

Joseph Smith in the Book of Mormon

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DID JOSEPH SMITH WRITE the Book of Mormon? To this over-familiar question the orthodox Latter-day Saint answer is a resounding "No" because the official belief is that a series of men with quasi-biblical names wrote the book over many centuries. For some critics of Mormonism the answer is an equally emphatic No, but for a different reason. Such critics have charged that the Book of Mormon was plagiarized from Solomon Spaulding's lost novel of Israelites in ancient America, "Manuscript Found."¹ A third group, liberal Mormons and fellow travelers, tend to recognize Joseph Smith as the author of the book, inspired though he may perhaps have been by earlier works such as Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.² I find myself in company with this third group. Here I want to call attention to the obvious. Given that those of us in this category agree on the nineteenth-century origin of the Book of Mormon, we may dismiss any theory that ascribes to it a non-Mormon, pre-Mormon origin; the Mormon origin of the scripture is clear from the straightforward fact that Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints movement, even the Book of Mormon itself, are repeatedly mentioned in its pages in an unmistakable fashion. While this observation does not preclude the possibility that some apostolic confederate of the Prophet may have written the book at his direction, the references to Joseph Smith and his church in the Book of Mormon make it fully evident that the text was not borrowed from some non-Mormon work. It is impossible that someone outside the

1. Gordon H. Fraser, "Who Did Write the Book of Mormon?" *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach? An Examination of the Historical and Scientific Statements of the Book of Mormon* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 102-109. The title sounds strange to today's readers but is of a piece with contemporary works such as Poe's "MS. Found in a Bottle" available, e.g., in *Complete Stories of Edgar Allan Poe*, International Collectors Edition (Harden City; NY: Doubleday, 1966), 148-155, originally published in 1831; and the anonymous *A Strange Manuscript Found in a Copper Cylinder* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1888).

2. David Persuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of The Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1991).

movement wrote the book as a Bible pastiche and that Joseph Smith subsequently decided to build a religion upon it.

MESSIAH BEN JOSEPH

The first piece of evidence which indicates a Mormon origin to the Book of Mormon is the fact that the Book of Mormon "anticipates" the coming of a future scion of the line of Joseph the Genesis patriarch, son of Jacob. The Old Testament Joseph's own boyhood visions (Genesis 37:5-10) prefigured his eventual rise to the right hand of Pharaoh, to viceregency over all mankind. Much later, Jewish sectarians appear to have understood these dreams to have further prophesied the eventual advent of a Northern, Ephraimite Messiah, a Messiah ben Joseph, who, for the sake of the sins of Israel, should die in battle against the heathen in the Last Days, clearing the way for the victorious Judean Messiah ben David to emerge. As Geza Vermes has suggested,³ this role may have been created to dignify the vanquished second-century CE messianic pretender Simon bar Kochba, assigning him a genuine role in the prophetic scenario, even if not that of the final deliverer.

I am suggesting that, in effect, the Book of Mormon revives such a role for Joseph Smith. As virtually all commentators acknowledge, granting this messianic role to Joseph Smith is the point of 2 Nephi, chapter 3:

Yea, Joseph truly said: Thus saith the Lord unto me: A choice seer will I raise up out of the fruit of thy loins. . . And he shall be great like unto Moses. . . Behold, that seer will the Lord bless; and they that seek to destroy him shall be confounded. . . And his name shall be called after me; and it shall be after the name of his father. And he shall be like unto me; for the thing, which the Lord shall bring forth by his hand, by the power of the Lord shall bring my people unto salvation.

Likewise, Jacob 2:25, "I have led this people forth out of the land of Jerusalem, by the power of mine arm, that I might raise up unto me a righteous branch from the fruit of the loins of Joseph."

Unless Joseph Smith ever made claim to Jewish descent, we must suppose he implicitly numbered himself among that remnant of the Lost Tribes of Israel who, in the course of their migrations, splintered from the main group, henceforth to live among the Gentiles, thereby becoming a leavening influence among them and preparing the heathen nations for the coming of faith in Christ.⁴ This Mormon version of the British Israel theory would seem to underlie Joseph Smith's claims to be the latter-day scion of the tribe of Joseph. In fact, one might

3. Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1977), 139-140.

