WHY IS THE BOOK OF MORMON’S HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY SO IMPORTANT?

“Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust?”

Moroni 10:27

THE KNOW

The Book of Mormon describes itself as “an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites” as well as “an abridgment taken from the Book of Ether also, which is a record of the people of Jared,” which was “sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile—The interpretation thereof by the gift of God” (Book of Mormon Title Page). The Book of Mormon’s claimed ancient provenance—its purported authors, compilers, and editors, as well as their source material—is very clearly delineated throughout its pages.¹ So too are its claimed ancient historical settings.² To cite just one example, Mosiah 2–5 preserves a speech purportedly delivered by an ancient king named Benjamin around the year 124 B.C. in the land of Zarahemla and recorded by scribes who “sent forth” his words to the people (Mosiah 2:8).

Joseph Smith, the “author and proprietor” and “translator” of the Book of Mormon,³ provided explicit accounts throughout his life as to how he produced the book.⁴ According to his own description, Joseph was visited by an angel on the evening of September 21, 1823. Joseph identified this angel on multiple occasions as Moroni, the final author and editor of the Book of Mormon.⁵ Moroni informed young Joseph of “a book . . . written upon gold plates,
giving an account of the former inhabitants of this
continent, and the source from whence they sprang’
(Joseph Smith—History 1:34). These plates were
delivered to Joseph by the angel Moroni four years
to the day (JS—History 1:59). Through divinely
prepared seer stones, Joseph was able to translate the
record by “the gift and power of God.”

Joseph Smith set some very high stakes with his
account of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.
As one historian recognized, Joseph “rested his own
veracity, the historicity of the Book of Mormon, the
reality of his prophetic mission, and the legitimacy
of his church on the existence of the plates.” In other
words, Joseph Smith made stark and matter-of-fact
assertions about the angel, the plates, and the method
of the translation. Therefore, if these statements are
not true, then his credibility as an inspired prophet, as
well as the credibility of his declarations of having
restored the Church of Jesus Christ, is fatally
undermined.

The coming forth of the Book of Mormon under such
dramatic and miraculous circumstances compels
everyone to decide for him or herself whether to accept
the book—and thereby the statements of Joseph
Smith—or not. “The strong historical assertions of
the [Book of Mormon] seem to allow for only three
possible origins,” scholar Grant Hardy observed. “As
a miraculously translated historical document, as a
fraud (perhaps a pious one) written by Joseph Smith,
or as a delusion (perhaps sincerely believed) that
originated in Smith’s subconscious.” Ultimately
everyone must make a decision at some point about
whether the book is what it claims to be.

In order to bypass this situation, some have proposed
that the Book of Mormon should be read as non-
historical and yet as inspired scripture—that is, as
nineteenth century inspired fiction. One proponent
of this approach has argued that “members of the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should
confess in faith that the Book of Mormon is the word
of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical
record of the ancient peoples of the Americas. We
should accept that it is a work of scripture inspired by
God in the same way that the Bible is inspired, but one
that has as its human author Joseph Smith, Jr.”

Another proponent of the “inspired fiction” theory for
the Book of Mormon has claimed that Joseph Smith
utilized vast amounts of reworked biblical material to
create “new holy fictions.” In this way, this author
alleged, Joseph Smith was the “inspired author” of the
Book of Mormon because he created new fictional
scripture in the same way that ancient biblical authors
created fictional scripture.

Finally, another advocate for reading the Book of
Mormon as “inspired fiction” has argued that the book
was produced by a method called “automatic writing.”
Automatic writing is the phenomenon where texts are
allegedly written with no conscious or deliberate effort,
and instead are the result of the author’s or scribe’s
subconscious or supernatural powers. If the Book of
Mormon was produced in this manner, the argument
goes, then Joseph Smith could not have been
consciously attempting to deceive anyone. Therefore
his integrity might remain intact, and the book might
be read as inspired scripture while not having any
historical authenticity.

