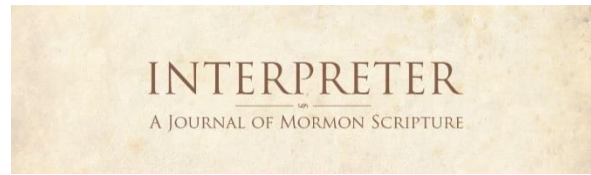




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Many Witnesses to a Marvelous Work

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Daniel C. Peterson

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MANY WITNESSES TO A MARVELOUS WORK

Daniel Peterson

Review of Dennis Largey, Andrew Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull, eds. *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder*, Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, in cooperation with Deseret Book Company, Salt Lake City, 2015, pp 308.

Abstract: At the end of October each year, speakers from the Church Educational System, as well as other gospel scholars, gather at Brigham Young University to make presentations at the Sidney B. Sperry Symposium. The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder is a compilation of the addresses given at the forty-fourth symposium, in 2015. This volume does not so much delve into the doctrine of the Book of Mormon as it studies the history behind its coming into the world. Just as the doctrine itself is inspirational, the story behind the coming forth of the Book of Mormon serves as an inspiration and a testament to its truthfulness.

One way of explaining the Book of Mormon, assuming Joseph Smith's own explanation is rejected, is to regard it merely as the product of Joseph's subjective imagination — whether that imagination is judged to have been sincerely deceived or, for whatever motives, deceptive and dishonest.

The historical evidence, however, seems lethal to such theories. And it's instructive to note that, while modern skeptics commonly assume that the golden plates never existed, many of Joseph's earliest persecutions came because some of his neighbors were convinced that he had them.

“These records,” Joseph later wrote,

were engraven on plates which had the appearance of gold, each plate was six inches wide and eight inches long and not quite so thick as common tin. They were filled with engravings, in Egyptian characters and bound together in a volume, as the leaves of a book with three rings running through the whole. The volume was something near six inches in thickness.¹

Why, if he were merely pretending, go into such details? Wouldn't it have been easier to simply claim inspiration without manufacturing ancient civilizations or claiming to possess tangible ancient artifacts? After all, as Anthony Sweat observes in his excellent chapter in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, this was how most of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants were received:

Joseph Smith did not describe the coming forth of the Book of Mormon the way he described many of his revelations found in the Doctrine and Covenants: as inspired words of the Lord that came to his mind and that he then dictated to a scribe. No, Joseph said the Book of Mormon came forth from a nearby hill, by removing dirt, using a lever to lift a large stone, and removing actual engraved plates and sacred interpreters for the translation of its inscriptions. The Book of Mormon didn't just pass through Joseph's trance-induced revelatory mind: its palpable relics passed through a clothing frock, hollowed log, cooper's shop, linen napkin, wooden chest, fireplace hearth, and barrel of beans.²

Sweat's article lays out some of the salient evidence by examining “multiple historical accounts of persons who interacted with actual, physical, tangible objects” that, “taken collectively ... provide compelling evidence to the truthfulness of Joseph Smith's account of the Book of Mormon's ancient origins.”³ Such accounts don't prove the Book of Mormon ancient, divine, or even correctly translated — no single piece or type of historical evidence can cover everything — but what

1 *The Joseph Smith Papers: History, 1838–1856, volume C-1* [2 November 1838–31 July 1842] (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2015), 1282.

2 Anthony Sweat, “Hefted and Handled: Tangible Interactions with Book of Mormon Objects,” in Largey, et al., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University and Deseret Book, 2015), 44.

3 *Ibid.*

Sweat powerfully terms the “indisputable physicality” of the plates and related relics⁴ goes a very long way toward establishing the plausibility of Joseph’s overall story and claim.

