

BOOK OF MORMON LESSON #1
"THE KEYSTONE OF OUR RELIGION"
by Ted L. Gibbons

Welcome to lessons for 2004. Welcome to the *Book of Mormon*. I consider your presence in this Cyberspace Sunday School at LDSLiving to be a serious stewardship. I will generally follow the Sunday School manual in my lessons. But I am not interested in replacing your Sunday School teacher. I will be honored if I can help you in your study of this book, but I will be devastated if my work lessens your interaction with the auxiliaries of the Church. Go to Sunday School.

Each week I will provide you with a favorite quote regarding the Book of Mormon. Here is the first one:

Quote of the week:

My brethren and sisters, the Book of Mormon is one of the greatest works in all the world. With the witness that I speak of there has come to me other knowledge, without which the testimony of the divinity of the Book of Mormon would not be of much value; but, the Book of Mormon being true, the truthfulness of it having been borne in upon my soul, I know . . . that God lives as an entity, a tangible being, in whose form I am fashioned and in whose likeness I am made. I know, beyond all peradventure of a doubt, that he is in very deed my Father, that I can call upon him as such, and that when I come before him in prayer, in sympathy, he will hear; and if my prayers are for righteous things he will grant unto me those things for which I ask. Through this book, knowing that it is true, I also have this witness, and to me it is valid, that Jesus is the Son of God; that he is the Redeemer of the world; that he was born of woman and lived in the world among men and ministered unto them and established the gospel; that he was nailed upon a cross and suffered for the sins of all men, redeemed them from the grave,

broke the bonds of death, and instituted the resurrection, becoming the first fruits of it; and he lives, for this book testifies that he lives (Rey L. Pratt, Conference Report, October 1929, p.20).

INTRODUCTION: We stand at the entrance to a great edifice, with innumerable rooms of varying size and purpose, and every room a repository of the riches of eternity. I saved a *Calvin and Hobbes* cartoon because of the lesson it teaches about the scriptures. Calvin had a shovel and was digging in the yard. Hobbes came along to observe, and wanted to know if Calvin had found anything. "An few dirty rocks, a weird root, and some disgusting grubs," were the things Calving mentioned that he had found.

"On your first try?" Hobbes asked, amazed.

"There's treasure everywhere!" Calvin assured him.

And in like manner I assure you that in this place—in this book—*there's treasure everywhere!* I will point out some exquisite sculptures we sometimes overlook. We will look at some etchings of silver glittering in infrequently explored closets and upper rooms. We'll examine some fabulous jewelry that has often been noticed but perhaps not fully appreciated. Feel free—indeed, feel *obligated*, to wander off on your own. Take all the time you can. Move slowly through building. Shine your light around and stop to examine what you see. Walk out on the balconies of the Helaman rooms and wander through the back hallways of the large Alma wing. Investigate the sheds and the out-buildings of Ether. And when you find things of great value, ask the important questions: Why is this treasure here? How will it enrich me, my family, my ward.

Elder Holland suggested to CES personnel that they teach their students to read scripture in the following way, a way that has had great value for me:

Invite them to read more slowly and more carefully and with

more questions in mind. Help them to ponder, to examine every word, every scriptural gem. Teach them to hold it up to the light and turn it, look and see what's reflected there. For some student, on a given day with a given need, such an examination may unearth a treasure hidden in a field, or a pearl of great price, a pearl beyond price (Jeffrey R. Holland: CES Video Conference, 20 June 1982, videocassette).

During this tour, we will linger at times, pausing to examine and reflect and compare. Some corridors and rooms we will pass through more quickly. You may wish the pace were altered to fit your personal tastes, but since I am the guide, you are rather compelled to move at my speed, unless of course you choose to strike off on your own. *I hope you will!* There are no locks in this castle that cannot be opened with time and the Spirit. Go where you will. Stay as long as you like. If you decide to join us again, you know where we will be and we will be delighted to have you back again.

It is no small thing to volunteer to guide believers through the halls and rooms of the most remarkable scriptural edifice ever constructed. But if you are willing to tag along once in a while, I am willing to try. Are you ready? Let's open the door and go in. Prophets are here waiting to teach us.

