

The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

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BYU Professor Dan Peterson sometimes shares a story about the famous 18th century hostess Marie de Vichy-Chamrond, the Marquise du Deffand, and a friend of Voltaire and other leading intellectuals of her day. She was conversing with Cardinal de Polignac, who told her about the purported miracle of St. Denis, the first Christian bishop of Paris. St. Denis was martyred by being beheaded, the Cardinal explained, but then took up his head and walked a hundred miles. Madame du Deffand replied, "In such a promenade, it is the first step that is difficult." Her point was that it's not the claim that St. Denis walked a hundred miles, carrying his head in his hands, that poses a challenge. It's that he walked at all. After the first step, the rest is just embellishment.

The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is a similar "first step" in the history of Joseph Smith and the restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. If that event cannot withstand close scrutiny, then all that follows fails and falls. Conversely, Elder Jeffrey Holland once noted that no person would be "able to leave the faith without crawling around or under or over the Book of Mormon."

With exactly that in mind, critics regularly challenge the existence of ancient American plates, the manner of the plates' translation, and the source and nature of the Book of Mormon's content. However, a careful examination of original, primary sources, as opposed to secondary reports (hearsay), and careful scholarship regarding the Book's structure and content, produces a very different picture. While these things by themselves are not a true testimony of the Book of Mormon, they create a space within which such a testimony, based on a spiritual witness, is completely reasonable.

(Rather than citing specific sources for the material below, I have attached a list of the books and academic papers from which they were drawn, in a References section at the end.)

Here are just a few things to consider about this remarkable text as we prepare to study it this year:

The manner of the Book of Mormon's production

Joseph Smith claimed that he retrieved a set of ancient plates under the direction of a heavenly messenger. He then translated the characters written on the plates, producing the Book of Mormon.

The work of translation took place mainly in the kitchens / common rooms or upper floor bedrooms / workrooms of several small homes. The setting was intimate. Homes, in those days on the American frontier, were much smaller than those we live in today. As family members and visitors went about their daily activities, they could often closely observe what Joseph and his scribe were doing. While none recorded their experiences immediately, many later spoke and wrote about what they had seen, heard, and experienced.

Joseph Smith used 3 primary scribes while translating the Book of Mormon: Martin Harris (April 12 to June 14, 1828), Emma Smith (Joseph's wife, helping intermittently from late September 1828 to early April 1829), then Oliver Cowdery (April 7 to June 11, 1829). John and Christian Whitmer also wrote for short periods during early June, 1829.

When Joseph was first learning how to do the work of translation, he was separated from his scribe Martin Harris by a hanging curtain that blocked a direct view of Joseph and the uncovered plates. Later, he stopped using the curtain. The plates were usually left on the table where Joseph and his scribe worked, wrapped in a cloth to hide them from direct view.

Initially, Joseph used the “interpreters” that he received with the plates. According to Martin Harris, they were 2 translucent white stones with gray streaks, each about 2 inches in diameter, set in a silver bow, similar to a very large pair of glasses or “spectacles.” It was not until 1833, 3 years after the Book of Mormon was published, that Joseph and others began to refer to them as a “Urim and Thummim.” After Martin Harris lost the first 116 pages of the manuscript (the Book of Lehi), the angel took the plates and the interpreters from Joseph. When he regained the plates some 3 months later (September 22, 1828), Emma began serving as Joseph’s scribe. The work of translation during that period was spotty, with frequent halts and interruptions. At some point during that time, Joseph shifted to using a small chocolate-colored “seer’s stone,” roughly the size and shape of a slightly flattened egg, as his primary tool for translation. That stone remains in the Church’s possession today.

To translate, Joseph placed the ancient “interpreters” or the “seer’s stone” in the bottom of a hat. He then placed his face in the hat, looking down upon the translation device. The purpose of the hat was to block external light. In an article in the July 1993 *Ensign*, Elder Russell M. Nelson cited an 1887 statement from David Whitmer, who directly observed the process:

“Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear, and another character with the interpretation would appear.” (David Whitmer, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, Richmond, Mo.: n.p., 1887, p. 12.)

Joseph Knight was a visitor to Joseph and Emma’s home where the bulk of the translation occurred. He also observed and later recounted the method:

“Now the way he translated was he put the Urim and Thummim into his hat and darkened [shielded external light from] his eyes, then he would take a sentence and it would appear in bright Roman letters, then he would tell the writer and he would write it. Then that would go away, the next sentence would come, and so on. But if it was not spelled right it would not go away till it was right, so we see it was marvelous. Thus was the whole translated.”

Joseph’s brother William, late in his life, described it thus:

“He translated them by means of the Urim and Thummim, (which he obtained with the plates), and the power of God. The manner in which this was done was by looking into the Urim and Thummim, which was placed in a hat to exclude the light, (the plates lying near by covered up), and reading off the translation, which appeared in the stone by the power of God.”

Such a process might better be described as “transcription” rather than our usual understanding of “translation.” Emma, in an interview near the end of her life, adds an interesting detail that fits well with and expands upon that view:

“In writing for ... [Joseph] I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the stone in it, ... with nothing between us. ... **when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do.**”
[emphasis added]

Emma and others noted that Joseph never used secondary materials – things like “books or manuscripts” – while translating. He never referred back to materials that he and his scribe had already completed, either by reading them himself or by asking his scribe to read previous passages back to him.

Joseph sometimes appeared to be surprised by what he was reading in the hat. He acted as though it was as new to him, as it was to people who were recording his words (his scribes) or who read the finished book. For example, Emma wrote about his reaction when the translation suggested that Jerusalem was surrounded by a city wall. He asked Emma whether that could possibly be so?!! Some of the things he read led directly to action. For example, the content of the translation led Joseph and Oliver Cowdery to personally encounter John the Baptist, under whose hands they received the Aaronic Priesthood (May 15, 1829, D&C 13). Along the same lines, observers noted that the text sometimes involved both words and names that were unfamiliar to Joseph, as a 23-year-old frontier farmer with less than 3 years of formal education. In those circumstances, Joseph spelled out what he saw, letter by letter.