4. R. Clayton Brough, *The Lost Tribes of Israel: History, Doctrine, Prophecies, and Theories About Israel's Lost Ten Tribes* (Bountiful: Horizon Publishers, 1979), 32-37.

view him as following in the footsteps of English messiah Richard Brothers (1757-1824), who esteemed himself to be the heir to the House of David, one of an imagined great legion of Jews living among the British population, oblivious of their own true racial identity.⁵

Perhaps the ancient prophetic figure most closely analogous to Joseph Smith would be the Prophet Muhammad (if not the Apostle Mani, founder of Manichaeism in the third century). Muhammad, too, planted a retroactive scriptural endorsement of his own mission. In a section of the Koran which supposedly represents the preaching of Muhammad but was at least composed by early Muslims, we read of Jesus foretelling the coming of his Arab successor: "Jesus. . . said to the Israelites: 'I am sent forth to you by Allah to confirm the Torah already revealed and to give news of an apostle that will come after me whose name is Ahmed'" (61:6).

Among more recent messiahs, we may think of Pentecostal faith healer William Marrion Branham, whose followers cherished various exalted estimates of him, some deeming him the forerunner of the Second Coming, others seeing in him the Messiah himself, still others a separate incarnation of God in his own right. His own view of his mission seems humble by comparison, for he implied transparently that he was the Elijah heralding the return of Jesus Christ. And, to create his own credentials for the job, Branham revealed that he who should occupy this role should have a name at least partially modeled upon "*Abraham*."⁶ Similarly, the Rev. Sun Myung Moon explained that the Lord of the Second Advent, he who should fulfill the suspended mission of Jesus Christ, would have to be born in Korea, the Third Israel.⁷ To recount these parallels is not an invitation to cynicism. It seems altogether fitting, in fact, for such a figure to accentuate his messianic status by creating, as it were, a scriptural door through which to walk onto the stage of history. Hugh J. Schonfield understood Jesus himself to have created a prophetic identity, that of the Suffering Servant, from synthesizing various scriptures, then raising that identity like a cross on his shoulder as he marched into destiny.)⁸

INFINITE REGRESS

The Book of Mormon story of the Plates of Jared (Mosiah 8:5-19; 28:11-18; Ether, chapters 1-3) surely seeks to furnish a scriptural subtext to which the

5. Michael Barkun, *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 6. See also Jack Gratus, *The False Messiahs* (New York: Taplinger, 1975), 179-185; H.L. Goudge, *The British Israel Theory* (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1933).

6. William Marrion Branham, *Twentieth Century Prophet: The Messenger to the Laodicean Church Age* (Jeffersonville, IN: Spoken Word Publications, nd.), 68-69.

7. Divine Principle, 2d ed. (New York: Holy Spirit Association for the Unification of World Christianity, 1973), 527-529.

8. Hugh J. Schonfield, *The Passover Plot: New Light on the History of Jesus* (New York: Bernard Geis Associates/Random House, 1965), 215-227.

"discovery" of the Book of Mormon itself may be seen to correspond. The first followers of Joseph Smith will have recognized themselves in an "ancient" "history" that provided the script for their own performance. Readers of the Book of Mormon are warned or reassured that model faith, such as the blessed ancients possessed, pointedly included belief in newly discovered ancient records.

Like the Prophet Smith himself, King Mosiah translated these metallic records not by the exercise of linguistic skills, but by use of the oracular Urim and Thummim, pictured as a pair of glasses so large that the frame encompassing the two lenses was as big as an archer's bow—presumably the legacy of antediluvian giants of the Bible (mammoth Jaredites are also hinted at in Ether 1:34; 13:15; 14:10; 15:26).⁹ Who has the power to handle such things? The account of the translation of the Jared text takes the opportunity, again, of magnifying the role of Joseph Smith, for which Mosiah provides a scriptural counterpart: "a seer is greater than a prophet. . . a seer is a revelator and a prophet also; and a gift which is greater can no man have. . . a seer can know of things which are past, and also of things which are to come, and by them shall all things be revealed" (Mosiah 8:15-17). The mention of "things which are past" is a revealing hint. When we think of a seer, literally a visionary, one who sees clairvoyantly, we are not to think of him as tied to written texts which may predict the future, but think rather of such texts as themselves the products of seers in the past. Likewise, for a seer to have clairvoyant access to the past ought presumably to denote his special mission—as do Rudolf Steiner's claims to be able to read past history, including the hidden history of Jesus, from the Akashic Record (etheric imprints of all past events).¹⁰ In this verse, in this claim, I think we have a candid expression of what Joseph Smith was really doing with his seer stone, gazing into the bottom of a hat all those hours and days as he sat concealed behind the blanket veil and gave dictation. He was seeing an unknown American past in his mind's eye, letting his imagination run free, much as Lord Dunsany did when he dictated jeweled prose-poetic fables off the top of his head to his wife who, pen in hand, sought to keep up. The result in that case is a fictive scripture called *The Gods of Pegana*, only Lord Dunsany never tried to get anyone to believe in the literal truth of it.¹¹

