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# **An Evangelical Perspective on the Book of Mormon**

## **An Evangelical Perspective on the *Book of Mormon***

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This paper is meant for both my fellow evangelicals and our Latter Day Saint friends and neighbors. For evangelicals, I hope that it will suggest some ways to speak respectfully and honestly with our LDS friends. For those who are LDS and venture to read this, perhaps you'll recognize an earnest attempt to acknowledge and honor what is biblical and true from an evangelical perspective in Mormonism's foundational document.

I confess that, as an evangelical Christian, I have too often let my disagreement with LDS teaching prevent me from seeing genuine common ground that our two traditions occupy. I've been guilty of an "all or nothing" kind of thinking - If the LDS faith isn't orthodox, then I can reject it wholesale. I felt justified in taking this position with respect to LDS doctrine, because I believe that it strays from orthodoxy in two very critical ways – it rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and it seems to qualify the gospel of "justification by faith apart from works of the law" in ways that contradict the doctrine of grace. All too often, however, I have allowed this assessment prevent me from having a genuine conversation with my LDS friends and neighbors. Too often, intentionally or not, I drove conversations and relationships to a dead end – "If we can't agree about these two critical items, there's no point going further and discussing mere details." I was in the conversation

to teach, not to learn; to preach, not to listen. My words and expressions betrayed the very gospel of grace that I intended to proclaim. The arrogance of being “right” too often crowded out the love that sacrifices itself to understand another.

In May 2012 there was an event at the Colonial Theater initiated by Larry Hall, who attends CCC, but hosted by the LDS Church, which proved to be a turning point for me. The event was “A Mormon and An Evangelical in Conversation” and featured Dr. Robert Millet, professor of ancient scripture at Brigham Young University, and Greg Johnson, an evangelical pastor. An LDS friend and I attended. We thoroughly enjoyed the presentation and agreed to meet a talk about our respective faiths. Since then, we’ve met for lunch once a month. We’ve determined that we will remain friends, while purposefully talking about our differences of faith. This has been a wonderful experience. It has not been a debate or an argument. I’ve genuinely learned some things from my friend that have helped me grow in my faith in Jesus Christ, the Bible, and the gospel. I’ve also grown in my understanding of and respect for the *Book of Mormon* and the LDS faith and think that he would say he has learned something about evangelicals and what we believe.

Early in the conversation, my friend recommended that I read the *Book of Mormon*, pointing to Moroni 10:4, “And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.” Another confession - in spite of living in a predominantly LDS community for many years and professing an evangelical love for my neighbors, I’d tried several times to read the *Book of Mormon*, but had never made it through. This time, motivated

by friendship and the knowledge that I'd be meeting my friend for lunch in less than a month, I was able to keep going. I not only crossed the finish line, but I read with a good deal more purpose and comprehension than previously. I believe I read with a sincere heart, asking God to show me whether what I was reading was true, and trusting that He would do so. By continuing to read, more carefully than I had before, I was able to bring genuine questions and topics of discussion to our meetings and I found that the conversation didn't have to always lead to debate or end in a discussion of differences. My friend was glad to answer my many questions about the book, its author, and its subject matter and his patient coaching helped me better understand what I was reading.

So what have I learned? Here, I must ask for patience on the part of LDS readers. Some of the opinions I'm going to share may strike you as unacceptable and, perhaps, even offensive. My intent is not to offend, but to honestly present one evangelical's thoughts. If you do persist and read on, I hope you'll find some of my thoughts more amenable and perhaps even points on which we can agree. At least, you'll gain a better understanding of the reasons for evangelical disagreement and a more accurate measure of the distance between our points of view.

In many ways my previous impressions about the *Book of Mormon*, based on partial reading and the critiques of others, have been confirmed by my reading. This is especially true with regards to the origins of the book. I believe, all the more for having read it carefully, that the *Book of Mormon's* origins lie in and only in nineteenth century, up-state New York. The claim that the *Book of Mormon* is the translation of an ancient record preserved on golden plates, it seems to me, is not credible. There are no plates to be examined which might validate this claim. In fact, the claim that the record was

preserved on metal plates is itself difficult to accept. To my knowledge no ancient examples of such a method of writing have been discovered in the Americas. Moreover, this is just one instance of the absence of specific, substantive details (linguistic, flora, fauna, geographic, cultural, etc.) which might connect the story told in the *Book of Mormon* to the actual history and geography of the Americas. This absence of specific points of reference has become more obvious, rather than less, since its publication in 1830, as geographic, archeological, genetic, and linguistic discoveries have added dramatically to what is known about ancient American peoples, history, and cultures. As more has become known about the ancient Americas, it has become increasingly difficult to find a plausible place for the story of the *Book of Mormon* within its pre-Columbian history and cultures. It is only true to a point, as *Book of Mormon* apologists have observed, that “the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence.” Given the advances in our knowledge of ancient American history and cultures, I believe that we are well past that point. The Loch Ness monster and the aether may exist, but it is difficult to convince many people of these things in the absence of evidence. Certainly Joseph Smith's intent was to produce a story that could be plausibly located in the new world, but his rudimentary knowledge of its history and geography has not withstood the tests of time and discovery.<sup>1</sup>

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1 There are a myriad of sources, pro and con, regarding the historicity of *Book of Mormon* events. I'll mention three, merely as representatives. David Persuitte gives a helpful list of many of the lines of evidence that have been offered and refuted regarding the Book of Mormon's historicity in *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 2nd edition, Appendix B: *The Book of Mormon and Ancient America* (McFarland & Co., 2000). Terryl Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford Press, 2002). Michael Coe (Charles J. MacCurdy professor emeritus of

This lack of historical credibility is not only a difficulty for evangelical readers, but seems to be felt, at least to some degree, within Mormonism itself. Raymond T. Matheny, professor of Anthropology at Brigham Young University, observed in 1984, "I would say in evaluating the *Book of Mormon* that it had no place in the New World whatsoever."<sup>2</sup> A few LDS authors have openly surrendered the claim that the *Book of Mormon* is a historical record while defending its spiritual authority. Authors whose essays were included in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology* stated, "members of the church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints should confess in faith that the *Book of Mormon* is the word of God but also abandon claims that it is a historical record of the ancient peoples of the Americas,"<sup>3</sup> "there is no evidence to substantiate the view that the *Book of Mormon* records a real visit by the resurrected Jesus to the place called Bountiful in the *Book of Mormon*,"<sup>4</sup> and "some studies in recent years have been making it clearer that these [i.e. the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph Smith's revision of the Bible, and the Book of Abraham] are not ancient but recent compositions set pseudonymously or pseudoepigraphically in the past. In my view these studies are on the right track, . . . I

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Anthropology at Yale University, expert in Mayan and Olmec cultures), *PBS interview in the series "The Mormons"* (2007), <http://www.pbs.org/mormons/interviews/coe.html>. This PBS series also contains an interview with Terryl Givens.

2 "Book of Mormon Archeology: A Panel Discussion," response by Professor Ray T. Matheny, Sunstone Symposium, August 25, 1984, cited by Brent Lee Metcalf, *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon* (Signature Books, 1993), x.

3 Ibid., Anthony Hutchinson, 1.

4 Ibid., Stan Larson, 133.

will show that Alma chapters 12-13, traditionally dated to about 82 B.C.E., depend in part on the New Testament epistle to the Hebrews, dated by critical scholars to the last third of the first century C.E. The dependence of Alma 12-13 on Hebrews thus constitutes an anachronism and indicates that the chapters are a composition of the Joseph Smith.”<sup>5</sup> In *An Insider's View of the of the Mormon Origins* Grant H. Palmer argues convincingly that the *Book of Mormon* is best understood, not as the translation of an ancient record preserved on golden plates, but as the production of a gifted, devout, and creative author who used materials that were available to him, such as the stories of his father, the then common theory that the American Indians were descendants of the lost tribes of Israel, the King James Bible, elements of magical lore, and revivalist preaching. In his conclusion Palmer wondered, “It is appropriate to tell simplified, faith-inspiring stories to children, but is it right to tell religious allegories to adults as if they were literal history?”<sup>6</sup>

The inability to identify a new world setting for the *Book of Mormon* has resulted in a non-technical, populist scramble for apologetic high ground within Mormonism, with the “American Heartland” model gaining recently against the more traditional Mesoamerican view.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that

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5 Ibid., David Wright, 165-166.