I. THE BOOK OF MORMON IS THE KEystone OF OUR RELIGION

Find a Book of Mormon. Hold it. Riffle through some of the pages. Examine the type and the text. The book is real. *It exists.* This has become a great dilemma for our detractors and our enemies. Since the book is here, it must have come from somewhere. For 170 years a multitude of unbelievers have been trying to explain where exactly that was. Hugh Nibley spoke of this predicament. He said:

There are three possible explanations for the origin of the Book of Mormon. One is that it is a product of spontaneous generation. Another is that it came into existence in the way Joseph Smith said it did, by special messengers and gifts from God. The third is

the hypothesis that Joseph Smith or some other party or parties simply made it all up. No experiments have ever been carried out for testing any of these theories. The first has not even been considered, the second has been dismissed with a contemptuous wave of the hand, and the third has been accepted without question or hesitation.

And yet the third theory is quite as extravagant as the other two, demanding unlimited gullibility and the suspension of all critical judgment in any who would accept it. It is based on the simple proposition that since people have written books, somebody, namely Smith or a contemporary, wrote this one. But to make this thesis stick is to show not only that people have written big books, but that somebody has been able to produce a big book like this one. But no other such book exists. Where will you find another work remotely approaching the Book of Mormon in scope and daring? It appears suddenly out of nothing--not an accumulation of twenty-five years like the Koran, but a single staggering performance, bursting on a shocked and scandalized world like an explosion, the full-blown history of an ancient people, following them through all the trials, triumphs, and vicissitudes of a thousand years without a break, telling how a civilization originated, rose to momentary greatness, and passed away, giving due attention to every phase of civilized history in a densely compact and rapidly moving story that interweaves dozens of plots with an inexhaustible fertility of invention and an uncanny consistency that is never caught in a slip or contradiction. We respectfully solicit the name of any student or professor in the world who could come within ten thousand miles of such a performance. As a sheer tour-de-force there is nothing like it. The theory that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon simply will not stand examination. (*Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, Vol.7, Ch.6, pp.137, 138)

Elder Holland spoke in different words of this same reality. I am going to

provide the entire quote. It is lengthy, but worth a careful scrutiny.

[I only] say what so many have said before: that if Joseph Smith—or anyone else, for that matter—created the Book of Mormon out of whole cloth, that to me is a far greater miracle than the proposition that he translated the book from ancient records with an endowment of divine power to do so.

Has anyone here ever tried to write anything? Have you ever, with your degrees and libraries and computers and research assistants, ever tried to write anything anyone could stand to read?

Even if you have my guess is you haven't succeeded at writing anything anyone would read more than once, or say it changed their lives, or say that were willing to leave family and fortune and future for—and then do it. You thought it was tough to have your dissertation committee grill you for a couple of hours. How about tossing your piece of work to the most hostile—and learned—of enemies for, say, 164 years (just to pull a number out of the air). Go ahead. Put that terrific master's thesis of yours out there under a microscope for everyone to kick and gouge and attack for a century or two, and let's see how marvelous that university-produced accomplishment of yours really was. After a little of that are you still standing by the divinity and immortality of your work? Is anybody still reading it?

In light of all this, as it applies to the Book of Mormon which is still changing human lives and still moving moral mountains, and as one who has tried to write a line or two of both poetry and prose and failed miserably, I want to meet the author of this work whoever it is. I want to praise first hand such a remarkably gifted writer.

Furthermore I'd love to read anything else this elusive figure has

ever written. I'd love to talk to the whole research team who must have produced it. If they've got anything else they've ever put their pen to, I'll pay any amount of money to get hold of it. This is writing that moves millions so more of it could certainly make millions. Let's talk contracts. Surely in 164 years there must be someone willing to step forward— you know, the “real” author—claiming credit for such a remarkable document and all that has transpired in its wake. Or at least those descendants of such an author should have come forth by now willing to cashier the whole thing.