For example, Sweat considers the stone box in which the artifacts of the Book of Mormon were preserved on the side of the Hill Cumorah. Several witnesses, both believers and nonbelievers, apparently knew the place where it had been, and some may even have seen it. Lucy Mack Smith reported that she had seen and held both the Urim and Thummim and the breastplate found in the box, describing both in strikingly concrete detail. And, if there were no “actual relics hefted and handled, touched and transported, from one place to another and by one person to another,”⁵ all the stories about such things, and about the great efforts expended to protect the plates from people seeking to steal them, represent nothing more than a charade.

Looking at the same sorts of evidence, Terryl Givens remarks of Joseph Smith:

This continual, extensive, and prolonged engagement with a tangible, grounding artifact is not compatible with a theory that makes him an inspired writer reworking the stuff of his own dreams into a product worthy of the name scripture.⁶

If the “keystone” of Mormonism was delivered wrapped in fabrications, regarding it as nevertheless somehow “true” becomes, to put it mildly, much more difficult. Like the bodily resurrection of Christ from death, the physicality of the Book of Mormon — purportedly recovered from a dead pre-Columbian civilization — resists attempts to treat it as merely symbol or metaphor. It forthrightly demands to be understood as literally, tangibly true. It virtually forces a sharp decision.

I strongly suggest Anthony Sweat’s summary of the available evidence to any who might be interested in pursuing this subject. Believers will be heartened by it. Honest skeptics should find themselves challenged.

Some, unable or unwilling to take the witnesses to the Book of Mormon at their word, question their claims of seeing and hefting the golden plates, insisting instead that the witnesses “saw” only with “spiritual eyes — which means, effectively, in their imaginations.

4 Ibid., 55.

5 Ibid., 43–44.

6 Terryl L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 178.

Recently, the preferred method of disposing of the witnesses has been to suggest — quite falsely — that they never claimed to have literally seen or touched anything at all or to insinuate that they were primitive and superstitious fanatics who, unlike us sophisticated moderns, could scarcely distinguish reality from fantasy; honest they were, perhaps, but misguided.

It seems implausible, though, to assume that the witnesses, early nineteenth-century farmers who spent their lives rising at sunrise, pulling up stumps, clearing rocks, plowing fields, sowing seeds, making barrels, carefully nurturing crops, herding livestock, milking cows, digging wells, building cabins, raising barns, harvesting food, bartering (in an often cashless economy) for what they could not produce themselves, wearing clothes made from plant fibers and skins, anxiously watching the seasons, and walking or riding animals out under the weather until they retired to their beds shortly after sunset in “a world lit only by fire,” were estranged from everyday reality.

It’s especially unbelievable when the claim is made by people whose lives, like mine, consist to a large extent of staring at digital screens in artificially air-conditioned and lighted homes and offices, commuting between the two in enclosed and air-conditioned mechanical vehicles while listening to the radio, chatting on their cell phones, and fiddling with their iPods (whose inner workings are largely mysterious to them); people who are clothed in synthetic fibers and buy their prepackaged food (with little or no regard for the time or the season) by means of plastic cards and electronic financial transfers from artificially illuminated and air-conditioned supermarkets enmeshed in international distribution networks of which they know virtually nothing and for whom the rhythms of their daily lives are largely unaffected by the rising and setting of the sun. Somehow, the current generation seems ill-positioned to accuse the witnesses’ generation of being out of touch with reality.

Responding to the fashionable notion that those who testified of the plates and the angel were unable to distinguish reality from religious fantasy, historian Steven Harper explains in an article titled “The Eleven Witnesses” that “this explanation is appealing to some because it does not completely dismiss the compelling testimonies of the Book of Mormon witnesses, but it categorizes them as unreal.”⁷

Harper’s essay is followed immediately by one from Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope, titled “A Multiplicity of Witnesses: Women and the

7 Stephen C. Harper, “The Eleven Witnesses,” in Largey, et al., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 126.

Translation Process.” Viewed together, these two articles examine the role of eleven men and four women who saw, felt, heard, and knew. We can accept their testimonies, or in my judgment, we can attempt to evade them.

Harper examines the surviving evidence of the witnesses, citing the basic, uncontroversial historical principle that, all else being equal, firsthand testimony should be preferred over secondhand reports when such testimony is available.