The real work of translation began with the arrival of Oliver Cowdery at Joseph and Emma’s home in Harmony, Pennsylvania (deeded to them by Emma’s father), on April 5, 1829. On April 7th, Joseph and Oliver began the work of translation “uninterrupted,” “with little cessation.” They worked through April, May, and into June of that year (Joseph applied for a copyright on the new work on June 11, 1829.) They probably started with Mosiah, working through the end of the text as currently found in the official Book of Mormon; then added the Small Plates of Nephi (Nephi 1 through Omni), appending them to the start of the book to replace the lost 116 pages of the Book of Lehi.

Across those 2½ months, Joseph and Oliver did not spend all of their time working on the translation. They took time to sleep and eat, to seek employment (for example, they had to work for money for a time when translating supplies ran out), to receive the Aaronic priesthood, to make at least one, and possibly two trips to Colesville 30 miles away, to receive and record 13 revelations (Sections 6 through 18 in the Doctrine and Covenants), to relocate from Harmony to Fayette, New York (via buckboard, moving into the home of Peter Whitmer, Sr., and his wife Mary), and to preach and baptize.

Welch estimates that Joseph and Oliver had, at most, 57 to 63 working days to complete the translation of essentially the whole book, totaling 269,510 words. That means they translated about 8 to 11 pages per day, of the 531 pages that make up the current official version of the Book of Mormon. Even with modern computerized tools, that is a stunning – an arguably impossible – rate of production. Again, this accords with the idea that the “translation” of the Book of Mormon might more accurately be called “transcription,” from its ancient language recorded as characters on metal plates, to its current form in English. In describing the work, Joseph would only ever say that it “was translated into our own language by the gift and power of God.” (I have attached the challenge that BYU Professor Hugh Nibley regularly issued to his students, to help them appreciate the overwhelming magnitude of the task.)

The 3 Witnesses, the 8 Witnesses, and at least 6 “unofficial” witnesses

The Book of Mormon is unique among major religious “origin stories” in that it started with a number of physical artifacts, rather than just inspiration delivered into a human mind (see, for example, the manner in which Muhammed produced the Quran). In particular, Joseph Smith claimed that the Book of Mormon came from ancient writings engraved on metal plates, which had the appearance of gold. Such statements lend themselves to direct tests of authenticity: What evidence do we have that the claimed artifacts actually existed?

Shortly after the translation of the Book of Mormon was completed, Joseph Smith showed the plates from which it was derived to 2 separate groups, called the Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses. The Three Witnesses and the Eight Witnesses had fundamentally different, complementary experiences.

Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris – the Three Witnesses – were all key participants in, and contributors to, the early Church. They saw the plates in 2 separate groups. Joseph, Oliver, and David saw them first. Some time later the same day, Joseph and Martin saw them. Those experiences happened during the day, in the woods near the home of Joseph Smith, Sr., in Manchester, south of Palmyra, New York. Oliver Cowdery, in a response to a letter written to Martin Harris by Cornelius Blatchly in November 1829, described it thus: “It was a clear, open beautiful day, far from any inhabitants, in a remote field, at the time we saw the record.” It was “brought and laid before us, by an angel, arrayed in glorious light.” The angel showed them the plates alongside the other artifacts Joseph Smith found in the original buried stone box that contained the plates: the Liahona (Lehi’s compass, or “director”), the Sword of Laban, the interpreters and the breastplate to which the interpreters could attach, and Laban’s Brass Plates. They heard the voice of God testifying to the truth of the Book of Mormon and commanding them to testify of that truth.

Some critics discount the Three Witness’s experience. It is expressly religious and strongly transcendent. It involved the miraculous appearance of a heavenly messenger. Given its visionary nature, critics argue that it was not grounded in the daily reality where regular humanity lives.

The testimony of the Eight Witnesses directly answers that criticism.

Some days later, 4 brothers from the Whitmer family – Christian, Jacob, Peter, Jr., and John – journeyed the 30 miles from the Whitmer home to that of Joseph Smith, Sr. Hiram Page, their brother-in-law, accompanied them. There they joined Joseph Smith, Sr., Joseph Smith’s father; and Hyrum and Samuel Smith, his brothers.

During the middle of another bright sunny day, they walked with Joseph Smith, Jr., to a nearby clearing in the woods. Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph’s mother, recounts in her history that they went there “... because it had been revealed to Joseph that the plates would be carried thither by one of the ancient Nephites.” There they found the plates. None of the other artifacts reported by the Three Witnesses were present. They saw no angels. They reported no visions. They heard no heavenly voices. These were men who tended livestock and farmed the earth, who worked with their hands and were deeply rooted in daily reality. Their descriptions of the plates use simple terms describing observable fact. For example, they stated that the plates “had the appearance of gold,” and “the appearance of ancient work.”

Richard Anderson summarizes their experience, as reflected in their written testimonies and later accounts, thus:

“The Eight Witnesses testified that they saw these plates, picked them up, and examined the "curious" characters. ("Curious" did not mean "strange" in that day; it meant that the characters were very carefully crafted. These men were craftsmen and artisans, remember, so they recognized fine workmanship. The witnesses also used the word *heft*, which is archaic for our day; it means "'to lift.") They examined the plates and bore testimony in their formal statement that they had ‘lifted’ the gold plates.

“They described the physical plates as weighing between forty and sixty pounds and being approximately eight inches long, five or six inches wide, and five or six inches thick. Their descriptions varied, from seven by five by four to eight by six by five, but the descriptions are consistent because they are estimations. They didn't take a measurement. Not only did the Eight Witnesses see the characters and turn over the leaves, but they reported seeing a sealed part. They described the plates as bound with ‘D’-shaped rings, saying a perpendicular center ran through the plates, like a loose-leaf notebook, and then the ring curved in a half circle across the spine. There is definitely a consistency in what the Eight Witnesses claim they saw.”

