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A New Witness for God: Chapter VI

Author(s): B. H. Roberts

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Abstract: This article is a discussion of the origin of the Book of Mormon. It is an abridgment by Mormon from many other writings of ancient prophets and was hidden by Moroni in the Hill Cumorah; its location was revealed to Joseph Smith and he translated and published the book.

 THE LATTER-DAY SAINTS' MILLENNIAL STAR.

 MONDAY, JUNE 18, 1888.

A NEW WITNESS FOR GOD.

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CHAPTER VI.

An angel from on high,
 The long, long silence broke;
 Descending from the sky,
 These gracious words he spoke—
 Lo! in Cumorah's lonely hill,
 A sacred record lies concealed.

It speaks of Joseph's seed,
 And makes the remnant known
 Of nations long since dead,
 Who once had dwelt alone.
 The fullness of the Gospel, too,
 Its pages will reveal to view.

P. P. PRATT.

THE reader will want to know how the facts detailed in our last chapter respecting the peopling of America, the leading events of their history, and the character of their civilization came to be known. It is our purpose in this chapter to deal with this question.

Shortly after the arrival of Lehi's colony on the western continent, his son Nephi, whom it will be remembered was a leading spirit in the colony, a great prophet, really the founder of the Nephite nation and its first king—was commanded to make plates from ore, most probably gold, and engrave thereon the history of his people. This he did; recording the history of the departure of the colony led out from Jerusalem, and their subsequent history in the land of promise up to the time of his death. He engraved on those plates the genealogy of his father, who was a descendant of Joseph, the favorite son of the patriarch Jacob. He also recorded many prophecies of his father's, and some of his own, but gave most prominence to the wars and contentions with their brethren, the Lamanites, and their colonizing enterprises, etc. These plates were kept in the possession of succeeding kings; but when the form of government changed to a republic, they were kept by the chief judges; each king or judge engraving, or causing to be engraved upon them, the historical events of his own day, generally giving to such

history his own name—hence in course of time there was the Book of Nephi, the Book of Mosiah, the Book of Alma, etc., contained in these plates. They were preserved in the manner described down to the close of the fourth century A.D. These plates we shall know as the larger plates of Nephi. On them was engraven a secular, or political history of the people inhabiting America for a period of about one thousand years.

I am now under the necessity of calling the reader back to this first Nephi again. After he had made the larger plates of which I have spoken, he received another commandment of the Lord to make another set of metallic plates, on which he should be particular to record more especially the revelations of God, the teachings of the holy prophets, and their prophecies; and commanded that they should be kept by the prophets for these sacred purposes. This last set of plates were smaller than the first set, and are known as the smaller plates of Nephi.

In them was given prominence to spiritual instruction and doctrine and revelation and prophecy, especially when such revelations and prophecy related to the coming and mission of the Messiah. Still upon them was recorded also a brief but succinct history of the departure of Lehi's colony from Jerusalem; the arrival upon the promised land; the rise of the Nephite and Lamanite peoples; some of their contentions and the development of the civilization of the Nephites, for a period of about four hundred years. By this time the plates were filled with engravings, and one Amaleki having them in charge at that time, delivered them up to the reigning king, and they were kept by the succeeding kings as the larger plates were, but no more was added to them. There were other records kept by the Nephites also, but it is with these plates of Nephi that we have to deal with here.

About the middle of the fourth century, A.D., these plates of Nephi, both the larger and smaller set, came into the hands of a prophet and leader among the Nephites by the name of Mormon, and he engraved upon the larger plates of Nephi the chief historical events of his day. But that was not all he did. He made an abridgement from these same plates of Nephi, giving to each part of his abridgement the name of the book from which he condensed it—hence in that abridgement was found what is called the Book of Alma, the Book of Heleman, etc.; but the work as a whole he called the Book of Mormon. Being exceedingly pleased with the contents of the smaller plates of Nephi, because of the prophecies and spiritual instruction they contained, and being impressed by the Spirit of God to do so, he attached them to the bunch of plates containing his own abridgement of the larger plates of Nephi; so that in that collection of plates there was a double history of the Nephites from the time they left Jerusalem to two hundred year B.C.—a period of four hundred years.

