

Introduction to the Book of Mormon

What is the Book of Mormon? This question is one of the most asked questions in the world. Since it was first published in 1830, the Book of Mormon, its origin and its purpose, has been discussed, debated, and disputed by many. Why the excitement and concern about its origin and purpose? Simply put, if its origin is of God, then we must reevaluate our beliefs and attitudes. Its message becomes critical to our worship of, and service to, God. If it is of God, then it reaffirms the calling of Israel as God's ancient covenant people and their eventual re-gathering from their long dispersion. It brings to light the origin and future of the Native American Indian. It explains many of the mysteries of the state of the soul after death. It confirms the virgin birth of Jesus Christ and his position as the Son of God, the Savior of the world. And so much more. If the Book of Mormon is truly the "word of God" it shows that God is the same yesterday, today and tomorrow, and that His concern for the souls of men and women is timeless. As well, it sheds new light on the past and reveals God's great plans for the future. So, let us take a few moments and examine the Book of Mormon, discuss its origin and determine its purpose. And as one of the ancient prophets said, "Ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true."

God's Revelation

We must first see if God foretold the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. To do that, we must look into the Bible and see what was prophesied.

In the Old Testament of the Bible, there are the prophecies of Ezekiel, a Levite Priest living among the Jews in Babylon during the time of the Jewish captivity. This is what he wrote around 580 BC:

The word of the Lord came again unto me, saying, Moreover, thou son of man, take thee one stick, and write upon it, For Judah, and for the children of Israel his companions: then take another stick, and write upon it, For Joseph, the stick of Ephraim, and for all the house of Israel his companions. And join them one to another into one stick; and they shall become one in thine hand. And when the children of thy people shall speak unto thee, saying, Wilt thou not show us what thou meanest by these? Say unto them, "Thus saith the Lord GOD: "Behold, I will take the stick of Joseph, which is in the hand of Ephraim, and the tribes of Israel his fellows, and will put them with him, even with the stick of Judah, and make them one stick, and they shall be one in mine hand.'" (Ezekiel 37:15-19)

We know that scriptures were written upon scrolls or "sticks" as this was the ancient custom of keeping records on parchment. They fastened a stick on each end of the parchment, for the purpose of rolling and unrolling as they read, and that hence records came to be called sticks. Even today, in Jewish temples and synagogues, the scriptures are read from scrolls, with each end mounted on a stick. In this prophecy, the Stick of Judah represents the Bible and Stick of Joseph represents the Book of Mormon, whose principal characters were descendants of Joseph (see below). This prophecy clearly shows that there would be two scriptures, and they would be one in God's sight.

The prophet Hosea wrote a prophecy around BC 723. He states in the eighth chapter verses 11 and 12 that, "Because Ephraim hath made many altars to sin, altars shall be unto him to sin. I [God] have written to him the great things of my law, but they were counted as a strange thing." Surely the Book of Mormon has been considered a strange thing by many, yet it contains great things from God. Also, Ephraim was one of the two sons of Joseph (see below).

In the 85th Psalm, there is a prophecy of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. The Psalmist wrote, "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Truth shall spring out of the earth and righteousness shall look down from heaven." Since the Book of Mormon was taken out of the ground, it is the truth springing out of the earth (see History section below). Isaiah, one of the greatest prophets, wrote about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon in fascinating details.

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed. And the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he says, I am not learned.

Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honor me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men. Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvelous work among this people, even a marvelous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid. Isaiah 29:11-14

When Joseph Smith, Jr. received from an angel of God the record upon which the Book of Mormon was written, he did not have the learning or education to translate the ancient characters to English. But by the gift and power of God he translated the work. Characters taken from the record were shown to a professor of languages, with the translation of such. He said the translation appeared correct. He asked if the record could be brought to him and he was told it was sealed. He said he could not translate a sealed record. Isaiah saw these events thousands of years before they occurred.