In addition, at least 6 “unofficial” witnesses – Lucy Mack Smith (Joseph’s mother), Josiah Stowell, William Smith (his brother), Emma Smith (his wife), Katharine Smith (his sister), and Mary Whitmer (the wife of Peter Whitmer, Sr., in whose home the final work of translation took place) – left accounts of handling or interacting with the plates. Only one of those individuals, Mary Whitmer, claimed to have directly seen the uncovered plates. William Smith wrote that “I handled them and hefted them while wrapped in a tow frock and judged them to have weighed about sixty pounds. I could tell they were plates of some kind and that they were fastened together by rings running through the back.” He also stated that he lifted them in a pillowcase. He “thum[b]ed them through the cloth and ascertained that they were thin sheets of some kind of metal.” Martin Harris said he “hefted the plates many times” and once held them on his knee for an hour and a half. Feeling them through a linen tablecloth while they sat on her kitchen table, Emma Smith said the individual plates were “pliable like thick paper.” Dan Peterson cites accounts where “People heard the leaves ‘rustle’ when thumbed and a ‘jink’ when they were put in a box. The accounts left little room to doubt that something heavy and plate-like existed in the boxes, the cloths, and the knapsacks they saw and felt.” (I have attached a full account of Mary Whitmer’s experience below, as transmitted years later to members of her family. I have also attached the testimony of Emma Smith.)

The Witnesses Maintained Their Testimonies Throughout Their Lives

8 years later, the rapidly growing Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints was centered in Kirtland, Ohio. Joseph Smith oversaw the dedication of the Kirtland Temple on March 27, 1836. He had identified a different area of the American frontier, in and around Independence and Far West, Missouri, as a gathering place for the Saints. David Whitmer (one of the Three Witnesses), W.W. Phelps, and John Whitmer (David’s older brother, and one of the Eight Witnesses) were set apart as the presidency of the Church in Missouri on July 3, 1834. They were given Church funds to purchase property in and around Independence for a temple site and a new, more permanent, LDS community. In Kirtland, Joseph had established the Kirtland Safety Society, a private bank that could help the new Church and its members with ongoing financial challenges.

1837–38 saw great turmoil come upon the struggling Saints. The Kirtland Safety Society failed, which led many of the new Saints to leave the Church. Others who remained directly, forcefully questioned Joseph Smith’s leadership role. The nascent Book of Abraham introduced difficult new religious

concepts, very different from what converts had brought with them from their original Christian religions. Even more, Joseph had shared the commandment to practice polygamy with some leaders. That produced even greater controversy. Many turned against Joseph. Several leaders accused him of being a “fallen prophet.”

To escape the controversy in Kirtland, Joseph Smith and Sidney Rigdon relocated to Far West, Missouri. That led to conflict with the presidency of the Church in Missouri. Joseph had given instructions regarding how Church monies should be used to purchase property and sustain the Saints. Facing local realities, Missouri Church leaders chose to set other priorities and use other methods. Before Joseph’s actual arrival in Missouri, communications were complicated by distance and travel time.

On January 26, 1838, Joseph removed David Whitmer, W.W. Phelps, and John Whitmer from their callings as the presidency of the Church in Missouri. The following April, one day after Oliver Cowdery’s excommunication, the Missouri high council excommunicated David and John Whitmer. Those cast out of the Church felt that they had been unfairly treated. All remaining surviving members of the Whitmer family (Christian Whitmer had died on November 27, 1835), including brother-in-law Hiram Page, were either excommunicated or left the Church.

At that point, 7 of the original 11 official witnesses had been excommunicated. That included Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer (all of the Three Witnesses); and Jacob Whitmer, Peter Whitmer, Jr., John Whitmer, and Hiram Page (4 of the 7 surviving Eight Witnesses). All were estranged from Joseph Smith. Some, such as John Whitmer, expressed very bitter feelings about how they had been treated.

Years later, Martin Harris and Oliver Cowdery would rejoin the Church. The Whitmers never returned. Initially, David and John Whitmer removed to Richmond, Missouri. A few years later, John and his family returned to Far West. The Saints having left, the area was largely abandoned. John bought up property to establish a large farm. His holdings included the original Independence Temple Lot. In 1877, still in Richmond, Missouri, David Whitmer started his own Church of Christ.

Several commentators have noted that, if you are trying to maintain a conspiracy built upon false testimony claiming the existence of plates, it doesn’t make much sense to excommunicate your co-conspirators, in an atmosphere of real bitterness. Hugh Nibley chronicles it this way: “ ... as soon as they [Harris, Cowdery, and the Whitmers] left the church all the newspaper reporters, ministers, and others swarmed in and descended on them like locusts. ‘Now you will tell us the truth; now you can tell us what really happened.’”

All of this happened at a time when anti-Mormons were actively persecuting members of the Church. The Witnesses paid a significant personal price as they continued to reaffirm their testimonies. For examples, see accounts recorded by William McLellin, attached below.

To their deathbeds, none of the Three or Eight Witnesses ever denied their testimonies of the plates or the Book of Mormon. Instead, several of them produced first-person accounts reinforcing their original testimonies. They continued to assert that they had seen and handled actual plates. An account attributed to John Whitmer is particularly interesting. Theodore Turley, a member of the Church, was assigned to travel to Missouri to see if it was possible to recover any of the Church’s property there. While in Far West area he encountered John Whitmer. He asked John whether “the Book of Mormon

was true.” As recorded by Turley, John replied that “I don’t know if the Book of Mormon is true or not. I couldn’t read the writing on those plates.”

In 1878, P. Wilhelm Poulson – a physician residing in Ogden, Utah, and a member of the Church – traveled East. He stopped in Missouri to visit his old friends, David and John Whitmer. Both were quite elderly, and both died within a few months after Poulson’s visit. Upon his return to Utah he shared verbatim notes of the conversations he had with John and David, sending transcripts of the conversations to the Deseret News. Copies of both interviews are attached below.

