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Joseph's Gold Bible

CHAPTER I

The story of the *Book of Mormon* cannot be separated from its self-proclaimed “author and proprietor,” Joseph Smith Jr.¹ The fifth child born into the farming family of Joseph and Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Jr. entered the world two days before Christmas, 1805, in the small town of Sharon, Vermont. In an era when children provided critical labor for a farm’s viability, the Smith family eventually grew to include six sons and three daughters. By the time Joseph was ten, his family had already moved several times, a tortuous migratory pattern that began after Joseph’s father sold his long-established Vermont farm to settle a debt he had incurred speculating on a cargo of ginseng sent to China. In the coming years, the Smith family migrated from one farm to another, drifting ever farther west to cheaper and less developed tracts of land. Eventually relocating to the burgeoning town of Palmyra, New York, Joseph’s father once



This image of Joseph Smith Jr. is the standard portrait of the prophet encountered by all who read the most recent missionary editions of the *Book of Mormon*. Courtesy of the Church Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

again attempted to start anew by working his own land and letting his sons out as day laborers.

In the opening years of the nineteenth century, Palmyra and its surrounding countryside stood on the farthest edge of the nation's rapidly expanding frontier. From 1790 to 1820, upstate New York grew from roughly 350,000 to nearly 1.4 million inhabitants, and yet for all the promises the region held out to those wishing to make a new life for themselves, uncleared land, harsh weather, and poor roads made

farm failure and debilitating poverty ever-present threats.² Complete economic collapse hovered so constantly at the Smith doorstep that Joseph's father became interested (and got Joseph interested as well) in seeking hidden treasure using divining rods and other magical instruments in vain attempts to gain riches from the earth in ways other than farming. In Palmyra, just as they had done on numerous farms before, the Smiths led difficult and dispiriting lives.

While Joseph Smith Sr. turned to treasure hunting to alleviate his family's precarious economic situation, Lucy Mack Smith found her solace in religion. She joined the local Presbyterian congregation and encouraged her family to seek comfort and guidance in faith.³ It was a time of particularly fervent religious activity on the New York frontier as the region was filled with all manner of revivalist preachers, missionaries, and other spiritual entrepreneurs. Baptists, Methodists, Quakers, Shakers, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Universalists all competed for the attention and religious loyalty of people desperate to make a living off land that only a few years before had been largely untouched by the plow.⁴ Palmyra was not immune to the region's pulsating religious fervor. In 1808 during a Baptist revival, one hundred Palmyrans converted, a number so large that it necessitated the building of a meeting hall for the hamlet's new believers.⁵

Central to the spiritual vision of many of those wishing to spread the Gospel on New York's hard-scrabble frontier was the promise that every individual could experience an unmediated and personal relationship with an omnipotent God. Such a relationship was often confirmed through dreams, fits, visions, and trances. While power might be wrested daily from their hands through the acts of relentless rent collectors, heartless shopkeepers, and disreputable land agents, many frontiersmen and women found themselves able to commune with a God who not only cared about their problems but also wielded the power to offer meaningful aid. Those who participated in camp meetings and other religious services took great comfort in the fact that God frequently revealed his presence and power through physical healing, electric-like pulses of ecstatic joy, or prophetic visions of the future. Just as those in the early Christian Church had been able to hold regular and direct discourse with God, many on the New York frontier experienced a similar, life-changing access to the Almighty.⁶

In this spiritually vibrant culture, the young Joseph experienced his own highly personal encounter with God at the age of fourteen. Long interested in religion, Joseph had begun to read his Bible regularly at the age of twelve and even joined the probationary class at the local Methodist church, hoping for

his own heartfelt experience of religion. He ended up confused and disenchanted with the religious enthusiasm that surrounded him.⁷ In an effort to bring clarity to his spiritual quest, he decided to take the Bible at its word when it encouraged, “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5). Joseph retreated to the woods near his home to ask God which one of the many competing religious sects actually taught his truths.⁸ In an event later christened “The First Vision,” Joseph claimed that God the Father and his son, Jesus Christ, had appeared and forbade him to join any of the religious bodies in the region.⁹ They instructed him to wait for an angelic visitation that would lead him to true faith.

