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## It Came from Beyond

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# IT CAME FROM BEYOND

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Daniel C. Peterson

**Abstract:** *The early Latter-day Saints viewed the Book of Mormon not only as a symbol of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling but also as the most powerful evidence for that calling. However, perhaps because they were ardent believers in the Bible who had been formed in a distinctly Bible-drenched culture and perhaps also because many of them had come to the Book of Mormon relatively late in their lives, they tended to quote from the Nephite record only rarely. Surprisingly, this was the case even for Joseph Smith himself — which can be taken as a sign that he didn’t write the book.*

In the early 1980s I attended a presentation at the Latter-day Saint Institute of Religion located on Hilgard Avenue, adjacent to the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA). Delivered by Grant Underwood, who was then a doctoral student at UCLA, it made a deep and lasting impression on me. An article setting forth Underwood’s argument that night was eventually published in *BYU Studies* as “‘Saved or Damned’: Tracing a Persistent Protestantism in Early Mormon Thought.”<sup>1</sup>

In it, Underwood makes the case that the vision of the three degrees of glory recorded as Doctrine and Covenants 76 — commonly known in the nineteenth century as “the Vision” — had surprisingly little discernible impact on Latter-day Saint thought in general and, most shocking of all, little or no noticeable impact on the thinking of Joseph Smith himself, for several years after its reception. And it was received quite early in the Restoration. Although many tend, and not without reason, to associate Latter-day Saint notions of a plurality of gods and of human deification or exaltation with the Nauvoo period of Joseph Smith’s ministry (roughly 1839–1844), Section 76, which strongly

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1. Grant Underwood, “‘Saved or Damned’: Tracing a Persistent Protestantism in Early Mormon Thought,” *BYU Studies* 25 no. 3 (Summer 1985): 85–103, <https://byustudies.byu.edu/content/saved-or-damned-tracing-persistent-protestantism-early-mormon-thought>.

suggests both of those concepts, was given on 16 February 1832, fewer than two years after the formal organization of the Church.

Underwood contends that what he terms “the minimal role of the Vision in early LDS thought”<sup>2</sup> was the result of theological backgrounds and assumptions brought into the Church by both Joseph Smith and his early converts. On the basis of numerous biblical passages, he explains,

in the world into which Mormonism was born, it was customary to conceptualize man as either saint or sinner, righteous or wicked, bound for heaven or headed for hell; and this formed an important part of the cultural baggage early converts carried with them into the Church.<sup>3</sup>

Underwood sketches “the persisting lineaments of traditional salvationist rhetoric” among Latter-day Saints of the 1830s and even 1840s and demonstrates that “the vision of the three degrees of glory did not begin to alter such notions until the end of the Nauvoo period.”<sup>4</sup> Surveying the historical sources, he remarks that

it seems clear that a saved-damned duality was deeply entrenched in early Mormon thought. But what about the vision of the three degrees of glory? Did it not immediately uproot all the old “either-or” notions? Did not the Saints quickly discard their former thinking as theologically naive when presented with this vision of a pluralized rather than a polarized afterlife? The answer is “no,” and that should not come as much of a surprise to those aware of the historical development of ideas within the Church. Nonetheless, that early Mormons neither understood the implications of the vision of the three degrees of glory nor lampooned notions they still retained is significant enough to merit careful consideration. ...

The Vision seemed to attract some attention for the first year or two. ... A specific search of presently available periodicals, pamphlets, and tracts as well as hundreds of unpublished diaries, journals, and letters from this time reveals that throughout the rest of the decade and on into the early 1840s, the Vision was virtually ignored. Admittedly there were numerous references to the celestial kingdom, but that term

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2. *Ibid.*, 98.

3. *Ibid.*, 88.

