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The Book of Mormon, the Most Correct Book

by
LeGrand L. Baker

The Prophet Joseph Smith wrote, "I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man could get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book."¹ He could not have been suggesting that it rivaled the literary genius of Shakespeare with his 32,000 word vocabulary, nor could he have been trying to claim its language approached the grandeur of the King James Bible. Yet he said it was the world's most correct book, and his saying so gives us the right to ask, What do you mean by correct?

The key to the answer of that question is found tucked away in the prophet's history. There is a story which helps answer the question, Who, besides Joseph Smith, was responsible for translating the Book of Mormon into the English language? The quick and easy answer is, "Moroni, he taught him;" but a full answer might also include Alma, "Mormon, Moroni, Nephi and others of the ancient Prophets who formerly lived on this continent,"² and who were the original authors of the Book of Mormon.

The story is this: When Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery moved into the Whitmer home to complete the translation of the Book of Mormon, Mrs. Whitmer became tired and felt a bit disgruntled because of the extra work they caused. Joseph had shown the plates to no one, so the Whitmer's had little tangible evidence that he and Oliver were actually doing anything constructive. It seemed unfair to their hostess that she should have to do all the extra work while her house guests did nothing to help.

The Lord responded to her needs with empathy and kindness. Years later, her son, David, told President Joseph F. Smith and Orson Pratt that one day when his mother was going out to milk the cows, an angel appeared to her and explained what Joseph was doing. The angel said,

'You have been very faithful and diligent in your labors, but you are tired because of the increase in your toil; it is proper, therefore, that you should receive a witness that your faith may be strengthened,' Thereupon he showed her the plates.³

Her grandson, John C. Whitmer, reported that she had told him the same story, adding that the angel "turned the leaves of the book of plates over, leaf after leaf, and also showed her the engravings upon them; after which he told her to be patient and faithful in bearing her burden a little longer...." His grandmother always referred to that angel as "Brother Nephi."⁴ Both son and grandson testify that Mrs. Whitmer never complained again about looking after Joseph Smith. However, she did get someone to help her with kitchen and household chores.

When Mrs. Whitmer hired her niece, Sarah Conrad,⁵ she did not tell her what Joseph and Oliver were doing, but Sarah knew something unusual was going on. She noticed that the Prophet and his friend "would go up into the attic, and they would stay all day. When they came down, they looked more like heavenly beings than they did just ordinary men."⁶ The "heavenly" appearance was far more than just a personable smile; they had a kind of translucent glow about them. When Wilford Woodruff tried to describe the glow in the Prophet's countenance at the time he delivered his last address to the Twelve Apostles, "His face was clear as amber." Then he added, "The room was filled as with consuming fire."⁷

At first this glowing caused "Sallie" to be curious, but in time it actually frightened her. She went to her aunt and threatened to leave if she were not told what made those men shine. When Sarah was an old lady, living in Utah, she told Oliver B. Huntington about her experience and he recorded it in his own diary.

I conversed with one old lady 88 years old who lived with David Whitmer when Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery were translating the Book of Mormon in the upper room of the house and she, only a girl, saw them come down from the translating room several times, when they looked so exceedingly white and strange that she enquired of Mrs. Whitmer the cause of their unusual appearance, but Mrs. Whitmer was unwilling to tell the hired girl, the true cause as it was a sacred holy event connected with a holy sacred work which [was] opposed and persecuted by nearly every one who heard of it.

The girl felt so strangely at seeing so strange and unusual appearance, she finally told Mrs. Whitmer that she would not stay with her unless she knew the cause of the strange looks of those men.

Sister Whitmer then told her what the men were doing in the room above and that the power of God was so great in the room that they could hardly endure it. At times angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them.⁸

The light Sarah had seen in Joseph's face came from his having been with the angels.

This explanation satisfied Sarah. She not only stayed with the Whitmer's, but became one of Joseph's good friends, was baptized, and much later, moved to Utah when the Church was driven from Nauvoo.

Sarah's testimony that the men who translated the Book of Mormon "looked so exceedingly white," and Mrs. Whitmer's explanation -- "that the power of God was so great in the room that they could hardly endure it. At times angels were in the room in their glory which nearly consumed them" -- gives us a valuable key to understanding the Book of Mormon. After Joseph and Oliver moved to the Whitmer's it took them less than two months to finish their work. They translated almost all of the Book of Mormon during that time. One may assume that if there were angels in the room they had some purpose for being there other than just "to pass the time of day."

Parley P. Pratt did not identify the angels, but he understood why they were there. He testified that through Joseph Smith "and the ministration of holy angels to him, that book came forth to the world."⁹

Moroni had introduced Joseph to other Book of Mormon prophets even before Joseph

actually had the Book of Mormon plates. The Prophet wrote almost nothing about these meetings, but he alluded to them in his letter to John Wentworth,

After having received many visits from the angels unfolding the majesty and glory of the events that should transpire in the last days, on the morning of the 22nd of September, A.D. 1827, the angel of the Lord delivered the records into my hands.¹⁰

Joseph also told his closest associates about them, and several intimated what they knew.