How does that principle apply in this case? Besides their formal testimonies printed in every edition of the Book of Mormon since 1830, two of the Three Witnesses and three of the Eight Witnesses are known to have left behind written accounts of their experience. And numerous statements survive from others who heard the testimonies of one or more of them.

Yet, Harper observes, critics of the Book of Mormon — to the extent that they engage the witnesses at all — “repeatedly choose to privilege selected hearsay more than the direct statements of the witnesses,” interpreting it by means of speculations and conjectures.⁸ (He writes of “selected hearsay” because the overwhelming majority even of the secondhand accounts are consistent with the official witness testimonies; only a small minority clash with them.)

Harper recounts the story of the intelligent but skeptical William McLellin, a onetime member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles who lived for five decades in embittered estrangement from the church. Yet McLellin never lost his conviction, founded upon lengthy and searching interviews with the witnesses, that their testimonies were true and that, consequently, the Book of Mormon was of God.

“Why not make the same satisfying choice?” Harper asks.

Why not opt to believe in the direct statements of the witnesses and their demonstrably lifelong commitments to the Book of Mormon? This choice asks us to have faith in the marvelous, the possibility of angels, spiritual eyes, miraculous translation and gold plates, but it does not require us to discount the historical record or create hypothetical ways to reconcile the compelling Book of Mormon witnesses with our own skepticism.⁹

8 Ibid., 127.

9 Ibid., 129.

His excellent question gave me pause; it is one that allows us to accept the accounts of and by the Book of Mormon witnesses at face value, without the need to selectively and creatively recast accounts to satisfy our biases of “what must have been.”

In their essay, Easton-Flake and Cope contribute to our understanding of the Latter-day Saint past by addressing the “gap in scholarship and historical memory”¹⁰ connected with the role of women in the formative events of the Restoration. They concentrate specifically on four women — Mary Musselman Whitmer, Lucy Mack Smith, Lucy Harris, and Emma Hale Smith — in their capacity as witnesses to the Book of Mormon and testators of its appearance.

I’ll mention the most surprising of them first: Lucy Harris. We’re accustomed to thinking of Martin Harris’s wife as an antagonist to the Book of Mormon, to Joseph Smith, and, for that matter, eventually to her own husband. But this oversimplifies a very complex person: before she became an opponent, she actually contributed money to help Joseph while he was translating the record. She did this after a remarkable dream in which an angel showed the plates to her. Later, she and her daughter were permitted to hold the wooden box in which the plates were kept, and both were impressed by how heavy they were. This is a more important point than it might seem at first glance: gold, like lead, is extremely dense and heavy — much more so than mere rocks. At one point before his experience as a witness, Martin Harris too lifted the box in which the plates were allegedly concealed, to see what he could determine. “I knew from the heft,” he recalled with perhaps unintended humor, “that they were lead or gold, and I knew that Joseph had not credit enough to buy so much lead.”¹¹

Lucy Mack Smith and others in her family, as well as Emma Smith, were allowed to touch the plates and related objects through thin cloths. These were mundane experiences, perceived not in some mystical state or in a religious ecstasy but by means of their ordinary senses. They heard the metallic sound that the plates made when they scraped together. They felt the rings that bound the plates together.

Finally, Mary Whitmer (David Whitmer’s mother) was shown the plates by an apparent angel while she was out in the family barn to

10 Amy Easton-Flake and Rachel Cope, “A Multiplicity of Witnesses: Women and the Translation Process,” in Largey, et al., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 133.

11 Joel Tiffany, “Mormonism — No. II,” *Tiffany’s Monthly* 5 (August 1859): 169-170.

milk the cows.¹² She may have been the first person to see them after Joseph Smith, followed by Josiah Stowell. (I'll address Stowell shortly.)