6 Grant H. Palmer, *An Insider's View of the of the Mormon Origins* (Signature Books, 2002), 261.

7 The more traditional view was defended by John L. Sorenson in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books Company, 1985). More recently Rob Meldrum, the FIRM Foundation, Elder L. Tom Perry (*Ensign*, December 2012), and others have defended the “American Heartland” model. Much of this discussion can be found at <http://www.bookofmormonevidence.org/>.

this is not merely a disagreement over the location of single battle or city, but whether the entirety of the events, peoples, and cities in the *Book of Mormon* were located in North, Central, or even South America. This internal LDS debate demonstrates the lack of solid historical evidence for the events, locations, and cultures described in the *Book of Mormon*. It also presents a strange spectacle to more traditional Christians, who, while they disagree over innumerable other issues, would never think of contesting the geographical locations of major biblical events. The exodus was from Egypt. The Jews were deported to Mesopotamia. Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. Paul was imprisoned in Rome. Of course there are historical and geographical difficulties with details of the biblical record.<sup>8</sup> These difficulties, however, are the exception rather than the rule, and appear against a background that is otherwise well-established by historical, geographical, and archeological evidence.

Admittedly, the voices above and others like them have been generally rejected or ignored by the Latter Day Saint mainstream. Nevertheless, they are important points of reference for this paper, because they are sincere attempts on the LDS side to recognize and address a concern that for evangelicals is perhaps the single most significant barrier<sup>9</sup> to

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8 For instance, there is as yet little evidence that camels had been domesticated by the time Abraham, but camels appear regularly in the patriarchal narratives of *Genesis*. Again, it is not clear whether the “Galatians” to whom Paul addressed his short epistle lived in northern or southern Asia Minor.

9 The evangelical position, like the gospel itself, is irreducibly historical. At the very center of the gospel message are the gospel events - real space-time, historical events. We believe and confess that if these



understanding and appreciating the *Book of Mormon*. As long as LDS insist that the spiritual content of the *Book of Mormon* is inseparable from its historical veracity, then I and other historically minded evangelicals will find it difficult to accept. On the other hand, if LDS followers of Jesus Christ could separate these two questions, conceding that the *Book of Mormon* may not be an historical record, while retaining their conviction that it strengthens them in their faith in Christ, evangelicals might be less inclined to reject the *Book of Mormon* out of hand. This approach will certainly strike most LDS readers as a “bridge too far,” an impossibly large step. Perhaps some further consideration can mitigate that feeling, at least to some small degree.

### **The *Book of Mormon* as “Another Testament to Jesus Christ”**

Early in our conversation, my friend pointed out that the subtitle on later editions of the *Book of Mormon* is “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.” I know that he understands this subtitle to imply that the *Book of Mormon* should to be placed alongside the Old and New Testaments as an equally inspired and authoritative source for faith and practice. This, of course, is unacceptable to most Christians who hold that the sixty-six books of our Bible (with allowance for a few Old Testament deuterocanonical books) have supreme and unique authority. Perhaps, however, it is possible for us to understand and

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events (the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ) did not, in fact, take place, then our faith is empty and worthless. Paul argues exactly this point in 1 Corinthians 15:1-20, citing the evidence of eyewitnesses who observed the risen Christ. Luke (Luke 1:1-4), Peter (2 Peter 1:16-18), and John (1 John 1:1-2) also insist on the testimony of eyewitnesses as verifying the gospel events.

accept this phrase in a less fractious sense. Whatever else it may or may not be, the *Book of Mormon* does appear to have been Joseph Smith's attempt to testify of his faith in Jesus Christ. It is "another testament" in the sense that it stands alongside the witness of every other Christian who declares his or her faith. Latter Day Saints, of course, believe that it is much more than this – that it is the miraculous translation of an ancient record, inspired by God, the most correct of any book on earth, the keystone of their religion, etc. We evangelicals will need to add disclaimers from our side to prevent misunderstanding – "a testimony yes, but not divinely inspired or inerrant, Joseph Smith's own creation, not the translation of ancient plates, etc." Apart from these qualifications, however, perhaps we can find common ground in thinking of the *Book of Mormon* as a testament of Joseph Smith's faith in Jesus Christ. I believe this leaves room for a more positive opinion of the *Book of Mormon* on the evangelical side.

The obvious challenge to this approach is to ask whether such a testament is even possible. Could a testimony to Christ, who is the Truth, have the form of history and yet contain no verifiable history? The answer, so far as I can see, is "maybe." Jesus Himself, after all, told parables, stories drawn from life situations, which may or may not have ever happened as told. It is obvious to the reader of the Gospels that the point of these stories is to teach spiritual truth. Whether they accurately record events that really happened is beside the point. Could the *Book of Mormon* be a very long and involved parable? Perhaps, but it seems unlikely. It is clear that Joseph Smith didn't think of his book as a parable. It is too long, too complex, and makes too much of a self-conscious effort to present itself as an historical record – with its descriptions of various other plates and methods of transcription and

translation. If not a parable, could it be an extended allegory, like *Pilgrim's Progress*? Again, there is no evidence that Joseph Smith intended his work as an allegory. Unlike those in John Bunyan's work, *Book of Mormon* characters and places do not stand for obvious virtues or vices.

There are other possibilities. Perhaps the *Book of Mormon* is similar to the Christian classic *Ben Hur*, a historical novel, a fictional story set in a real, concrete period and place in history. The story of the *Book of Mormon* does start in a historically known place and time, Jerusalem in the sixth century B. C. It mentions historical figures such as Moses, Zedekiah, and, of course, Jesus Christ, though never in places or contexts that are historically verifiable. Its story conforms to what Joseph Smith understood to be the geography and the history of the new world. Perhaps, like Lou Wallace, Joseph Smith attempted to produce a story that could be reasonably taken as history, a story that would encourage his readers to trust in Jesus Christ. Believability and plausibility are marks of good fiction and we cannot fault an author for striving for those qualities. As noted above, however, the world in which Joseph Smith placed his story, in which the American Indians were the descendants of the lost tribes of Israel who spoke Hebrew and wrote in reformed Egyptian script, is now clearly seen to have existed only in the imagination of nineteenth century Americans. This means that while it may have been intended as historical fiction, the *Book of Mormon* today appears to be more a work of fantasy, closer to Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* than to *Ben Hur*. Like the *Lord of the Rings*, the *Book of Mormon* is an extended work in historical form with its own geography and cultures, meant to convey Christian teachings and virtues. Most readers see in Gandalf or Aragorn figures of Christ, and see the struggle between good and evil as presenting a Christian view of history and

eschatology. Perhaps it is possible to view the *Book of Mormon* in this way.

Still another possibility is to consider the *Book of Mormon* as analogous to the biblical book of *Job*. Because the book of *Job* is accepted as divinely inspired by both Latter Day Saints and evangelicals, this analogy may be more amenable to LDS and more difficult for evangelicals than Tolkien's *Trilogy*. While the language of *Job*, the mourning customs, and the theological constructs of the book are very much at home in the history and literature of ancient Israel, it is also true that the book has a timeless quality. Its message and events are not closely tied to Israel's history or to a particular geographic location.<sup>10</sup> The land of Uz (1:1) is mentioned only twice elsewhere in the Bible (Jeremiah 25:20; Lamentations 4:21) and has been identified only generally, as the region east of the Jordan River or Dead Sea. Linguistic details like the term *kesitah* ("piece of silver," 42:11) indicate that the story originated in the second millennium B.C., rather than the first, but we do not know when *Job* was written down in its present form. We presume that the writer was an Israelite, writing during or after the time of David. The point is that *Job* conveys its divinely inspired message without the necessity of being located in a specific time and place. For instance, we could easily imagine the story transposed into a modern setting, with the protagonist suffering under calamities like stock-market reverses, car accidents, and cancer. Is the *Book of Mormon* similar to *Job*? Perhaps, but the *Book of Mormon*, unlike *Job*, purposely locates its events in time and space – with reference points such as fall of Jerusalem, "in the thirty and seventh year

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10 The two references to Job elsewhere in the Bible clearly affirm that he was a historical figure (Ezekiel 14:14, 20; James 5:11). Was he a son of Issachar (Genesis 46:13)?

of the reign of the judges,” the “narrow neck of land,” the locations of various cities relative to one another, and the deliberate coordination of Christ’s appearance in the new world with His resurrection appearances in Jerusalem. Moreover, its existence and message are predicated on the assumption that a separate revelation of Christ was necessary because of the geographic isolation of the new world. This is quite different than the universal and timeless quality of *Job*. Of course, it could be argued that certain *Book of Mormon* discourses, such as King Benjamin’s in Mosiah 2-4, have a “timeless” quality about them, providing principles that are valid beyond a specific time and circumstance. This may be true, but such examples always appear in the *Book of Mormon* as part of the history of the Nephites and, thus, cannot so easily be transposed to a different time and place. For this reason the *Book of Mormon* seems to be more analogous to Tolkien’s *Trilogy* or Wallace’s *Ben Hur* than to *Job*.

