. What we get through experience we *know*; what we get in some other way—through reading or conversation, for instance—we can only believe at most on the testimony of others. And so, after his experiences with Moroni and the gold plates, Joseph Smith knew in a sense

of which the most learned theologians of his times had no awareness at all. He knew with the same certitude that we read of in the ancient prophets and wise men—Abraham, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah. It was like seeing Niagra Falls as compared with merely hearing about that natural wonder.

As for the matter of training, this was not the least part the *Book of Mormon* played in the education of the Prophet. Joseph Smith was a very different sort of person in 1830, when the Nephite Record appeared in print, from what he was in 1823, when Moroni first appeared to him—different in several respects.

For one thing, as we have said he *knew* more. He knew more about God, about the principles of salvation, and about God's dealings with his children on the earth. And this was knowledge, not hearsay, with him. Moreover, this knowledge on his part gave him a confidence he could not have possessed in any other way. For it is the nature of knowledge to produce self-confidence in those who have it. Often, during this time and after, this self-assurance in Joseph Smith was mistaken for conceit, egoism. But it was not. It was the result of knowledge.

And then, for another thing, he was more dependable in his character at the end of this period than he was at the beginning.

Once, before the plates were delivered to him, he was passing the hill Cumorah. The angel of the Record suddenly appeared to him and reprimanded him for not having been "sufficiently engaged" in the Lord's work. Just the nature of his misdemeanor and of the reproof he received, Mother Smith, who relates the story, does not inform us. But Joseph told his par-

ents that it was the "severest chastisement" he had ever received in his life.

And then there is that well known incident involving the loss of one hundred sixteen pages of manuscript by Martin Harris. It seems that the young man would not take no for an answer to his prayerful request for a loan of the manuscript to Harris. He was severely punished. The angel took away from him both the urim and thummim and the plates.

That there were other detours from the direct path of right as he had been told it, is evident from certain reproofs to be found in the revelations. Says one of them, "After it was truly manifest unto this first elder that he had received a remission of his sins, he was entangled again in the vanities of the world." And another revelation calls attention to the "strictness" of the commandments that were given to him and accuses him of having transgressed them "oft" and "gone after the persuasions of men," setting "at naught the counsels of God."

Nor are these missteps by Joseph Smith during his first years of spiritual work to be wondered at. He was very young—for a prophet. He was without experience and training. And the responsibilities he had to bear were extremely heavy. Moreover, as he himself tells us, the reputation he had on account of his first vision was such as to shut him off from the companionship of the young people with whom he would otherwise have mingled.

But he grew under these responsibilities and the guidance of his heavenly instructor. One can hardly conceive of his falling into these early errors after his judgment and his moral strength had developed under the tutorship of Moroni. The

messenger's educative work with the young seer was well done therefore.

And, for still another thing, the Prophet's "psychic" powers developed during these years of translation. For spiritual powers, like the taste for music or literature or intellectual things generally, grow with cultivation.

A circumstance related by Orson Pratt shows this.

While the Prophet was revising the *Bible*, Elder Pratt visited him. Joseph, after chatting a few moments with the visitor, resumed his work of revision. Young Orson sat there listening.

Pretty soon Joseph turned to the young man. "Once I needed the urim and thummim," he explained, "in work like this. That was when I was inexperienced. But now I do not any more require any tangible instrument."

This explanation, Elder Pratt says, exactly met the thought that was just then running through his head.

And so it was. At first we find the Prophet's revelations coming to him through the urim and thummim. It seems that, during these early years, he could receive none without it. For, once when that instrument was taken away from him, he was completely at a loss what to do. And when it was restored to him by Moroni he immediately asked for, and received, divine instructions. Later we find him bowing his head in silence for a few moments, then dictating slowly a revelation. Parley P. Pratt so informs us. Many of the revelations in subsequent years were given in this way.

THUS the *Book of Mormon* became the means through which to educate the modern prophet.

It taught him implicit obedience to God. It taught him to be dependable in his character. It trained his mind in concentration. It gave him exact knowledge of God's dealings with the children of men. It furnished him with more knowledge

and information than was possessed by all his contemporaries put together. But, most of all, it put into his hands, through the training of his spiritual powers, the means by which he was to contact the mind of the Almighty.

Stretching Dollars

By Elaine Hyde Thomas

ESTHER was enjoying her new home. She enjoyed it with her eyes for it was clean and new and expressed unnumbered possibilities for adornment. She enjoyed it with her body, for though it was larger than her former home, it was arranged to require less work and it stayed clean longer. Esther appreciated these things and was happy.

As she prepared the lunch table, she heard Dan in the bed-room talking to their three months old baby Peggy.

"Peggy, O Peggy! You cute little kid, look at your dad! Like the looks of that streak of sunshine on the mirror, do you? Guess *you* are crazy about your surroundings like the rest of us. Well, if it hadn't been for you, guess we'd still be in the old place. You expensive little bundle!"

It was true. Peggy's advent forced the necessity of more room. Therefore the new house.

"Dan," Esther began, when the serving of the children had been attended to, "I just *love* my new home! And I was thinking today that I haven't entertained my friends for years; I didn't have room in the other place. Besides, I'm so proud of this house that I really want to show it."

"Sure you do, go ahead. It's all

right with me." Dan was proud too.

"Of course there are some things I'll have to have before I can think of entertaining." After a pause she continued. "So perhaps I hadn't better plan it right away."

Dan shifted uneasily and looked at his watch. "Just what things do you mean, Esther?"

Esther hesitated a moment; she had been trying for a week to approach the subject. Now that she had begun it, she must handle it just right.

"Well—the furniture, Dan! I can't very well show my new home with this old furniture in it. I want the house to look *beautiful!*"

She looked at Dan and waited. He didn't answer her at once so she added, "Dan, don't think I'm dissatisfied—this old furniture is plenty good enough for awhile if there's just the family here alone."

"Well, my dear, we'd better remain alone awhile longer then. You know, no doubt, that the house cost money!"

That cut Esther. Didn't she realize? Hadn't she been patient and careful? What was the use of trying to help if all she got was sarcasm? Instead of crying as she felt like doing, she said, "All right then, I'll not entertain. The only refreshment I could serve that would be in keeping with my dining-room furniture,