These articles by Anthony Sweat, Steven Harper, Amy Easton-Flake, and Rachel Cope represent the latest scholarship on the Book of Mormon witnesses, who remain as formidable and as convincing today as they were when William McLellin interviewed them back in the early 1800s.¹³ The new articles should be accompanied, in this regard, by the work of historians Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat who, in their recent book, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon*, take a fresh look, enabled by their work with the ongoing Joseph Smith Papers Project, at a story that most active members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints already know fairly well.¹⁴ MacKay and Dirkmaat also have two chapters in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*. In "Firsthand Witness Accounts of the Translation Process" and "Joseph Smith's Negotiations to Publish the Book of Mormon," they further treat topics covered in *From Darkness unto Light*.

Some readers, having heard the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon all of their lives, may therefore imagine that there's

12 On Mary's account, see Daniel Peterson, "Mary Whitmer, 12th witness to the Book of Mormon," *Deseret News* (18 July 2013): <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865583267/Mary-Whitmer-12th-witness-to-the-Book-of-Mormon.html?pg=all>.

13 They supplement, but emphatically do not replace, the essential work of Richard Lloyd Anderson, most prominently including his *Investigating the Book of Mormon Witnesses* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981) but also his "Attempts to Redefine the Experience of the Eight Witnesses," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14/1 (2005): 18–31 [<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1399&index=4>]; "Personal Writings of the Book of Mormon Witnesses," *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 39–60 [<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1099&index=4>]; and "The Credibility of the Book of the Mormon Translators," *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds and Charles D. Tate (Provo UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 213–237 [<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1130&index=12>]. Also very worthy of note are Lyndon W. Cook, ed. *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, UT: Grandin 1991); John W. Welch and Larry E. Morris, eds., *Oliver Cowdery: Scribe, Elder, Witness* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2006) [<http://publications.mi.byu.edu/book/oliver-cowdery-scribe-elder-witness/>].

14 Michael Hubbard MacKay and Gerrit J. Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light: Joseph Smith's Translation and Publication of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center and Deseret Book, 2015).

nothing new to be learned about those familiar narratives of the early Restoration covering the years 1827–1830.

However, I think they'll be surprised as I was.

E. B. Grandin, for example, who printed the first edition of the Book of Mormon, emerges both as more hostile to the project than I'd realized and, frankly, as more greedy. And the sheet supposedly suspended between the Prophet and his scribes while he dictated turns out to have little support in the sources.

MacKay and Dirkmaat also provide fascinating details about the breastplate given to Joseph Smith, as well as about the "spectacles" that aided in the translation process. (They proved so cumbersome that Joseph eventually replaced them with a single seerstone.) The complex relationship between Lucy and Martin Harris, and between both of them and the Book of Mormon, is also depicted more fully than I've seen before.

Moreover, the motivation for Martin Harris's trip to New York City, during which he famously met with Professor Charles Anthon, is substantially transformed, as follows: 1. Joseph likely didn't yet know about "reformed Egyptian," 2. the authors persuasively argue that Joseph sought expertise not on Egyptian or Hebrew but on Native American languages, 3. because of his expertise, Samuel Mitchell rather than Anthon was the crucial person in the original story, and 4. as I independently but privately surmised a few years ago, Joseph at first wanted someone else to translate the plates, unaware that he himself was to be the translator.

Richard E. Bennett, the senior historian represented in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, concurs with them in offering a fresh look at "Martin Harris's 1828 Visit to Luther Bradish, Charles Anthon, and Samuel Mitchill." He suggests a rather different understanding of the undisputed fact that Martin Harris returned from his visit to the East fortified in his determination to contribute financially — and probably few of us fully recognize how *massively* he did so — to the publication of the Book of Mormon.

Along with Anthony Sweat, McKay and Dirkmaat also offer new information about the stone box in the Hill Cumorah that had once contained the plates. Many in the area, it seems, knew of the box or at least of the hole in which it had once rested.

