

# Introduction

The transcendent events surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon—its translation, publication, and central role in the establishment and growth of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints—comprise a story of faith, testimony, and conversion repeated for millions the world over since the book was first published in 1830. The Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, and those who assisted him in the early days of the Restoration, made bold and unapologetic claims concerning the book's origin and power to transform the hearts and lives of sincere seekers of truth throughout the earth.

Among these was Elder Orson Pratt, who proclaimed: “God Himself is the author of the Book of Mormon. He inspired the ideas it contains. . . . He sent forth His angels from heaven, clothed in brightness and glory, to chosen witnesses, commanding them to declare to all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, that this precious book [is] divine revelation.”<sup>1</sup> The Book of Mormon is a witness that God has power to speak to His children in our day by any means agreeable with his omnipotent will, including through a sacred record kept by ancient American prophets and translated by a modern American prophet. Additionally, the book is a faithful companion, defender and champion of the Bible, and restorer of much lost truth.

*The Challenge the Book of Mormon Makes to the World* presents Elder Hugh B. Brown's thirty conditions or limitations any would-be writer must meet to produce a book comparable to the Book of Mormon. Using these conditions as a framework, *The Challenge* provides extensive evidence in support of the assertion that neither Joseph Smith, an unlearned farm boy, nor the most celebrated of scholars, or anyone else, could have produced the Book of Mormon without divine aid. We have found it necessary to update the original conditions due to anachronistic language or advancements in Book of Mormon scholarship. The table of contents consists of short versions of the conditions with the full versions found under these chapter titles at the beginning of each chapter.

Dr. Hugh Nibley provides an apt analogy as to why authoring a book like the Book of Mormon is such a daunting task:

Where else [but in the Book of Mormon] will one find such inexhaustible invention combined with such unerring accuracy and consistency? To put it facetiously but not unfairly, the artist must not only balance a bowl of goldfish and three lighted candles on the end of a broomstick while fighting off a swarm of gadflies, but he must at the same time be carving an immortal piece of statuary from a lump of solid diorite.

In an undertaking like this, merely to avoid total confusion and complete disaster would be a superhuman achievement. But that is not the

assignment; that is only a coincidental detail to the main business at hand, which is, with all this consummately skillful handling of mere technical detail, to have something significant to say; not merely significant, but profound and moving, and so relevant to the peculiar conditions of our own day as to speak to our ears with a voice of thunder.<sup>2</sup>

Accordingly, one of the first challenges for a potential author of a book comparable to the Book of Mormon is the actuality of its existence. Regardless of how improbable it may seem to some that a book, engraved on plates of gold in a language called “reformed Egyptian,” revealed by an angel of God, and translated in the way Joseph Smith said it was, “by the gift and power of God,” this long and complex book does exist. With that reality and the book’s ever-growing, worldwide influence, skeptics are finding it increasingly difficult to simply dismiss it as unworthy of examination, as has been the practice. The book is filled with too many powerful evidences of its divinity for such easy disregard.

President Gordon B. Hinckley, the fifteenth President of the Church, has written:

Unbelievers may doubt [Joseph Smith’s] First Vision and say there were no witnesses to prove it. Critics may scorn every divine manifestation incident to the coming forth of this work as being of such an intangible nature as to be unprovable to the pragmatic mind, as if the things of God could be understood other than by the Spirit of God. They may discount our theology. But they cannot in honesty dismiss the Book of Mormon. It is here. They can feel it. They can read it. They can weigh its substance and its content. They can witness its influence.<sup>3</sup>

The challenge, therefore, the Book of Mormon makes to every writer in the world is one of replication—that is, to produce a book comparable to the one that came to us through the Prophet Joseph Smith. Such a book about ancient Tibet, for example, or any other little-known civilization, must provide a detailed description of countless aspects of that society, fulfill Bible prophecy, and change writing styles many times while using language that can be traced to that civilization’s beginnings. Further, many historical, linguistic and archaeological evidences must validate the book.

