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## Side Lights on the Book of Mormon, IV: Joseph Smith's Intimate Knowledge of Bible Truths

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**Abstract:** The Book of Mormon clears up many disputed doctrines of the Bible, such as baptism, the Godhood of Christ, pre-earth life, the nature of man, the purpose of life, and others. Hebrew culture, customs, ideas, and mode of thought is at the very root of the book.

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# Side Lights on the Book of Mormon

By John Henry Evans

## IV

### JOSEPH SMITH'S INTIMATE KNOWLEDGE OF BIBLE TRUTHS

**I**N those violent Kirtland days, when the Prophet was forced to flee the place before the hatred of apostates, a turbulent meeting was held in the temple there.

Speaker after speaker rose and assailed the character of the absent "Mormon" leader in the bitterest language. For the dissenters were in the saddle. The few present who still believed in the Prophet longed for some voice to defend him.

John Taylor obtained permission to speak.

Elder Taylor was a recent convert to the faith. He had only lately come from Toronto, Canada, where he was a local preacher in the Methodist church and where also he was one of a group of highly intelligent men who were looking for the true church.

Said the new comer to Kirtland: "Whence do we get our intelligence and knowledge of the laws, ordinances, and doctrines of the kingdom of God? Who understood even the first principles of the doctrines of Christ? Who in the Christian world taught them? If we, with our learning and intelligence, could not find out the first principles which was the case with myself and millions of others, how can we find out the mysteries of the kingdom? It was Joseph Smith, under the Almighty, who developed the first principles, and to him we must look for further instructions."

Here was one of the most intel-

lectually alert, independent, and courageous spirits in the group of rather remarkable men who were attracted to "Mormonism" in its first years; and the thing, evidently, that stood out in his mind in connection with the faith was the Prophet's firm grasp of theological and religious truth. It was so in the case of the other men in the group of leaders to which John Taylor belonged. Indeed, this it is that set him apart in the minds of most of those who knew him and accepted his teachings.

Now, this grasp of theological ideas is one of the things that stand out in the author of the *Book of Mormon*, whoever he may be. It strikes the non-believer as well as the believer in the divine origin of the Nephite Record. Only, the non-believer is amazed at the extent and depth of the knowledge of the *Bible* revealed in whoever wrote the *Book of Mormon*. And when he understands that its author was a country boy without education, experience, or social standing, his amazement increases.

And so, in this article, we purpose to examine this aspect of the volume, so as to ascertain just what bearing this feature may have on the claims of Joseph Smith to having produced the *Book of Mormon* under divine inspiration.

**M**ASTERY of our English Bible is an extremely difficult task. And when we say "mastery" we mean something more than a familiarity with its contents. We mean a getting of one's mind around its fundamental truths, so as to ar-

rive at not only the significance but also the relation of them to one another and to the great scheme of human redemption as revealed in the Christian theory.

There are many people, even today, who read the *Bible* consistently and persistently. We know, for instance, a woman who begins with "Genesis" and goes through to "Revelations" without skipping anything, just as Ruskin used to do under the guidance and compulsion of his mother, and who, on finishing this last book, turns again to the first one; and she has done this all her mature life. And we know a man who reads it from cover to cover once every year for its literary value alone, instead of its theological worth, like most people who read it.

These persons, and others who make a business of reading the Hebrew Scriptures, gradually acquire an acquaintance with that volume, so that they are able to tell you where anything is and to find it easily without the use of the *Ready Reference*. But they do not have a mastery of its contents in the sense for which we are contending here. That is, they do not have such a knowledge of its ideas with the background of persons and environment, as will enable them to get behind these into the very spirit and genius of things.

That, however, is exactly what the author of the *Book of Mormon* has done.

First of all, that author, whoever he was, exhibits a profound and extensive knowledge of the principles that underlie the religious life of the people of whom the Bible tells us.

The fundamental religious ideas in the *Book of Mormon* are of a piece with those which we find in the Hebrew Scriptures. Only, in

the *Book of Mormon*, as everybody knows who has read that work sympathetically, these ideas are much clearer than they are in the *Bible*.

Take, for example, the doctrine of baptism. In the *New Testament* it has apparently been difficult to determine the mode of this ordinance so there shall be no question concerning it. This is evident from the fact that many sincere Christians believe in baptism by immersion, others by sprinkling, and still others by pouring water on the head of the candidate for church membership. The same thing is true of the question as to whether the ordinance should be administered to infants as well as to adults. A very large number of Christian churches thus baptize babies, while others insist that the rite may be properly administered only to people who are capable of belief and repentance.