"Ironically," MacKay and Dirkmaat comment,

while the detractors of Joseph Smith spent the remainder of his life claiming that he had never found any gold plates, had

any visitations from angels, or received any visions, Joseph's initial problems with his enemies in 1827 were precisely because they were certain that he had in fact obtained some golden treasure from the hill, and therefore they wanted to take it from him, forcibly if they had no other choice. Those who were most acquainted with Joseph Smith in Palmyra did not doubt he had received the plates but instead took steps to obtain them for themselves or at the very least find remnants of the buried treasure possibly still lying in the hill.¹⁵

Numerous statements from multiple sources support the literal materiality of the contents of that box. "Most of Joseph's closest friends and family," write MacKay and Dirkmaat, "testified to touching, hefting, or seeing the plates."¹⁶

For me, the most surprising piece of new information in the book involves Josiah Stowell.¹⁷ He was apparently "the first person other than Joseph to feel and heft the plates."¹⁸ Later, however, Stowell actually

testified under oath that he saw the plates the day Joseph first brought them home. As Joseph passed them through the window, Stowell caught a glimpse of the plates as a portion of the linen was pulled back. Stowell gave the court the dimensions of the plates and explained that they consisted of gold leaves with characters written on each sheet.¹⁹

15 Ibid., 10

16 Ibid., 15.

17 Or *Stoal*; see Joseph Smith-History 1:56–58.

18 MacKay and Dirkmaat, *From Darkness unto Light*, 13.

19 Ibid. Another significant step forward is MacKay and Dirkmaat's entirely unembarrassed description in *From Darkness unto Light* of a translation process for which Joseph Smith used a stone placed at the bottom of a hat. Related to this is an appendix to the book by Anthony Sweat, who teaches LDS church history and doctrine at Brigham Young University and who, equipped with a degree in art, contributed the book's illustrations. In "By the Gift and Power of Art," on pages 229–243 of *From Darkness unto Light*, he offers a helpful perspective on the fact that artwork illustrating events in LDS church (and other) history is often historically inaccurate. Some critics have used such artistic inaccuracies as weapons against the Church and the confidence of the Saints. I've actually argued, though, that Joseph's use of the rock in the hat, properly understood, is strongly faith-affirming. See Daniel Peterson, "Joseph, the stone and the hat: Why it all matters" (*Deseret News*, 26 March 2015): <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865625005/Joseph-the-stone-and-the-hat-Why-it-all-matters.html>.

Thus, Josiah Stowell can now be listed as yet another eyewitness who could testify to the existence of the Book of Mormon plates.

But what of the contents of those plates? What about the substance of the Book of Mormon itself?

Even before its publication in March 1830, most people knew what to expect from “that spindle shanked ignoramus Jo Smith,” as Abner Cole would shortly describe him.²⁰ And opinions didn’t change after the Book of Mormon actually appeared.

When Samuel Smith placed a copy with him in the summer of 1830, the Methodist preacher John P. Greene quickly dismissed it as a “nonsensical fable.”²¹ It was a “miserable production,” sniffed the *Ashtabula* [Ohio] *Journal* in 1831.²²

On the church’s first birthday (April 6, 1831), the editors of the *Brockport* [New York] *Free Press* pronounced the Book of Mormon “a fiction of hobgoblins and bugbears.”²³ The volume is “a bungling and stupid production,” said one 1840 periodical.²⁴ Another critic described it in 1841 as “mostly a blind mass of words . . . without much of a leading plan or design. It is in fact such a production as might be expected from a person of Smith’s abilities and turn of mind.”²⁵ In 1842, Daniel Kidder found it “nothing but a medley of incoherent absurdities,” and J. B. Turner called it “a bundle of gibberish.”²⁶ In 1930, the literary critic

20 Abner Cole, *Reflector* (30 June 1830); cited by Jeremy J. Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon in Nineteenth-Century America,” in Largey, et al., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, 180 (emphasis omitted).

21 See Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 183.

22 “The Golden Bible, or The Book of Mormon,” *Ashtabula Journal* (5 February 1831), 3, as cited in Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 186.

23 Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 188, citing “Mormon Bible,” *Brockport Free Press* (6 April 1831), 1.

