

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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BOOK OF MORMON IN A BIBLICAL CULTURE

One does not need to look beyond the prevailing revivalist sects in America to discover why the earliest Mormon elders won an immediate hearing for their sacred book. Firm calls for personal righteousness and obedience to the moral requirements of the Judeo-Christian scriptures were by 1830 the dominant motifs in all Protestant communions. Moreover, each of the American sects shared speculations about the ancient and future history of Indians and Jews.

These interests and beliefs were also predominant among Methodist, Congregational, and Baptist ministers serving congregations in and around Cheshire, in northern England. Heber C. Kimball's *Journal*, giving an account of his mission to Great Britain, shows how the flowering of biblical study and of millennial speculation prepared the soil for early Mormon evangelization there. He reported that even clergymen in the Church of England told their congregations that the teachings of the Latter-day Saints reveal the same principles taught by the apostles of old.

The Book of Mormon also gives clear direction on several matters that the Christian scriptures seem to have left unclear, including baptism by immersion and the promises that all believers, and not just the apostles, might be "filled with the Holy Ghost"; that Christian believers can be made pure in heart (as John Wesley had insisted in the previous century); that the experience of salvation received by a free response to free grace is available to all persons, and not simply to the "elect"; and that obedience and works of righteousness are the fruit of that experience. The book also affirms the veracity of the biblical accounts of the scattering of Israel by affirming that Native Americans originated from descendants of Joseph and Judah.

The persuasive power of the new scriptures and of the missionaries who expounded them, therefore, lay in their testimony to beliefs that were central to evangelical Protestant sects in both Jacksonian America and early Victorian England. An early LDS missionary, Parley P. PRATT, told his English hearers that two errors in interpretation of the Bible had produced widespread uncertainty. One was the belief that direct inspiration by the Holy Ghost was not intended for all ages of the Church; and the other was that the Jewish and Christian scriptures contained all truth necessary

to salvation and comprised a sufficient rule of faith and practice.

Some nineteenth-century deacons and elders and a few evangelical pastors struggled with grave temptations to doubt the truth and relevance of large portions of the book upon which they had been taught to stake their eternal destiny. True, the details of the histories recounted in the two sacred books were radically different. But they fit together wondrously. And their moral structure, the story they told of Jesus, their promise of salvation, and their description of humankind's last days were remarkably similar. Though the new scriptures had similarities with evangelical Arminianism, at the expense of the Calvinist views long dominant in colonial America, the same was true of the early nineteenth-century teachings of many Protestants, even Presbyterians, to say nothing of Methodists and Disciples of Christ. In the voice of two witnesses, the Bible and the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints declared the truth confirmed, just as the prophet NEPHI₁ had predicted (cf. 2 Ne. 29:8).

In five important ways, the Book of Mormon seems to some who are not members of the Church to strengthen the authority of Holy Scripture. First in importance is the volume's affirmation that the Christian religion is grounded upon both the Old and New Testaments. The book affirms what recent biblical scholarship is now making plain: the continuity of the theology, ethics, and spirituality that the two Testaments proclaimed. In the Book of Mormon, Jesus is the Lord who gave the law to Moses, and the risen Christ is identical to the prophet Isaiah's MESSIAH. He delivers exactly the same message of redemption, faith, and a new life of righteousness through the Holy Spirit that the New Testament attributes to him.

Second, the Book of Mormon reinforces the unifying vision of biblical religion, grounding it in the conviction of a common humanity that the stories of creation declared, God's promise to Abraham implied, and Jesus affirmed. Puritan MILLENARIANISM may have inspired an ethnocentric view of Anglo-Saxon destiny, but the image of the future in the Book of Mormon is a wholly opposite one. It envisions a worldwide conversion of believers and their final gathering into the kingdom of God. This begins where John Wesley's "world parish" leaves off.

Third, the biblical bond linking holiness to hope for salvation, both individual and social, also

finds confirmation in the Book of Mormon. Certainly, Methodists had no corner on that linkage, for Baptist preachers, Charles G. Finney's Congregationalists, Alexander Campbell's Disciples of Christ, and Unitarians like William E. Channing affirmed it. Ancient Nephites heeded the word of their prophets and looked forward to the second coming of Jesus Christ, the Son of Righteousness. When he appeared to their descendants in the New World, Jesus repeated even more understandably the words of the SERMON ON THE MOUNT that he had proclaimed in the Old.

Fourth, Joseph Smith's translation of an ancient sacred book helped bring to fruition another movement, long growing among Puritans, Pietists, Quakers, and Methodists, to restore to Christian doctrine the idea of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of believers. Charles G. Finney came eventually to believe, for example, that the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or the experience of entire SANCTIFICATION, would remedy the inadequacies of righteousness and love that he saw in his converts. So, of course, did almost all Methodists. Observers from both inside and outside the restored Church testified that in the early years something akin to modern pentecostal phenomena took place among at least the inner circle of the Saints. By the 1830s, evangelicals in several traditions were greatly expanding their use of the example of the Day of Pentecost to declare that God's power is at work in the world.

Fifth, the Book of Mormon shared in the restoration of some Christian expectations that in the LAST DAYS biblical prophecies will be literally fulfilled. Those who by faith and baptism become Saints will be included among God's people, chosen in "the eleventh hour." They, too, should gather in ZION, a NEW JERUSALEM for the New World, and a restored Jerusalem in the Old; and Christ will indeed return.

Whatever LDS interpretations of the King James Version of the Holy Scriptures developed later, the mutually supportive role of the Bible and the Book of Mormon was central to the thinking of Joseph Smith, the early missionaries, and their converts.

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TIMOTHY L. SMITH

BOOK OF MORMON CHRONOLOGY

The Book of Mormon contains a chronology that is internally consistent over the thousand-year NEPHITE history, with precise Nephite dates for several events, including the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. However, its chronology has not been unequivocally tied to other calendars because of uncertainties in biblical dates and lack of details about the Nephite calendars. Even less information exists about JAREDITE chronology (Sorenson, 1969).

INTERNAL NEPHITE CHRONOLOGY. Nephites kept careful track of time from at least three reference points:

1. Years were counted from the time LEHI left Jerusalem (Enos 1:25; Mosiah 6:4); not only was this an important date of origin, but also an angel had said that the Savior would come "in 600 years" from that time (1 Ne. 19:8).
2. Time was also measured from the commencement of the reign of the judges (c. 91 B.C.; cf. 3 Ne. 1:1), which marked a major political reform ending five centuries of Nephite kingship (Jacob 1:9-11; Alma 1:1), during which the years of each king's reign were probably counted according to typical ancient practices (1 Ne. 1:4; Mosiah 29:46).
3. The Nephites later reckoned time from the sign of the birth of Christ (3 Ne. 2:8).

The Book of Mormon links all three systems in several passages that are apparently consistent. Table 1 lists several events using the Nephite systems.

Most of the Nephite record pertains to three historical periods: the time of Lehi and his sons (c. 600-500 B.C.), the events preceding and following the coming of Christ (c. 150 B.C.-A.D. 34), and the destruction of the Nephites (c. A.D. 300-420). Thus, the relatively large book of Alma covers only thirty-nine years, while the much smaller books of Omni and 4 Nephi each cover more than two hundred years.

LDS editions of the Book of Mormon show dates in Nephite years, deduced from the text, at the bottom of the pages. The exact nature of the Nephite year, however, is not described. The Nephite year began with the "first day" of the "first month" (Alma 51:37-52:1; 56:1), and it probably had twelve months because the eleventh month was at "the latter end" of the year (Alma 48:2, 21;