According to Joseph, these promises were fulfilled three years later on September 21, 1823, when a floating, white-robed angelic figure named Moroni visited him in his room late one night.¹⁰ Moroni told him that there was a “book deposited, written upon gold plates,” that gave an account of the former inhabitants of the American continent and also taught “the fulness of the everlasting Gospel” as Jesus had delivered it to those ancient people.¹¹ Although Joseph was allowed to glimpse the plates the day after Moroni’s initial appearance, he was not permitted to remove them immediately from their centuries-old hiding place. Only four years later did Moroni allow Joseph to remove the plates, which

had been buried under a stone slab on a hill roughly three miles south of his family's Palmyra farm. Later the hill would come to be known as "Cumorah" after a location named in the *Book of Mormon*. In the months that followed, Joseph learned that he was to translate only a portion of the plates. Certain plates containing prophecies of the future were to remain sealed until a time "when the people of the Lord are prepared, and found worthy."¹²

Joseph had taken along with him his new bride, Emma, when he set out to recover the plates just after the stroke of midnight on September 22, 1827. He found the stone slab, levered it off with a sturdy stick, and recovered the plates along with an ancient breastplate and two stones called "interpreters." The interpreters were set in eyeglass-like frames that could be attached to the breastplate.¹³ The whole apparatus was later referred to as the Old Testament divination tool called the "Urim and Thummim."¹⁴ Joseph and Emma returned to the Smith farm, but not before hiding the plates in an old hollowed-out birch log along the way.

The safety of the plates was a primary concern for Joseph from the moment he unearthed them.¹⁵ The birch log was but the first of a series of hiding places he found for the plates as he settled on the best way to begin translating them. In the days that followed, Joseph's mother, Lucy, helped him com-

mission a local cabinetmaker to build a cherry-wood chest to hold them.¹⁶ Joseph transferred the plates to the chest and then constantly moved the chest around the farm to keep it out of the hands of robbers. What came to be known throughout the area as Joseph's "Gold Bible" proved to be a sore temptation for an ever-growing number of treasure hunters intent on making their fortune by stealing Joseph's golden plates.¹⁷ For the next three years Joseph waged a constant battle to protect the plates from others who had more interest in their gold than in their spiritual substance.

Joseph quickly realized that he would need financial help if he were ever going to find the time to translate and raise the capital to publish the plates' message. He turned to one of Palmyra's wealthier citizens, a farmer named Martin Harris, for help. Harris had frequently given Joseph work on his farm just a mile north of Palmyra, and he was known by his neighbors as a kind, if somewhat religiously enthusiastic, man.¹⁸ Upon first broaching the topic of the plates, Joseph informed Harris that an angel had appointed the farmer to be a special aide to his translation work. Harris went home, retired to his bedroom, and prayed about Joseph's proposition. His prayers were quickly answered, for in a "still small voice spoken in the soul" Harris felt that the Lord told him that the plates were indeed "de-

signed to bring in the fullness of [God's] gospel."¹⁹ He accepted Joseph's commission.

Because others in Palmyra were so insistent on seeing the plates—to the point that a mob declared its intention to tar and feather Joseph if he would not show them his newfound treasure—Joseph decided to take the plates and translation stones to Emma's parents' farm in Harmony, Pennsylvania, some 135 miles southeast of Palmyra. Stealing away late one evening with the plates hidden in a barrel of beans, Joseph and Emma surreptitiously journeyed to Harmony. Complicating an already long and difficult journey was the fact that Emma was now pregnant with the couple's first child. When they arrived, they found Emma's father, Isaac Hale, highly skeptical of the existence, much less the message, of Joseph's plates. Joseph allowed Hale to heft the box that contained the plates, but did not allow him to see the plates themselves.²⁰ Hale was incensed by this secrecy and demanded that Joseph find honest work if he wished to stay in his home. Over the next few months Joseph simultaneously worked his father-in-law's land and attempted to carve out time to translate the plates.