The Contents of the Book of Mormon Itself

Hugh Nibley noted, “Nobody has ever been able to get around the witnesses, but it’s harder to get around the book.” (*Teachings of the Book of Mormon, Semester 3, Lecture 57, Alma 45, Periodic Exterminations*, pg. 7).

A complex text

Nibley most likely meant the Book of Mormon’s complicated history of the Nephite people, their Lamanite contemporaries, and the Jaredite people, spanning more than a thousand years. The Book addresses sophisticated religious and philosophical principles. It recounts complex, extended political interactions. It tracks hundreds of named individuals. It quotes master orators at length. It gives details of an extensive geography. It outlines detailed weight and coinage systems. It tracks overlapping timelines, retelling events from different viewpoints.

Consider another example of internal complexity. As might be expected within a record kept across hundreds of years by many successive authors, later authors sometimes quoted earlier authors. Welch supplies an illustrative example, in the context of the very rapid production of the original translation:

“Knowing how quickly it was dictated amplifies the significance of many kinds of details, helping astute readers notice and value literary features that would otherwise go underappreciated. For example, in Alma 36:22, Alma quotes exactly twenty-two words from Lehi as found in 1 Nephi 1:8. ... [T]hat ... passage in Alma was translated in Harmony in April, perhaps about April 24, while the Lehi text was not supplied until June, perhaps about June 5 in Fayette”

Local observers reported that Joseph Smith didn’t review his earlier work, to get such quotations exact. He just read out what the interpreters showed him, in the hat. But the text is consistent. It is identical across these 2 instances, and several others.

Some raise questions about seeming anachronisms in the Book of Mormon, such as its use of the word “steel.” Careful scholarship has found plausible explanations for most such instances. Extending that concept, Joseph Smith used a great many proper names and foreign words in the Book of Mormon. Examples include words like “neas,” “ziff,” and “cumoms.” Some criticize these “out of place” words, saying that when Joseph could not think of a word, he simply made one up. In 2022, Stephen D. Ricks, *et al.*, published a *Dictionary of Proper Names and Foreign Words in the Book of Mormon*. They found valid ancient origins (etymologies) for more than 400 such names and words, drawing upon ancient Near Eastern languages. Ricks’ work accounts for nearly all such instances that exist in the Book of Mormon. Devn Cornish asks “How could Joseph Smith have guessed or ‘made up’ so many words that were unknown in his day, but that actually are ancient words that indeed mean what the Book of Mormon says they mean?”

The Book of Mormon is not a simple text, at many different levels. But for all of that, it contains no direct, unexplainable, internal contradictions.

Recent years have seen both LDS and non-LDS scholars apply modern textual analysis tools to the Book of Mormon. Beyond internal complexity, the Book of Mormon exhibits at least 3 other elements that are very hard to explain if one does not accept the Book's own claims regarding its origins.

Multiple authors

Orson Scott Card, a widely published author of a great many books of fiction, noted that every author writes with a unique "voice." That voice is reflected in word choices, grammar, and assumptions about underlying social and physical reality. Card points out that "voice" is subconscious, and thus unavoidable. It is consistent, a "signature" that identifies a particular author, although it can shift over long periods of time.

The Book of Mormon claims to contain major subsections written by different authors, such as Nephi₁, Jacob₂, Benjamin, Alma₂, Helaman, Nephi₃, Mormon, and Moroni₂. Card points out that the writings attributed to each unique Book of Mormon author have a unique, identifiable voice. More recently, Grant Hardy reached the same conclusion based on stylometry, or wordprint studies, a form of formal academic textual analysis.

The text of the Book of Mormon was not produced by a single author. Empirically, its contents were written by a series of different authors.

Chiasms, parallelism, and other ancient Near-Eastern writing forms

In 1967, John Welch was serving an LDS mission in Germany. He attended a lecture given by a local Jesuit priest. The priest discussed common Near Eastern writing forms embedded in the Bible. The lecture focused, particularly, on chiasmic literary structures, so-named after the Greek letter chi (X). A chiasm is "a reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clauses", of the form A-B-C-C'-B'-A'. The main emphasis of the chiasm is located in the central phrase(s), while the lead-in / lead-out phrases provide increasing levels of context. The individual corresponding X, X' elements of a chiasmic structure work together to define and expand the meaning of each paired phrase.

The following morning during missionary scripture study, Welch was reading Mosiah Chapter 5. He noticed that Mosiah 5:10-12 has a chiasmic structure:

- A And now it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall not take upon him the name of Christ
- B must be called by some other name;
- C therefore, he findeth himself on the left hand of God.
- D And I would that ye should remember also, that this is the name that I said I should give unto you
- E that never should be blotted out,
- F except it be through transgression;
- F' therefore, take heed that ye do not transgress,
- E' that the name be not blotted out of your hearts.
- D' I say unto you, I would that ye should remember to retain the name written always in your hearts,
- C' that ye are not found on the left hand of God,

B' but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be called, and also
A' the name by which he shall call you.

Welch and others have since found many chiastic structures scattered throughout the Book of Mormon. Some are even more extensive and complex. For example, the entirety of Alma chapter 36 – Alma₂'s account to his son Helaman of his encounter with an angel, while traveling with the sons of Mosiah “seeking to destroy the church of God” – is a chiasm. They have also found other poetic Near Eastern literary structures, such as an extensive use of parallelism, in the Book of Mormon text. In 2007, Donald Parry published *Poetic Parallelisms in the Book of Mormon: The Complete Text Reformatted*. It lays out the entire text of the Book of Mormon, with chiasms, parallelisms, and other forms of ancient middle eastern text structures laid out in their poetic form. Chiasms alone account for more than 300 such entrees in Parry's book. The first chiasm appears in 1 Nephi 1:1-3 – the very first words in the Book of Mormon.

