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Elder Paul V. Johnson

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“Out of the Dust”

Elder Paul V. Johnson

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This address is adapted from a talk given at the Church Educational System (CES) Religious Educators Conference at Brigham Young University on August 14, 2001.

The Book of Mormon has been brought forth out of the dust and made available to millions of people on the earth in our day. It has been a powerful spiritual influence in the lives of countless individuals over the past 175 years.

Each of us has had our own feelings about this book. It has affected our lives so much. We view the gospel more clearly because we have studied it. We have all felt the Spirit confirm to our souls the truths found therein. In fact, a person’s feelings about the Book of Mormon might be a little like the feelings of a person in love. People in love feel like no one else in the whole world could have feelings as strong as they have. They view their experience as being unique.

We might have similar feelings about our testimony of the Book of Mormon. We might feel as if we have had such a strong witness and loved the book so much that no one else could feel quite so strongly—that our experience is unique. In actuality, our personal testimony of the book is probably not stronger than all others, but it is true that our own experience is unique. The experiences each of us has had with the Book of Mormon haven’t happened quite the same way with any other person who has walked the earth.

The Lord's Hand in Preservation and Translation

In order for anyone to gain a testimony of the Book of Mormon, he or she must read or hear its words. The Lord prophesied that “his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation” (Moroni 10:28). In the twenty-first century we have the words of Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and others from ancient times. The Lord described these prophets as “crying from the dead” and “speaking out of the dust” (Moroni 10:27). The story of how we received their words clearly shows the Lord's hand in preserving and bringing forth this record. Think of all the years those records needed to be preserved. Some of the records were written a very long time before Mormon's plates were buried in Cumorah. Speaking of the records he was entrusting to his son Helaman, Alma explained that they should “be kept and preserved by the hand of the Lord until they should go forth unto every nation, kindred, tongue, and people. . . . And now behold, if they are kept they must retain their brightness; yea, and they will retain their brightness; yea, and also shall all the plates which do contain that which is holy writ” (Alma 37:4–5).

We know that from the time Moroni buried the plates until the time Joseph translated them, those plates did retain their brightness.

Today there are exciting developments in restoring ancient records. With modern technology, people are better able to decipher characters that were written with ink that has faded or from parchment, papyrus, or paper that has deteriorated. Amazingly, it has even been possible to read some documents that have been burned or carbonized. The world seems fascinated at the preservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but even those records are now fragmented remains. But the plates that came out of Cumorah were not fragments. There were no deteriorated parts. Those plates had retained their brightness both physically and symbolically. Every character was there exactly as Moroni or Jacob or Mormon engraved it. Those plates were not faded or worn or corroded.

In addition to preserving the record, the Lord was also involved in its translation from the ancient language. Speaking of Joseph Smith, the Lord said that he had “power from on high . . . to translate the Book of Mormon” (D&C 20:8). It is no wonder the Prophet Joseph called it “the most correct of any book on earth.”¹ As a result, we have a book that has helped change millions of lives and is destined to influence millions more.

Since the time when the Book of Mormon was translated, the Lord's words have begun to “hiss forth unto the ends of the earth” (2 Nephi 29:2). It has been over 170 years since that first edition was printed, and the word of the Lord continues to hiss forth. President

Ezra Taft Benson spoke to the Church about “flooding the earth with the Book of Mormon.”² We are making headway in making this book available to the world.

When the first edition of the Book of Mormon was printed in 1830, five thousand copies came off the press; 170 years later, in the year 2000, over 5,600,000 copies of the Book of Mormon were printed. That’s over 1,100 times as many copies printed in 2000 than were printed in 1830.

From 1830 to 1981, 152 years, there were over 27 million copies printed. During the next nine years there were nearly that many printed, and in the last ten years there have been almost 50 million copies printed.

It took the workers at the Grandin press seven months to print five thousand copies. In our day, the new Timson web press prints that same amount, the equivalent of five thousand copies, in less than forty minutes. From 1830 to the present there have been nearly 105 million total copies printed. That is a lot of books!

International Translations

It isn’t just the number of books being printed that counts either. In order for people around the world to be able to read it, they must have it in a language they can understand. The continued translation process of the Book of Mormon is a noteworthy modern miracle! We are all familiar with the exciting news that there were one hundred working temples in the year 2000.

A milestone that didn’t get as much publicity was the fact that by the end of the year 2000 the Book of Mormon, or selections from the book, had been translated into one hundred languages. In fact, consider the names of the languages that were completed in the year 2000: Estonian, Igbo, Latvian, Armenian-East, Amharic, Xhosa, and American Sign Language.

The Lord has been involved in the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon in these other languages—not just the English at the time of Joseph Smith. People have been raised up by the Lord who have been able to do the translation, and they have been inspired in their work. If all of the stories were known of the great miracles of translation into these other languages, we would have other powerful witnesses of the Lord’s hand in the work.

The story of the Book of Mormon translation into Estonian is an example. Sister Aimo Teemant and her husband fled from Estonia to Sweden in 1944, leaving some members of their family behind. In 1951 they

met Latter-day Saint missionaries, and in 1952 they joined the Church. One night in September of 1953, Sister Teemant had an extremely vivid dream in which she was again sitting in the kitchen of her home in Estonia. As she sat there, her mother came in from another room with the German, Swedish, and Finish editions of the Book of Mormon in her hand. She told Sister Teemant that these languages were not enough and that she demanded the Book of Mormon in Estonian. The dream made such a strong impression on Sister Teemant that she began translating the Book of Mormon into Estonian the next morning.