Translating the plates was no easy task, and as Joseph began the work, he struggled to find a method to reveal the plates' message. In the earliest days of the translation endeavor, Joseph worked

with Emma to draw as precisely as possible a few of the characters he found on the plates. Just two months after his move to Harmony, Martin Harris arrived in Harmony announcing that God had told him of the significance of Joseph's translation work, and proffering his help. At intermittent intervals over the next year and a half, the two men worked together to transcribe the plates. At one point, Harris even took samples of the figures Joseph had copied from the plates, along with their accompanying translations, and sought out leading ancient-language scholars in Utica, Albany, and New York City who might be able to confirm, and possibly even aid them in, their work.²¹

Reports differ concerning to whom exactly Harris showed these facsimiles and what their conclusions were. The most famous individual he consulted was Charles Anthon, professor of classical studies at Columbia College in New York City. Anthon later claimed that he had verified neither Joseph's transcriptions nor his preliminary translation work. Harris, on the other hand, claimed that Anthon had fully confirmed Joseph's work, but then withdrew his endorsement once he learned that the figures came from golden plates unearthed by a poor farmer in upstate New York. Anthon demanded to see the original plates, something that Harris told him was impossible. Anthon then fa-

mously declared that he could not read a “sealed book,” a statement that Joseph later claimed to be a fulfillment of the Isaiah passage that told of a “book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this I pray thee, and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed” (Isa. 29:11).²² Undeterred by Anthon’s skepticism, Harris returned to Joseph utterly convinced of the authenticity of the message the golden plates contained.²³

Upon Harris’s return, the two men sat down anew to translate the plates, moving from concentrating on copying the plates’ intricate symbols to depending ever more heavily on the “interpreters,” and later a single seer stone (which he had found while digging a well for one of his Palmyra neighbors in 1822), to guide the translation. From April through June of 1828, the two men sat at a table with a curtain dividing them as Joseph used the “interpreters” to painstakingly dictate the plates’ message. By the middle of June, they had translated 116 pages of what later became known as the Book of Lehi. The work was so arduous, and Joseph’s claims at times so unbelievable, that Harris began to question once again whether Joseph was indeed translating ancient plates or simply making a fool of him in order to swindle him out of his money. As the work proceeded, Harris repeatedly asked to see the plates, and repeatedly Joseph refused. Not

even granted a glimpse of the plates, Harris began to doubt the entire endeavor.

Nursing his own doubts and stinging from the persistent skepticism of his wife, Harris began to beg that he might at least be permitted to take the manuscript home to show his family. Harris's wife had long believed the worst of Joseph. She did not credit the plates' existence, and repeatedly told her husband that all Joseph wanted was to cheat him out of his wealth.²⁴ At last Joseph relented and told Harris that he had received divine permission for Harris to show the manuscript to five members of his closest family: his wife, his brother, his parents, and his sister-in-law. Joseph, however, remained uneasy about releasing the manuscript and required that Harris take a solemn oath that he would carefully guard the work and reveal it only to the five people he had named. Harris readily agreed and eagerly set off for his home with the manuscript.

The decision proved a disastrous one. Upon arriving at his home in Palmyra, Harris locked the manuscript in a bureau drawer. The pages seemingly placated his wife, and, encouraged by having tangible evidence to support his claims concerning Joseph and the importance of their work together, Harris began to show the manuscript to people not named in the covenant he had made with Joseph. Soon, he was showing the manuscript to any visi-

tor who happened to stop at his home. In a matter of days, the manuscript disappeared. No one is sure what became of it, but Joseph's mother, Lucy, suspected Harris's wife of stealing the manuscript to destroy it or alter it in such a way that if Joseph chose to retranslate the section, she would be able to expose the work as a fraud by pointing to discrepancies between the original translation and a later one.²⁵

To make matters worse, Joseph had been required to return the plates and the "interpreters" to Moroni soon after he handed over the manuscript to Harris. With the loss of the manuscript, and now bereft of the plates and the means to translate them, Joseph feared that he had forfeited his divine appointment as revelator of a new Gospel. It was only when Joseph received a revelation chastising him for his carelessness, but assuring him that he would continue to serve as God's revelatory instrument, that he found some measure of peace.²⁶ The plates and the "interpreters" were returned to him on September 22, 1828, the date of Moroni's annual visitation, and the way was once again open to Joseph to become the means of bringing forth a new sacred scripture.