In the *Book of Mormon*, however, the form of baptism is clear beyond dispute. Says Jesus to the Nephites:

"Whoso repenteth of his sins through your words and desireth to be baptized in my name, on this wise shall ye baptize them—Ye shall go down and stand in the water. And these are the words which ye shall say, calling them by name: 'Having authority given me of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.' Then shall ye immerse them in the water, and come forth again out of the water."

This is so plain that, in the words of an ancient prophet, a wayfaring man through a fool need not err therein. It is difficult to understand how one would go about to get any other meaning out of the words than what they bear on their face. To be sure, the thing may at one

time have been as clear as this in the New Testament and have been juggled with by men who had a purpose to serve.

Of course, it has been claimed by critics of the *Book of Mormon* and Joseph Smith that the author of the work, who was the unaided and uninspired boy in Palmyra according to them, was merely struggling with a current question in his locality and time; he was merely setting right the churches of his day. For baptism was much discussed in the neighborhood where Joseph Smith lived.

But how does it come about that a country boy without education and experience has so firm a grasp on the subject? That has never been explained by the critics. Nor is it attempted. There has almost never been a time in Christian history when the subject of baptism was not warmly talked about and debated. It was not by any means a topic peculiar to the conversation of those who lived in Palmyra. But Joseph aspires to settle a question that has agitated the minds of theological scholars for hundreds of years. And he does clarify the situation remarkably, even though his pronouncements are not generally accepted by Christians. Just how does it happen that this farm-boy knows so much about a controverted subject like baptism?

This is only an illustration of what the author of the *Book of Mormon* has done by way of clearing up disputed points in the *Bible*. He has done exactly the same thing with the subject of God, the personality and godhood of Christ, the pre-earth life of man, the intermediate state between death and the resurrection, the resurrection itself, the nature of man, the purpose of life, the immortality of the soul, and

many other subjects of controversy in Christian theology.

These topics are all mentioned in the *New Testament*, and some of them are discussed there, especially by the Apostle Paul. But the explanations of them are always brief and often so vague that even Christian scholars are not of the same mind as to the meaning of them. The young seer of our times, however, in the *Book of Mormon*, has not only enlarged upon them, but made them so clear that the layman can readily comprehend them.

An example of this may be found in the doctrine of the pre-earth life of man. An existence before this mortal life is declared, although not with the greatest clarity, of Jesus Christ in the *New Testament*. Only the vaguest hints, however, are given there of a pre-earth life for man—so obscure, in fact, that even the poet Wordsworth dared not advance it as a teaching of the gospel, although he seems to have grasped the idea. But Joseph Smith, in the Nephite Record, develops the idea with reference to man with a boldness and clearness that are startling.

This sort of elaboration is closely akin to original thinking. Certainly it evinces a vigorous understanding in whoever accomplishes the feat. And this kind of thing is done over and over again in the *Book of Mormon*.

But the author of the Nephite Record has done more than that. He has entered into the very spirit of the Hebrew life and thought.

The warp and woof of Nephite life and civilization is Hebrew, the sort of thing we find the *Bible* saturated with. The Leuites came originally from Jerusalem, as did also the Mulekites—two peoples who ultimately united into one nation. Their roots were therefore deep in the soil of Palestine. They had the

same grand traditions, the same outlook upon life, the same everything. Only their environment in the New World was different from that of their ancestors.

Now, the author of the *Book of Mormon*, to all intents and purposes, becomes one of its personalities. Not merely in the larger and more obvious features does he show this—the ideas, the customs, the general civilization, this would not be very difficult necessarily, but he does so in the smaller particulars—the modes of thought, for instance. He sets down what one would naturally expect men to think and say and do, who had the moral and spiritual background that the Nephites are supposed to have. But he sets these down in about the way they would be expected to do under the circumstances. We have reference primarily to the concrete, imaginative manner so common to the Jewish mind.

The Greek mind, as a rule, thought in generalities. That was characteristic of their mental operations. The Hebrew mind, on the contrary, thought in images, in concrete things. "The Lord is my shepherd," says the Psalmist, "I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." No Greek would have said it thus. He would probably have been content with something like this: God takes care of his children.

Much of this concreteness of thought and expression is in the *Book of Mormon*, just as you would have expected on the assumption that it is a translation of an ancient document about an Israelitish people. "Butter and honey shall he eat," says Nephi of the then unborn Jesus, "that he may know to refuse the evil and to choose the good." This is about as one of Hebrew

origin and education would have put it.

Not, of course, that the *Book of Mormon* has no generalizing in it. That would be asking too much. In the *Bible* are generalizations also. But the characteristic of the Nephite mind, as of the Hebrew mind, was its tendency to think in images rather than in ideas and abstractions, like the Greek intellect. This feature of the Nephite Record has not been enough studied.