The discussion above suggests possible ways to maintain that the *Book of Mormon* was a sincere testament of Joseph Smith’s faith, in spite of the absence of historical evidence for the story it tells. Joseph Smith certainly believed that what he wrote, if not true history, was true with respect to the spiritual lessons it taught. So, abandoning the proposition that the story of the *Book of Mormon* is reliable history does not force the conclusion that Joseph Smith was knowingly deceptive or cynical in writing it. At this point it is important to address possible motivations of the author that have sometimes been thought of as compromising his sincerity. It seems likely that for Joseph, as for most authors, the commercial potential of the undertaking was significant. He clearly needed more income than farming and day labor could provide and more reputable income than hiring himself out as a treasure hunter. He needed to support his new wife, Emma, in a manner that

would be acceptable to her father.<sup>11</sup> Being “published,” then as now, conveyed a degree of respectability. These are worthy motives and are no reason to question his sincere desire to bear witness to his faith. Such motives, if present, would not necessarily undermine or detract from his sincere intent to encourage his readers to follow Jesus Christ.

### **Genuine Spiritual Power in the *Book of Mormon's* Biblical Quotations**

As an evangelical, I can accept the *Book of Mormon* as “another testament of Jesus Christ” in this qualified sense and try to evaluate it on these terms. As Joseph Smith's testament to Jesus Christ, then, how effective is the *Book of Mormon*? My LDS friend is convinced that it has genuine spiritual power and nourishes and promotes his faith in Jesus Christ. Could this be true?

Certainly evangelicals can agree that the portions of the 1769 King James Bible that are reproduced in the *Book of Mormon* have genuine spiritual power. The longest single quotation is of Isaiah chapters 2-24 (2 Nephi 12-24). Isaiah chapters 48-51, most of 52, 53, 54 and many shorter portions (about 30% of Isaiah in all) are also found in the *Book of Mormon*. Other quotations of KJV paragraphs, verses, and phrases occurring throughout the *Book of Mormon* are so numerous as to be difficult to catalogue completely. Among these, the biblical

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11 Ibid., 9. and Avery, Valeen Tippetts and Newell, Linda King, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith* (University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp 20ff. Avery and Newell describe Joseph's difficult relationship with his father-in-law and his financial straits through the period of writing and publishing.

books of Matthew, John, 1 Corinthians, and Hebrews are prominent. As an evangelical Christian, I believe that the Word of God retains its clarity and power regardless of how it is proclaimed. The Spirit of God can use God's Word wherever it appears; a phrase, a verse, a chapter, regardless of the vehicle, regardless of the preacher's language, character, or culture. Peter and Paul proclaimed God's word, but so did Balaam. God's word retains its power, regardless of the setting, whether liturgical, high-church, or the most non-traditional and contemporary; whether in print, spoken over the radio, sung in Handel's *Messiah* or acted out in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments*. Translations are imperfect, preachers misinterpret, Christian tracts and books are partial and selective in the portions of the Bible they use, but God's Spirit has used God's word spoken through all of these to draw individuals to Himself, to speak truth to their minds, and create faith and life in their hearts. I believe that the Spirit can use the portions of the Bible that appear in the *Book of Mormon* in these ways. For instance, I think it quite possible that a reader could gain a clear understanding of the substitutionary atonement and trust in Christ for forgiveness through reading Mosiah 14, which reproduces Isaiah 53.

### **Genuine Spiritual Power in the Remainder of the *Book of Mormon*: four points to consider**

There remains a great deal of material in the *Book of Mormon* that does not reproduce verbatim parts of the Bible. Does this material have genuine spiritual life and power? The answer depends largely on how one defines "spiritual power." As an evangelical, my belief is that the transforming power of the Bible centers on Jesus Christ and, more specifically, on Jesus as he offers himself in the gospel of grace. Jesus certainly is our

great teacher and our great example, but if our understanding of Him stops there, we have missed how He desired himself to be understood - as our savior. "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). This is how Christ presented Himself and how the gospel, the good news first proclaimed by Christ and the apostles, presents Christ. Paul says very concisely, "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, then to the twelve" (1 Corinthians 15:1-5). From an evangelical point of view, the *Book of Mormon* may be considered to be a faithful and powerful testament to Jesus Christ if it presents Him in the same way - clothed in the gospel of grace. When this understanding of spiritual power is applied to the *Book of Mormon* several observations seem warranted: 1) there are passages in the *Book of Mormon* that present this gospel clearly and forcefully, 2) there are other passages which, from an evangelical perspective, dilute and even contradict the gospel of grace by adding requirements of obedience, 3) the *Book of Mormon* clearly teaches that the apostolic gospel found in the New Testament, considered so complete, precious, and essential by evangelicals, is compromised because certain "plain and precious truths" have been taken away from it, and 4) there are passages in the *Book of Mormon* that, from an evangelical perspective, lack the genuine spiritual power of the gospel or of the New Testament generally.



## Passages which Present the Gospel of Grace Clearly

2 Nephi 2:6-9 is an example of a passage in the *Book of Mormon* which presents the gospel with a good measure of clarity. "Wherefore, redemption cometh in and through the Holy Messiah; for he is full of grace and truth. Behold, he offereth himself a sacrifice for sin, to answer the ends of the law, unto all those who have a broken heart and a contrite spirit . . . there is no flesh that can dwell in the presence of God, save it be through the merits, and mercy, and grace of the Holy Messiah, who layeth down his life according to the flesh, and taketh it again by the power of the Spirit, that he may bring to pass the resurrection of the dead, being the first that should rise. . . . they that believe in him shall be saved." Alma 7:13-14 is another, "The Son of God suffereth according to the flesh that he might take upon him the sins of his people that he might blot out their transgressions according to the power of his deliverance . . . Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven; therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins, that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness." This passage is comparable in a number of respects with Peter's gospel appeal in Acts 2:38-40. In Alma 34:8-17, Amulek explains that God will provide atonement for sins of all mankind through an infinite and eternal sacrifice of the Son of God, "bringing salvation to those who believe on His name." Amulek's elaboration is somewhat reminiscent of Anselm's argument in *Cur Deus Homo*. Helaman contains clear statements of the gospel of grace: (3:28) "Thus we see that the gate of heaven is open to all, even to those who will believe on the name of Jesus Christ," (14:8) "Whosoever shall believe on the Son of

God, the same shall have everlasting life,” and (14:14) “He surely must die that salvation may come, yea, it behooveth him and becometh expedient that he dieth, to bring to pass the resurrection of the dead that thereby men might be brought into the presence of the Lord.”

Of course, these examples and others could be faulted for being incomplete or imprecise. We evangelicals, in my opinion correctly, stress the *sola fide* (“through faith alone” as in Romans 3:28) and *sola gratia* (“by grace alone” as in Ephesians 2:8-9) of the Protestant Reformation and are usually quite careful not to let repentance or baptism compromise these essential aspects of the gospel message. I think, however, if we consider Paul’s definition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:4-5, which does not mention faith, repentance, or baptism, we can view the above passages in the *Book of Mormon* as agreeing with and accurately presenting that gospel. Moreover, if we broaden our perspective beyond the evangelical, we can certainly find representations of the gospel like these in historic and contemporary Christianity. We should also keep in mind that we tend to interpret such statements in the *Book of Mormon* in light of what we know of a later, fully developed LDS theology.<sup>12</sup> Joseph Smith, however, when the *Book of Mormon* was published, did not have a fully developed LDS theology. His understanding of what he wrote in the *Book of Mormon* was probably shaped most strongly by the theology he heard in the churches, discussions, and revivals in the Palmyra and Manchester area of upstate New York. His faith

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12 It seems to me that both LDS and evangelical readers often interpret these passages in view of those other passages which emphasize the importance of repentance and obedience. If one insists on reading these passages in that way, the *Book of Mormon*, from an evangelical point of view, cannot be said to contain clear presentations of the gospel of grace.

and thought may have been developing apart from and away from that basic, American, Protestant theology, but he had not, as yet, traveled far on that path. In this regard, it is instructive to notice that many (or even most) of the distinctive elements of LDS faith and practice are not found in the *Book of Mormon* at all. This point will be elaborated below, but here we simply observe that it seems best to take these gospel passages at face value and resist the urge to interpret them in light of later LDS teaching.

