

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



Edited by
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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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Hel. 14), but several still look to the future. One reason some people were puzzled when Jesus declared he had fulfilled the law and the prophets was that many prophecies of Isaiah, Nephi¹, and others remained open—in particular, the Nephites had not yet been reunited with a redeemed people of Israel. Jesus explained: “I do not destroy that which hath been spoken concerning things which are to come” (3 Ne. 15:7). Yet to be fulfilled in the prophetic view of the Book of Mormon are promises that the branches of scattered Israel will be gathered in Christ and will combine their records into one (2 Ne. 29:13–14), that the remnants of Lehi’s descendants will be greatly strengthened in the Lord (2 Ne. 30:3–6; 3 Ne. 21:7–13), and that a great division will occur: a New Jerusalem will be built in the Western Hemisphere by the righteous (3 Ne. 21:23; Ether 13:1–9), while the wicked will be destroyed (1 Ne. 30:10). “Then,” Jesus said, “shall the power of heaven come down among them; and I also will be in the midst” (3 Ne. 21:25).

[See also Jesus Christ in the Book of Mormon.]

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Most Latter-day Saint doctrinal writings refer to the Book of Mormon on particular topics, but no comprehensive analysis of Nephite religious experience as such has been written.

In general, see Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City, 1968); and Rodney Turner, “The Three Nephite Churches of Christ,” in *The Keystone Scripture*, ed. P. Cheesman, pp. 100–126 (Provo, Utah, 1988).

For a cultural anthropologist’s approach to Nephite religious institutions and practices, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, 1985).

JOHN W. WELCH

BOOK OF MORMON STUDIES

Since the publication of the BOOK OF MORMON in 1830, a substantial amount of material analyzing, defending, and attacking it has been published. Studies of this complex record have taken various approaches, for the book itself invites close scrutiny and rewards patient and reflective research.

For most Latter-day Saints the primary purpose of scripture study is not to prove to themselves the truth of scriptural records—which they

already accept—but to gain wisdom and understanding about the teachings of these sacred writings and to apply in daily life gospel principles learned there. Because of the origins of the Book of Mormon, however, many people have also explored the secondary features of this document: its vocabulary, style, factual assertions, main themes, and subtle nuances.

Book of Mormon research has generally followed many of the same forms as biblical research. In both fields, writings range from expository texts to doctrinal, historical, geographical, textual, literary, and comparative commentaries. But there are also several salient differences. For example, unlike the authors of the Bible, the prophets, compilers, and abridgers of the Book of Mormon frequently state explicitly the dates when they worked, their purposes in writing, and the sources from which they drew, thus clarifying many compositional and interpretive issues; furthermore, academic and archaeological studies of the Book of Mormon are more limited than in biblical research because the earliest extant text is Joseph SMITH’S 1829 English translation and the precise locations of Book of Mormon settlements are unknown. Nevertheless, a significant number of internal and comparative analyses have been pursued. The works of the following individuals are most notable.

ALEXANDER CAMPBELL. The founder of the Disciples of Christ and a colleague of Sidney RIGDON before Rigdon converted to Mormonism, Alexander Campbell (1788–1866) composed a response to the Book of Mormon that he published on February 7, 1831, in his paper the *Millennial Harbinger* (reprinted as a pamphlet called *Delusions*). In it, Campbell challenged the idea that the Book of Mormon had been written by multiple ancient prophets and attacked the character of Joseph Smith. He said that the book was solely the product of Joseph Smith, written by him alone and “certainly conceived in one cranium” (p. 13). Campbell claimed that the book simply represents the reflections of Joseph Smith on the social, political, and religious controversies of his day: “infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of

freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man” (p. 13). He also asserted that the Book of Mormon misunderstands Israelite and Jewish history (portraying the Nephites as Christians hundreds of years before the birth of Christ) and is written in abysmal English grammar. Campbell characterized Joseph Smith as a “knave” who was “ignorant” and “impudent” (p. 11; *see also ANTI-MORMON PUBLICATIONS*). *Delusions* is significant among Book of Mormon studies because in many ways it set the agenda for most subsequent critiques of the Book of Mormon (e.g., that the book derives from, or responds to, various trends in early-nineteenth-century upstate New York). Subsequently, however, Campbell changed his position, adopting the Spaulding-Rigdon theory, according to which Sidney Rigdon purloined a copy of a manuscript by Solomon Spaulding, developed from it what became the Book of Mormon, which he passed on to Joseph Smith in the late 1820s, and later pretended to have met Joseph for the first time in 1830 (*see SPAULDING MANUSCRIPT*).