4. *Ibid.*, 87.

for most Mormons seems to have been just another name for the heaven Christians had always talked about, and it required no new mental framework to adopt it. *Celestial*, after all, was a common synonym for *heavenly*. Discussion, even mention of the terrestrial and telestial glories, however, which might have hastened the demise of dualistic thinking, appears to have been almost nonexistent.<sup>5</sup>

The dualistic mainstream Christian framework that constrained early Latter-day Saint thoughts about the world to come also influenced their conception of the judgments of the Last Days, which, they had first assumed, would entirely sweep the wicked (whom they identified as those who had failed to accept the Restored Gospel) from the Earth. Thus,

When in 1841 Joseph first advanced the idea that there would be “wicked” men on the earth during the Millennium, it represented an abrupt about-face from a decade’s consensus to the contrary, and it would be at least another decade before the idea really caught hold even among Church leaders. To introduce the color gray to those so accustomed to black and white was not easy.<sup>6</sup>

The only instance of anything resembling a substantial or sustained reflection on the Vision in the early Church came in Joseph Smith’s own versified summary of it, which he wrote in 1843. Underwood speculates that this renewed engagement with his early-1832 revelatory experience might have inclined Joseph to alter his thinking on salvation and damnation,

for in the remaining sixteen months of his life he discussed in new ways the nature of hell and the torment of the damned. Furthermore, he specifically ridiculed the pervasive Protestant rhetoric that in the hereafter there were only two possible outcomes — heaven or hell. This represents a watershed in Mormon thought. Until that time, if the Vision were discussed at all, it was done from within an interpretive framework that was still patently polarized. ... Just four months after the Prophet versified the Vision, he began to publicly and repeatedly denounce the heaven-hell dichotomy. ... Toward the close of his life, then, Joseph Smith began to emphasize a pluralized, rather

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5. *Ibid.*, 93–94.

6. *Ibid.*, 91.

than a polarized picture of eternity. He symbolized hell, diminished damnation's domain, and expanded salvation.<sup>7</sup>

This is striking. It strongly suggests that Joseph Smith himself did not begin to grasp the implications of the great 1832 revelation on the three degrees of glory for at least nine to eleven years after it was given. Only then did he begin to share the expanded understanding of divine benevolence and human destiny that was already plainly present in Section 76. However, observes Underwood, "The fact that he repeatedly discussed these concepts the last months of his life did not ... guarantee that they were instantly internalized by the Saints."<sup>8</sup>

It's pretty clear why the doctrinal implications of D&C 76 required more than a decade to take root in the thinking of the Latter-day Saints: The Vision was a gift to them from the outside, from God. It certainly didn't emerge from their prior assumptions; instead, it clashed with them and was forced to overcome their resistance.

But the same was surely true for Joseph Smith himself. His recognition of what the Vision entailed came only gradually, requiring years to sink in. He was only slightly ahead of the general membership of the Church in this regard.

And that fact, it seems to me, is highly significant. It suggests that the ideas in Section 76 were not conclusions Joseph himself had drawn over some undetermined period prior to 16 February 1832 — perhaps, as some critics have suggested, developed as the result of his alleged studies in the works of the remarkable Swedish scientist and mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). They seem to have arrived suddenly, from outside Joseph's own mind. That is why he took so long to assimilate them, to recognize the implications of what he had seen. It's important to remember as well that Joseph Smith wasn't alone in seeing the Vision. He shared it with Sidney Rigdon. Moreover, others present — notably Philo Dibble — also perceived something of it if only partially, which makes it difficult to take seriously the suggestion that the doctrines of Section 76 represent purely the culmination of Joseph's own personal thought processes.<sup>9</sup>

Recently, I've encountered a claim regarding Joseph Smith's use of the Book of Mormon — or, more precisely, the relative *rarity* of his use of the Book of Mormon — that has reminded me of the matter of D&C 76.

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7. Ibid., 94–95, 98, 99.

8. Ibid., 99.

9. On Philo Dibble's experience during the reception of the revelation, see <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/doctrine-and-covenants-student-manual/section-76-the-vision-of-the-degrees-of-glory>.

Joseph's apparent preference for citing the Bible over the Book of Mormon, so the claim goes, is persuasive evidence that he made it up.

But, in my judgment, this seems to be precisely the opposite of the likely truth.