Mormon may not inappropriately be called the last of the Nephites. He was their great commander in those terrible battles near the close of the fourth century, which resulted in the annihilation of the Nephite nation, and he himself was slain. But previous to his death he left his abridgement of the plates of Nephi, together with some other records, with his son Moroni.

Moroni survived the overthrow of his people; he lived to see their utter destruction, and the Lamanites themselves split up into innumerable parties

or tribes at war among themselves. He closed up the abridgement made by his father by adding the items of interest which happened after Mormon's death, together with a discourse of his father's, some letters from the same to himself, etc. But he did something more.

In the second century B.C., a company of Nephites wandered into North America, and there discovered evidences of that land having been formerly inhabited by a numerous people, many of whose bones were bleaching on the plains, and amid the ruins of their cities, and a wasted, desolate land. But what was most important, they brought back with them twenty-four gold plates they had found filled with engravings, and these were kept by the Nephite kings and judges as the plates of Nephi were, and with the other records of which I have spoken, finally came into the hands of Moroni. He made an abridgement from them, and as these plates were made and filled with engravings by one Ether, he calls his abridgement the Book of Ether, but joins it to his father's abridgement of the Nephite records.

From this source we learn that the forefathers of those people whose ruins were found by the Nephites in North America, were led to that land by the Lord from the Tower of Babel, at the confusion of languages: that for a time they flourished and became a powerful nation; but falling into gross wickedness they were divided into numerous parties, and soon embroiled in war with each other. These civil feuds ended ultimately in the destruction of the entire people, and their ruins and these twenty-four plates of Ether were found by the Nephites.

After Moroni had completed the record of his father, Mormon, and abridged the plates of Ether, he concealed the whole work in a stone box in a hill known among the Nephites as Cumorah—its location is in the western part of the State of New York—where it remained until its existence was revealed to Joseph Smith. The manner in which it was revealed to him is as follows:

In September 1823, Moroni—the same personage who had concealed the Nephite records in Cumorah, 421 A.D., and having been raised from the dead—appeared to Joseph Smith and revealed to him the existence of this history of the Nephites. He was told that it not only gave an account of the source from whence the aborigines of America sprang, but contained also the fullness of the Gospel as taught to the people of that land by the Son of God. In vision he was shown the place where the Book of Mormon was concealed, and so vivid was the vision that when he visited the place the next day, 22nd of September, he easily recognized it.

He succeeded in removing the soil and grass from about the edges of the stone box, the convex surface of the cover appearing above the surface, and with a lever he fixed under the edge of the stone, he succeeded in raising the cover, and there beheld the plates containing the precious records of the ancient inhabitants of America, and the Urim and Thummim, which consisted of two stones set in silver bows and fastened to a breast plate—a means prepared by the Lord for the translation of the book. Each plate was about seven inches in width by eight in length, and a little thinner than common tin, filled on both sides with engravings, the characters being small and beautifully executed. The whole volume was about six inches in thickness.

Joseph Smith was about to take the plates from the box, when Moroni again stood at his side and forbade him doing it, saying that the time had not yet come for the record to be given to him, and instructed the youth to meet him at that place in one year from that time, and he would receive further information in relation to the work the Lord was about to commence in the earth. He continued to go on the same date in each year, until 1827, when the messenger met him, and delivered into his keeping the sacred record which he was to translate. He was made responsible for its safety; but was told that if he would use all his endeavors to preserve it until the same heavenly messenger called for it, it should be protected. He was also strictly commanded not to show the plates or the Urim and Thummim to any one except they to whom the Lord commanded him to show them.

He proceeded with the work of translation, but in consequence of his lack of means and the want of a scribe, the progress was slow. Finally a respectable farmer of the neighborhood, Martin Harris, came to his assistance by furnishing him some means, and also by writing for him occasionally as he translated. By February 1829 they had translated enough to fill 116 pages of manuscript, foolscap paper, and Joseph, listening to the importunities of Martin Harris, allowed him to have what had been written to show to some few of his friends. They by a stratagem succeeded in getting the manuscript out of his hands, and he never recovered it.