Scholars have been aware of chiasm, parallelisms, and similar poetic forms in the Bible and other Near Eastern ancient writing for a very long time. Chiasm does occur in Western writing, but it is uncommon. For example, the nursery rhyme “Hickory, Dickory, Dock” employs a simple chiastic structure. Chiasm can occur randomly, but random instances are rare and always simple. Most important, Hebraic literary structures are not widely used in Western literature. Because they are uncommon, they are not obvious to Western eyes, or to typical writers embedded in Western cultures.

In the Book of Mormon, chiasm, parallelism, and other Hebraic poetic forms are neither rare nor simple. They are very common. They span full chapters. They were a well-known tool regularly used by successive authors in the Book of Mormon.

Early Modern English

From about 1770 to 1830, American and European authors published many tracts and books using “pseudo-Biblical” language. Most promoted their work as translations of heretofore undiscovered ancient texts. All tried to appear legitimate by replicating the style and language of the King James Bible. All were fictional.

Some critics have tried to lump the Book of Mormon into that category.

Recent scholarship directly challenges that allegation. Skousen compared the text of the Book of Mormon to several prominent pseudo-Biblical texts, showing striking structural differences. His work discredited a long list of proposed “sources” for the Book of Mormon, that relied on pseudo-Biblical texts. By implication, it also ruled out their authors as potential sources for the Book of Mormon. Welch catalogued “about 80 potential cases of nonbiblical, obsolete lexical usage in the Book of Mormon.” By “nonbiblical, obsolete lexical usage” Welch means grammar structure and word choices that feel twisted, unnatural, contrived and artificial, relative to the elegant language of the King James Bible. Critics use those anachronisms to assert that not only was Joseph just trying to copy the language of the King James Bible, but that he was an uneducated frontiersman and didn't do it very well. Welch notes that those 80 cases “represent a level of nonbiblical archaism that far exceeds any known pseudobiblical baseline. In the case of syntax, the Book of Mormon contains various large-scale archaic patterns and many individual archaic structures that are nonbiblical and nonpseudobiblical.” In terms of a text that is trying to duplicate the language, look, and feel of the King James Bible, the Book of Mormon just doesn't fit.

In 2020, Stanley Carmack examined Welch's list of non-Biblical anachronisms. He showed that they weren't anachronisms at all, if one examined them through the lens of an earlier version of the English language. Early Modern English was in common use in 1530, when Tyndale first translated the Greek New Testament into English. By 1611, when the King James Bible appeared, English language practices had changed substantially. Carmack argues that the original Book of Mormon translation is Early Modern English, which explains its striking differences from the English used in the King James Bible. That also explains clear, strong differences between the Book of Mormon and pseudo-Biblical works.

Conclusions

Of course, none of this proves that the Book of Mormon is "true." Coming to that personal conclusion falls into an entirely different class of experience, and requires a different approach. However, these investigations do create a space where such belief is not just possible, but entirely reasonable.

Davis Bitton is a respected historian. He is also a believing member of the Church. He said it this way: "Let's get one thing clear. There is nothing in church history that leads inevitably to the conclusion that the church is false. There is nothing that requires the conclusion that Joseph Smith was a fraud." (Meridian Magazine, 11Feb24, reprint of *I Don't Have a Testimony of the History of the Church.*)

Blaise Pascal, the famous French mathematician, expressed a more general form of the same insight almost 4 centuries ago:

"There is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don't."

The answer is simple. Read the book. Read the whole thing, with an open mind and an open heart. Make your own judgments. Finally, follow the Book of Mormon's own admonition:

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. (Moroni 10:4)

If you want to supplement your reading of the Book of Mormon with other sources along the lines of what we have discussed here, I particularly recommend the first 2 books listed below. After the scriptures themselves, and the words of modern prophets, they are some of the most faith-promoting volumes I (and others) have ever encountered:

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Professor Hugh Nibley's 'Book of Mormon Challenge,' as recorded in the *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol. 8, Ch. 11, pp. 221-2:

"Since Joseph Smith was younger than most of you and not nearly so experienced or well-educated as any of you at the time he copyrighted the Book of Mormon, it should not be too much to ask you to hand in by the end of the semester (which will give you more time than he had) a paper of, say, five to six hundred pages in length. Call it a sacred book if you will, and give it the form of a history. Tell of a community of wandering Jews in ancient times; have all sorts of characters in your story, and involve them in all sorts of public and private vicissitudes; give them names--hundreds of them--pretending that they are real Hebrew and Egyptian names of circa 600 b.c.; be lavish with cultural and technical details--manners and customs, arts and industries, political and religious institutions, rites, and traditions, include long and complicated military and economic histories; have your narrative cover a thousand years without any large gaps; keep a number of interrelated local histories going at once; feel free to introduce religious controversy and philosophical discussion, but always in a plausible setting; observe the appropriate literary conventions and explain the derivation and transmission of your varied historical materials.

"Above all, do not ever contradict yourself! For now we come to the really hard part of this little assignment. You and I know that you are making this all up--we have our little joke--but just the same you are going to be required to have your paper published when you finish it, not as fiction or romance, but as a true history! After you have handed it in you may make no changes in it (in this class we always use the first edition of the Book of Mormon); what is more, you are to invite any and all scholars to read and criticize your work freely, explaining to them that it is a sacred book on a par with the Bible. If they seem over-skeptical, you might tell them that you translated the book from original records by the aid of the Urim and Thummim--they will love that! Further to allay their misgivings, you might tell them that the original manuscript was on golden plates, and that you got the plates from an angel. Now go to work and good luck!

"To date no student has carried out this assignment, which, of course, was not meant seriously. But why not? If anybody could write the Book of Mormon, as we have been so often assured, it is high time that somebody, some devoted and learned minister of the gospel, let us say, performed the invaluable public service of showing the world that it can be done."

