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## The Book of Mormon — A Guide to Religious Living: I. How to Read the Book of Mormon

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# *The Book of Mormon— A Guide to Religious Living*

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## I. HOW TO READ THE BOOK OF MORMON

ONE night in Cologne, Germany a newly arrived missionary went to hear a Wagnerian opera. His senior companion, a veteran of two years, assured him that the opera was a good place to learn German. For more than three hours the new missionary strained his ears to recognize two or three German words. Meantime, except for one or two already familiar strains, the great music of Wagner fell on insensitive ears and an unresponsive heart. The young man left the opera quite disillusioned.

The missionary was later persuaded by other companions to attend the opera occasionally. Gradu-

ally he learned that music and not language was the heart and soul of opera. As soon as his own purpose became the same as that of the opera, he thoroughly enjoyed each operatic performance he was privileged to hear.

Good books have this much in common with great operas—they too are rich and composite in content. They may be read for any number of purposes or interests. The Bible, for example, may be studied profitably as literature, biography, law, history, theology, culture, religion and for other interests. Each time that it is read with a new or special interest, it

becomes a new book. To different persons, depending on their particular interest, the Bible is quite a different book.

This is also true of the Book of Mormon. The secret of one's enjoying it lies, to a marked degree, in the interest or purpose with which one peruses its pages. The very same book is to some dry and confusing, involved and bewildering; to others it is like manna from heaven, full of interest and inspiration. It being one and the same book, the difference lies not in the book but in what various readers bring to the book—their own life's experience and, equally important, their particular interests and expectations.

Latter-day Saints are busy people. In the fast tempo of modern living, often including generous service to the Church, we seldom read the scriptures. And when we do, it may be simply to give a talk, to prove a point, to teach a class, or to please a teacher. How many of us read the Book of Mormon with the same regularity or eagerness with which we read the daily paper or nourish the body? What was it Jesus said? "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matt. 4:4.) Do we?

Most people find time to do the things they really want to do. It is our conviction that many of us don't particularly want to read the Book of Mormon. Our appetites have not been whetted. We don't know how. We may have begun

repeatedly and lost interest. Perhaps our interest in the book, like the missionary's first interest in Wagnerian opera, has had little to do with the main emphasis in the book itself.

Since the Gospel Doctrine classes of the Sunday School will be studying the Book of Mormon this year, teachers and students will wish to read it. The purpose of this article and those to follow will be to suggest how to read the book and to indicate some of the remarkable teachings to be found in it.

What did Nephi, Jacob, Alma, Mormon, Moroni, and others have in mind in keeping the Nephite record? Was their chief interest geography—a careful account of the wanderings and settlements of their people? Was it history—a detailed and comprehensive account of the economic, social, political, and cultural events and development of their people? Was it archaeology and anthropology—a careful description of their language, artifacts, and customs which might be preserved in stone and in tradition? Was their chief concern theology—in the sense of an abstract and systematic statement of their beliefs? Was it war—written particularly for the enlightenment of future students of military science and tactics? Or did they have an all-consuming purpose which lay much nearer to their hearts and which occupied their minds continually? What does a careful reading of the book itself reveal as to its purpose and emphasis?

Its authors were not much concerned about their geographical notations. Read the book for geography and you will be quite confused. Men in the Church, who have written on the subject after years of study, use considerable conjecture and also disagree.

While the Book of Mormon makes frequent reference to the wars and contentions between the Lamanites and Nephites, it is not a manual of warfare. Even in its chapters on war there is another emphasis which is nearer the hearts of the writers than the description of battles and intrigues.

The Book of Mormon is often recommended to people as a history of the pre-Columbian aborigines on the American Continent. This is misleading. People then read the book expecting to find the same exhaustive type of history which they read in history text-books and are disappointed. True, there is much good history in it—history of three peoples, Jaredites, Lehi's colony, and Mulekites—but the writing of history was not the primary purpose of the authors. History is mostly a frame for the real picture which they painted.

What kind of a picture did they paint—theology? In the sense of an abstract statement of beliefs, no, but in terms of a dynamic, functional theology translated into religious living and a religious evaluation of life, yes. The Book of Mormon is essentially a religious record—a religious picture set in a framework of history and the ex-

pression of an underlying design of theology.

Latter-day Saints, who have not already done so, should try reading the Book of Mormon with the same humble, earnest, and devotional religious spirit and interest which characterized its authors. Let us, in our next reading of the book, keep geography, history, war, the ruins in Mexico and Peru, fine points of doctrine, and even the style in the background as secondary interests. Let us simply ask such questions as these: What does the book teach me about my relationship to God and to fellowmen? What things in life matter most? What evils should I avoid? What goods or values shall I pursue? What does it mean to be a disciple of Christ? How can I be one in spirit and in truth?

Many years ago a young Latter-day Saint left Utah for graduate study in the East. Away from the branches of the Church, he set aside each Sunday morning to read the scriptures. In them he marked the passages which he liked—those which brought him comfort, made him stop and think and evaluate, and which rang true to his heart and mind. He had no other purpose than to learn truth and to seek wisdom and inspiration. To this day he turns with satisfaction to those passages marked forty years ago, for they have guided his steps through the years.

Another young Latter-day Saint, a missionary, was isolated in a cabin on an island in the Pacific for five weeks during a continuous storm.

Natives brought him boiled potatoes twice a day. His only other nourishment was a New Testament in the native language of the island. This he read, again and again. It indeed became a part of him and he has exemplified its teachings well for over half a century.

If we would read the Book of Mormon with this same consuming religious interest and purpose, we would discover much in it which would turn our hearts to God and mellow and purify our thoughts and feelings towards fellowmen. The Book of Mormon is a deeply religious book in both its spirit and content. It will reward anyone who will read it seeking its religious message and cultivating the religious spirit of the book.

It will be our purpose in succeeding articles to indicate some of the great teachings of the Book of Mormon and their value to us today.

The following are a few short passages which illustrate the religious intent and emphasis of the book.

#### *A Witness for Christ*

"... and also to the convincing of Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations." (Title page.)

"Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ. . . ." (2 Nephi 31:20.)

"Wherefore we labored diligently among our people, that we might persuade them to believe in Christ. . . ." (Jacob 1:7.)

"Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in Him, and deny yourselves all ungodliness. . . ." (Moroni 10:32.)

#### *A plea to forsake evil and do good*

"... and the words which I have written in weakness shall be made strong unto them; for it persuadeth them to do good . . . and it speaketh harshly against sin according to the plainness of the truth." (2 Nephi 33:4, 5.)

"And again, believe that ye must repent of your sins and forsake them, and humble yourselves before God; and ask in sincerity of heart that he would forgive you; *and now, if you believe all these things see that ye do them.*" (Mosiah 4:10.)

#### *Recommended Readings*

To catch the religious emphasis and spirit of the Book of Mormon, read 1 Nephi 6:3-6; 2 Nephi 4:15 ff. and 33:—; Jacob 1:2-8; Moroni 10.

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"Therefore hearken unto me, ye men of understanding: far be it from God, that he should do wickedness; and from the Almighty, that he should commit iniquity.

"For the work of man shall he render unto him, and cause every man to find according to his ways.

"Yea, surely God will not do wickedly, neither will the Almighty pervert judgment." (Job 34:10-12.)