In my opinion, such *Book of Mormon* statements can be taken as accurate representations of the gospel of grace. I believe that the Spirit of God may use them to create faith and spiritual life in the reader. This is not different than how the Spirit of God uses our individual spoken or written presentations of the gospel. When we evangelicals proclaim the gospel and testify of Christ's promise to forgive and to save, our presentations are always partial and faulty, limited by our experience, language, understanding, and circumstances. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, they contain enough of the Word of God that the Spirit of God may choose to use them to create faith in Christ in the heart of the one who hears or reads. In this sense we can acknowledge that similar statements of Joseph Smith in the *Book of Mormon* have genuine spiritual power.

### **Passages which Add to the Gospel of Grace the Requirement of Obedience**

There are, however, and this is the second category mentioned above, other passages in the *Book of Mormon* which, from an evangelical perspective, dilute and even contradict the gospel of grace by adding requirements of obedience. 2 Nephi 31:17-

20 is one of the many examples, “For the gate by which ye should enter is repentance and baptism by water; and then cometh a remission of your sins by fire and by the Holy Ghost. And then are ye in this strait and narrow path which leads to eternal life; . . . ye have done according to the commandments of the Father and the Son; and ye have received the Holy Ghost, . . . I would ask if all is done? Behold, I say unto you, Nay; for ye have not come thus far save it were by the word of Christ with unshaken faith in him, relying wholly upon the merits of him who is mighty to save. Wherefore, ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward, feasting upon the word of Christ, and endure to the end, behold, thus saith the Father: Ye shall have eternal life.” The synergy between faith and works suggested by this passage is much more like the Roman Catholic concepts of operative and cooperative grace than the evangelical Protestant gospel of by grace alone through faith alone. To an evangelical this passage suggests that for a sinner to be saved he must add his own works (baptism, obedience to the commandments, perfect love for God and men, etc.) to the work of Christ. This in turn implies that the death, burial and resurrection of Christ are insufficient in themselves to accomplish the salvation of the sinner.

This very real difference between the evangelical understanding of the gospel and the gospel presented in these *Book of Mormon* passages is stated clearly and concisely in 2 Nephi 25:23, a passage often cited by Latter Day Saints and evangelicals. “For we labor diligently to write, to persuade our children, and also our brethren, to believe in Christ, and to be reconciled to God; for we know that *it is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do.*” This verse receives much attention because it is similar to the New Testament passage often used

by evangelicals to emphasize our belief that salvation is by grace alone, Ephesians 2:8-9, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Although an exact reckoning would be difficult on a number of different levels, it does seem to me that most *Book of Mormon* presentations of the gospel, like 2 Nephi 25:23, affirm that obedience, in addition to faith, is necessary for salvation. It is also clear that 2 Nephi 25:23 represents the current LDS position. According to the church published *True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference*, "the phrase 'after all we can do' teaches that effort is required on our part to receive the fullness of the Lord's grace and be made worthy to dwell with him."<sup>13</sup> Under the article for "grace" the online *LDS Bible Dictionary* explains: "Divine grace is needed by every soul in consequence of the Fall of Adam and also because of man's weaknesses and shortcomings. However, grace cannot suffice without total effort on the part of the recipient. Hence the explanation, 'It is by grace that we are saved, after all we can do' (2 Ne 25:23). It is truly the grace of Jesus Christ that makes salvation possible."<sup>14 15</sup>

From an evangelical perspective, these passages and the

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13 True to the Faith: A Gospel Reference (Intellectual Reserve, Inc., 2004), p. 77.

14 Bible Dictionary (Intellectual Reserve, Inc. 2013), article on "grace."

15 In *How Wide the Divide?: A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation*, Stephen E. Robinson offered a different explanation of 2 Nephi 25:23. He explains that "In this passage, 'all we can do,' is have faith in Christ." (InterVarsity Press, 1997), p. 222, n. 24. Evangelicals welcome this understanding of the verse, but it does seem at odds with the other sources quoted here and with the LDS position generally.

accepted LDS version of the gospel which they support compromise or even nullify the genuine spiritual power of the gospel of grace. Evangelicals, of course, hold that good works and obedience to God's commands are necessary in salvation, but only as a result of, an after-effect, of the conversion of the sinner (rebirth, as in John 3:1ff) by the Holy Spirit through the gospel as an act of God's sovereign grace. To use an illustration that Jesus offered – good trees produce good fruit. Bad trees do not become good trees by producing good fruit. Good trees are created, made good, by God. Evangelicals note that the three most prominent New Testament images for the conversion of the sinner to new life in Christ are rebirth (John 3: 1-8), re-creation (2 Corinthians 5:17), and resurrection from the dead (Ephesians 2:1). Each of these metaphors emphasizes the inability of the sinner and the active, gracious, initiative of God. Babies do not birth themselves. Creation did not make itself. The dead man does not raise himself. Nor does the sinner, once forgiven and reborn, hang in the balance, his fate dependent upon the amount and sincerity of his obedience. His good works are evidence, not the cause, of the new life that is in him. Having been forgiven and indwelt by the Spirit, he is characterized, increasingly, by the fruit of the Spirit – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23). Obedience to God's commands flows out of this new center, not out of the fear of falling short of salvation. From this evangelical perspective the condition in 2 Nephi 30: 31:17-20, “ye must press forward with a steadfastness in Christ, having a perfect brightness of hope, and a love of God and of all men. Wherefore, if ye shall press forward . . . Ye shall have eternal life,” puts the believer back under the impossible burden of the law of works. If such “total effort” is necessary in order to be saved, then there can be no “full assurance of faith” in the Christian life, but only a “fearful expectation of judgment”

(Hebrews 10:22, 27).

### **1 Nephi 13-14: That "Plain and Precious Parts" of the Biblical Gospel were Removed**

This disagreement between the evangelical and the LDS views of the gospel is intensified by the *Book of Mormon's* prediction, in 1 Nephi 13-14, that a "great and abominable church" will form among the Gentile nations and will, among other evils, "take away from the gospel of the Lamb many parts which are plain and most precious" (13:26). Clearly Joseph Smith held that the gospel, as preserved in the New Testament, was defective, incomplete, and inadequate. This contradicts the conviction of evangelicals and other Christians that the gospel is preserved and presented in the New Testament in its apostolic completeness and authority.

Evangelicals and others see several difficulties with the LDS claim that such a "great apostasy" occurred or resulted in a defective New Testament and gospel. First, there is no historical evidence that this kind of drastic redacting of the New Testament documents took place. There are no manuscripts of canonical books from the early centuries of the church that are longer or fuller or that contain information not found in the manuscripts that we do have. John 7:53-8:11 and Mark 16:9-20 seem to present the opposite case – material that was not in the original text that was later added and perpetuated in later manuscripts. There are, of course, extant Gnostic gospels and other quasi-Christian works, but these were written later than the first century and clearly not

considered to be authoritative by early Christians.<sup>16</sup> It cannot be fairly maintained that these works were “excluded” from the canon since there is no evidence that they were ever accepted as authoritative by a significant number of Christians. Moreover, I do not believe that LDS scholars themselves have identified any of these spurious works as the “plain and precious parts” that were removed from the canon. Finally, if such a drastic redaction did indeed take place, surely there would be some surviving evidence of protest from those loyal to the supposed fuller apostolic tradition. Consider the widespread and well documented protest over Marcion’s unsuccessful attempt to abbreviate the canon, or the immense debate over a single word, *filioque*, which the western church added to the Apostles’ Creed.

