

THE BOOK OF MOSES

INTRODUCTION

HISTORY

In June 1830—just months after the publication of the Book of Mormon on March 26, 1830, and the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints on April 6, 1830—Joseph Smith received an extraordinary revelation concerning a previously unknown incident in the life of the biblical prophet Moses. This revelation brought to light “the words of God which he spake unto Moses at a time when Moses was caught up into an exceedingly high mountain” (Moses 1:1). This revelation, now known as the first chapter of the book of Moses, was the first tangible result of an inspired translation or revision of the Bible that the Prophet occupied himself with for at least the next three years of his life. The resulting text (known today as the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible but simply designated a “new translation” by the Prophet himself [see Doctrine and Covenants 124:89]), and especially the portion related to Genesis 1:1–6:13 now canonized as the book of Moses, has profoundly influenced Latter-day Saint theology.

The content from Joseph Smith’s revision of the King James Bible preserved today in the canonical book of Moses was revealed, or translated, between June 1830 and February 1831. Assisting the Prophet as scribes in this portion of the work were Oliver Cowdery, John Whitmer, Emma Smith, and Sidney Rigdon. By the spring of 1831, after the Saints had relocated to Kirtland, Ohio, this initial dictated manuscript, commonly designated Old Testament Manuscript/Revision 1 (OT1), was copied and revised under the direction of Joseph Smith. It served as the base text from which the Prophet completed the rest of his translation of the Old Testament, which is referred to as Old Testament Manuscript/Revision 2 (OT2). However, some revisions continued to be made to the original dictated manuscript as well. Whereas OT1 reflects the Prophet’s initial prophetic outpouring connected to the Bible revision project, OT2, with its numerous revisions and emendations, appears

to essentially reflect the final form of the text as intended by the Prophet. Together, OT1 and OT2 constitute the earliest extant manuscripts of the book of Moses (and the rest of the Joseph Smith Translation) and are profitably studied together to discern how the Joseph Smith Translation, including the book of Moses, grew out of an unfolding, “line upon line” revelatory process (2 Nephi 28:30; Doctrine and Covenants 98:12).

In addition to early manuscript copies of the text that circulated among some Latter-day Saints, portions of the book of Moses appeared in print as early as August 1832, when William W. Phelps published what is now Moses 7 in *The Evening and the Morning Star* in Independence, Missouri. Additional excerpts from the book of Moses (including what is now designated Moses 5:1–16; 6:43–68; and 8:13–30) appeared in print not long thereafter. In the 1835 first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants, excerpts from the translation of Genesis were quoted in the Lectures on Faith, further signifying the importance the early Saints attached to the Prophet’s biblical revisions. On one occasion Joseph Smith indicated that it was “not the will of the Lord” for the New Translation to be published serially as other histories or revelations were but that it would be published as a single volume instead. (The New Testament was intended to also be published together with the Book of Mormon.) He accordingly made serious though unfruitful efforts to publish the text in its entirety during his lifetime.

Recognizing the enormous value and doctrinal contributions of this text, Elder Franklin D. Richards included portions of the book of Moses in the 1851 first edition of the Pearl of Great Price, drawing from both previously published excerpts and, it appears, unpublished manuscript copies in circulation at the time. Unlike the text’s current form, however, Richards’s version began with Moses 6–7 and then followed with Moses 1–5, 8. The text underwent further modification in the 1878 second edition prepared by Elder Orson Pratt. Besides rearranging the contents of the book of Moses into its current order, Pratt utilized the published edition of the New Translation—the Inspired Version prepared by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (now the Community of Christ) in 1867—as the base text for this edition. It was this edition that would become canonized two years later, thus solidifying the basic structure of the text as read and appreciated by Latter-day Saints today.

STRUCTURE

The book of Moses is recited in both first- and third-person narrative voices. The text opens with a third-person narrator describing Moses receiving a series of grand panoramic visions in which God reveals to him details about the earth and its inhabitants as well as the wider Creation. This opening chapter frames the ensuing narrative by depicting God as instructing Moses

to record the information He is about to give him concerning the Creation and the early history of humanity (1:40–41; 2:1). Thereafter the text switches to the first-person voice of God as He retells the stories of Creation, the Garden of Eden, and the Fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 1–3. At Moses 5:4, however, the narrative voice reverts to the third person for the remainder of the canonical text. The cumulative effect of this narrative disjointedness blurs the lines between the primary narrators within the text (God and Moses) and Joseph Smith as the modern prophetic intermediary who rendered it into the familiar biblical idiom of the King James Bible for modern readers.

Embedded in the narrative of the book of Moses is a series of visions and revelations given to the primeval ancestors of humanity. Readers thus encounter revelations given to Moses (1:3–9, 24–41), Adam and Eve (6:51–68), and Enoch (7:2–11, 23–59, 65–67) as they progress through the story. They likewise encounter sometimes lengthy discourses, most notably Enoch’s extended address at 6:40–7:1. Also woven into the narrative are artfully executed literary and thematic elements, such as the stark moral dichotomies depicted between the wicked descendants of Cain (5:42–57) and the righteous descendants of Seth (6:10–25), or the juxtaposition of Adam as the prototypical priest of God offering sacrifice in the similitude of the Only Begotten (5:4–12) and Cain as the prototypical priest of Satan offering his brother as humanity’s first martyr (5:26–41). Poetic elements likewise feature in the text (7:41, 48), as do irony (5:33) and immense pathos (7:28–37). As a literary work, the book of Moses is abundantly rich.