Let us look at one more scriptural reference. When Jesus was teaching His Apostles in the land of Judea, He told them, “And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd.” (John 10:16) This comment confirms that Israel had been dispersed but they would all have an opportunity to hear and see Jesus, the long awaited Messiah. The Book of Mormon testifies that Jesus Christ visited ancient America, taught the people the same Gospel, and established His church among them.

Testimony of Witnesses

As with all of God’s work, there are witnesses. The children of Israel took stones from the bottom of the Red Sea, so that many years later they could testify of how God brought them out of Egypt and through the Red Sea “dry shod.” Or, like the Apostles of Jesus Christ, who were witnesses to His ministry, death and resurrection. For the Book of Mormon, there were twelve specific witnesses to the translation and publishing of the book, as well as others who participated in the great events surrounding it. Included in every publication of the Book of Mormon is a reproduction of the Testimony of the Three Witnesses and the Testimony of the Eight Witnesses. These eleven, along with Joseph Smith, Jr.’s personal testimony comprise the strongest evidence of the divine nature of the Book of Mormon. We encourage you to read their testimonies for yourself.

The Three Witnesses, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris, all testified that they saw “the plates which contain this record.” They stated that the record had been “translated by the gift and power of God” as the voice of God spoke to them. They also stated that “we know of a surety that the work is true.” The question becomes, did they have anything to gain by making such bold statements? None of them became wealthy because of the publishing of the Book of Mormon. Actually, quite the contrary occurred. They spent most of their lives defending their testimony and suffering persecution for it. Even upon their deathbeds they continued to affirm this most sacred testimony.

As collaboration, eight others signed their names to their testimony. Their statement clearly declared that Joseph Smith was only the translator of the work (not the author) and that they each saw and handled the plates (record) from which the Book of Mormon was translated. Like with the three witnesses, these eight never recanted nor denied their testimony.

Joseph Smith Jr., seeking only to know which church to join in 1820, was used as an instrument in the hands of God in bringing forth this record and publishing it for all. His testimony that an angel of God delivered the ancient record to him caused him to suffer persecution. But is it a strange thing that an angel should appear to men or women (see Genesis 16:7; Judges 6:11, 13:3; Zechariah 1:9; Matthew 1:20, 28:5; Acts 5:9, 10:3; and Revelations 1:1, 14:6). Throughout his life Smith suffered terrible persecution, eventually giving his life for the work of God. He died a martyr in 1844 at the hands of an angry mob, still claiming that the Book of Mormon was the word of God, translated by the gift and power of God from ancient records.

More Evidence

There is another class of evidence that proves the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. The book came forth and was published in the year 1830, at a time when the antiquities of the North, Central, and South American continents were scarcely known. Yet the Book of Mormon boldly stated the fact that a people once lived and built cities of curious workmanship in stone in Central America, and that at a certain time a portion of that people emigrated northward, along the west sea, and became exceeding expert in the use of cement, building many buildings of that material. As well, the book states that great civilizations thrived in these lands, with democratic governments, large armies and specific religious rites

Since the first printing of the Book of Mormon, numerous books have been published detailing the ancient civilizations that resided throughout the Western Hemisphere. These books only add to the divinity of the Book of Mormon. No other book, except for the Bible, has contained such unparalleled claims that post-archeological explorations have confirmed.

Contents and Purpose of the Book of Mormon

The Bible is a natural and spiritual history or record of God's selection and dealings with men and women since the beginning of time. It includes the culmination of God's plan of salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ, his ministry, death and resurrection. And finally, it depicts the establishment and expansion of His Church.

The Book of Mormon is a record of certain families that God brought to America thousands of years ago. It includes his dealings with them, culminating in Christ's appearance in America after His resurrection. He thus fulfilled His own prophecy: "Other sheep I have that are not of this fold [Jerusalem], they must hear my voice [other tribes of Israel]."

The Book of Mormon covers a period of approximately 1000 years, from 600 BC to 421 AD of the descendants of Joseph in America (see below). It also includes an abridged account of another people brought to America after the Tower of Babel around 2200 BC.