Second, there is no evidence that there existed an overarching ecclesiastical authority (a “great and abominable church”) that could have made such a redaction during the centuries when the New Testament books were first copied, widely disseminated, and gathered together into the New Testament canon. Given the very early translation of the New Testament books into Latin, Syriac, Coptic, and other languages and the intellectual and ecclesiastical distance between the Greek and Latin worlds, it seems impossible to imagine that such a feat could have ever been accomplished and gone unnoticed and unopposed. Trying to compress this supposed excising of

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16 In his discussion of this point Alexander B. Morrison states, “It must also be noted, however, that all non-canonical early manuscripts attributed to New Testament characters are, in the views of nearly every scholar, out and out forgeries.” In “Plain and Precious Things: The Writing of the New Testament,” in *How the New Testament Came to Be: The Thirty-fifth Annual Sidney B. Sperry Symposium*, ed. Kent P. Jackson and Frank F. Judd Jr. (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2006).



portions of the New Testament into the last decades of the first century, as several LDS scholars do, simply makes the problem worse. Little overarching organizational structure and authority had developed in the church at all by AD 100, much less a sufficiently well-organized and powerful alter-ego, a “great and abominable church,” capable of accomplishing the process described in 1 Nephi 13-14. If there was such a church surely it would have left evidence of its existence, and yet LDS scholars seem unwilling or unable to identify any of the surviving writings, such as the Gnostic gospels or apostolic fathers, as representing it.<sup>17</sup> In this matter, the LDS apologist appears to be in the impossible position of arguing that the “great and abominable church” was powerful and extensive enough to accomplish the removal of “plain and precious parts” from all of the then extant copies of the New Testament documents, while at the same time small and decentralized enough to remain invisible to contemporaries (such as Clement of Rome or Ignatius) and later generations of Christians. Alternately, LDS apologists sometimes suggest that the “great abominable church” was not a single organized, recognizable institution, but a multitude of individuals, all moved by a common evil intention. This explanation, however, leaves us with the strange impression that this proposed early corruption of the New Testament documents was carried out by the very copyists who were most dedicated to and effective in preserving those documents. Alexander Morrison, emeritus member of the First Quorum of the Seventy, admits, “We cannot clearly identify the leaders and members of the great and abominable church.” His immediate assertion, “But that

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17 Morrison, for instance, refuses to equate “the great abominable church,” with any historically identifiable group, rejecting as possible candidates the Jews, the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Churches, and malicious medieval monks. Ibid.

does not mean it was not real. It still exists,”<sup>18</sup> is a bit too loud of a protest to be accepted without evidence.

A third difficulty occurs to evangelicals with respect to the proposed removal of “plain and precious parts” of the New Testament and the gospel - if this were the case, one would expect that at least some of these parts would be included in the *Book of Mormon*. In fact, 1 Nephi 13:40 promises that “these last records,” (that is the *Book of Mormon* or the ancient group of writings which included the *Book of Mormon*), “shall make known the plain and precious things which have been taken away.” But this does not appear to be the case when the Bible and the *Book of Mormon* are compared. In general, it does not seem that the *Book of Mormon* restores any of those teachings which distinguish Mormonism from the mainstream of Christian belief and practice: the pre-existence of souls, eternal progression, celestial marriage, baptism for the dead, the three “personages” concept of God, that God the Father has a material body, three different heavens, the priesthood(s), the rationale for building temples, the temple rites and garments, plural marriage, the word of wisdom, and many aspects of church order (e.g. the twelve apostles, quorum of the seventy, first presidency), and the atoning value of Christ’s blood shed in the garden (possibly Mosiah 3: 7ff?). We might expect, in accord with the promise of 1 Nephi 13:40, that at least some of these items would be mentioned in the *Book of Mormon*. It seems reasonable to think that Jesus would have taught on one or more of these topics in His appearances in the new world, especially if He knew that they would be removed from

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18 Ibid.

the New Testament by the great and abominable church. This, however, is not the case.

At the danger of trying the readers' patience, I believe that elaboration of this point is worthwhile. Let's, however, approach it at a slightly different angle. It seems reasonable that, if plain and precious truths were taken away from the New Testament and then restored by the *Book of Mormon*, at least some of these would have to do with Jesus' life and teachings. Let's compare the "Jesus material" in the New Testament and the *Book of Mormon* more closely, to try to find passages in the *Book of Mormon* that might reasonably be thought to restore life events or teachings of Jesus that are not in the New Testament and so would have otherwise been lost.

Matthew's gospel contains about 22,000 words in our English translations, of which approximately 10,000 were spoken by Jesus. 3 Nephi 1, 8-30 (chapters 2-7 do not deal directly with Jesus' appearance, but give the history of the previous decades) have about the same number of words as Matthew, with about 12,500 words spoken by Jesus. When the additional non-Matthean material given in Mark, Luke, John and Acts is considered, it is evident the New Testament, at least by volume, contains significantly more Jesus material than the *Book of Mormon*. Moreover, the kind of material in 3 Nephi is less varied than that in the New Testament. For instance, 3 Nephi 1:12-26 does tell of the sign of extended daylight that marked the day of Christ's birth and the resultant new world conversions, but otherwise contains little information about the birth or lineage of Jesus. Presumably, birth and lineage information would have been as significant to the Nephites of the new world as it was to the Jews of the old. 3 Nephi contains no stories of individual healings (though a summary statement of healings is found in 26:15), while

Matthew contains fourteen stories of this kind<sup>19</sup>. There are no “private” or “incidental” miracles in the 3 Nephi account, such as the miraculous catch of fish, walking on water, stilling the storm, or the withering of the fig tree. There are no accounts in 3 Nephi of human or demonic opposition to Christ or his teachings. There no private interviews with honest inquirers such as Nicodemus or the rich young ruler. There are no teachings of Jesus that are occasioned by casual observations, such as the poor woman who gave her two mites in the temple or the question to Peter regarding the temple tax.

These differences may be explained by observing that during Christ’s first advent, he spent much more time in Israel than the new world, thirty years (three years are intensely reported), as compared with a few weeks. Moreover, his new world appearances, according to the *Book of Mormon*, were subsequent to His resurrection, giving His teaching a different and more narrowly focused character. Even with these allowances, however, one specific deficit in 3 Nephi is conspicuous and difficult to explain - the absence of parables. The imagery found in Jesus’ teaching in 3 Nephi is limited to short phrases found in the canonical gospels (e. g. “the gates of Hell,” “upon my rock,” “as a little child,” “candle under a bushel,” “false prophets in sheep’s clothing” “salt that has lost its savor,” “sift you as wheat”<sup>20</sup>). In contrast, the gospels

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19 e.g. the leper in Galilee, 8:1-4; Peter’s mother-in-law, 8:14; paralytic at Capernaum, 9:2-8; man with withered hand, 12:10; Jarius’ daughter, 9:18; Gentile Woman’s daughter, 15:21.

20 Would the images of sheep or wheat being separated from chaff be meaningful to Nephites in the New World who did not have or know of these items?

contain thirty-three distinct parables;<sup>21</sup> Matthew's gospel, twenty-three. It is evident that Jesus loved to use parables or other dramatic images (e.g., a camel passing through the eye of a needle, the lost coin, the wheat and the tares, "I am the vine") in his teaching. This penchant seems to have persisted after His resurrection in his injunction to Peter "Feed my Lambs," in the vision given to Peter (Acts 10:10-16), and in his letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. If 3 Nephi preserved an otherwise unknown parable of Jesus as memorable as the "Lost Son," the "Good Samaritan," or the "Servants and the Talents," what a treasure that would be. Regrettably, it does not.

Thus, the relative amounts of material, the relative length of Jesus' time spent among His people, and the kind of material reported suggest that we will not find the "plain and precious parts," which are said to have been removed from the New Testament, in 3 Nephi. Further analysis of the teachings of Jesus in 3 Nephi confirms that this is the case. Jesus' teachings in 3 Nephi may be characterized as being of three types. First, there are passages which are unique to a new world setting, such as "Behold the great city of Zarahemla, I have burned with fire" (9:2-14) or the prophecy regarding the three Nephites not seeing death (28:4-12).<sup>22</sup> It seems unlikely that material of this kind would have been included in the original New Testament documents because it would make no sense in that context, and, therefore, could not have been the "plain and precious" material that was excised. Moreover, according

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21 The number would be 31 if John 10:1-18 (the good shepherd) and John 15:1-6 (the vine) are excluded, on the grounds that they are not parables, but rather extended metaphors.

22 Other passages of this type are: 3 Nephi 9:2-14; 15:12-24; 16:1-20; 17:1-4; 21:1-29; 23:6-24; 26:2; 27:23-26; 28:1-11.

to 3 Nephi 15:14-18, Christ was specifically commanded by the Father not to say anything (beyond John 10:16) to the “brethren at Jerusalem” about the “other tribes of the house of Israel which the Father hath led away out of the land.” This seems to positively prohibit material of this type from appearing in the New Testament. Therefore, passages of this kind could not have been removed from the New Testament, since they wouldn’t have been present there to begin with.