Where are they? Well the simple fact of the matter is no other origin for the Book of Mormon has ever come to light because there isn't one. A bad man could not have fabricated such an inspiring book and a good man would not have done so. (Elder Jeffrey R. Holland, CES Symposium, BYU Marriott Center, 9 August 1994)

Look at the book again. The hand and power of God are behind it. The witness of the divinity of Christ is in it. The fulness of the gospel comes from it. Elder McConkie, in a remarkable sermon given at BYU on 18 August 1978, after expressing his love and “reverential awe” for the Bible, made the following five statements about this book:

1. Most of the doctrines of the gospel, as set forth in the Book of Mormon, far surpass their comparable recitation in the Bible.
2. This Nephite record bears a plainer and purer witness of the divine Sonship of Christ and the salvation which comes in and through his holy name than do the old world scriptures.
3. Men can get nearer to the Lord; can have more of conversion and conformity in their hearts; can have stronger testimonies; and can get a better understanding of the doctrines of salvation through the Book of Mormon than they can through the Bible.

4. More people will flock to the gospel standard; more souls will be converted; more of scattered Israel will be gathered; and more people will migrate from one place to another because of the Book of Mormon than was or will be the case with the Bible.
5. There will be more people saved in the kingdom of God—ten thousand times over—because of the Book of Mormon than there will be because of the Bible. (“The Book of Mormon—Its Eternal Destiny,” by Elder Bruce R. McConkie: Church Education Symposium, Brigham Young University, August 18, 1978)

Turn in your Book of Mormon to the Introduction and read the sixth paragraph: 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 would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book.

I remember looking at the arches in the Roman ruins at Caesarea. They all had keystones—specially shaped stones at the top of the arch designed to hold the arch together and to keep it from collapsing. And those arches still standing had been there for 2000 years! The image is clear enough. What would happen to the Church and to your testimony of the Church if it were to be proved tomorrow, conclusively and incontrovertibly, that the Book of Mormon is a fraud?

President Benson said

. . . a keystone is the central stone in an arch, which holds all other stones in place things. Surely the Book of Mormon is a sacred thing, and yet if removed, the arch crumbles. . . . there are three ways in which the Book of Mormon is the keystone of the religion of Latter-day Saints. "It is the keystone in the witness of

Christ. It is the keystone of our doctrine. It is the keystone of testimony." (Ensign, Nov. 1986, p. 5)

Elder McConkie taught that

The Prophet's expression that "the Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion" means precisely what it says. The keystone is the central stone in the top of the arch. If that stone is removed, then the arch crumbles, which, in effect, means that *Mormonism* so-called -- which actually is the gospel of Christ, restored anew in this day -- *stands or falls with the truth or the falsity of the Book of Mormon*. Thus our program and our purpose, as witnesses of the Lord in this day, ought to be to devise ways and means and to create inducements that will persuade those who are not of us to read the Book of Mormon and to read it according to the revealed pattern. (Bruce R. McConkie, Conference Report, April 1961, pp.38-39, *emphasis added*)

Turn to the Title Page of the Book of Mormon. Joseph Smith told us in 1830 that " . . . the title-page of the Book of Mormon is a literal translation, taken from the very last leaf, on the left hand side of the collection or book of plates, which contained the record which has been translated, the language of the whole running the same as all Hebrew writing in general; and that said title-page is not by any means a modern composition, either of mine or of any other man who has lived or does live in this generation." (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, Section One 1830–34, p.7)

Moroni told us in Mormon 8:5 that he would write the intent of the book if he had room on the plates or ore to make more plates, but he had neither. Clearly he found ore, however. For he later abridged the book of Ether and wrote the book of Moroni, and he wrote the intent of the book on the final gold leaf, on what we call the 'title page'. The title page of the book suggests three great purposes for the Book of Mormon, and they can be summarized in three words: *show*, *know*, and *convince*.

SHOW: The book will show a remnant of the House of Israel—the Lamanites—the “great things the Lord hath done for their fathers”

KNOW: The book will help them know “the covenants of the Lord,” which assure them “that they are not cast off forever”

CONVINCE: The book will help convince “the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.”