The Why
These efforts to read the Book of Mormon as “inspired
fiction” may be well-meaning, but they are logically
unpersuasive, if not incoherent. Daniel Peterson has
succinctly laid out the logical problem with this theory.
“If the plates really existed, somebody made them. And
if no Nephites existed to make them, then either
Joseph Smith, or God, or somebody else seems to have
been engaged in simple fraud. The testimony of [those
associated with the coming forth of the Book of
Mormon] exists, I think, to force a dichotomous
choice: true or false?” Failing to provide an
explanation for this dichotomy ignores an essential
aspect of the Book of Mormon.

Even worse, rather than preserving the Book of
Mormon’s inspired teachings as intended, the “inspired
fiction” theory actually harms the believability and
power of the book’s testimony of Jesus Christ. “From
the title page to the book’s final declaration,” wrote
Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, “this testament reveals,
examines, underscores, and illuminates the divine
mission of Jesus Christ. . . . The Book of Mormon has
many purposes, but this one transcends all others.”

The Book of Mormon attempts to persuade all men
and women that “Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God”
(Book of Mormon Title Page) not only by describing
the inspired teachings of ancient prophets who
foretold his birth, life, ministry, Atonement, death, and
Resurrection, but also by narrating the actual
appearance of the resurrected Jesus to the ancient
Nephites in the New World (3 Nephi 11–26). If these
ancient prophets never existed, and if a resurrected
Jesus never actually appeared to the ancient Nephites, then the Book of Mormon loses all its credibility as another testament of Jesus Christ.

This point is reinforced by the fact that two different Book of Mormon prophets warn their readers that they will one day stand face to face with them and be held accountable for whether they accepted or rejected their teachings. “And now, my beloved brethren,” the prophet Nephi wrote in his concluding remarks,

Christ will show unto you, with power and great glory, that [the words in Nephi’s record] are his words, at the last day; and you and I shall stand face to face before his bar; and ye shall know that I have been commanded of him to write these things, notwithstanding my weakness. . . . for these words shall condemn you at the last day. For what I seal on earth, shall be brought against you at the judgment bar; for thus hath the Lord commanded me, and I must obey. Amen. (2 Nephi 33:10–11, 14–15)

The prophet Moroni similarly declared,

And I exhort you to remember these things; for the time speedily cometh that ye shall know that I lie not, for ye shall see me at the bar of God; and the Lord God will say unto you: Did I not declare my words unto you, which were written by this man, like as one crying from the dead, yea, even as one speaking out of the dust? I declare these things unto the fulfilling of the prophecy. And behold, they shall proceed forth out of the mouth of the everlasting God; and his word shall hiss forth from generation to generation. And God shall show unto you, that that which I have written is true. (Moroni 10:27–29)

But if Nephi and Moroni are not real individuals and are instead fictional characters created by Joseph Smith, then these warnings are powerless, since it is clearly impossible for fictional characters to meet people in real life.

For these and other reasons the prophetic leaders of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have emphasized the profound importance of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, as the Prophet Joseph Smith himself made clear, “Take away the Book of Mormon, and the revelations, and where is our religion? We have none.”

FURTHER READING


NOTES


5. See “Angel Moroni,” online at history.lds.org/saints.


19. “The Church stand[s] or fall[s] with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. The enemies of the Church understand this clearly. This is why they go to such great lengths to try and disprove the Book of Mormon, for if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church. But in like manner, if the Book of Mormon is true . . . then one must accept the claims of the Restoration and all that accompanies it.” Ezra Taft Benson, A Witness and a Warning (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 1988), 18–19. “One has to take a do-or-die stand regarding the restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the divine origins of the Book of Mormon. Reason and righteousness require it. Joseph Smith must be accepted either as a prophet of God or else as a charlatan of the first order, but no one should tolerate any ludicrous, even laughable middle ground about the wonderful contours of a young boy’s imagination or his remarkable facility for turning a literary phrase. That is an unacceptable position to take—morally, literarily, historically, or theologically.” Holland, Christ and the New Covenant, 345–46.

20. See “Minutes and Discourse, 21 April 1834,” 44, online at www.josephsmithpapers.org, spelling standardized.