A second and by far the most extensive type are teachings of Jesus in 3 Nephi which duplicate material in the Bible. Sometimes this duplication is word for word or nearly so. Sometimes biblical concepts are reproduced in different words or with different emphases. 3 Nephi 13:3 illustrates both kinds of duplication. “I would that ye should do alms to the poor” (concept is taught in passages like Matthew 19:21; 25:35-45; James 1:27), “but take heed that ye do not your alms before men to be seen of them” (verbally identical to Matthew 6:1 KJV). Sometimes words or concepts attributed to others in the Bible are spoken by Jesus in the *Book of Mormon*. In commanding the disciples to baptize in 3 Nephi 22-28, Jesus repeatedly warns, “there shall be no disputations among you.” This is very much like Paul’s chastening of the Corinthians regarding baptism, “Now I beseech you, . . . that there be no divisions among you” (1 Corinthians 1:10-15; see also instructions regarding the Lord’s Supper in 3 Nephi 18:28-28 and 1 Corinthians 11:27-29; also compare 3 Nephi 26:3 and 2 Peter 3:10). Many biblical cross references for passages of this type can be found in the footnotes of the 1981 Intellectual Reserve edition of the *Book of Mormon*. It is evident that these teachings in 3 Nephi do not restore “plain and precious”

parts that were lost, because these teachings were never lost, but are preserved in the New Testament as we have it.<sup>23</sup>

A third group of passages in 3 Nephi are those which contain concepts or report incidents which do not appear in the New Testament and, yet, are meaningful beyond their new world setting. Such passages might preserve some of those “plain and precious truths” which 1 Nephi 13:26 states were removed from the New Testament. There are, in my opinion, very few clear examples of these. Perhaps 3 Nephi 15:9, “I am the law,” could be considered to be in this category, but this thought seems to be closely connected to the previous statement “the law which was given to Moses has an end in me” and that thought closely parallels Paul’s teaching in Romans 10:4. In 3 Nephi 17:24-25 the heavens opened and the little children are encircled by fire. No similar miracle appears in the gospel accounts as we have them. However, even if a similar miracle had occurred in Jesus’ Judean ministry and if it had been originally recorded in one of the gospels, it seems unlikely that the great and abominable church would have deleted this particular miracle and yet left so many others untouched. Another idea, not found in the New Testament, is the prediction that the Gentiles would be “established in this land” (21:4). This would not violate the prohibition, mentioned above, that Christ not say anything to the brethren at Jerusalem about the Jews in the new world, since this prediction concerns the Gentiles. But, it seems unlikely that this prediction would have been included in the

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23 Passages of this type are: 3 Nephi 9:15-22; 10:4-7; 11:10-14; 11:21-41; 12:1-48; 13:1-34; 14:1-27; 15:1-10; 17:6-7; 18:5-7; 18:10-16; 18:18-25; 20:18; 18:27-35; 19:20-23; 19:28-29; 19:35-36; 20:8, 10-46; 22:1-17; 23:1-5; 24:1-18; 25:1-6; 27:10-22; 27:28-31; 27:33.

canonical gospels, since the New World was, as far as we know, unknown to the Jews of Jesus' day in Jerusalem. Moreover, even if it had been included, it is difficult to see why it would have been purposefully excised. Even further, if present in the original texts and excised, it is difficult to see how its absence seriously harms, in any way, the central teachings of the New Testament. Another possible plain and precious teaching might be that in 3 Nephi, unlike the four gospels, Jesus expressly limits the authority to baptize and offer Lord's Supper to a few leaders in the church (11:21; 18:5). But, if this teaching was purposefully removed from the New Testament documents by the great abominable church, its absence has not really been noticed, since many Christian groups follow this practice with or without New Testament authorization. Similarly, in 3 Nephi 27:4-9 Jesus specifies that the true church should be called by His name. This injunction does not appear in the New Testament as we have it. Nevertheless, this absence has not caused any significant group of Christ-followers to reject the name or description of "Christian." Beyond these cases, I cannot find other specific passages in this category. In sum, there are very few "plain and precious" life events or teachings of Christ which appear in 3 Nephi 1, 8-30 that might have been removed from the canonical gospels.

### **Passages which may not seem Inspired to the Evangelical Readers**

In trying to establish whether the *Book of Mormon* has genuine spiritual power, the ability to create and nurture faith in the reader, we now come to the fourth point mentioned above. There are passages in the *Book of Mormon*, which, when compared with Bible, do not seem to evangelicals to be



inspired or inspiring. Of course, this is a very subjective kind of criticism and, admittedly, there are portions of the Bible which seem obscure and of little interest to modern readers. Mormon and evangelical sensibilities and tastes will differ on particular texts and, without a doubt, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” The Bible also has the advantage here of long use, familiarity, and shaping the very languages and cultures into which it has been translated, especially English. The *Book of Mormon*, unknown until the 1830’s, although circulated and translated widely since then, has not had as much time to become commonplace or to exert so great an influence on literary forms and styles. In spite of the above limitations and with the certainty of strong LDS opinions and arguments to the contrary, I’ll venture to mention two passages, as examples, which seem to me to lack spiritual, literary, and rational force.

The first is the allegory of olive cultivation found in Jacob 5:1-77. Jacob, the brother of Nephi, tells us that he is writing fifty-five years after Lehi’s departure from Jerusalem, that is, during the second or third generation of the Nephites who had settled in the new world. He attributes this story to the prophet Zenos, evidently copying it from a now lost written record, to explain how “the Jews, after having rejected the sure foundation <of Christ>, can ever build upon it.” The allegory is quite lengthy compared with similar figures in the Bible. Jesus’ longest parable is the “lost son,” about 550 words in Luke 15:11-32. The “song of the vineyard” in Isaiah 5:1-7 is about 200 words. The allegory of Zenos is over six times as long as the “lost son,” about 3500 words. Zenos introduces his parable with the explanation, “I will liken thee, O house of Israel, like unto a tame olive tree, which a man took and nourished in his vineyard.” What follows is a very detailed account of the master’s and his servant’s efforts to save a favorite olive tree which is old and decaying. They eventually

succeed in this effort through an elaborate process of cutting, grafting, pruning, and nourishing.

Jacob seems hard pressed to explain how the allegory answers the question of how the Jews will be able to build upon Christ after having rejected him. Among the lessons he draws from Zenos' prophecy are: "the things in the prophecy will surely come to pass," that after the Lord's servants prune and nourish the vineyard a second time "the end soon cometh," "blessed are they that labor in the vineyard," and "how cursed are those who shall be cast into their own place." More to the point are his observation that "God is merciful to remember the house of Israel, both roots and branches, those who will not harden their hearts shall be saved in the kingdom of God" (6:4), and his extended exhortation "cleave to Lord as he cleaveth unto you, . . . why after being nourished by the good word of the Lord all day long will ye bring forth evil fruit, that ye must be hewn down and cast into the fire" (6:5, 7ff). He does not, however, explain the meaning of the various prunings, graftings, purgings, and nourishings that comprise most of the prophecy. Jacob's main point is his exhortation to his readers to "repent and enter the strait gate," but the prophecy of Zenos, which he repeats, seems to be a poor choice to make this point. The good branches and fruit do seem to appear or disappear regardless of the strategies and efforts of the master and his servant and regardless even of the type of soil. Nevertheless those strategies and efforts seem predicated on the assumption that branches and fruit do not determine in themselves whether they are good or bad. If they did, what would be the point of grafting and re-grafting? Jacob's point in 6:5-11 is clear and forceful, but it is difficult to see how it is helped by the long and complex allegory of Zenos.

Zenos' allegory, on another level, does provide an answer to Jacob's initial question, "How is it possible that <the Jews>, after having rejected the sure foundation <of Christ>, can ever build upon it," which Jacob does not point out or explain. It gives us, as do a number of passages in the *Book in Mormon*, the rationale for the existence of Joseph Smith's work - the scattering and re-gathering of Israel. The much beloved tree, Israel, loses its vigor and decays. To save it the Lord takes cuttings from it to the "nethermost parts of the vineyard." He also takes cuttings from wild trees (presumably the Gentile Christians as in Romans 11:18), and grafts them into the root of the favored tree. At first these cuttings produce good fruit, with the exception of one set of cuttings which had been planted in good ground and produce a mixed crop of good and bad. Perhaps this last set of cuttings is meant to symbolize Nephi and his kin in the new world. At the next harvest all trees and cuttings in the vineyard have produced evil fruit. This seems to be a prediction for the favored tree, the Israel-Gentile church of the old world, of widespread apostasy resulting, perhaps, from the work of the great abominable church. Perhaps Joseph was thinking of the Roman church during the early middle ages. The Lord, in this case holds out hope that the "roots are good." In the case of the cuttings taken from the favored tree to the other parts of the garden all, "the first, the second, and the last," not only have produced evil fruit, but "all had become corrupt" (5:39). Perhaps Joseph here had in mind the end of the *Book of Mormon* story which describes the destruction of the last righteous descendants of Nephi.