During the following winter, Joseph's work on the translation slowed to a crawl as he spent the majority of his time tending to a small farm he had recently purchased. Emma replaced Harris as her husband's principal scribe, sometimes aided by Joseph's

younger brother Samuel. Working with Emma, Joseph did not begin his translation at the same point he had earlier. Instead, he took up the translation with Emma where he and Harris had stopped (somewhere around the first part of the Book of Mosiah). As they worked, Joseph removed the curtain between him and Emma. The plates simply sat on the table between them, although they remained hidden from view, wrapped in a linen tablecloth. Emma never saw the plates, but she did feel them, later reporting that they gave off a metallic sound when she thumbed them like pages in a book.²⁷ Throughout the translation process, she sat in awe of Joseph's ability to dictate such a complex work. She sat patiently for hours receiving his dictation and later recalled that when they took breaks to eat or do chores, he invariably resumed the story exactly where he had left off without referring to the manuscript they had just transcribed or any other material.²⁸

Emma also claimed that no other book was near them as he dictated God's message. She steadfastly maintained that he could not have hidden such a book from her. Joseph simply used the "interpreters" or a seer stone placed in a hat as he dictated twenty to thirty words at a time. In explaining the later stages of the translation process, Joseph told of words that glowed to life in the seer stone itself. Joseph Knight, a local farmer who witnessed this por-

tion of the translation process, recounted that Joseph saw the words “apper in Brite 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.”²⁹ Examining the stone buried in his hat, Joseph recited each of the revealed words, and he also spelled out the more difficult names of people and places.³⁰ Later, Joseph dictated at times without the plates’ even being present.

The pace of the translation work increased radically in April 1829 when Oliver Cowdery, an occasional schoolteacher and ardent religious enthusiast, appeared on Joseph’s doorstep, having heard of the plates and wanting to know more. Cowdery had traveled from Vermont, where his family’s pastor, Ethan Smith, had become a local celebrity by publishing a book entitled *View of the Hebrews* (1823).³¹ In it, Smith argued that Native Americans were descended from the lost tribes of Israel. Cowdery was almost certainly familiar with the book, and it probably catalyzed his passionate interest in Joseph’s manuscript, which also posited a link between Native Americans and the ancient Hebrews. Joseph soon convinced Cowdery of the importance of the plates and had him replace Emma as his primary scribe.

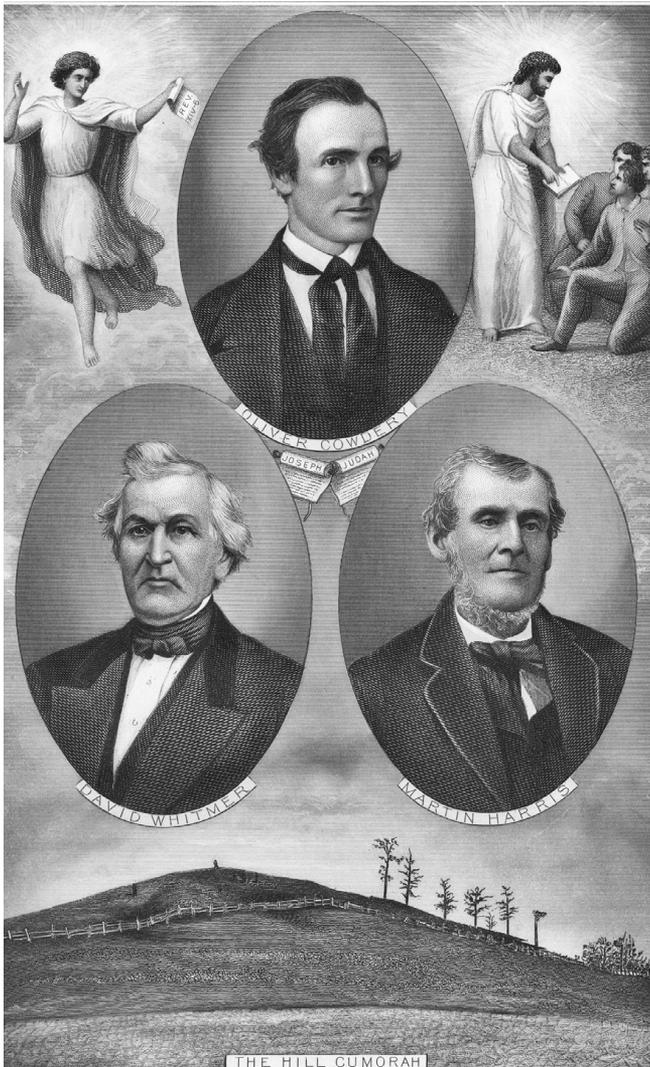
Together the two men embarked on an astounding prolific period of translation work. Over the space of just three months (April through June),