“Unofficial” witness Mary Whitmer’s claim to have seen the plates

“Mary Whitmer, another plain-spoken witness, said she saw the plates when she went to do the milking. ... years after the event, her son said that his mother had grown weary with the work of housing and feeding the translating contingent. In June 1829, Joseph, Oliver, and Emma squeezed into an already crowded household. Emma must have been pressed into service, but the two men were of no help. They spent their days in an upstairs room recording the translation. Mary Whitmer had reason to complain of the added burden. Mary’s son David told Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith in 1878 that as his mother was going to milk the cows, an old man carrying a pack met her in the yard. He recognized that “you are tried because of the increase of your toil,” and so “it is proper therefore that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened.” Then he took the plates out of the knapsack and showed them to her. Whitmer said that seeing the plates “nerved her up for her increased responsibilities.” One of Mary’s grandsons, John C. Whitmer, added that “this strange person turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them.” Then he vanished with the plates.

Mary Whitmer did not record the experience herself, but she told the story to her grandchildren “on several occasions.” Her account was of a piece with other stories the Whitmers told. David Whitmer linked his mother’s angel to the “very pleasant, nice-looking old man” he had seen on the road while bringing Joseph and Oliver to Fayette. His nephew John also described the visitor as “a stranger carrying something on his back that looked like a knapsack” and “spoke to her in a kind, friendly tone.”

Another “unofficial” witness – The Testimony of Emma Smith

Interview of Emma Smith by Joseph Smith III (her son) in Nauvoo, Illinois, 1879, Saints’ Herald 26 (1 October 1879): 289–90

Question: What of the truth of Mormonism?

Answer: I know Mormonism to be the truth; and believe the Church to have been established by divine direction. I have complete faith in it. In writing for your father I frequently wrote day after day, often sitting at the table close by him, he sitting with his face buried in his hat, with the [seer] stone in it, and dictating hour after hour with nothing between us.

Q. Had he not a book or manuscript from which he read, or dictated to you?

A. He had neither manuscript nor book to read from.

Q. Could he not have had, and you not know it?

A. If he had had anything of the kind he could not have concealed it from me.

Q. Are you sure that he had the plates at the time you were writing for him?

A. The plates often lay on the table without any attempt at concealment, wrapped in a small linen table cloth, which I had given him to fold them in. I once felt of the plates, as they thus lay on the table, tracing their outline and shape. They seemed to be pliable like thick paper, and would rustle with a metallic sound when the edges were moved by the thumb, as one does sometimes thumb the edges of a book.

Q. Where did father and Oliver Cowdery write?

A. Oliver Cowdery and your father wrote in the room where I was at work.

Q. Could not father have dictated the Book of Mormon to you, Oliver Cowdery and the others who wrote for him, after having first written it, or having first read it out of some book?

A. Joseph Smith [and for the first time she used his name direct, having usually used the words, “your father,” or “my husband”] could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon. And, though I was an active participant in the scenes that transpired, and was present during the translation of the plates, and had cognizance of things as they transpired, it is marvelous to me, “a marvel and a wonder,” as much so as to any one else.

Q. I should suppose that you would have uncovered the plates and examined them?

A. I did not attempt to handle the plates, other than I have told you, nor uncover them to look at them. I was satisfied that it was the work of God, and therefore did not feel it to be necessary to do so.

Major Bidamon here suggested: Did Mr. Smith forbid your examining the plates?

A. I do not think he did. I knew that he had them, and was not specially curious about them. I moved them from place to place on the table, as it was necessary in doing my work.

Q. Mother, what is your belief about the authenticity, or origin of the Book of Mormon?

A. My belief is that the Book of Mormon is of divine authenticity—I have not the slightest doubt of it. I am satisfied that no man could have dictated the writing of the manuscripts unless he was inspired; for, when acting as his scribe, your father would dictate to me hour after hour; and when returning after meals, or after interruptions, he would at once begin where he had left off, without either seeing the

manuscript or having any portion of it read to him. This was a usual thing for him to do. It would have been improbable that a learned man could do this; and, for one so ignorant and unlearned as he was, it was simply impossible.

Dan Peterson (The Book of Mormon Witnesses):

William E. McLellin was chosen as one of the Twelve Apostles in 1835 but was excommunicated from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1838. However, he never abandoned his faith in the Book of Mormon, and one of the pillars of his faith rested upon his early, searching interviews with the witnesses to that book. He was a highly intelligent man (and, it seems, a rather irascible one), and he was very careful and intent upon getting at the truth.

McLellin left a number of statements on his investigations. This one comes from a previously unpublished manuscript he wrote between January 1871 and January 1872. I find it fascinating and, since I don't think it's very well known, I'll quote it at length:

In 1833, when mobbing reigned triumphant in Jackson Co. Mo. I and O. Cowdery fled from our homes, for fear of personal violence on Saturday the 20th day of July. The mob dispersed, agreeing to meet again on the next Tuesday. They offered eighty dollars reward for any one who would deliver Cowdery or McLellan in Independence on Tuesday. On Mond[a]y I slipped down into the Whitmer's settlement, and there in the lonely woods I met with David Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery. I said to them, "brethren I have never seen an open vision in my life, but you men say you have, and therefore you positively know. Now you know that our lives are in danger every hour, if the mob can only ~~only~~ catch us. Tell me in the fear of God, is that book of Mormon true? Cowdery looked at me with solemnity depicted in his face, and said, "Brother William, God sent his holy angel to declare the truth of the translation of it to us, and therefore we know. And though the mob kill us, yet we must die declaring its truth." David said, "Oliver has told you the solemn truth, for we could not be deceived. I most truly declare ~~declare~~ to you its truth!!" Said I, boys I believe you. I can see no object for you to tell me false <hood> now, when our lives are endangered. Eight men testify also to handling that sacred pile of plates, from which Joseph Smith <read off the> translation of that heavenly Book.