When we think about even a few of the conditions Joseph Smith faced as he dictated the words of the Book of Mormon to his scribes, we realize that those who dismiss the book without a sincere and deep examination of its message, risk rejecting a modern revelation from God, with eternal outcomes to follow that choice.

Among the conditions examined in *The Challenge* are these: Joseph Smith had little formal education. During the period of translation work he could read but not write well enough to compose an adequate letter (Chapter 2); he was young, only twenty-three years old (Chapter 3); he did no research—library or

other resources available to the prophet were decidedly limited (Chapter 4); the book is long, 531 pages of small text, composed of 239 chapters, and 6,604 verses (Chapter 5); one hundred and eighty-eight new names appear in the book (Chapter 14); the English translation of the Book of Mormon exhibits unmistakable characteristics of ancient Hebrew (Chapter 15); the book fulfills Bible prophecy unlike any other book in the world (Chapter 21); the manuscript was completed in about 65 working days (Chapter 30); and Joseph gained no wealth from the book but voluntarily died a martyr to seal his testimony of the book and his mission with his own blood (Chapter 29).

Although *The Challenge* presents much evidence supporting the truth of the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's calling as a prophet of God, it does not, and cannot, provide absolute proof of these things. "The origin, preparation, translation, and verification of the truth of the Book of Mormon," declared President Ezra Taft Benson, "have all been retained in the hands of the Lord, and the Lord makes no mistakes. You can be assured of that."<sup>4</sup> As Elder Neal A. Maxwell has written, "The scriptures . . . will remain in the realm of faith. Science will not be able to prove or disprove holy writ. However, enough plausible evidence will come forth to prevent scoffers from having a field day—but not enough to remove the requirement of faith."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, *The Challenge* is written in the spirit of Austin Farrer's observation that "though argument does not create conviction, the lack of it destroys belief. What seems to be proved may not be embraced; but what no one shows the ability to defend is quickly abandoned. Rational argument does not create belief, but it maintains a climate in which belief may flourish."<sup>6</sup>

Ultimately, such a climate of belief can help a person, hungering for truth and righteousness, come to his or her own inspired testimony of the book's divine truth, which will come as a fruit of faith and reason, after honest inquiry, diligent study, and sincere prayer (see Moroni 10:3–5). Regarding faith and reason, and the important role of evidence in strengthening conviction, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, speaking at Book of Mormon Central's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration of the discovery of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon, noted that

truly rock-ribbed faith and uncompromised conviction comes with its most complete power when it engages our head as well as our heart. . . . I believe God intends us to find and use the evidence He has given—reasons, if you will—which affirm the truthfulness of His work. . . . My testimony . . . is that the gospel is infallibly true and that a variety of infallible proofs supporting that assertion will continue to come until Jesus descends as the ultimate infallible truth of all. Our testimonies aren't dependent on evidence—we still need spiritual confirmation in the heart . . . but not to seek for and not to acknowledge intellectual,

documentable support for our belief when it is available is to needlessly limit an otherwise incomparable strong theological position and deny us a unique, persuasive vocabulary in the latter-day arena of religious investigation and sectarian debate.<sup>7</sup>

Hugh Nibley suggests only three possible explanations for the origin of the Book of Mormon: 1) spontaneous generation; 2) Joseph Smith's account—"by special messengers and gifts from God," or 3) that Joseph Smith or someone else simply created it out of thin air. "No experiments have been carried out," he observes, "for testing any of these theories." No one has considered the first, the second is widely dismissed with contempt, and the third is accepted "without question or hesitation."

And yet the third theory is quite as extravagant as the other two, demanding unlimited gullibility and the suspension of all critical judgment in any who would accept it. It is based on the simple proposition that since people have written books, somebody, namely Smith or a contemporary, wrote this one. But to make this thesis stick is to show not only that people have written big books, but that somebody has been able to produce a big book like this one. But no other such book exists. . . .

We respectfully solicit the name of any student or professor in the world who could come within ten thousand miles of such a performance. As a sheer tour-de-force there is nothing like it. The theory that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon simply will not stand examination.<sup>8</sup>

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