Cowdery—with occasional help from others—copied down 3,500 words a day as Joseph dictated the remaining contents of the plates.³² In June of 1829, Joseph, seeking a place where he could finish the translation without distractions, moved with Emma and Cowdery to Fayette, New York (roughly twenty-seven miles southeast of Palmyra), to take up residence at Peter Whitmer Sr.’s farm. Joseph was an acquaintance of Whitmer, but Peter’s son, David, was a good friend of Cowdery’s. Unlike their homestead near Emma’s parents, the Whitmer farm offered Joseph the solitude and focus he needed to complete the translation. The Whitmer family quickly became enthusiastic supporters of Joseph’s translation work.

As they neared the end of their work on the plates, Joseph once again had to confront Harris’s loss of 116 manuscript pages. After praying for guidance concerning how best to handle these lost pages, Joseph reportedly received a revelation that he was not to retranslate this particular portion of the plates. Doubters might use contradictions between manuscripts to discredit the work as a whole if the missing 116 pages ever reappeared. Instead, Joseph was instructed to translate a new set of plates he later identified as the “Small Plates of Nephi” that contained the books of Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni and covered roughly the same events recorded in the now lost Book of Lehi.

During this frenetic, final period of translation, Joseph also had to deal with Cowdery's increasing desire to act not only as the project's scribe, but as a translator as well. Joseph answered Cowdery's pleas by telling him that he would indeed be given the ability to translate the plates if he would only be patient and earnestly wait upon the Lord for the gift.³³ Cowdery did, in fact, eventually try his hand at translation, but found himself unable to replicate Joseph's success with either the seer stone or the Urim and Thummim. Joseph remained the sole translator of the plates.

Joseph had so jealously guarded the plates that even his most sympathetic associates began to doubt their actual existence as the translation process unfolded. While some had touched the plates either by lifting boxes that held them or feeling their outline under a cloth cover, Joseph was the only person who could say that he had actually seen them. To reassure those around him and give his claims greater credibility, Joseph agreed to take three of his closest supporters—Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer, and Martin Harris—into the woods to pray, to inquire whether they might be allowed to see the plates. As the four men knelt in prayer, nothing happened. After a fruitless period of waiting, Harris dismissed himself, declaring that he lacked the faith to be granted the gift of seeing the plates. After



The three witnesses to the golden plates as pictured atop the Hill Cumorah where the angel Moroni directed Joseph Smith Jr. to uncover the plates. From the *Contributor* 5 (1883): 35; courtesy of Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

he left, an angel holding the plates appeared to the others. Cowdery later reported: “I beheld with my eyes. And handled with my hands the gold plates from which it was translated. I also beheld the Interpreters.”³⁴ Joseph then went in search of Harris, whom he found deeper in the woods. He prayed with Harris, and the two men were then visited by the same angel and shown the same plates.

Just days later, Joseph widened the circle of witnesses by showing the plates to an additional eight men (all of whom later skeptics complained were members of either the Smith or the Whitmer family).³⁵ These eight men were allowed to see and handle the plates without the aid of an angel. Joseph attached the testimonies of these eleven men at the end of the first published version of the *Book of Mormon* to bear witness to “all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come” that he was not the only man who had “seen the plates which contain this record.”³⁶ After he finished his translation work, Joseph claimed that the angel Moroni took back the plates, making him and these eleven witnesses the only people in the modern era ever to see this ancient golden record.

Now came the time to find a publisher for the work, and Joseph faced a double challenge. He needed to find someone willing to print an alleged new sacred scripture, and he needed the funds to

pay for the work. A local printer in Palmyra, Egbert B. Grandin, initially balked at the opportunity to publish Joseph's mammoth manuscript.³⁷ He worried about the massive size of the project (six hundred pages in printed form), about getting paid, and about the response of his Protestant neighbors if he agreed to print a book that questioned traditional Protestant beliefs. This last concern is not to be underestimated. Grandin lived in a revival-soaked community where the Bible reigned as the preeminent, often unquestioned, divine text. Joseph's book promised to significantly challenge the beliefs of those who revered the Bible with its claim to be a revelation that was every bit as divinely inspired and authoritative as their treasured sacred text. Grandin needed to think long and hard before becoming the publisher of a text many would consider an upstart rival to, and thus critique of, the book American Christians held most dear.