So far, so good, but then the story gets confused and confusing. It is as if the story line at this point is being driven by the desired interpretative outcome rather than logic and rules of horticulture. The Lord's summary judgment of his olive

trees is “all the trees of my vineyard are good for nothing save it be to be hewn down and cast into the fire” (5:42, 49) and yet he seems easily persuaded by his servant to “spare it a little longer” (5:51). The Lord commands the servant to “take of the branches which I have planted in the nethermost parts of my vineyard and let us graft them into the tree from whence they came” (5:52). Yet these branches have been previously declared “corrupt” (5:39) or had “withered away and died” (5:40). The concept of “natural” branches now emerges as important, although these have before been designated as both “good” (5:20) and as “corrupt” (5:38-39). Branches from the mother tree are grafted into natural branches, natural branches which have become wild are grafted into natural trees which also have become wild, natural branches which have become wild are grafted into the mother tree, and the most bitter wild branches are plucked off, all with the hope that, “perhaps, the roots thereof may take strength because of their goodness; and because of the change of the branches, that the good may overcome the evil” (5:55-59). More servants are called, more grafting, more nourishing, more pruning (which includes balancing root and top), until good fruit re-emerges and the desired outcome is reached, “thus will I bring them together again, that they shall bring forth the natural fruit, and they shall be one” (5:68). The interpretation appears to be that the old and new world Israels have been reunited as equals. Having accomplished his purpose, the Lord enjoys his vineyard and its fruit until the “time cometh that evil fruit shall again come into my vineyard . . . And then cometh the season and the end; and my vineyard will I cause to be burned with fire (5:77). It is difficult, at least for a first time evangelical reader, to make sense of these details and Jacob does not interpret them for us.

Apart from its ponderous length, puzzling ending, unnecessary repetitions (e.g. “and it came to pass” used thirty times), I suspect evangelicals will most strongly object to how Zenos' allegory pictures God. Admittedly, the allegory does bring out the Lord's long-suffering patience and intense love for the lost, a point that Jacob notices. Nevertheless, the distinct impression is that God's compassion outruns his knowledge, sovereign power, and faithfulness. The Lord of vineyard seems forced to try various strategies because he really doesn't know how to get his trees to produce good fruit. He must go down to the vineyard each season to learn what has happened and often is taken aback by the outcome. He seems overly dependent upon the wisdom and patience of his servant (5:48-50). His compassion is powerless to save his favored tree in the face of forces he doesn't understand. The God of Jacob's allegory is changeable, even fickle, very much in command when things work out favorably (“Counsel me not, I knew it was a poor spot of ground. . .” 5:22), but when, in spite of his best efforts, the crop fails to meet his expectations, he appears genuinely baffled and frustrated (5:41ff), even ready to blame someone else (5:47). He determines to destroy and then determines to spare the vineyard, but doesn't show the same mercy to individual branches. He arrives at a solution piecemeal, by trial and error, with a “perhaps” (5:59) that suggests “I hope it works out this time.” At story's end, “when evil fruit shall again come into my vineyard,” we are still left wondering whether this Lord is sovereign over evil forces or must simply react to them. The Lord of the vineyard in this allegory does not inspire the reader to worship.

A second example of a *Book of Mormon* passage which may seem to evangelicals to lack spiritual force is 2 Nephi 5:20-25:

"Wherefore, the word of the Lord was fulfilled which he spake unto me, saying that: Inasmuch as they will not hearken unto thy words they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord. And behold, they were cut off from his presence. And he had caused the cursing to come upon them, yea, even a sore cursing, because of their iniquity. For behold, they had hardened their hearts against him, that they had become like unto a flint; wherefore, as they were white, and exceedingly fair and delightsome, that they might not be enticing unto my people the Lord God did cause a skin of blackness to come upon them. And thus saith the Lord God: I will cause that they shall be loathsome unto thy people, save they shall repent of their iniquities. And cursed shall be the seed of him that mixeth with their seed; for they shall be cursed even with the same cursing. And the Lord spake it, and it was done. And because of their cursing which was upon them they did become an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety, and did seek in the wilderness for beasts of prey. And the Lord God said unto me: They shall be a scourge unto thy seed, to stir them up in remembrance of me; and inasmuch as they will not remember me, and hearken unto my words, they shall scourge them even unto destruction."

Of course, the aspect which makes this passage difficult to accept as divinely inspired is its reference to skin color with its attendant implications of racism. The passage teaches that God curses the Lamanites<sup>24</sup> with "a skin of blackness" as a punishment for their unwillingness to listen to his words and hardening their hearts. This outward sign shows them to be

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24 See chapter introductory note for 2 Nephi 5 in 1981 Intellectual Reserve edition. This identification doesn't seem clear in the text, however.

"cut off from the presence of the Lord." Their black skin makes them unattractive to the white-skinned Nephites, is passed on to their descendents, brings a curse upon those righteous who would intermarry with them or their descendents, and is connected with their becoming "an idle people, full of mischief and subtlety." Alma 3:6-10 repeats and reinforces the logic of this passage, as does a brief reference in 3 Nephi 2:15. The apparent teachings of this passage are not merely unacceptable, but abhorrent in our present public discourse. LDS apologists have suggested ways in which the "racist" charge may be blunted or avoided,<sup>25</sup> but these explanations are not very satisfying and would not occur to the first time reader. In 1852 Brigham Young, whether swayed by this passage or by the racially charged atmosphere of his day or both, barred men of black African descent from the LDS priesthood. This ban remained in effect until 1972. In 2012 the Church published a statement of current Church teaching and belief on the subject, "Race and the Priesthood." In the final section of that statement is a paragraph that seems to speak directly to the apparent teachings of 2 Nephi 5.

"Today, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, or that it reflects unrighteous actions in a premortal life; that mixed-race marriages are a sin; or that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior in any way to anyone else. Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form."

Evangelicals welcome such a clear renunciation of racism and readily accept that this is a sincere expression of what LDS

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25 "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon," Todd A. Tvedtnes, *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003).

followers of Jesus Christ believe. At the same time we cannot help but notice that the teachings renounced in "Racism and the Priesthood" are what 2 Nephi 5 teaches, specifically "that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse" in 2 Nephi 5:21, "that mixed-race marriages are a sin" in 2 Nephi 5:23, and "that blacks or people of any other race or ethnicity are inferior" in 2 Nephi 5:24. It seems to us that the LDS authorities are rejecting the clear teachings of 2 Nephi 5, Alma 3, and 3 Nephi 2. Perhaps, in view of this, evangelicals' reluctance to accept these passages as divinely inspired is understandable.

### **Conclusion: the *Book of Mormon's* Genuine Spiritual Power Derived from the Bible**

Does Joseph Smith's testimony to Jesus Christ through the *Book of Mormon* have genuine spiritual power? As an evangelical, without contradicting my evangelical convictions regarding the centrality, clarity, and completeness of the apostolic and New Testament gospel of grace, I can affirm that it does. However, I must also add that I believe that its spiritual power did not originate with Joseph Smith and much less with a set of ancient metal plates. Nor does it reside in what is individual and unique in Joseph Smith's testimony to Christ. The *Book of Mormon's* genuine spiritual power resides, rather, in those elements which it shares with and borrowed from the Bible, the Old and New Testaments. I believe that the *Book of Mormon* is properly viewed as a product of and part of the spreading influence of the Bible.