Additionally, the Book of Mormon confirms the prophecy given by Israel (Jacob) to his son Joseph:

Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well; whose branches run over the wall. The archers have sorely grieved him, and shot at him, and hated him. But his bow abode in strength, and the arms of his hands were made strong by the hands of the mighty God of Jacob; (from thence is the shepherd, the stone of Israel.

Even by the God of thy father, who shall help thee; and by the Almighty, who shall bless thee with blessings of heaven above, blessings of the deep that lieth under, blessings of the breasts, and of the womb. The blessings of thy father have prevailed above the blessings of my progenitors unto the utmost bound of the everlasting hills: they shall be on the head of Joseph, and on the crown of the head of him that was separate from his brethren. (Genesis 49:22-26)

Notice two specific things. First, Joseph's "branches" would "run over the wall". This means that his descendants would cross the oceans to another land. What land? Jacob received blessing beyond his progenitors, even to the receipt of a land with "everlasting hills." These hills are representative of the mountains of North, Central and South America. This prophecy indicates that Joseph's descendants would cross the ocean to America, a land that was given to Jacob.

This prophecy is in conjunction with Jacob's blessing on his two grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Their blessing was that Manasseh would become a great people and Ephraim a multitude of nations (Genesis 48:19). Both of these prophecies are borne out by the Book of Mormon. No other book and no other land can make such a claim.

One important purpose of this book is to increase the testimony of God to the human family in regard to the plan of salvation, and the truths of the Christian religion by giving to them the testimony of the prophets and apostles of God sent forth to Joseph's descendants on this continent. It also is a testimony that the prophets and apostles of God to Judah on the other continent are sure and true. This He does in view of the fact that two witnesses who agree in regard to the same truths are better than one. At the very beginning, on the title page, it plainly states that, "Jesus is the Christ." How bold! How important!

In regards to the plan of salvation and all things pertaining to salvation, the Bible and Book of Mormon agree. In condemnation of sin in all its forms, they are perfectly united. As to church government and governance, they are one.

Another purpose is to make all people acquainted with the origin and history of the ancient inhabitants of America. This information is important for two reasons. First, it shows us that God continued to deal with all of Israel, not simply those in Judea. Second, it shows us God's love and concern for all of His people, regardless of where they are.

The Book of Mormon details the future of the descendants of these ancient people (Native American Indians), as well as the future of all other people who are living in the Americas. We learn from the Book of Mormon that God has great things in store for Joseph's descendants (whom we call today Native Americans, American Indians or First Nations People), including their gathering and building of a great, religious society and a holy city in America founded on the principals of God's law.

In general, the Book of Mormon is a complement to the Bible. It does not supplant the Bible, but supports it. It does not add to, or take away from, the Bible, but confirms it, especially that Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ [Messiah], the Son of God. It also shows how God dealt with others of his people who were not in or around Judea and Jerusalem.

Recent History

We have explained who wrote the Book of Mormon and what it is about. Let us provide some additional information about its coming forth. In the year 1820, Joseph Smith, Jr., a boy of 15 years old, inquired of God as to which Church he should join. He was told by Jesus Christ to join none of them. A few years later, in 1823, while praying, an angel of God visited Joseph Smith. The angel told Joseph Smith about the record buried in a hill not far from the Smith farm. In 1827, Joseph Smith was allowed to take the record and soon began the translation of it by the gift and power of God. Another young man, by the name of Oliver Cowdery, acted as his chief scribe. A copy of the manuscript was delivered to a printer in Palmyra, New York, and in 1830 the first edition of the Book of Mormon was presented to the world. Since then, numerous editions have been printed. The most recent, by The Church of Jesus Christ (Monongahela, Pennsylvania), includes a referencing system, an extensive concordance, and the words of Jesus printed in red.

We invite all people to prayerfully read the messages, prophecies, sermons, teachings, and historical accounts contained in the Book of Mormon, and we are confident that God, through His son Jesus Christ, will show you the “truth of all things.”