Eventually, Grandin did agree to print the book. All the reasons for his change of heart may never be known, but his course reversal came, in part, because Martin Harris guaranteed payment for the book's printing costs and Grandin discovered that another printer, located in Rochester, New York, was willing to undertake the work. If nothing else, Grandin was a pragmatist. If the book's publication

was inevitable, he was willing to risk the ire of his neighbors. Grandin was enough of a businessman to not let work and money go to another printer if he could obtain the commission himself.

Harris mortgaged his farm as a security for the three thousand dollars Grandin demanded to produce five thousand copies of the book. Lucy, Harris's wife, was absolutely livid. She was convinced that Joseph had finally accomplished what he had always intended to do, get her husband's money. She soon left her husband, and, as it turned out, her predictions of financial ruin were well-founded. Once the book was published, it sold so slowly that Harris was forced to sell his farm to settle the unpaid balance of publication costs.

Joseph submitted a title page for the *Book of Mormon* on June 11, 1829, to obtain a copyright for the work, and Grandin hired John Gilbert, another local printer, in August of that year to begin typesetting the book. Grandin, however, was not the first person to publish portions of the *Book of Mormon*. During the typesetting, a Palmyran named Abner Cole obtained some loose pages of the book and, under the pseudonym O. Dogberry, began to publish excerpts of it in his new weekly periodical, the *Reflector*.³⁸ Joseph personally intervened to stop Cole's work, warning him of the penalties for infringing upon his established copyright. After

printing two issues that contained excerpts from the Book of Nephi, Cole desisted.³⁹

As if pirated copies of the book were not trouble enough for Grandin, opposition to the work grew in Palmyra. Rumors circulated that men were eager to obtain the manuscript in order to destroy it, and Grandin worried about his personal safety and the safety of his print shop. More than a few townspeople tried to convince him to abandon the work, vowing never to buy a copy of the book. Threats against the book also worried Joseph, who, still haunted by the loss of the 116 pages he had entrusted to Harris's care, instructed Cowdery to recopy the entire manuscript to safeguard the translation. Ultimately, Cowdery's second copy came to be known as the "Printer's Manuscript," and Joseph instructed that the Original and Printer's Manuscripts never be in Grandin's print shop at the same time. Gilbert typeset most of the *Book of Mormon* from the Printer's Manuscript until roughly the last sixth of the book, when Cowdery fell behind in his copying work and Gilbert was forced to use the Original Manuscript.⁴⁰ As a final precaution, Joseph ordered that anyone carrying manuscript pages between the Smith farm and the printing office not travel alone.

It is notable that although the manuscript was closely and legibly written, it contained precious few punctuation marks from beginning to end. Gil-

bert became almost totally responsible for punctuating the text as he typeset it. Joseph came to the print shop to revel in the appearance of the first pages of the book, but after his initial interest in the printing process, he largely left the details and editing of the manuscript to Cowdery and Gilbert.⁴¹ Cowdery even learned to set type in order to help see the book published.

In March 1830, the book was finally finished, and Grandin began to advertise it for sale. The area's boycott proved unusually effective, and hundreds of copies languished in Grandin's storeroom. Martin Harris, who had struck a deal with the Smiths to be able to sell the books on his own in exchange for his financial backing, found that no one wanted the Gold Bible.⁴² Joseph even sent out his younger brother Samuel to peddle the book as a traveling salesman, but he had no more luck than Harris.⁴³ Samuel took seriously Joseph's claims that "the Book of Mormon [was] a record of the forefathers of our western Tribes of Indians," and emphasized that the book was a history of the region and "the origin of the Indians."⁴⁴ Even with this stress on the historical nature of the book, New Yorkers shunned the *Book of Mormon* as the worst type of blasphemy. Aside from the fact that its very existence bespoke the inadequacy of the Bible so many Americans held dear, the *Book of Mormon's* immense thematic and historical complexity did not



Imaginative re-creation of the golden plates placed behind a first edition of the *Book of Mormon*. Photo by Mark Philbrick; courtesy of Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University

enhance the work's appeal. Years later, Mark Twain went so far as to call the book "chloroform in print" because of what he perceived to be its overly repetitive and hopelessly convoluted nature.⁴⁵

Joseph did not apologize for the complexity of his book. After all, one of the Bible's most distinctive features was its complicated nature. *The Book of*