When, in 1986, President Ezra Taft Benson delivered his enormously influential exhortation to the Saints to pay more attention to the Book of Mormon,<sup>10</sup> I was, frankly, rather puzzled. I was unaware that we had been neglecting it. After all, as a freshman student at Brigham Young University, I had taken the required year-long course on the Book of Mormon. I had already come under the influence of Hugh Nibley, and I was an enthusiastic follower of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), which was beginning to reach its stride after having been founded in 1979, turning out an abundance of first-rate faithful scholarship on the Church's "keystone scripture."

Yes, I had read the Lord's revealed warning to the elders of the Church, given in late September 1832 and alluded to by President Benson:

Your minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received — Which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation.

And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all. And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say, but to do according to that which I have written.

That they may bring forth fruit meet for their Father's kingdom; otherwise there remaineth a scourge and judgment to be poured out upon the children of Zion. (D&C 84:54–58)

Still, it was perhaps not until I read Noel Reynolds's important 1999 *BYU Studies* article "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century" that I realized the truth and justice of President Benson's lament that we as a people had not taken the Book of Mormon as seriously as we ought to have done. In fact, the freshman Book of Mormon class that I had imagined perpetually fixed in stone had only been made mandatory for graduation a few years before

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10. Ezra Taft Benson, "A Sacred Responsibility," *Ensign* 16 (May 1986), <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1986/04/a-sacred-responsibility>.

and even then not without facing considerable resistance.<sup>11</sup> Reading Reynolds’s article, which is fascinating in itself but which also seems to me a salutary warning that is once again increasingly and unfortunately relevant, I was convinced that “the Book of Mormon was underutilized by most Latter-day Saints until interest in it surged during the second half of the twentieth century.”<sup>12</sup>

Happily, in recent years the Book of Mormon has indeed grown “to become appreciated not just as an artifact, but as a fully utilized tool in teaching the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, as the California-born son of a non-member father and a semi-active Latter-day Saint mother, I had both come of age and to religious commitment at a time when Latter-day Saints — some of them, anyway — were beginning to take the Book of Mormon very seriously and to accord it central importance in the Restoration and in their own reading.

And, by and large, that focus on the Book of Mormon has continued. However, Professor Reynolds observed,

Such fervor did not always exist. Early LDS converts were students of the Bible, and with no traditions concerning the Book of Mormon, they did not readily incorporate the new scripture into their devotions. The early Saints valued the Book of Mormon as evidence of the Restoration, but by the Nauvoo period, focus on the book had already decreased. As recently as the mid-1930s, BYU and the LDS Institutes of Religion only

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11. Noel B. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38 no. 2 (1999): 7–47. See also Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 17 (Autumn 1984): 35–74, [https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue\\_V17N03\\_37.pdf](https://www.dialoguejournal.com/wp-content/uploads/sbi/articles/Dialogue_V17N03_37.pdf); Casey Paul Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints: Evolving Use of the Keystone Scripture,” in Dennis L. Largey, Andrew H. Hedges, John Hilton III, and Kerry Hull, eds., *The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon: A Marvelous Work and a Wonder* (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University Religious Studies Center, 2015), 199–226, <https://rsc.byu.edu/coming-forth-book-mormon/book-mormon-among-saints-evolving-use-keystone-scripture>. I have not yet consulted Alton D. Merrill, “An Analysis of the Papers and Speeches of Those Who Have Written or Spoken about the Book of Mormon, Published during the Years of 1830 to 1855 and 1915 to 1940, to Ascertain the Shift of Emphasis” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1940), <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/4938/>, but, according to Reynolds, Merrill’s findings agree with his own perceptions.

12. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” 7.

13. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 200.

occasionally featured the Book of Mormon in their curricula. ... [T]he Book of Mormon was largely overlooked throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>14</sup>

Further, Professor Reynolds wrote,

Although the existence and truthfulness of the Book of Mormon was a crucial point of faith and touchstone of conversion for the early Saints, it would take time and effort for the contents of that distinctive volume to come into widespread use. ... [A] very low percentage of early LDS speeches and writings overtly encouraged the study or distribution of the book.<sup>15</sup>