And he continues:

"One circumstance I'll relate of one of these eight witnesses. While the mob was raging in Jackson Co. Mo. in 1833 some young men ran down Hiram Page <in the woods> one of the eight <witnesses,> and commenced beating and pounding him with whips and clubs. He begged, but there was no mercy. They said he was <a> damned Mormon, and they meant to beat him to death! But finally one then said to him, if you will deny that damned book, we will let you go. Said he, how can I deny what I know to be true? Then they pounded him again. When they thought he was about to breathe his last, they said to him, Now what do you think of your God, when he don't save you? Well said he, I believe in God—Well, said one of the most intelligent among them, I believe the damned fool will stick to it though we kill him. Let us let him go. But his life was nearly run out. He was confined to his bed for a length of time. So much for a man who knows for himself. Knowledge is beyond faith or doubt. It is positive certainty."

P. Wilhelm Poulson, Letter, 31 July 1878; rep. "Correspondence. Death of John Whitmer. Testimony to the Book of Mormon," The Deseret News, August 14, 1878, 2

https://bhiroberts.org/records/uthtQb-0Echl1/poulson_reports_john_whitmers_final_testimony_of_the_bom

The following letter contains several items that will prove interesting to the Latter-day Saints. We publish it without knowing anything personally of the incidents related by the writer. The testimony of John Whitmer, however, is prefixed to the Book of Mormon in connection with that of the other witnesses, and remains unimpeached and unimpeachable.

Ovid City, Idaho,
July 31, 1878

Editors of the Deseret News:

I received, to-day, a letter from Miss Sarah Whitmer, at Far West, Missouri, in which she informs me about the death of her father, John Whitmer, Esq., one of the eight witnesses to the plates from which the Book of Mormon is translated. She writes:

"I seat myself to a painful task, this morning to inform you of the death of my dear father, who departed earthlife, the 11th day of this month (July). Father's disease was congestion of the lungs, heart and stomach. He died very easy. I have the great consolation in knowing that he was prepared to meet his God.

"He asked only a few days before his death when I thought you would come. He always felt so very anxious only to see you again.

"I visited Richmond directly after the storm, and it was a sad-looking sight to behold. Uncle David (David Whitmer, one of the three witnesses,) has about recovered from his injuries, and is out once more on the street."

So far from Sarah Whitmer's letter. I visited this last one of the eight witnesses in April this year, at his fine residence at Far West. On John's farm is located the foundation of Far West Temple, and the cornerstone is laid of gray sandstone. A short distance from John Whitmer's residence we discover the house in which the Prophet Joseph Smith dwelt with his family, and in the adjoining county is the beautiful valley, Adam-ondi-Ahman. John Whitmer received me as a dear father would receive a son, and answered readily all my questions.

I said: I am aware that your name is affixed to the testimony in the Book of Mormon, that you saw the plates? He—It is so, and that testimony is true.

I—did you handle the plates with your hands? He—I did so!

I—Then they were a material substance? He—Yes, as material as anything can be.

I—Were they heavy to lift? He—Yes, and as you know gold is a heavy metal, they were very heavy.

I—How big were the leaves? He—So far as I recollect, 8 by 6 or 7 inches.

I—Were the leaves thick? He—Yes, just so thick, that characters could be engraven on both sides.

I—How were the leaves joined together? He—In three rings, each one in the shape of a D with the straight line towards the center.

I—In what place did you see the plates? He—In Joseph Smith's house; he had them there.

I—Did you see them covered with a cloth? He—No. He handed them uncovered into our hands, and we turned the leaves sufficient to satisfy us.

I—Were you all eight witnesses present at the same time? He—No. At that time Joseph showed the plates to us, we were four persons, present in the room, and at another time he showed them to four persons more.

John Whitmer was about 77 years of age. He told me that he should not live and see the coming of Christ nor the restoration of Zion in Jackson County, Mo. That Joseph Smith gave him once the following blessing:

"Thou shall live to good old age, and shall walk over the ashes of all thy enemies. Then you shall sleep with your fathers, and meet the Lord, when he cometh in the clouds."

Now, said John Whitmer, I have lived to a good old age, and I have walked over the ashes of every single one of all my enemies.

We say farewell to one of those who wrote part of the Book of Mormon from the dictation of the Prophet's voice and one of the eight witnesses. He was firm as a rock in his faith, and when Joseph Smith, living in Plano, sent word to John Whitmer to reaffirm his testimony, his answer was: "I have never recalled it, and I have nothing to reaffirm."

In regard to joining the Church, he said: "I have a testimony within me, that testimony I got when I was raised up as a witness—that testimony has never left my bosom, it is by me to this day, and I am in the very place where I have to be, according to the Book of Mormon, which is the law that came out from Zion, which center stake is never to be taken away from here, in Jackson County, Mo." He had a firm and most absolute faith in the restoration and triumph of Zion on this continent, and the building of temples in Independence and Far West, Mo.

John Whitmer was in possession of copies from the plates, with the translation below, and showed to me, and also of other valuable records. I shall correspond with Sarah Whitmer, and hope she will be willing, with the permission of David Whitmer, to restore those documents to the Church.

Yours truly,

P. Wilhelm Poulson, M. D.

<https://whitmercollege.com/interviews/dr-p-wilhelm-poulson-1878/>

Dr. P. Wilhelm Poulson Reports

Visit with David Whitmer, 1878

**Source: P. W. Poulson to editors of the *Deseret News*, 13 Aug 1878,
cited from *Deseret News*, 16 Aug 1878, p. 2.**

[Dr. Poulson, living in Ogden, wrote to the editors of the *Deseret News* concerning a visit he had had with David Whitmer. The *News* published those portions of the letter it thought would be of interest to its readers in its issue of August 16, 1878.]

Ogden City, August 13, 1878.

Editors *Deseret News*:

Several persons have inquired of me about David Whitmer, especially since the publication in the *News* of a letter about the late John Whitmer. If the *Deseret News* will give the space in its columns it will afford me pleasure to write what I know about him from my visit to Richmond, Missouri, and also my personal conversation with him.

He is now 73 years old but is a wonderfully well-preserved man, tall and erect as a pine, well proportioned, with a military bearing, Roman nose and dark eyes full of fire and expression. His forehead is broad and large, and his head nearly bald, but well-balanced.

