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Indian Traditions of the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: Traditions of the Indians tell of “a book” that their forefathers once possessed. It was taken from them, buried, and promised that it would come forth at a later time. Accounts from letters and journals of early missionaries of the Church as well as scholars of ancient Indians tell of these traditions.

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Indian Traditions of the Book of Mormon

By E. Cecil McGavin

Among the numerous external evidences of the Book of Mormon are the traditions of the Indians themselves whose fathers wrote and preserved the sacred writings now contained in that book.

The aborigines of the Western Hemisphere have scores of legends about the historical events recorded in the first part of the Old Testament, but to this day, they possess similar oral accounts of a sacred book which their fathers once had and which they expect to be restored to them at some future time. Their traditions about Bible incidents are so comparable with the Hebrew Scriptures that many students attribute the coincidence to Satan who, "by some means managed to teach the Indians false doctrines, to prevent them from accepting the true gospel the Spaniards had to offer."

Their traditions respecting the Book of Mormon are no less remarkable.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints from its inception has been very interested in the American Indian. Within six months after the Church was organized a special mission to the Lamanites was organized by revelation. This was the first missionary work west of the state of New York. Oliver Cowdery, Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson and David Whitmer represented the Church in this tour of the lands of the Indian. During the autumn of 1830 they commenced their labors among the red

men, visiting three powerful tribes on the western frontier, with whom they left copies of the Book of Mormon. By 1831 they were preaching to the natives within a few miles of St. Louis.

On May 7, 1831, Oliver Cowdery wrote to the prophet Joseph Smith about their labors among the natives of Missouri. He spoke of a tribe he called the "Navashoes", farther west, near Santa Fe. Thus the natives of Missouri had engaged in some form of intercourse with their kin of the distant west. The following is an excerpt from the letter of Oliver Cowdery:

"One Indian, spokesman for his tribe, said, 'We feel thankful to our friends who have come so far and been at such pains to tell us good news, and especially this news concerning the book of our forefathers; it makes us glad in here', and the speaker placed his hand over his heart. 'It is now winter; we are new settlers in this place; the snow is deep; our cattle are dying; our wigwams are poor; we have much to do in the spring— to build houses and fence and make farms; but we will build a council house and meet together, and you shall read to us and teach us more concerning the book of our forefathers and the will of the Great Spirit.'"

Parley P. Pratt, in telling of the manner in which the Indians received the Book of Mormon writes, "We continued for several days to instruct the old chief and many of his tribe; the

interest became more and more intense on their part, from day to day, until at length, nearly the whole tribe began to feel a spirit of inquiry and excitement on the subject. We found several among them who could read, and to whom we gave copies of the book, explaining to them that it was the book of their forefathers. Some began to rejoice exceedingly and took great pains to tell the news to others in their own language.

"The excitement now reached the frontier settlements of Missouri and stirred up the jealousy and envy of the Indian agents and Sectarian preachers to the degree that we were soon ordered out of the Indian country as disturbers of the peace, and even threatened with the use of the military in case of non compliance."¹

From Columbia to Canada legends abound that warrant a belief in just such a book as the *Book of Mormon* professes to be.

Elder Melvin J. Ballard was called to labor among the Blackfoot Indians. Upon his arrival at the reservation they enquired about the "Book" he was expected to bring to them. They were well acquainted with the Bible, yet yearned for another book. Elder Ballard concluded that the Three Nephites had labored among them, preparing them for the restored Gospel.

Pres. Wilford Woodruff tells of three Moquitcha Indians from New Mexico who came to visit the Church authorities at Salt Lake City. They were his guests for many days and told him much about their history and beliefs. Of them he writes in his journal: "* * * they have never mixed their blood with any white man or other Indian tribe. They have a tradition that good men will come from the west and bring them the truth. They think we are the prophets, and they have come as ambassadors to see the people and

to learn if we are the ones they have been looking for. They seem anxious that we should instruct them in their affairs."²

Jacob Hamblin, who spent many years among the Indians of the Southwest, writes a similar account told to him by the Moquis of Arizona. He says, "The fathers of the people told them very emphatically that they still believed that the 'Mormons' who had visited them, were the men prophesied of by their fathers, that would come among them and do them good * * * But they could make no move until the re-appearance of the three prophets who led their fathers to that land, and told them to remain on those rocks until they should come again and tell them what to do."³

Almost the same tradition is repeated by the Hopi of Arizona, and published as late as 1925. The author, Leo Crane, in his valuable book, "The Indians of the Enchanted Desert," says, "* * * in speaking of the work done by the United States Government, and their Indian agents in the west, the chief of the tribe, Youkeoma, said, 'these white men are not the true Bohama, who will come some day and Will know the Hopi language.' Chief Youkeoma was taken to Washington, D. C. and had an interview with President Taft. After his return the chief said that he had seen nothing that impressed him, and the council of the leaders at Washington contained no wisdom. He was convinced that the leaders at Washington were not the true Bohamas who were to come and rule them."

Winship writes that when Coronada was in the Southwest a delegation of natives visited him requesting that the Spaniards teach the Indian children in the religion of the white men.

Calvir Colton, a missionary from

²Cowley, M. F. Life of Wilford Woodruff, page 427.

³Little, J. A. Jacob Hamblin, pages 68-70.

¹Pratt, P. P. Autobiography, page 60.

