



Type: Book Chapter

The Book of Mormon and the Heavenly Book Motif

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Source: *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: The F.A.R.M.S. Updates*

Editor(s): John W. Welch

Published: Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon
Studies; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992

Page(s): 26–28



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Chapter 7

THE BOOK OF MORMON AND THE HEAVENLY BOOK MOTIF

1 Nephi 1:9–11 “He saw One descending out of the midst of heaven, . . . and stood before my father, and gave unto him a book, and bade him that he should read.”

The Book of Mormon was once dismissed with the assertion “you don’t get books from angels; . . . it is just that simple.” However, evidence from the ancient world indicates that angels or other heavenly beings have delivered many sacred works to men. Indeed, according to Orientalist Geo Widengren, “Few religious ideas in the Ancient East have played a more important role than the notion of the Heavenly Tablets or the Heavenly Books,” which are “handed over [to a mortal] in an interview with a heavenly being.”¹

The books of Exodus, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Revelation contain elements of the Heavenly Book motif, as well as more than a dozen books of pseudepigraphic literature (nonbiblical writings dating c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 200) and early Christian literature. Elements of this motif, also evident in Lehi’s vision (see 1 Nephi 1:11) and in the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, include these elements: (1) A divine being gives a book to a mortal; (2) the mortal is commanded to read the book; (3) he is then told to copy the book; and (4) he is commanded to preach the book’s message to other mortals. In what follows, we shall consider the elements of this motif as they relate to the Bible, the Book of Mormon, the pseudepigraphic book of 1 Enoch, and the early Christian Vision of Hermas.

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In Exodus 31, Moses went to the top of Mount Sinai to commune with the Lord. He received many instructions orally, which he then relayed to the children of Israel below. At the conclusion of his meeting, the Lord gave Moses “two tables of testimony . . . written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18; compare Ezekiel 2:9–10; Revelation 10:8).

In the books of Ezekiel and Revelation, the prophets were commanded to eat the scroll (see Ezekiel 2:8; Revelation 10:9–10), symbolically suggesting that they have internalized its message. Further, John was commanded that he “must prophesy again before many peoples, and nations, and tongues, and kings” (Revelation 10:11).

In the book of 1 Enoch, an angel commanded Enoch to “look at the tablets of heaven [and] read what is written upon them.” Enoch did as commanded: “I looked at the tablets of heaven, read all the writing [on them], and came to understand” (1 Enoch 81:1–2). Then he was commanded to make a copy for his posterity: “Write it down for them and give all of them a warning” (1 Enoch 81:6). Thereafter, Enoch preached from the copy.

Another example is found in the early Christian book *Vision of Hermas*. During a vision, Hermas saw a “woman, arrayed in a splendid robe, and with a book in her hand; and she sat down alone, and saluted [him].” After a short conversation, she asked, “Do you wish to hear me read?” Hermas replied that he did. In response to her reading, Hermas said, “Then I heard from her, magnificently and admirably, things which my memory could not retain. For all the words were terrible, such as man could not endure. The last words, however, I did remember; for they were useful to us, and gentle” (Visions 1:1, 2–3). After reading to him, she asked him, “Can you carry a report of these things to the elect of God?” He replied, “Woman, so much I cannot retain in my memory, but give me the book and I shall transcribe it.” “Take it,” she said, “and you will give it back to me.” Hermas then transcribed “the whole of it letter by letter.” However, no sooner did he finish transcribing the book, than, as he reported,

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“all of a sudden it was snatched from my hands; but who the person was that snatched, I saw not” (Visions 1:2, 1).

Deeply rooted in this Judeo-Christian prophetic mode, Lehi similarly reported that he saw a divine being come down from heaven, who gave him a book and asked him to read it. From that book Lehi learned not only the judgments of God upon Jerusalem, but also God’s plan of mercy, and he was commanded to declare those things publicly.

Similarly, the angel Moroni told Joseph Smith that “there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent.” Joseph Smith recorded, “While he was conversing with me about the plates, the vision was opened to my mind that I could see the place where the plates were deposited, and that so clearly and distinctly that I knew the place again when I visited it” (Joseph Smith–History 1:34–42). Later, “the same heavenly messenger delivered them up to me” (Joseph Smith–History 1:59).

Through “the gift and power of God” (Title Page, Book of Mormon), Joseph Smith was able to read and translate a portion of the plates that the angel Moroni gave him, which Joseph Smith’s scribe recorded. The original (as in the case of Hermas) was returned to Moroni by Joseph Smith, but the translation has become a prime source of preaching, warning, and the basis of much missionary work since that time.

The theme of the Heavenly Book, which has been developed by several scholars over the years in relation to early Christian and Jewish texts, has been examined broadly and carefully by Brent E. McNeely in his paper, “The Angelic Delivery of the Book of Mormon: An Ancient Near Eastern Motif,” from which this November 1990 Update was drawn.

Note

1. *Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Leipzig: Harrassowitz, 1950), 7.