Being, as it is, in part a revision of the text of the King James Version of Genesis 1:1–6:13, the book of Moses, of course, parallels the familiar biblical stories of the early chapters of Genesis. However, at several key points the text radically departs from the biblical text, introducing new themes, doctrines, characters, and narrative points. Satan, for example, who is absent from the Genesis text, makes several open appearances in the narrative as the chief antagonist of the drama (see Moses 1:12–23; 4:1–4; 5:13–15, 18–31). Likewise, the mention (and presence) of God’s Only Begotten Son, Jesus Christ, pervades the narrative. Although mentioned only briefly (and cryptically) at Genesis 5:18–24, Enoch plays a significant role in Joseph Smith’s reworking of the biblical material, prominently occupying nearly two chapters (Moses 6:26–7:69) out of the eight that presently constitute the book of Moses. The prophet Noah, who otherwise utters not a single word of dialogue in the Genesis text, is recast in the book of Moses as a preacher of righteousness warning the evil inhabitants of earth of the impending deluge (8:23–24). These expansions afford the book of Moses, in many points, a remarkable resemblance to the so-called “rewritten Bible” tradition that flourished in ancient Judaism and Christianity (a point that has been appreciated by both Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint commentators).

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LATTER-DAY SAINTS

As mentioned above, excerpts from Joseph Smith's translation of Genesis were already circulating in print in the decades leading up to their inclusion in the 1851 first edition of the Pearl of Great Price. Latter-day Saints both then and now have greatly cherished the book of Moses for the knowledge it restored about the lives and teachings of Adam and Eve and other antediluvian personalities. Without question, the crowning truth revealed in the book of Moses is the primacy of the gospel of Jesus Christ and that Adam and Eve were explicitly instructed directly by God in the foundational principles and ordinances of this gospel (5:4–12, 58–59; 6:51–68). This reconfiguration of the Genesis account to include plain mention of the salvific work of Jesus Christ in the earliest stages of human history drastically impacts how Latter-day Saints conceive God's unchanging, eternal plan of salvation for all His children.

In addition to making clear the primacy of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Book of Moses also prefigures the rise and triumph of Zion in the latter days. As narrated in the text, Enoch and his people attained such a level of holiness in their Zion community that they ultimately enjoyed the blessing of translation into God's own presence (7:18–22, 60–64, 68–69). The concept of Zion, the New Jerusalem, in Latter-day Saint religious consciousness can in no small measure be traced back to this foundational text, which underpins the subsequent revelations Joseph Smith received on the establishment of latter-day Zion in anticipation of the return of Enoch's holy city at the Second Coming of the Son of Man (Moses 7:60–64; D&C 45; 97:18–28). The book of Moses has likewise greatly impacted Latter-day Saint temple theology and worship, and an increasing consensus among Latter-day Saint scholars sees chapters 2–8 of the text as a temple text—an account of ritual ascent that is comparable with the account of Moses's heavenly ascent in the opening chapter.

One of the most profound passages in the book of Moses that affects the Latter-day Saint understanding of the nature of God comes from Enoch's vision recorded at 7:23–40, wherein the prophet, to his great astonishment, beholds in vision God weeping in sorrow because of the abject wickedness of His children. This moving display both refutes sectarian notions of an immutable, impassible deity and reorients how Latter-day Saints imagine their relationship with God as their Father. Other vivid anthropomorphisms in the text (see Moses 1:6, 13, 16; 2:26–27; 6:57; 7:35) have become an integral part of the scriptural foundation from which Joseph Smith and subsequent Latter-day Saint thinkers have built compelling theologies concerning the nature of God.

With the modern rediscovery of forgotten or neglected ancient apocryphal texts—texts that also narrate accounts of the lives of Adam and Eve, Enoch, Noah, and other ancient prophets—Latter-day Saint scholars have,

with considerable interest, scoured these and other sources in search of parallels with the book of Moses. The results of these investigations have been unquestionably impressive, with noteworthy convergences between Joseph Smith's revealed text and related ancient sources. Especially significant are the parallels that the Enoch material in the book of Moses shares with the corpus of apocryphal Enoch texts, which, as scholars now rightly recognize, played a pivotal role in shaping much of the thinking of ancient Judaism and Christianity. While this evidence does not "prove" the historical authenticity or divine inspiration of the book of Moses, it nevertheless reinforces Latter-day Saints' belief that with his inspired revision of Genesis, Joseph Smith tapped into genuinely ancient wells of thought and even restored ignored or forgotten accounts and themes. While questions remain about to what degree the book of Moses reflects the recovery of ancient Mosaic writings as opposed to being Joseph Smith's modern, inspired expansions on the biblical text (questions that will largely remain unresolved without more ancient manuscript witnesses), what cannot be doubted are the ancient congruencies in the text, to say nothing of the book's profound doctrinal contributions to the Restoration.

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ABBREVIATIONS

The abbreviated designations for book of Moses manuscripts used in this study edition follow Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004); and Kent P. Jackson, ed., *The Book of Moses and the Joseph Smith Translation Manuscripts* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2005). They have been correlated with the designations used on the Joseph Smith Papers Project website.

OT1 = Old Testament Manuscript 1 = Old Testament Revision 1

OT2 = Old Testament Manuscript 2 = Old Testament Revision 2