Mormon echoed the Bible not only in this regard, but in its very language and multibook format. Joseph translated the plates in a style of language strangely reminiscent of the English found in the King James Version. Clearly, lines such as “And it came to pass that the Lord spake unto me, saying: Blessed are thou, Nephi, because of thy faith, for thou hast sought me diligently, with lowliness of heart” signaled that the book was not just another newfangled novel or traditional antebellum historical chronicle.⁴⁶ Its very language was biblical. The book also echoed the Bible’s basic structure. The Protestant Bible, deriving its very name from the Greek words *τὰ βιβλία* meaning “the books,” contains sixty-six different books in its Old and New Testaments. These books differ widely in terms of genre. Some contain epic histories, while others are composed of biographic, poetic, or prophetic writing. In total, the Bible’s narrative covers some four thousand years of ancient history. The structure of the *Book of Mormon* ran in a similar vein. It contained fifteen different books spanning centuries of history, often named after biblical-sounding authors such as Jacob and Alma, and echoed the Bible in its stories of divinely favored people traveling to a promised land, the global importance of the House of Israel, the fulfillment of various sacred prophecies, and the messianic mission of Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

As Joseph explained the origin of his new scripture, he told how Mormon and his son, Moroni, redacted a much larger body of work to create the *Book of Mormon*. This view is critical to an understanding of the book's importance. Mormon and Moroni stood in a long line of prophets, historians, and scribes who reportedly helped write and store thousands of records telling of God's work on the American continent and beyond. Through this great host of record keepers, the *Book of Mormon* taught that each of the tribes that left Palestine kept carefully preserved accounts of God's dealings with them. The *Book of Mormon* hinted at this multiplicity of records when it had God declaring, "For behold, I shall speak unto the Jews, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the Nephites, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto the other tribes of the House of Israel, which I have led away, and they shall write it; and I shall also speak unto all the nations of the earth, and they shall write it."⁴⁸

Thus the *Book of Mormon* taught that people over vast expanses of time and space received their own revelations from God. Judea no longer possessed a monopoly on divinely inspired biblical content; throughout the ages, all the world had been filled with sacred revelation. The *Book of Mormon* is just one such divine record, and the Bible simply stood as one of its sister-texts. Furthermore,

because of their common, divine origins, the Bible and the *Book of Mormon* testified to each other's veracity. The implication of so many divine records not only pushed the Bible aside as the world's single most important text, but it made the Bible a companion piece to countless other Bible-like records that, while now lost, extended God's message to people in any place and age who might be spiritually attuned to his words.

Joseph positioned himself in this lineage of records and record keepers as God's most recent chosen instrument of grace and redemptive enlightenment. In the final analysis, the *Book of Mormon* could be seen as an analogue to the lever Joseph had first used to move the stone slab to obtain the golden plates hidden below. It pried open the canon of Christian scripture, the set of books contained in the most widely accepted versions of the Bible. To open the canon was to accept that God's revelation did not cease with the apostles of the early Church but continued into the present age, and that additions could be made to the sixty-six books most commonly accepted by Protestants in their version of the Bible.

In the eyes of Joseph's Protestant contemporaries, new books had not been added to the scriptural canon since the fourth century CE. Through the *Book of Mormon*, Joseph sought to change this

fact. From these plates, Joseph claimed to have produced a new, equally valid history of God's redemptive work. In fact, he soon went one step further. He claimed that the *Book of Mormon* was a purer text than the Protestant Bible.⁴⁹ It had been passed to his hands directly from America's own ancient and inspired scribes, and had not been defiled by centuries of scribal error and Church politics. Along with its more pristine status, the book also testified to the fact that the canon of scripture was not closed. The *Book of Mormon* vividly showed that the Bible was not the only scripture available to those who believed in Christ. A multitude of scriptural accounts existed, of which the Bible and the *Book of Mormon* were only two examples.

In the clearest possible terms, the *Book of Mormon* promised a new era of prophecy and intimate contact with the Divine. Telling anyone who would listen, Joseph proclaimed that God had not only spoken to the ancient Jews of the Middle East; he had spoken to the ancient inhabitants of the Americas. More importantly, Joseph wished those around him to realize that God was still speaking, and in his inscrutable wisdom had chosen Joseph as the Prophet ordained to inaugurate a new biblical age.

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