England, came to America to teach Christianity to the Indians. During the years of 1830 to 1832 he mastered their language and attempted to teach them the knowledge of God, the account of the creation, the history of Israel, the birth and life of the Christ, his crucifixion and resurrection. To all of his teachings they would reply by saying, "Yes, we know," and much perplexed over the monotonous reply, he asked how they knew and in brief they told him this story:

"Once, long time ago, how long they didn't know—their forefathers had the book that told all these things and, due to the wickedness of their forefathers, the Great Spirit took it from their midst, promising that sometime when their people grew better, he would return that record to them. They said to Mr. Colton that they felt "in here," pointing to their chests, "that it was going to come back pretty soon."

Mr. Colton further wrote on this subject: "They, the American aborigines, assert that a book was once in possession of their ancestors; and along with this recognition they have traditions that the Great Spirit used to foretell to their fathers future events; that he controlled nature in their favor; that angels once talked with them; that all the Indian tribes descended from one man who had twelve sons; that this man was a notable and renowned Prince, having great dominions; and that the Indians, his posterity, will yet recover the same dominion and influence. They believe by tradition that the spirit of prophecy and miraculous interposition once enjoyed by their ancestors will yet be restored to them, and that they will recover the book, all of which have been so long lost."

The great scholar, Kingsborough, made an exhaustive study of the traditions of the Indians and upon this subject wrote: "* * * the Indian told him that they in ancient times had been in possession of a book which was handed down successively from father

to son, in the person of the eldest, who was dedicated to the safe custody of it and to instruct others in its doctrines * * *

"On this ecclesiastic questioning the Indian of the contents of that book, and its doctrines, he was unable to give further information, but simply replied that if the book had not been lost he would have seen that the doctrines which he taught and preached to them, and those which the book contained, were the same; that the book had rotted in the earth, where the persons who kept it had buried it on the arrival of the Spaniards."⁴

Another scholar of the ancient Indians: "* * * bitterly bemoans the loss of the most precious of all documents, the Teoamoxtli—Book of God, or of Divine or sacred things—a work composed by Hueman, a sort of Toltec Bible, containing the laws, the religious precepts, the traditions, and all facts relating to Toltec history, from the remotest period."

The following story has attracted considerable interest among students of the Book of Mormon:

"In the summer of 1832 there appeared on the streets of St. Louis, then America's largest frontier settlement, four Indian Chieftains, wan and haggard from a long journey. They explained that they had heard of "The White Man's Book from Heaven" and had come in search of it.

General William Clark, who had previously made a journey to the land of these Indians, in company with Merriwater Lewis, was then commander of the military post at *St. Louis*. He received the natives as his guests, giving them every comfort the little city afforded. Wigwams were pitched on the village green, and in these the four delegates from the far west made their temporary home. They were shown everything in the city and espe-

⁴Lesueur, J. W. *Indian Legends*, page 212.

cially the Churches, in which the white men thought the natives would find their coveted Pearl of Great Price, the Book from Heaven.

The sudden change of life brought about the untimely death of two of the visitors. Before the remaining two, Rabbit Skin Keggings, and No Horns On His Head, returned to their kindred in the Far West, General Clark gave a banquet in their honor. At this feast the following speech is said to have been made by one of the braves:

"I came to you over a trail of many moons, from the setting sun. You were the friends of my fathers who have all gone the long way. I came with one eye partly opened for more light for my people who sit in darkness. I go back with both eyes closed. How can I go back blind to my blind people?"

"I made my way to you with strong arms, thru many enemies and strange lands, that I might carry back to them the White Man's Book from Heaven. I go back with both arms broken. The two fathers who came with me, the braves of many winters and wars, we leave asleep here by your great waters. They were tired in many moons and their moccasins wore out. My people

sent me to get the White Man's Book from Heaven.

"You took me where you allow your women to dance, as we do not ours, and the Book was not there. You showed me images of the good spirits and pictures of the good land beyond, but the Book was not among them. I am going back the sad long trail to my people of the dark land. You make my feet heavy with burdens of gifts, and my moccasins grow old in carrying them, but the Book is not among them. When I tell my people, after one more snow, in the council, that I did not bring the Book, no word will be spoken by our old men, and our young braves. One by one they will rise and go out in silence. My people will die in darkness, and they will go on the long path to other hunting grounds. No white man will go with them, and no white man's Book to make the way plain. I have no more words."

It is not improbable that the Indians of the Northwest who possessed such traditions as the one related above, upon hearing, from white colonists or trappers, of the publication of the Book of Mormon had sent their delegates in search of that Book from Heaven.

In the Heart of a Child

By Linnie Fisher Robinson

There never was such a garden
As the one which I picture to you;
In it are flow'rs of every kind
And all just sparkling with dew.

It hasn't a gate to guard it,
And any can ask and then share;
I've ne'er heard of it running low,
And it hasn't a spot that's bare.

I have found in every corner,
There are blossoms of "Love" and
"Trust";
And most all over its surface
Are the flow'rs, "Let me Help, I
Must."

You see its a marv'lous garden,
God laid out the bed and the seeds;
And placed it here in our pathways,
To grow on the strength of our
deeds.

To the gard'ner there is promise—
Each act will bring bounteous pay,
And every blossom will bless him
Who toils for high blooming to-day.

Now, think you can guess its location,
Or where this strange garden lies?
In the heart of a child I found it,
It's the child before your eyes!