24 “The Mormons,” *Religious Herald* (9 April 1840): 1.

25 John W. Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New York* (New York: S. Tuttle, 1841), 581, as cited at Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), xiv.

26 Daniel P. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons: A Historical View of the Rise and Progress of the Sect Self-Styled Latter-day Saints* (New York: Carlton & Porter, 1842), 330 (in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America: “The Book of Mormon”* [Independence, MO: Zion’s Printing, 1943], 2:199); J. B. Turner, *Mormonism in All Ages: or, The Rise, Progress, and Causes of Mormonism* (New York: Platt & Peters, 1842), 19 (Kirkham, *New Witness*, 2:186).

Bernard DeVoto declared it “a yeasty fermentation, formless, aimless, and inconceivably absurd.”²⁷

From the beginning, however, others responded differently, and more than 150 million copies of the Book of Mormon having now been printed in with over a hundred languages, it has been ranked among the most influential books in American history.²⁸ Merely hearing the term “Gold Bible,” said the early-nineteenth-century religious seeker Solomon Chamberlain, “there was a power like electricity (that) went from the top of my head to the end of my toes. The Lord revealed to me by the gift and power of the Holy Ghost that this was the work I had been looking for.”²⁹ “As I read,” Parley Pratt wrote of his own experience, “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.”³⁰

John P. Greene’s wife, Rhoda, convinced him to give the book another chance, and between his 1832 baptism and his death in 1844, he served eleven missions for the Restored Church. That same copy of the Book of Mormon brought Heber C. Kimball, a future apostle and counselor in the First Presidency, into Mormonism, along with the Young brothers — Phineas, Lorenzo, Joseph, and Brigham. After two years of careful examination, Brigham recalled, “I knew it was true, as well as I knew that I could see with my eyes, or feel by the touch of my fingers, or be sensible of the demonstration of any sense.”³¹

Although rare, even a non-Mormon editor or two evaluated the Book of Mormon with reasonable fairness and accuracy. For instance, Robert Dale Owen, editor of New York City’s *Free Enquirer*, published a “comparison between the Book of Mormon and the Scriptures of the

27 Bernard DeVoto, “The Centennial of Mormonism,” *American Mercury* 19 (1930): 5.

28 Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 174. See also <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865610637/Bible-Book-of-Mormon-make-list-of-top-50-influential-books.html?pg=all>.

29 As cited by Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 177, from Larry C. Porter, “Solomon Chamberlain — Early Missionary,” *BYU Studies* 12/33 (1972): 1–3.

30 Cited by Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 177, from Parley P. Pratt, *The Autobiography of Parley Parker Pratt, One of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (New York: Russell Brothers, 1874), 36–38.

31 Cited by Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 173, from Brigham Young, in *Journal of Discourses* (Liverpool: Orson Pratt, 1856), 3:91.

Old and New Testaments, or the Golden Bible vs. the Holy Bible” in 1831. Nearly a full page long, it was written by his brother William who, “after a pretty careful perusal,” concluded that

The Golden Bible will bear a very good comparison with the holy Bible. I find nothing in the former inconsistent with the doctrines or opposed to a belief in the latter; on the contrary, the one seems to corroborate the other; and I can discover no good reason why the generality of Christians should scoff, as I have generally found them do, and hoot at the idea of believing in such a monstrously absurd book.³²

For the Book of Mormon is demonstrably neither “bungling” nor “gibberish” nor “incoherent” nor “aimless.” (Grant Hardy’s Oxford University Press volume *Understanding the Book of Mormon* has recently destroyed that venerable claim yet again.³³) Many critics have, in fact, tended to fault the Book of Mormon not for what it actually is but for what they assume it must inevitably be. As the Catholic sociologist Thomas O’Dea quipped in 1957, “the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it.”³⁴