The course pursued by Joseph in letting the manuscript go out of his hands, displeased the Lord, and the Urim and Thummim was taken from him for a season. On his sincere repentance, however, it was restored and the work of translation continued. Satan put it into the hearts of those men into whose hands the 116 pages of manuscript fell to change what had been written, and then intending to wait until Joseph should retranslate that portion, they would produce the first translation, which they had altered, and claim that he could not translate the same record twice alike, and therefore would prove to the world that his claims to inspiration were vain pretensions. This was a deep laid plot to destroy the work of God, but the Lord's wisdom was greater than Satan's cunning. He commanded His servant Joseph not to translate again the first part of Mormon's abridgement, but instead thereof to translate the smaller plates of Nephi of which I have before spoken as containing a brief history of the Nephites from the time the first colony left Jerusalem to two hundred years B.C. The history the smaller plates of Nephi contained thus took the place of the first part of Mormon's abridgement. It occupies the first 157 pages of the Book of Mormon, and is connected with Mormon's abridgement of the larger plates of Nephi by the words of Mormon which he wrote on finding the smaller plates and attaching them to the abridgment he was making.

In April 1829, Oliver Cowdery, a school teacher living in the vicinity where the Smiths resided, having heard the account of Joseph obtaining the plates, came to see him, and being convinced that he had the plates, he remained to assist him in the work, acting as his scribe. The translation was at last completed, and the Book of Mormon was published in the winter of 1829-30.

It was thus that the history of the ancient people of America was given to this generation. It rolls back the clouds of mystery which otherwise effect-

ally enshrouds the western continent. From it we learn something of that people who have long centuries ago become extinct. We know their origin; we know something of their fortunes; how they became powerful; and what causes led to their destruction. We know something of the character of their governments and civilization. The ruins of their temples and cities, roads and mighty aqueducts no longer astonish us. But better than all this we learn how it is that they became acquainted with the principal incidents in Bible history—they had the Jewish Scriptures among them. We know how it is that traces of certain principles of the Gospel are to be found in their mythology—the Son of God visited their forefathers and taught them the truth, the way, the life, and organized among them His Church; and they have preserved in their traditions distorted accounts of these glorious events, and have also preserved to some extent the rites and ceremonies connected with the Gospel taught to their fathers, and which is so clearly set forth in its fullness in the sacred pages of the Book of Mormon.

It is in this last respect that the Book of Mormon is of so much worth to the children of men. It is as a new witness for God and Christ that most importance attaches to it. It is the voice of a whole continent speaking low out of the dust of the earth, testifying to this unbelieving generation that the Lord is God; that Jesus of Nazareth who was rejected and crucified by the Jews is indeed the Messiah—the Redeemer of mankind; and that the Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe and obey its precepts and ordinances.

As foretold by one of old, (Isaiah xxix—read it all I pray you) because of the increased evidence it gives of these great truths, fundamental in religion, the meek may increase their joy in the Lord; the poor among men may rejoice in the Holy One of Israel; for the terrible one is brought to nought, the scorner is consumed; they that watch for iniquity and make a man an offender for a word are cut off; they that have erred in spirit may come to understanding; and they who have murmured may learn doctrine—for God has brought forth a New Witness for Himself—one that speaks with a familiar voice, so easy to be understood, that he who runs may read, and yet whose testimony cannot be impeached. R.

The names and ages of persons intending to go with the June 23rd company should be sent to this Office before the 21th inst. The next company of Saints from Great Britain will leave in August.

OFFERINGS RECEIVED FOR MANTI TEMPLE.—Susan Houchin, 1s. 6d.; Avis Cross, 3s.; Alma Cross, 1s.

CONFERENCE NOTICE.—The London Conference will be held at Orson's Assembly Rooms, 23, New Road, Commercial Road, London, E., on Sunday, July 15, 1888. Meetings commencing at 10-30 a.m. and 2-30 and 6 p.m. President Teasdale and other Utah Elders are expected to attend.

RELEASES AND APPOINTMENTS.—Elder John E. Clark is released from his labors in the Birmingham Conference and appointed to assist in the business department of the Liverpool Office.