Orson Pratt testified that "during those four years he was often ministered to by the angels of God, and received instruction" from them.¹¹ President John Taylor said, "I can tell you what he told me about it," then, in the course of his story, reported,

Afterward the Angel Moroni came to him and revealed to him the Book of Mormon, with the history of which you are generally familiar, and also with the statements that I am now making pertaining to these things. And then came Nephi, one of the ancient prophets, that had lived upon this continent, who had an interest in the welfare of the people that he had lived amongst in those days.¹²

On another occasion President Taylor said,

And when Joseph Smith was raised up as a Prophet of God, Mormon, Moroni, Nephi and others of the ancient Prophets who formerly lived on this continent, and Peter and John and others who lived on the Asiatic Continent, came to him and communicated to him certain principles pertaining to the Gospel of the Son of God. ... He was indebted to God; and we are indebted to God and to him for all the intelligence that we have on these subjects.¹³

George Q. Cannon added his testimony without being explicit about times and places:

He [Joseph Smith] was visited constantly by angels; ... Moroni, in the beginning as you know, to prepare him for his mission came and ministered and talked to him from time to time, and he had vision after vision in order that his mind might be fully saturated with a knowledge of the things of God....¹⁴

Neither Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, the Whitmers, nor Sarah Conrad left any record identifying who the angels were who spent so much time with the Prophet during those final days when he was rushing to complete his translation. But President John Taylor may have known:

Again, who more likely than Mormon and Nephi, and some of those prophets who had ministered to the people upon this continent, under the influence of the same Gospel, to operate again as its representatives? Well, now, do I believe that Joseph Smith saw the several angels alleged to have been seen by him as described one after another: Yes, I do.¹⁵

One cannot read the words of the Book of Mormon prophets without being aware they were very concerned that their message be accurately conveyed to us.¹⁶ There is nothing that would be more consistent with that desire on their part, than for those men to be present when Joseph translated their own writings. It is consistent with all else this writer knows, to believe that when Joseph got to the 12th and 13th chapters of Alma, Alma was there to make sure that the English translation conveyed precisely the ideas which he had written in the original; and so with Nephi, Moroni, Mormon and the others.

If that is true, then the correctness the Prophet referred to when describing the Book of Mormon has nothing to do with literary style but is about the precision of the words used in the translation. The Book of Mormon is a perfect translation because its English represents exactly the ideas of the prophets who first wrote it.

The greatest problem for translators is that words have more than one meaning, and the translator must decide which meaning the author intended before he can select a word with a similar meaning in the second language. If he misjudges, his translation may be technically accurate but still fail to convey the meaning intended by the author. A possible example may be in John 3:3. The Saviour is quoted as saying: "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be

born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." In verse 7 he adds, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again." The Greek word translated "again" is unique in the New Testament, for it is used nowhere else in the scripture. It may mean "from above," "from the first," "anew," "again," or "from the beginning (very first)."¹⁷ So the Saviour might have said to Nicodemus, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew." or "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above." Or He may have reminded Nicodemus of commitments made in his pre-mortal life by saying, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born as from the beginning." One can assume that if John the Beloved had been a member of the committee which translated the Bible, there would be no question about which meaning the Saviour intended his words to convey. The correctness of the Book of Mormon stems from the fact that it had that advantage.

A Greek scholar may analyze the words in New Testament to discover their various possible meanings, and he may gain some important insights about what may have been intended, but he can never speak about the meaning with absolute certainty. On the other hand, if the original authors of the Book of Mormon helped the Prophet Joseph translate the work, and if they selected the English words with great care, then anyone who can read English can go to the Book of Mormon and discover precisely what message the original author intended his words to convey.

That precision of language imposes upon its readers the obligation to read with great care before they draw conclusions about meaning, but even then it does not guarantee there will be no pitfalls. For one thing, English words also have more than one meaning, and the reader is still left to discover which meaning the author intended. The fact that two readers can believe a statement means different things is clear evidence that the readers understand the words

differently, but is not evidence the words were not carefully chosen. For another, the English Joseph Smith spoke one hundred and fifty years ago was not exactly the same as ours, and that can cause problems. For example, the first verse of the 13th chapter of Alma introduces a beautiful discourse on fore-ordination with these words, "And again, my brethren, I would cite your minds forward to the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children..." To the modern American reader the phrase "cite your minds forward" implies a reference to the future, yet the other verb in the sentence, "gave," is unquestionably past tense, and the subject of the discourse, fore-ordination, is a part of our distant past. Apparently the word "forward" does not convey the same meaning to us as it did to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries. The first definition of "forward" in the multi-volume Oxford English Dictionary is "the first or earliest part of (a period of time, etc.)."¹⁸ Such a definition would be appropriate here, but it is very old. One can not know whether it was correct in parts of New England until Joseph Smith's time, but another, equally appropriate, meaning very likely was in use. Even today, in England, Australia, and other English speaking countries (but not in America) the word "forward" can mean "in the direction of." Whether that direction is toward the back or front makes no difference. So when one gets on a bus in England he is apt to hear, "Please step forward to the rear of the bus."