If you are interested, other purposes of the book can be reviewed in D&C 10:62,63, Mormon 3:20, and D&C 20:13-15.

II. MANY WITNESSES HAVE TESTIFIED OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

The three witnesses and the eight witnesses wrote testimonies that are included in every copy of the Book of Mormon. They are both remarkable statements but they are very different. It might be worth while to consider for a moment why these two groups of witnesses had such different experiences.

How would people have responded if the only witness were the witness of the three? Their’s is a wonderful testimony founded exclusively in the supernatural.

- G “We know [the plates] have been translated by the gift and power of God”
- G “His voice hath declared it unto us”
- G “The engravings . . . have been shown unto us by the power of God”
- G “An angel of God came down from Heaven”
- G “The voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record.”

These were men who claimed to have gone off into the woods to pray, and who said that they saw the plates and an angel and heard the voice of God saying that the translation was correct. How would people rationalize this testimony. Perhaps they would call the experience an hallucination. Mass hypnosis. Perhaps a drunken reverie.

But what if the only testimony were the testimony of the eight who went out by the barn in Palmyra and saw and handled the plates as they lay on a stump. Their language is literal and temporal.

G "Joseph Smith . . . has shown unto us the plates"

G They have "the appearance of gold"

G "We did handle [them] with our hands"

G "We saw the engravings"

G "All of which has the appearance of ancient work and curious workmanship"

G "We have seen and hefted"

G "We . . . know of a surety that said Smith has got the plates"

Their testimony is so practical, so literal, so simple. Eight men in broad daylight saw and handled and examined the plates. But they did not know of their divinity from this experience. They could only affirm that the plates they were deceived by a clever craftsman.

Taken together, however, these witnesses, and the witness of the Prophet Joseph Smith (which follows theirs in the beginning of the Book of Mormon), are a powerful affirmation to every person who reads the book, now matter how spiritual or cynical he or she might be. One might ignore the testimonies of these men, but together they are almost impossible to contradict.

But there are other testimonies. Our literature is filled with the accounts of those who read and prayed and *knew*. Here are some examples:

Within a few days of obtaining a copy of the Book of Mormon, Sidney Rigdon knew, by direct revelation, that it was true. "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto me, but my Father which is in heaven" (p. 68). Luman Shurtliff "heard a sweet melodious voice" testify to the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith and the truth of the Book of Mormon (pp. 71-72). Harrison Burgess testified that "a glorious personage clothed in white" came to him and showed

him the plates from which the Book of Mormon had been translated (p. 27). Benjamin Brown found himself strongly rebuked by two of the Three Nephites for his lack of faith in the Book of Mormon, and then heard "the Spirit of the Lord" say to him, "Now, you know for yourself! You have seen and heard! If you now fall away, there is no forgiveness for you" (p. 31). The angel Moroni appeared to Oliver Granger and testified to him of the truthfulness of the book (p. 10).

Such joy, however, was not always the immediate reaction of those who came to know the truth of the Book of Mormon. The case of Daniel Spencer, Jr., illustrates this well. In 1840, he was a highly successful businessman in West Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Then the missionaries arrived. He listened to their message and gave it serious consideration. One day, while his son was with him in his study, he suddenly burst into tears and cried out, "My God, the thing is true, and as an honest man I must embrace it; but it will cost me all I have got on earth." Nevertheless, he accepted baptism and moved to Nauvoo, where he eventually succeeded Joseph Smith as mayor of the city. (Daniel C. Peterson, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon*, p.16,17; the numbers in parentheses after each account are from Susan Easton Black, ed., *Stories from the Early Saints: Converted by the Book of Mormon*)

To all of this I add my witness, just as you will add yours. I know the Book is the work and the word of God. The witness of it's divine origins came to me with burning power in 1965 as I sat reading 2 Nephi 4. It came again as a quiet, penetrating affirmation as I knelt alone late at night with the book in my hands. It came as a part of the most powerful experience I have ever had with the Spirit. Therefore, to the witness of Oliver and David and Martin and the others, I add my own. And I express my willingness to share that witness with anyone who will hold still long enough to listen.