ORSON PRATT. In *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (1850–1851), a series of six pamphlets, Orson Pratt (1811–1881), a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, drew together early Latter-day Saint thinking about the Book of Mormon. He argued on logical grounds for the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, confronted criticisms of it, and presented evidence in favor of its truth, relying heavily on biblical and historical evidences. He did not discuss the contents of the Book of Mormon directly, but addressed ideas of other churches that hindered their acceptance, or even serious consideration, of the Book of Mormon.

The first three pamphlets discussed the nature of revelation, giving evidence to support Pratt’s claim that continued communication from God is both necessary and scriptural. The final three pamphlets reported on many witnesses who received heavenly visions substantiating Joseph Smith’s claims (*see BOOK OF MORMON WITNESSES*), and asserted that the divinity of the Book of Mormon is confirmed by many miracles, similar to those recorded in the Bible, experienced by Latter-day Saints. Finally, he appealed to prophetic evidence for the Book of Mormon, taken from Daniel and Isaiah. In an 1872 discourse, Pratt proposed a geography for the Book of Mormon that



George Reynolds (1842–1909) held many Church positions in England before coming to America in 1865. He served as secretary to the First Presidency until the end of his life and was called as one of the First Seven Presidents of the Seventy in 1890. He was the first to write extensive commentaries on the Book of Mormon. His Book of Mormon concordance required twenty-one years to produce. Courtesy University of Utah.

has greatly influenced LDS thinking (*see BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY*).

GEORGE REYNOLDS AND JANNE M. SJODAHL. During the nineteenth century, most defenses of, and attacks on, the Book of Mormon were based primarily on reason, on examinations of the environment contemporary with the book, or on the Bible. But George Reynolds (1842–1909) and Janne M. Sjodahl (1853–1939), in their seven-volume *Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (reissued 1955–1961), investigated the plausibility of the claims of the Book of Mormon by examining external evidences of a historical, cultural, linguistic, or religious nature from the Old World and the New. Although their examples and explanations are often not heavily documented and were sometimes mistaken, this work was the first major effort to study the cultural and historical contexts of the Book of Mormon (i.e., to place the book in a histor-

ical context by adducing relevant materials from the ancient world).

Whereas in *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, an earlier work, Reynolds had agreed with Orson Pratt on Book of Mormon geography, in their *Commentary* he and Sjordahl placed geography at a low level of priority and were interested primarily in establishing an internally consistent map of all Book of Mormon sites, without attempting to identify those sites with modern locations (Reynolds, pp. 19, 49, 301–330; Reynolds and Sjordahl, Vol. 1, pp. ix–xi). Reynolds eventually authored nearly three hundred articles and several Book of Mormon resource works. Sjordahl published *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon*, featuring a wide variety of cultural and linguistic theories.

B. H. ROBERTS. Among the most influential Latter-day Saint writers of his time, B. H. Roberts (1857–1933) wrote widely on a variety of Church-related topics, including the Book of Mormon. Like Reynolds and Sjordahl, he was interested not only in the theological implications of the Book of Mormon but also in its historical, geographical, and cultural setting (1909, Vol. 2, pp. 143–44, 162, 347–458; Vol. 3, pp. 3–92). Roberts was not afraid to ask difficult—and, for him, sometimes unanswerable—questions about the Book of Mormon, but affirmed his faith in the Book of Mormon to the end of his life (1985, pp. 61–148; J. Welch, *Ensign* 16 [Mar. 1986]:58–62).