Without knowing Joseph Smith's usage we cannot know whether Alma said, "I would cite your minds to the 'earliest part of' time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children...," or whether he said, "I would cite your minds 'in the direction of' the time when the Lord God gave these commandments unto his children...." The fact that Americans no longer understand the Book of Mormon usage is only a commentary of the changes in the language. Such evidence cannot be used to show an inexactitude of the translation. Neither can the fact

that some uses of words in the Book of Mormon may have become archaic color the more important fact that when it was written, it was written with great precision. Neither does it give us licence to read without care. Not many words in the book are used differently from the way they were used in Joseph Smith's time.

One of the reasons the Book of Mormon is difficult for some people to read is that, for them, the book is written with too much care and too much attention to its choice of words. Since most of what we read is not written with the care of a major decision of the United States Supreme Court, and since we are not accustomed to thinking of the scriptures as being written with that kind of care, we are often caught asking questions about the meaning of a passage in the wrong order, so the questions themselves preclude enlightening answers. If we ask, What does the scripture mean? before we have asked, and answered, What does the scripture say? we will make little progress in our understanding.

One's greatest strength is often one's greatest weakness, and that seems to be true of the Book of Mormon. If the reader does not take the precision of its words into consideration the very precision of the book can get in the way of his understanding. For example, the first verse in the Book of Mormon reads,

I, Nephi, having been born of goodly parents, therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father; and having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless, having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea, having had a great knowledge of the goodness and the mysteries of God, therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

If one were to read that sentence the way he would read a novel, he might come away with a notion like: Nephi had righteous parents; he understood the Gospel and loved the Lord even though he experienced some hard times in his life. While all that may be true, it is nothing like what the verse says.

In ancient languages, like Egyptian, which use no punctuation, the relationship of ideas is established by words rather than by the structure and punctuation of the sentence. The words which are most important are the verbs and the conjunctions. The two words which give meaning to this verse are "having" and "therefore." If one wishes to ignore these two words he can make the verse mean almost anything, but without them, it actually says nothing at all. When proper emphasis is placed upon those two words, the statement is seen to be one of the most meaningful and precise introductions to an autobiography in any literature:

I, Nephi,

[1] having been born of goodly parents,

therefore I was taught somewhat in all the learning of my father [The word "therefore" ties the meaning of "goodly" to the fact that Nephi was taught.]

[2] having seen many afflictions in the course of my days, nevertheless,

[3] having been highly favored of the Lord in all my days; yea,

[4] having had a great knowledge of the goodness [of God] and

[5] [having had a great knowledge of] the mysteries of God,

therefore I make a record of my proceedings in my days.

The correctness of the Book of Mormon is found in the precision of its clarity.

Because the Book of Mormon is such a careful translation, it retains much of the style of the original Egyptian. That not only means it does not sound like "everyday English," it also means it can not be read like "everyday English." In that fact lays its correctness and its illusiveness. But if one will read the Book of Mormon with the understanding that the book says exactly what it intends to say, being aware that the key to what it says is found in its verbs and conjunctions, then its meanings will leap from their hiding places, and the reader will find great joy in keeping President Benson's admonition that we read the Book of Mormon.

FOOTNOTES

1. Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 4: 461.
2. This statement by President John Taylor is quoted in context below. George Q. Cannon, who did not know the Prophet, added Alma to the list: Joseph Smith "had doubtless, also, visits from Nephi and it may be from Alma and others...." JD 13: 47
3. Andrew Jenson, LDS Biographical Encyclopedia, 1: 267.
Andrew Jenson, Historical Record 7: 621.
4. Historical Record, 1: 283
5. Pearl Bunnell Newell, "History of Sarah (Sallie) Heller Conrad Bunnell," and "My Grandmother Bunnell" (Typed copy in author's possession.).
6. Interview statement reported in, Richard L. Anderson, "The House where the Church Was Organized," Improvement Era, April, 1970, p. 21.
7. Wilford Woodruff, Conference Report, April, 1898, p. 89.
8. Oliver B. Huntington, "Diary," typescript copy at BYU library. 2: 415-6.
9. Journal of Discourses, 9: 212.
10. Joseph Smith, History of the Church, 4: 537.
11. JD 15: 185. See similar testimonies in JD 13: 66 and 14: 140.
12. JD 21: 161.
13. JD 27: 374.
14. JD 23: 363.
15. JD 21: 164.
16. 2 Ne. 33: 3-4; 3 Ne. 5: 18; Mormon 8: 12, 9: 30-31; Enos 1: 15-16; Ether 12: 25-29. See also, 2 Ne. 3: 19-21, 26: 16, chapter 27; Mormon 5: 12-13; Mosiah 1: 7; D&C 17: 6.
17. James Strong, Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible, New York (Thomas Nelson Publishers), 1984. p. 22.
18. Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford, Eng. (Clarendon Press), 1933. 4: 481.