The Bible, both in its Jewish and its Christian forms, has had an almost incalculable influence upon the history and culture of the west and a rapidly growing influence upon the entire



world. The Bible and, of course, its central figure, Jesus Christ, have transformed empires (Rome, Russia, Britain, etc.) and peoples (Gauls, Goths, Vikings, South Koreans, etc.), and individuals, created whole literatures (not just commentaries, theologies, and Bible encyclopedias) and individual classics (Augustine's *Confessions*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings*, etc.), spawned uplifting, compassionate social movements (abolition of slavery, the Red Cross, Salvation Army, orphanages, hospitals, etc.), shaped languages and spawned literacy programs and institutions of learning (University of Paris, Oxford, Harvard, etc.), and provided a foundation for social agreements and legal systems. Kenneth Scott Latourette's magisterial seven volume *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* tells this story in detail. Latourette used three criteria to assess the degree to which Christianity has fulfilled the command of Jesus to "Go therefore, teach all nations . . .": 1) geography 2) the "vigor" of Christianity in any particular era, as evidenced, at least in part, by the new movements which emerge from it, and 3) the effect of Christianity on mankind as a whole. He summarized his findings:

"It becomes apparent that the course of Christianity in the history of mankind has been somewhat like that of an incoming tide. As one stands on the shore and watches the tide sweep in, he sees that each major wave carries the waters a little higher than its predecessor. Each retreat from a major wave carries the flood a little less far back than did the one before it. So with Christianity. When viewed against mankind as a whole and measured by the three criteria we have suggested, it is seen to have great periods of advance and recession. In each major advance it becomes more widely potent in human life than in the one before it, and each

recession is marked by less dwindling of the impact of Christianity than the one which immediately preceded it."<sup>26</sup>

Noting that "the boundary years of each cannot be exact," Latourette judged the "major pulses" of Christianity's advance to be: from it's inception to A.D. 500, A.D., from A.D. 950 to 1350 A.D., from A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1750, and then from A.D. 1815 to A.D. 1914.<sup>27</sup> The last period he entitles the "Great Century" and dedicated three of his seven volumes to Christianity's remarkable expansion and vitality during that period. His work was published in 1945 and he noted that in the decades after 1914 Christianity's progress had slowed with both significant losses and significant gains. More than half a century later, however, in view of the dramatic growth of charismatic forms of Protestantism in South America, Asia, and Africa, the emergence of a energetic indigenous Chinese Christianity, and the reassertion of Orthodoxy in Russia and its former satellite states, is it too much to hope for or see another, even larger, wave building?

With this framework in mind, in considering the *Book of Mormon*, two things are immediately apparent. First, if, for the sake of argument, we accept the *Book of Mormon's* representation of itself as an ancient inspired revelation of God and an historical record of the Nephite peoples, the *Book of Mormon* had no comparable influence on history. In fact, just the opposite is the case. The peoples and cultures with which the *Book of Mormon* was associated in its original formulation (again, if we accept that premise) have completely

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26 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Volume 7, Advance through the Storm*. (Harper & Row, 1945), p. 418

27 Ibid.

vanished and, what's more, have vanished without a trace. The *Book of Mormon* had no discernible, lasting influence upon the language, literature, laws, art, architecture, customs, social structures of pre-Columbian America. It is as if it never existed in that context at all.

The second thing we notice when we consider the *Book of Mormon* in the context of the spreading influence of Jesus Christ and the Bible, is that it is readily explained as a product of nineteenth-century American Christianity.<sup>28</sup> The lively ferment and tremendous energy of Christianity's "Great Century" produced many remarkable movements in nineteenth-century America, dozens of new missions initiatives and agencies, revivals, social reforms, and new denominations and sects. Joseph Smith's energy and creativity are best understood as part of that larger picture. The *Book of Mormon* has been, in many ways, a remarkable conduit through which the Bible's influence has flowed, but it is quite clearly a conduit and not a separate and original source. The *Book of Mormon* is heavily dependent on the Bible, and specifically upon the New Testament, for its literary and theological constructs. Many of its terms and concepts would be meaningless to someone unacquainted, not just with the Bible generally, but specifically with the New Testament. Terms such as "gospel" (1 Nephi 10:14), "Lamb of God" as referring to the Messiah (1 Nephi 10:10), "baptism" (1 Nephi 20:1), "Holy Ghost" (1 Nephi 10:11), "crucifixion" (2 Nephi 10:3), "Father" as applying to God (1 Nephi 11:21), and "church" (1 Nephi 4:26) appear without explanation, assuming

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28 Three works mentioned earlier discuss this point in detail: Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon* (pro LDS); Palmer, *An Insider's View of Mormon Origins* (LDS author but not standard LDS view); Pursitue, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, (non-LDS).

that the hearer or reader understands these New Testament concepts. The degree to which the subsequent story of the *Book of Mormon* depends on the New Testament may be gathered from the need to recount (in the form of prophecies by Lehi and Nephi) the history of the Babylonian captivity, the intertestamental period, John the Baptist, the virgin mother and birth of Christ, the apostles, Christ's ministry, death and resurrection at its start in 1 Nephi. Without this introduction many of its later prophecies, sermons, revivals and other events would not have made sense to a people who lacked the New Testament, as the *Book of Mormon's* story requires.

The *Book of Mormon's* expressions regarding the three-ness of God illustrate this dependence even more dramatically. These expressions are only comprehensible in the light of the New Testament and those discussions in the church which led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. 2 Nephi 31:21 explains "And now, behold, this is the doctrine of Christ, and the only and true doctrine of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, which is one God, without end."<sup>29</sup> This very Trinitarian expression would have been a shock to Jews of Zedekiah's day or even to Jesus' disciples, as would have been the less-Trinitarian explanation of it by LDS interpreters. The expression and its explanations are more much at home among those nineteenth-century American Trinitarians, Unitarians, and Transcendentalists who rehashed the early ecclesiastical debates than among ancient Hebrew monotheists. It is quite easy to see how Joseph Smith could have gotten this expression from the religious conversation of his day. It is very difficult to see how or why an ancient Jew, 600 years before Christ, would have used such an expression.

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29 Similiar passages are Mosiah 15:3-4, Alma 11:44, Mormon 7:7. Other passages, such as Alma 11:38-39, equate the Son and the Father.

The *Book of Mormon's* literary and theological dependence on the New Testament demonstrate it to be a product of and part of the Bible's still spreading influence.

As a conduit of that influence, the LDS church has grown rapidly, in the face of persecution. Evangelicals sometimes attempt to minimize this growth with statements such as: "There are many more people leaving the LDS church than the church admits to." "The church's growth has been largely by recruiting disaffected members from other more orthodox churches." "The LDS Church is too 'American' to have much real extended growth beyond North America." But these are attempts to deny the obvious. The statistical report by the First Presidency gave the following figures for 2014: members - 15,372,337; wards and branches - 29,621; temples - 144. Other sources claim that half or more LDS members are outside of the U.S. This is certainly significant growth in less than 200 years, although perhaps not as remarkable as it might seem at first. For instance, by comparison, the Assemblies of God, founded in 1914, claims 67 million members world-wide, attending 366,105 churches. Again, Christianity was broadly introduced in China at about the same time *Book of Mormon* was first published. For 2010, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reported that there are over 67 million Christians in China: 35 million "independent" Protestants, 23 million Three-Self Protestants, 9 million Catholics and 20,000 Orthodox. The vitality and growth of the Mormon faith, at least in part, result from its connection with the spiritual dynamism of the Bible and the person of Jesus. I believe that the *Book of Mormon*, with its extended quotations of biblical passages, its biblical phrasing and concepts, its clear statements of the gospel of grace (even if these are in the minority), and its persistent emphasis upon

Jesus Christ as savior and as Lord have provided much of that connection.

In bringing these thoughts to a close, I realize that I've left many questions unanswered, many conclusions un-drawn, and many valid points unacknowledged. Mormon apologists on the one hand and anti-Mormons on the other and many who are neither have written more and better accounts of subjects I've only touched upon. I realize that most of my conclusions are far from being acceptable to Mormon readers, but perhaps they are less offensive and better founded than they expected. I hope LDS readers will see a more than superficial attempt to interact with the *Book of Mormon's* contents. I hope they'll see, in spite of disagreement, a sincere respect for Joseph Smith and the *Book of Mormon*. Even this admission, in turn, may give my evangelical friends pause. Some may feel that I haven't been clear enough or stood firm enough on precious matters of faith. Perhaps so, but to you I would also say, "Read the Bible, study the Bible, memorize the Bible, live out of the Bible, and, above all, walk with the God of the Bible and with His Son Jesus Christ. But then, if you haven't already done so, for the sake of our LDS friends and neighbors and our testimony to them of the saving love of Christ, read the *Book of Mormon*. It may surprise you, or perhaps not, but it will certainly give you something to talk about. Most importantly, it may be a way to say to our LDS friends and neighbors 'I care about you. I care about what you believe. Let's talk.'"