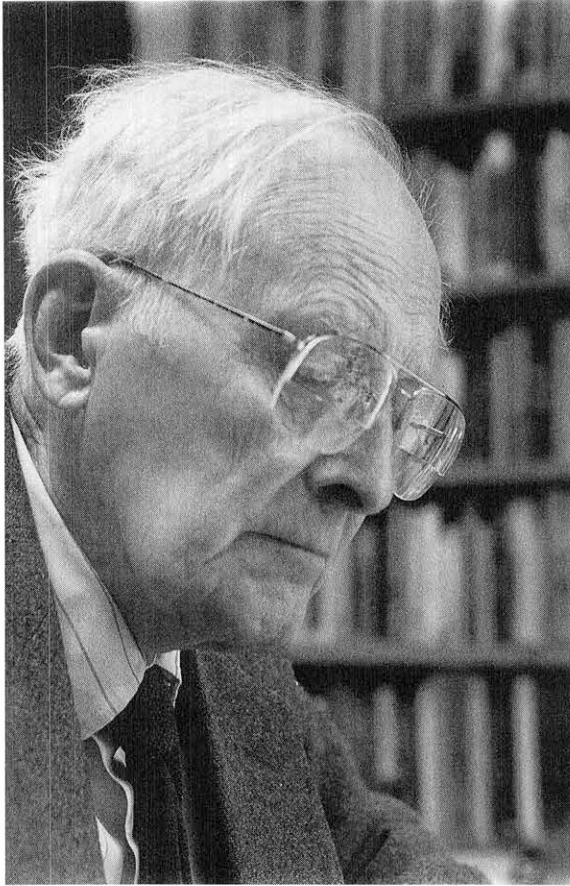
FRANCIS KIRKHAM. In his two-volume study *A New Witness for Christ in America* (1942), Francis Kirkham (1877–1972) examined the 1820s historical evidence relating to the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Kirkham showed that the testimonies of Joseph Smith and his friends are consistent and coherent, while those of his enemies are frequently inconsistent and contradictory. He carefully documented how alternative explanations for the origin of the Book of Mormon sometimes changed or were abandoned. While favoring the traditional view of Book of Mormon origins, Kirkham allowed all to speak for themselves with little commentary. He liberally presented the primary materials, published and unpublished, from libraries and archives across the United States. His use of the widest available range of primary sources set a new standard in the study of the origins of the Book of Mormon.

Kirkham's second volume of *A New Witness*

for Christ in America (1951) examined the alternative explanations of Book of Mormon origins. Regarding the assertion that Joseph Smith wrote the book personally, Kirkham presented statements of some who knew Joseph well, with views representing both sides of the issue of whether he was capable of writing such a book. Kirkham also gave extensive evidence to show that the Spaulding hypothesis was fraught with difficulties. The theory provides only the most circumstantial and dubious evidence for Rigdon's theft of the manuscript and for his passing it on to Joseph Smith with no one else's knowledge. Even though the Spaulding hypothesis has fallen into disfavor as an explanation of the Book of Mormon during the past several decades, it is still occasionally revived.

HUGH W. NIBLEY. In his considerable corpus of writings on the Book of Mormon, written over a period of some forty years, Hugh W. Nibley (b. 1910) has taken several approaches, mainly historical contextualization based on the internal claims of the Book of Mormon as a document of people who come from the ancient Near East, but also testing the book for authenticity on the basis of internal evidence alone, and seeing the fateful collapse of mighty civilizations as an ominous warning to people today.

In *Lehi in the Desert* (1949–1952), after reviewing the great American archaeologist William F. Albright's criteria for determining the historical plausibility of ancient accounts, Nibley asks these questions about the story of Lehi: "Does it correctly reflect 'the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time'? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the *mise-en-scène* mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?" (*CWHN* 5:4). The proper approach to the Book of Mormon, according to Nibley, is simply to give the book the benefit of the doubt, granting that it is what it claims to be (a historically authentic ancient document of a people who originated in ancient Israel) and then testing the internal evidence of the book itself (names, cultural and religious ideas) against what can be known about the ancient Near East. When this is done, a picture emerges that is strikingly consistent with what can be determined about the ancient Near East. Most of Nibley's examples come from the Arabs, Egyptians, and Israelites.



Hugh W. Nibley (1910–), noted linguist and historian of religion, was one of the first to detect and explore numerous cultural similarities between ancient Near Eastern literatures and Book of Mormon texts. His candid wit and wide-ranging insights emphasize the relevance of the Book of Mormon to modern world circumstances (1989). Photographer: Mark A. Philbrick. Courtesy F.A.R.M.S.