“It is a surprisingly big book,” remarked Hugh Nibley,

supplying quite enough rope for a charlatan to hang himself a hundred times. As the work of an imposter it must unavoidably bear all the marks of fraud. It should be poorly organized, shallow, artificial, patchy, and unoriginal. It should display a pretentious vocabulary (the Book of Mormon uses only 3000 words), overdrawn stock characters, melodramatic situations, gaudy and overdone descriptions, and bombastic diction ... Whether one believes its story or not, the severest critic of the Book of Mormon, if he reads it with care at all, must admit that it is the exact opposite. ... It is carefully organized, specific, sober, factual, and perfectly consistent.³⁵

32 Chatelain, “The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon,” 189–190, citing William Owen, “Communications,” *Free Enquirer* (10 September 1831): 3.

33 See the publication data on Hardy’s *Understanding the Book of Mormon* above, in note 25.

34 Thomas F. O’Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26 (emphasis omitted).

35 Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 337–338.

While they'll discount his obvious assumption that it was composed in the nineteenth century, believing Latter-day Saints will, I think, appreciate the Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel Walker Howe's judgment that "the Book of Mormon should rank among the great achievements of American literature."³⁶

Most, though not all, of the early reactions to the book cited above are discussed in Jeremy Chatelain's interesting chapter in *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon*, titled "The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon in Nineteenth-Century America."³⁷ Chatelain examines public reaction to the recovery of Mormon's record from 1829 through 1831.

The Book of Mormon was more heavily addressed in newspapers in these three years than in the next nine years combined. The primary sources used for the study are from a newly assembled collection of over 10,000 articles on Mormonism in more than 660 newspapers from 1829 to 1844. Among these sources are at least 583 articles that mention the Book of Mormon by name. More than two-thirds of those articles were written the first three years.³⁸

Steven C. Harper's "The Probation of a Teenage Seer: Joseph Smith's Early Experiences with Moroni" takes an admirably candid look at how a frontier American farm boy grew over four years, learning how to rise to his calling as a prophet before he could commence his public ministry. The chapter contributed by J. B. Haws, "The Lost 116 Pages Story: What We Do Know, What We Don't Know, and What We Might Know," surveys the best scholarship on a somewhat puzzling episode and even produces a very subtle but intriguing argument for the consistency and prophetic authenticity revealed in the story. (I can't recall having ever seen the loss of the first Book of Mormon manuscript used to promote and defend the faith, but the argument advanced by Haws is well worth pondering.)

In his contribution, "The Book of Mormon among the Saints: Evolving Use of the Keystone Scripture," Casey Paul Griffiths pursues the earlier landmark work of Noel B. Reynolds even further, showing how Latter-day Saints have begun to move beyond the underutilization

36 Howe's statement is cited at Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon*, 11, as well as (partially) on page xi, from Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*, Oxford History of the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 314.

37 Chatelain, "The Early Reception of the Book of Mormon," 173–198.

38 *Ibid.*, 174; compare 191.

of the Nephite record that was so surprisingly typical of believers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He identifies several genuine heroes in this process — including not only President Ezra Taft Benson but Elder George Reynolds, Elder Joseph F. Merrill, and Professor Sidney B. Sperry — who deserve more credit for their roles than they have thus far received. An important part of the church’s rediscovery of, and renewed emphasis on, the Book of Mormon has been its translation into well over a hundred languages since the original inspired 1830 translation into English. This story is told in a chapter by Po Nien (Felipe) Chou and Petra Chou, titled “To Every Nation, Kindred, Tongue, and People.”

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon opens with a chapter (“The Coming Forth of Plain and Precious Truths”) by Elder Merrill J. Bateman, emeritus member of the Seventy, former presiding bishop of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and former president of Brigham Young University. Also not to be missed are “‘They Are Not Cast Off Forever’: Fulfillment of the Covenant Purposes” by Jared W. Ludlow and “To the Convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ” by Shon D. Hopkin, who has been a valued participant in the Interpreter Foundation’s “scripture roundtables.”

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon is filled with insightful and inspiring stories about how we received the Book of Mormon. There is very good material in this book, which I enthusiastically recommend.

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