In company with a son and grandson, Mr. Whitmer keeps a livery and feed stable at Richmond, Missouri, the old grandfather is principally relieved from business, but he makes his regular trips down to the stables, and to the minute as in olden times.

David Whitmer's sister [Elizabeth Ann] was married to Oliver Cowdery, whose remains rest in the graveyard at Richmond, and who practiced law in that town from 1838 to 1849, [only intermittently] when he died in full faith and bore testimony about his visions. On his deathbed he requested to be buried without any display or large attendance, and he wanted no gravestone to be erected over his ashes. David Whitmer said his brother-in-law was, in many respects, a peculiar man. David's brother, Jacob Whitmer, one of the witnesses, lived and died in Richmond, and his grave is only a short distance from Cowdery's. On Jacob's grave is erected a fine marble stone. On the top of the stone appears his name and next we discover the cut of the Book of Mormon laid open, with a blooming rose resting on the divine, and the book resting upon the closed-up Bible. Jacob Whitmer died April 21, 1856, aged 56 years, 2 months and 26 days.

After a self introduction to David Whitmer and some general conversation, I remarked to him:

I – You are one of the Three Witnesses?

He – I am one of them.

I – And you saw the angel, and he showed you the plates?

He – The Book of Mormon is true, as true as any record can be, I saw the angel, and I saw the sword of Laban, and the breastplate, and the Urim and Thummim, and the plates and the director, and the angel stood before us, and he turned the leaves one by one.

I – Did the angel turn all the leaves before you as you looked on it?

He – No, not all, only that part of the book which was not sealed, and what there was sealed appeared as solid to my view as wood.

I – How many of the plates were sealed?

He – About half of the book was sealed. Those leaves which were not sealed, about the half of the first part of the book, were numerous, and the angel turned them over before our eyes. There is yet to be given a translation about Jared's people's doings and of Nephi, and many other records and books, which all has to be done, when the time comes.

I – How large were the plates?

He – About eight inches wide and six or seven inches long, as they appeared a little wider than long, and three rings kept the plates together; one above, one in the middle, and one below, so the angel could turn every leaf entirely over. The thickness was about of a common sheet of tin used by tinsmiths.

I – How did the engravings look?

He – There were characters. We copied some, and if you visit my brother John, one of the Eight Witnesses, who wrote for Joseph, John can show you some of the old manuscript which he borrowed from me. I must have it returned to me again, as it belongs to the Church, in connection with other records.

I – Martin Harris, who died lately in Smithfield, Utah, gave a testimony in Salt Lake City Tabernacle that he saw the plates by faith and the power of God.

He – Martin Harris is correct. He was not by us at all when he first saw the angel. First when we told him what we had seen, and were the second time in prayer all together, and when the angel appeared for a second time, we saw Martin Harris by us, and he saw, and we saw it, and our testimony which we give to the world is true exactly as you read it, we saw by the gift and power of God. As we were praying, the angel stood before us in his glory, and all things were before us on a table, and we heard the testimony about the plates, and we were commanded to bear that testimony to the world, and our testimony is true. And when the angel had finished his words, and shown us the plates one by one, which were to be translated, then the vision was closed at once, and exactly as it came even so did the sight disappear.

I – But these things which you saw were material things, how could they come and vanish away again?

He – It is the power of God. He does those things and his angels know how to do it. It was wonderful to us, but it was by the power of God. He had appointed his angels to be the guardians of the plates and other things, and the angel knew how it was done.

I – Did the Eight Witnesses not handle the plates as a material substance?

He – We did not, but they did, because of the faith of Joseph became so great that the angel, the guardian of the plates, gave the plates up to Joseph for a time, that those Eight Witnesses could see and handle them.

I – Did not Joseph, at an earlier period, have the full possession of those plates?

He – Yes, he did do in the commencement, but the persecution grew so hot that the angel took possession of the records, and showed those things, as he did, to Cowdery, Harris and me, and in the presence of Joseph, and afterwards he was allowed to show the plates to the Eight Witnesses.

I – Where are the plates now?

He – In a cave, where the angel has hidden them up till the time arrives when the plates, which are sealed, shall be translated. God will yet raise up a mighty one, who shall do his work till it is finished and Jesus comes again.

I – Where is that cave?

He – In the state of New York.

I – In the Hill Cumorah?

He – No, but not far from that place. I saw the place where the plates were found, and a great many did so, and it awakened an excitement at the time, because the worst enemies of “Mormonism” stirred up the confusion by telling about the plates which Joseph found, and the “gold bible” which he was in possession of, so he was in constant danger of being robbed and killed.

I – How did the place look?

He – It was a stone box, and the stones looked to me as if they were cemented together. That was on the side of the hill, and a little down from the top.

I – How did you know Joseph to be at that time?

He – He was a very humble and meek man, and very simple, indeed. He did the will of the Lord, and an arduous task it was to translate the Book of Mormon.

I – Did Joseph use the Urim and Thummim when he translated?

He – The Urim and Thummim were two white stones, each of them cased in as spectacles are, in a kind of silver casing, but the bow between the stones was more heavy, and longer apart between the stones, than we usually find in spectacles. Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, Emma, and my brother John each at different times wrote for Joseph as he translated.

I – When will the temple be built at Independence?

He – Right after the great tribulation is over.

I – What do you mean by that?

He – A civil war more bloody and cruel than the rebellion. It will be a smashing up of this nation, about which time the second great work has to be done, a work like Joseph did, and the translation of the sealed plates, and peace all over.

I – Will you live and see those things?

He – It was said to us, that the second great work should commence when nearly all the witnesses to the first plates had passed away, so I may live and see those things take place.

I – You are in good health?

He – I am in very well indeed for my age. I am not troubled with anything except a little rheumatism or what it is in my hops. I was thrown from a buggy, and feel ever since some weakness over my hips.

This conversation was mostly written down word for word half an hour after the interview with David Whitmer, esq., who will recognize it as his words, and I send it that the public may form a better idea about this truly remarkable man.

Yours truly,

P. Wilhelm Poulson, M.D.