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## Conversions Through the Book of Mormon - I. The Literature of Power

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# Conversions

## THROUGH THE BOOK OF MORMON

John Henry Evans

### I. THE LITERATURE OF POWER

A few years ago there was held on the West Coast a convention of the police officials and social workers of the United States and Canada. The general theme of the gathering was how the inmates of prisons, jails, and penitentiaries in these two countries might be restored to good citizenship after their release, and many papers were read and freely discussed on this aspect of penal work.

Toward the end of the sessions, which had continued for three days, a man rose in the body of the hall and asked for the privilege to be heard. On being granted this courtesy, he told substantially the following story about himself:

"For some twenty years," he said, "I was myself a criminal. One time and another I have been in jails and penitentiaries in many states, and I have committed about every sin on the calendar. I discovered that the more often I was sent to prison and the longer I stayed there, the harder I got, and during my last incarceration I came to hate everything and everybody—my jailors, my captors, the prison life, the prisoners themselves, the law, and society. And I solemnly vowed that, if I ever regained my freedom, I would wreak as terrible a vengeance as I could on society.

"One day an elderly woman came to the door of my cell. She tried to engage me in conversation, but I steadfastly refused to talk to her. Finally, in disappointment, she said to me, 'Here, my friend, is a little book, which I should like to leave with you, but I won't give it to you unless you promise to read it through.' She persisted, and I promised. I wanted to get rid of her once and for all. But as soon as she left, I threw the book savagely into the darkest corner of my compartment, where it gathered dust and cobwebs.

"That little book was the New Testament.

"I was very uneasy, however, over what I had done. I was sorry that I had made any promise. But I had, and that was all there was to it. Every time my eyes fell on that little book, I said to myself, 'You gave her a promise, which she took in good faith. Why not read it and get it off your conscience?'

"So I picked up the book and began to read it. Gradually, I found, my feelings began to change. I did not know why, I only

knew that they were changing. I found myself losing my old hatreds, my spirit of revenge. The feeling was imperceptible at first, but it grew till it overwhelmed me. In the end I no longer hated anyone or anything. In the place of hate there was now only love. I saw what I had made of my life and what I could have made of it.

"Then it was that I fell to my knees and made a new vow. I promised myself and God that, if ever I was set free again, I would spend the rest of my life trying to undo what I had done to myself and to others.

"And faithfully I have kept that vow. From the time of my liberation till now I have visited prisons throughout this land, in an effort to bring the same spirit into the lives of other men that came into my own life through the reading of that little book. I knew the ropes now. I knew how men got into jails, and now, thank God and that small woman, I knew how to get men out.

"And so I tell you here and now that there is only one thing that can change a bad man into a good man. It is the spirit of this little book, the New Testament, the spirit of Jesus Christ. And this, the papers and the discussions I have heard in this convention have not taken into consideration."

This incident, as already stated, has been given to show the power that is in the New Testament, a power that brings changes in wrong-going men. The New Testament is therefore in the class of writings that DeQuincey calls the literature of power.

As a matter of fact, that little volume, so small that one can read it in a few hours (the entire Bible can be read in a hundred days at the rate of but an hour a day), has altered for the better countless millions of men and women, has put new heart and purpose into their lives, and made them happier than they could otherwise be.

Well, the Book of Mormon has done exactly the same thing. Only, of course, not on such a vast scale, since it has been in existence for a hundred and fourteen years, whereas the Bible has been in popular use ever since Coster and Gutenberg printed books from movable type, more than four hundred years ago. But to the extent to which it has been read the Book of Mormon, in its spirit, is comparable to the Hebrew scriptures, as I shall attempt to show in articles that are to follow in this series.