III. THE BOOK OF MORMON WAS WRITTEN FOR OUR DAY.

The plates were buried for 1400 years. The labor of engraving and preserving was not for those whose lives and histories are given in the thousand years of history, nor for those who lived soon after. They are for us. This reality is best expressed by Moroni, but it is implied throughout the book. Moroni said:

Behold, the Lord hath shown unto me great and marvelous things concerning that which must shortly come, at that day when these things shall come forth among you. Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and yet ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. (Mormon 8:34,35)

The title page mentions this truth—that the book was written with us in mind: “Written by way of commandment, and also *by the spirit of prophecy and of revelation.*” Why write by the spirit of “prophecy and revelation” unless you are writing for the future? It was for this reason that the book was “sealed up” and “hid up” until the time that the work should come forth to those who needed it most.

Why do we have such a great need? For at least three reasons: (1) In a world that retreats from the concept of absolute truth, or religious truth of any kind, this book gives us a chance to know the “truth of all things.” (2) In a world turning away from a belief in the divinity of Christ, this book offers “Another Testament of Jesus Christ”—an independent, beautiful, inspiring witness of his divinity and atonement. (3) In a world with thousands of different religions (the United States had 2,630 denominations at the beginning of 2003), where even the meaning of the words of God in the Bible are misunderstood, this book teaches us how to conform to his will.

IV. THE BOOK OF MORMON CAN BRING US NEARER TO GOD

The Book of Mormon has power to change human nature. Joseph’s promise that abiding by its precepts will bring us closer to God is a promise that has been repeated many times by other prophets.

Elder Spencer W. Kimball said of this book in 1963,

But after all, it is not the book's dramatic crises, its history, its narrative that are so important, but its power to transform men into Christlike beings worthy of exaltation. (Spencer W. Kimball, Conference Report, April 1963, p.6)

I have felt that transforming power in my own life. I suspect that you have too.

President Benson, who may have been the greatest advocate this book has had since the Prophet Joseph Smith, said something very similar about the study of the Book of Mormon:

The Book of Mormon will change your life. It will fortify you against the evils of our day. It will bring a spirituality into your life that no other book will. It will be the most important book you will read in preparation for a mission and for life. A young man who knows and loves the Book of Mormon, who has read it several times, who has an abiding testimony of its truthfulness, and who applies its teachings will be able to stand against the wiles of the devil and will be a mighty tool in the hands of the Lord. (Ensign, May 1986 p. 43.)

President Hinckley said it this way:

"Without reservation, I promise you solemnly that if each of you will observe this simple program, regardless of how many times you previously may have read the Book of Mormon, there will come into your lives...an added measure of the spirit of the Lord, a strengthened resolution to walk in obedience to His commandments, and a stronger testimony of the living reality of the Son of God." (Gordon B. Hinckley, *Faith, the Essence of True Religion*, p. 64)

CONCLUSION:

As you study this book, a witness of its divinity will come into your hearts, again and again. This is a spectacular blessing, but it is not the destination of this journey. Knowing the book is true is terribly important, but it is for all of that less important than what else we know *when* we know the book is true. For you see, if the Book of Mormon is true, then Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world, and Joseph Smith was his prophet, and the Church of Jesus Christ is restored again on the earth. If it is true, then we are accountable for the teachings and the doctrines and the instructions and the injunctions given in its pages. Nephi wrote these words from the Son of God:

For I command all men, both in the east and in the west, and in the north, and in the south, and in the islands of the sea, that they shall write the words which I speak unto them; for out of the books which shall be written I will judge the world, every man according to their works, according to that which is written (2 Nephi 29:11)

It is in a quest for those teachings and doctrines and instructions and injunctions that we come searching. They are the treasures that will show us the way to eternal life, and he that hath eternal life is rich."

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A NOTE FROM THE TEACHER: I want these lessons to be useful to you. I want, as much as possible, to meet your needs and expectations. Please feel free to contact me with concerns and suggestions and insights and inquiries. You can reach me through LDSLiving. Have a great year!

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