In support of his claim, Reynolds draws upon analysis published by Grant Underwood in a 1984 *Dialogue* article entitled “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” indicating that early Latter-day Saint writing cited the Book of Mormon far less frequently than it cited the Bible. From 1832 to 1838, for instance, the ratio of biblical references to Book of Mormon references averaged nineteen to one. In fact, in some publications (such as the *Elders’ Journal*), the ratio rose to fully 40 to one.<sup>16</sup>

Why was this so? Virtually all adult members of the Church in its first years were necessarily converts. They had grown up knowing the Bible, and — as scripture — *only* the Bible, in a particularly Bible-drenched era of American and Western history when people who knew the Bible tended to know it quite *well*. It’s scarcely surprising, therefore, that “most of the early Saints felt more comfortable sharing doctrine pulled from biblical passages.”<sup>17</sup>

And, in this regard, Joseph Smith was at one with his environment. As Casey Paul Griffiths puts it,

Even the Prophet Joseph Smith, the instrument used in bringing forth the book, showed a tendency to favor biblical passages in his teachings. A study of the Nauvoo discourses of Joseph Smith revealed allusions to 451 different biblical passages compared to 22 references to the Book of Mormon, or a ratio of 21:1. ... Joseph’s marked propensity toward using the Bible was likely the product of his upbringing and his desire to build on the common beliefs already held by

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14. Reynolds, “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” 7, 8.

15. *Ibid.*, 8.

16. *Ibid.* Reynolds is citing Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” 52–53.

17. Griffiths, “The Book of Mormon among the Saints,” 203.

most new converts. The discovery of the Book of Mormon as a doctrinal gem was still in the process during the first generation of the Church, the Prophet included.<sup>18</sup>

So, what does this mean?

Maybe you've had the experience of needing an appliance or a tool — a computer, perhaps. You may even have made a list of the specific features you needed. You researched online. You talked to friends who might know something about the subject. Finally, after long and careful consideration, you made your purchase and, when it arrived, you knew exactly what to do with it and you put it to immediate use. But many of us, I suspect, may also have had the experience of receiving an unexpected gift. We'd never thought about it before, nor felt any need for it. We're grateful for the gift, of course, but, very possibly we then put it on a shelf or in a closet and essentially forget about it — perhaps to the quiet disappointment of the giver of the gift. Only later do we perhaps bring it back out again and, for the first time, recognize how valuable and useful it is.

I see the Book of Mormon as in a sense analogous to such an unexpected gift. Moreover, it seems to me that the case of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon is entirely comparable with the case of Joseph Smith and the vision of the three degrees of glory. Joseph didn't work his way through to the doctrine and the stories of the Book of Mormon. Rather, the Book of Mormon was an unexpected gift to him. It came from outside him, from a source external to his mind. Had it been his composition, he would have known it thoroughly, and its thoughts would have (literally) been his thoughts. It would have been directly relevant to his issues because it would have been composed on the *basis* of those issues.

But that isn't what we find with Joseph and his subsequent behavior relative to the Book of Mormon. Although it passed through his mind during an intensive and miraculous period of two or three months, that translation process did not position it equally in his mind with the Bible, which was virtually omnipresent in his upbringing and in the ambient culture and the religious discourse of his day. This is not to make him the master of the biblical text (or the literary arts) that he would have had to be in order to have composed the Book of Mormon himself, especially in the rapid manner it was dictated. But it seems inevitable that he would have been much more comfortable, just as the other members of his Church were, with the Bible than with the Book of Mormon.

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18. *Ibid.*, 204.

While it's scarcely decisive proof, this seems to me an indicator not that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon but rather that he didn't.

However, I thank those who *have* written the articles and reviews in this issue of *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship*. They write and review without financial compensation. I'm grateful to the peer reviewers, the source checkers, the copy editors, and all those who make the production of the *Journal* possible — and especially to Allen Wyatt and Jeff Lindsay, who oversee that relentlessly demanding production, week in and week out. And this is an appropriate place to express my appreciation for all those who are involved with the Foundation in various ways and on various fronts. (Many of them — necessarily omitted are our peer reviewers, who are anonymous as a matter of policy — are listed on pages ii–iii of the present volume.) Without the time and effort and financial support offered by a large number of generous people, the Interpreter Foundation would be dead in the water.

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