The author of the *Book of Mormon*, then, has made a notable achievement in a literary way. For he has succeeded in placing himself in the very shoes of his characters, in creating an atmosphere of verisimilitude, as the literary critic would say, that is very striking. Of course, this does not appear so patently to one who is looking for flaws in the book. Nevertheless, it is there, and he who runs may read.

That this sort of thing is extremely difficult, is well known to the literary fraternity. It is vastly more difficult to one who is unschooled than to the educated.

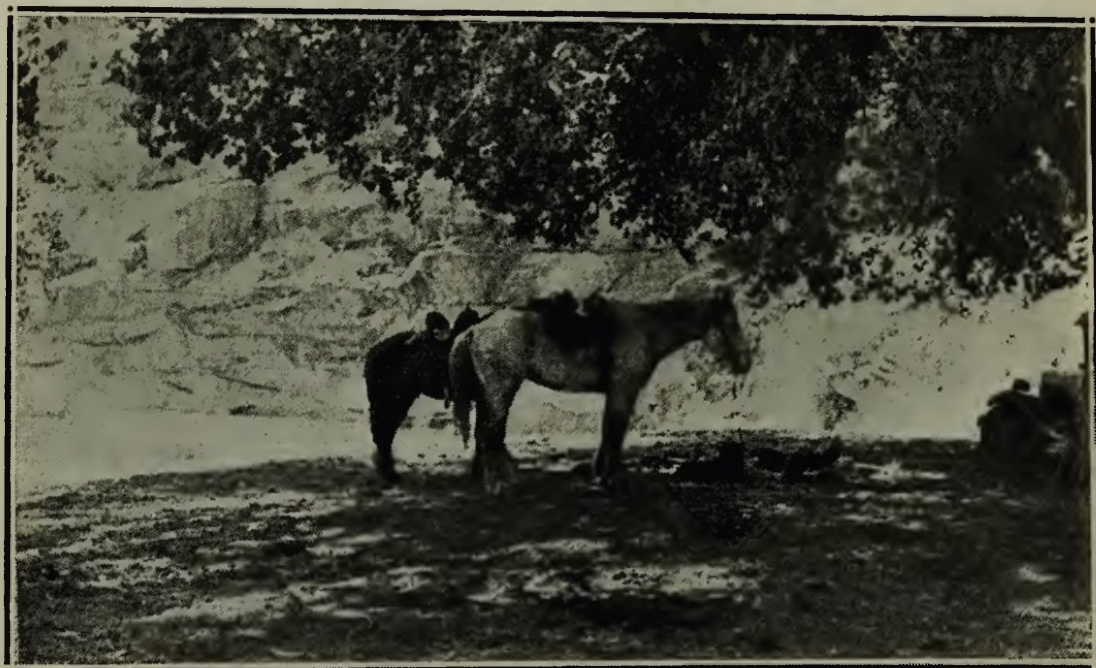
Great credit is claimed for Lew Wallace, the author of *Ben Hur*, because the details and characters in that book are true to the life of the people and the period it tells about, whereas Wallace had not at the time he wrote the story ever set his foot in Palestine. But Lew Wallace was, first of all, an educated man; then, he had access to all sorts of books on the subject; and, finally, he had had much experience of life and books when he produced the story of the Christ.

Joseph Smith, on the contrary, was but a youth at the time the *Book of Mormon* was published. He had had no training of the mind and no experience of life, to speak of. Moreover, he was but a back-

woods boy, whose thoughts and deeds did not transcend the barren environment in which he had been reared. It is doubtful whether he had ever read a book through in his life up to this time, let alone a book on Palestine and the Jews. True, he had read the *Bible* in parts. But one can read that book very studiously without getting from its pages the ability to do what is done in the *Book of Mormon*. And the "Mormon" prophet was too young and

too inexperienced then to have given the *Bible* much deep study. Besides, all the evidence points to the fact that Joseph was a thinker rather than a reader.

So, then, he who believes that the *Book of Mormon* is a product of an uninspired country boy, taxes his credulity to the breaking point. It is far easier to believe that that work is an inspired translation of an ancient document—as the Prophet says it is.



## High Noon on the Escalante

By Harrison R. Merrill

Sunshine—  
 A deluge of blinding light  
 Poured down from polished skies;  
 Cliffs—  
 Rose-hued sky-scrappers with solid  
 walls  
 Rising from a winding water-way;  
 Cottonwoods—  
 Tremulous canopies,  
 Magnificent in fresh May-green  
 Above warm sands of a siren shore;  
 Shadows—  
 Tender, cool, alluring—

Lavender and purple shot through  
 With emerald;  
 Winds—  
 Cool—capering on cliffs,  
 Careening through caves and caverns!

Shade,  
 Sunshine,  
 Sheer indolence—  
 Time?—Eternity  
 Creeping past on snail feet,  
 At high noon On the Escalante.