With wit and erudition, Nibley argues against alternative explanations of the Book of Mormon. For example, in discussing Thomas O’Dea’s environmentalist assertion that the book is obviously an American work, Nibley calls for greater specificity and uniqueness of the American sentiments that allegedly permeate the work (*CWHN* 8:185–86). With skillful parry and thrust, Nibley proceeds in his studies on the Book of Mormon, sometimes defending points in the book, sometimes taking the offensive against those who attack it, always enriching the reader’s understanding of its setting. As a teacher, lecturer, and writer, Nibley has been widely influential on subsequent studies of the Book of Mormon.

JOHN L. SORENSON. Devoting his attention to Mesoamerica in an effort to understand better the geographical, anthropological, and cultural setting of BOOK OF MORMON PEOPLES, John L. Sorenson (b. 1924) examines the text of the Book of Mormon. He carefully analyzes the Mesoamerican evidence, particularly the geography, climatic conditions, modes of life and warfare, and archaeological remains in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, in order to create a plausible, coherent matrix for understanding the book. With regard to Book of Mormon geography, Sorenson concludes that the events recorded in the Book of Mormon occurred in a fairly restricted area of southern Mexico and Guatemala:

The narrow neck of land is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The east sea is the Gulf of Mexico or its component, the Gulf of Campeche. The west sea is the Pacific Ocean to the west of Mexico and Guatemala. The land southward comprises that portion of Mexico east and south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. . . . The land northward consists of part of Mexico west and north of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. . . . The final battleground where both Jaredite and Nephite peoples met their end was around the Tuxtla Mountains of south-central Veracruz [pp. 46–47].

An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon has placed the study of the ancient American background of the Book of Mormon on a scholarly footing as no previous work (*see* BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY).

CURRENT DIRECTIONS IN BOOK OF MORMON STUDIES. Much of the scholarly work on the Book of Mormon has been devoted to a fuller understanding of its theological riches or concerned with applying the Book of Mormon principle to “liken all scriptures unto us” (1 Ne. 19:23). Some of the recent publications of the Religious Studies Center at Brigham Young University have focused on various theological aspects of the Book of Mormon and on seeking life applications from the book (e.g., essays by various authors in Cheesman, in McConkie and Millet, and in Nyman and Tate).

Following the lead of Nibley, Sorenson, and others, several recent studies on the Book of Mormon have been concerned with enhancing an understanding of its Old World background and American setting. The research and publications of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon

Studies (F.A.R.M.S.), the Society for Early Historic Archaeology (SEHA), and the Archaeological Research Institute have been particularly concerned with the historical and geographic context of the Book of Mormon.

In certain circles, one of the major focuses in current Book of Mormon studies is concerned with its historicity. Whereas in the past, positions on the Book of Mormon divided themselves roughly between those who accepted it as an inspired and historically authentic ancient document and those who rejected it in both these regards, several different lines of approach have developed.

According to one view—a position that has existed since even before its first publication—the Book of Mormon is a conscious fabrication of Joseph Smith. Those holding to this view see the book as reflecting no inspiration and having no historical value, although they may see some religious value in it as a statement of Joseph Smith's religious feelings. The assumption underlying this view may be either a doctrinaire rejection of divine intervention in human affairs or a specific rejection of Joseph Smith's claims to experience with the divine. Those maintaining this position may accept either the Spaulding theory or, more commonly, various environmentalist explanations for the contents of the book (see VIEW OF THE HEBREWS). One environmentalist explanation that has attracted some interest in the recent past among both believers and nonbelievers is based on the purported "magic worldview" that suffused the environment in which Joseph Smith grew up. However, this position has been heavily criticized and has not been widely received.

Another view of the Book of Mormon accepts its inspiration but rejects its historical authenticity, seeing it as in some sense inspired but not the product of antiquity, coming rather from the pen of Joseph Smith.

A third position accepts parts of the Book of Mormon as ancient, but views other parts of the book as inspired expansions on the text. This view has suffered because a concession that any part of the book is authentically ancient (and beyond the powers of Joseph Smith to have established through research) seems an admission that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be and what has traditionally been claimed for it: that it is ancient.

While these views have been articulated by some members in the LDS community, the major-

ity of LDS students of the Book of Mormon accept the traditional view of its divine authenticity and study it as both an ancient document and a tract for modern days, thereby enhancing their appreciation of, and benefit from, the book.

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