Mail from the Teemants' family members in Estonia first began to reach them in 1956. One of the initial letters they received told of the death of Sister Teemant's mother on September 20, 1953. That was the same night Sister Teemant had had the dream. Soon after that, the Teemants received permission to immigrate to the United States. Because of frequent moves and the responsibility of raising her children, she worked only occasionally on the Book of Mormon translation. Her husband retired in 1982, and they moved to Provo, Utah.

In the October 1986 general conference of the Church, President Benson gave his great admonition to use the Book of Mormon and remove the condemnation that the neglect of the book had brought upon the Church. Sister Teemant knew that she must finish her work and allow the Estonians to read the Book of Mormon in their own tongue. She began her translation again in earnest. She finished translating the last verses in December 1988. After an extensive review, the Estonian Book of Mormon was published in February 2000.

The Latvian version of the Book of Mormon was published before the end of the year 2000. In January of 2001, Gvido Senkans, who serves as district president and was translator of the Book of Mormon into Latvian, scheduled a visit to the Leipaja Branch. The Saints in this branch had not yet seen the new book that had recently been published. President Senkans had a copy with him to present to the branch. As he began to speak, he bore testimony of the Book of Mormon and then held up a Latvian copy. A loud gasp and soft cheer came from the audience in perfect unison.

After the meeting, the members rushed the stand to see the new book. They formed a line and passed the book along. They handled it like fine crystal. Most of them simply rubbed the cover with their hands, especially the gold lettering. An old woman waited her turn to hold the book, and then she turned to President Senkans and asked, "May I open it?" Tears flowed down her face while she read the first words of 1 Nephi.

A group of young women were some of the first to hurry to the stand to see the book. One of the people on the stand took a picture of the girls as they approached the book. Their excitement was visible. Can you imagine the impact if all our students felt the excitement for the Book of Mormon that these young women felt? We want all our students to feel this way about the Book of Mormon and the gospel it contains.

To think of all the work and dedication and time and money put forth for the translation and publication of the Book of Mormon is inspiring. We know that the reason for these sacrifices boils down to the great power its message can have in individual lives. Remember that it is no blessing to simply have the book on a bookshelf. The promise is that a person "would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."³ Notice that the promise entails more than just *having* or even diligently studying the book. That isn't even enough. We must "*abide* by its precepts." We hope every person in the world gets a chance to read the book and find out for themselves of its truthfulness and to live its teachings.

The Power of the Book of Mormon

I think the Book of Mormon, as we have it, is analogous to the records Alma spoke of to Helaman when he said:

They have enlarged the memory of this people, yea, and convinced many of the error of their ways, and brought them to the knowledge of their God unto the salvation of their souls.

Yea, I say unto you, were it not for these things that these records do contain, which are on these plates, Ammon and his brethren could not have convinced so many thousands of the Lamanites of the incorrect tradition of their fathers; yea, these records and their words brought them unto repentance; that is, they brought them to the knowledge of the Lord their God, and to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer. (Alma 37:8-9)

We have a great opportunity to be involved in this work in our own families and in our classrooms. We too can participate in enlarging memories, convincing so many thousands, and bringing them knowledge unto salvation, even bringing them to rejoice in Jesus Christ their Redeemer!

I wonder how many thousands and hundreds of thousands of seminary and institute students through the years have gained a love for the Book of Mormon because of their own teacher's testimony and feelings about that book.

Before I went on a mission, I was a stake missionary on BYU campus. We were teaching another student who was my age, and my companion asked me to learn the discussion about the Book of Mormon so that I could teach it to this young man after the Christmas break. I worked on memorizing the discussion, but what seemed more important to me was to be able to bear testimony of the truthfulness of the book to my friend. I spent a lot of that Christmas vacation reading the Book of Mormon and praying. As I was finishing the book, I knelt down and prayed to the Lord that I could know for sure that it was true. I had always felt good about the book and felt it was true, but this situation seemed different, since I was testifying to someone else. I had to know.

I did receive a witness that day when I prayed. It was a strong confirmation to me, and I was able to testify to my friend about the Book of Mormon. Less than a year later, I was in the mission field in Norway, and my companion had borne his testimony to an investigator about the Book of Mormon. The man turned to me and asked me if I could say the same. I was able to testify without hesitation because I did know. I remember walking back to our apartment that cold night and being so thankful that the Lord had answered my prayers so clearly the year before when I wanted to know about the truthfulness of the book.

I know the Book of Mormon is true. I testify that the Prophet Joseph Smith translated it by the gift and power of God. The people we read about are real. We may get to meet them. We may get to meet Alma and Nephi and Sariah and Abish someday. In fact, Moroni closes the Book of Mormon record by declaring: “And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?” (Moroni 10:27).

The plates are real. They are physical plates. They were seen and handled by a number of witnesses in our dispensation. The stories are real. The book is not just some extensive allegory, as some have suggested. The gospel that is so plainly taught in the book is also real. The Being we are taught to have faith in is real. Jesus Christ did live, and He did visit this hemisphere after His Resurrection. The Atonement is very real.

The remission of sins is not, as Korihor claimed, the “effect of a frenzied mind” (Alma 30:16). It is, as Alma testified, an actual washing and purifying of our garments “through the blood of” our Redeemer

(see Alma 5:21–22). I am thankful for those people in ancient times and in modern times who put forth so much effort so that we could have that powerful book be part of our lives.

Our efforts to help students and families read the Book of Mormon and “abide by its precepts” will be greatly rewarded. May teaching the gospel powerfully, as it is found in the Book of Mormon, be one way that we, the Church Educational System, make a major contribution to the building up of the kingdom of God. **RE**

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Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1957), 4:461.

2. Ezra Taft Benson, in Conference Report, October 1988, 5; or *Ensign*, November 1988, 6.

3. Smith, *History of the Church*, 4:461; see also introduction to the Book of Mormon.