We might compare the Prophet Smith's literary labors, his inspired penmanship, with that of the Roman Catholic mystic Anna Katherina Emmerich, whose *Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ* (1862) is still avidly read by old-school Catholics curious to know the details behind the gospel stories of Jesus,

9. David Chandler, *Book of Mormon Studies* (<http://www.mormonstudies.com>). "Parallels," 4.

10. Rudolf Steiner, *The Fifth Gospel: From the Akashic Record*, trans. A.R. Meuss (East Sussex: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1995).

11. Lord Dunsany, *The Complete Pegana: All the Tales Pertaining to the Fabulous Realm of Pegana*, ed. S.T. Joshi (Oakland, CA: Chaosium, 1998).

as well as more stories about him. Edgar Cayce, too, supplied new gospel vignettes by mining the ostensible memories of previous lives of many for whom he gave psychic readings.¹²

And again, we need not seek far for a parallel with the Prophet Muhammad and the Koran. Muhammad, too, claimed, or had Allah claim, to be vouchsafing hitherto secret episodes of sacred history (3:44; 7:101; 11:49, "That which We have now revealed to you is secret history; it was unknown to you and to your people;"¹³ 11:121; 12:102; 20:100; 28:1), including new versions of old stories. Invariably these new versions had a way of casting light on Muhammad's own career, of paralleling it—which is to say of actually being based on it. Time and again the reader of the Koran is told that Noah, Abraham, Moses, and others suffered the same sort of opposition, even the same specific insults and cat-calls, that Muhammad is said elsewhere in the Koran to have brooked. The stories serve either to encourage the Prophet or to refute his opponents by showing how the ancient heroes faced the same conflicts and used the same polemics with their enemies as Muhammad did against the hostile Quraysh tribe. If Muhammad's opponents mock his warnings of the final catastrophe (34:3; 79:42; 82:9), so did those of Noah and Shoaib (11:32; 29:36-37). If the unbelievers demand miracles from Muhammad (10:30; 13:27; 29:50), they did the same to Houd (11:53). If they accuse him of merely practicing "plain magic" (46:7; 74:24),¹⁴ Jesus and Moses received the same insult (5:110; 10:77). If Muhammad be accused of subverting the religion of the fathers (34:43; 25:42), so were Moses and others (10:79; 14:10). Is Muhammad called a madman (52:29)? So was Noah (54:9). In other words, the polemics of Muhammad's day are prophetically retrojected onto the careers of the worthies of the past.

And so it is with Joseph Smith and his Book of Mormon prophets. Samuel the Lamanite refers to himself, of course, but also Joseph Smith, we cannot help but think, when he excoriates the Nephites:

... if a prophet come among you and declareth unto you the word of the Lord, which testifieth of your sins and iniquities, ye are angry with him, and cast him out and seek all manner of ways to destroy him; yea, you will say that he is a false prophet, and that he is a sinner, and of the devil, because he testifieth that your deeds are evil (Helaman 13:26).

To say of a man "he is of the devil" reflects American sectarian mudslinging rather than biblical idiom. And we see nineteenth-century polemics no less in 2 Nephi 28:29: "Woe be unto him that shall say: We have received the word of

12. Anne Read, *Edgar Cayce on Jesus and his Church* (New York: Paperback Library, 1971).

13. *The Koran*, trans. N.J. Dawood (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1956).

14. It is generally supposed that in his lifetime or soon after the Prophet Muhammad was not believed to have performed miracles, though later Muslim hagiography credited him with many. But we must ask if the accusations of magic do not imply that he did claim to perform miracles.

God, and we need no more of the word of God, for we have enough." Biblical writers never refer to scripture as "the word of God." For them the phrase always denotes a particular message, oracle, command, promise, etc., of God, not a written book. That is Protestant idiom, and the opinion expressed here is that of conventional Presbyterians, Methodists, Congregationalists, and their ilk, whether faced with a new scripture (like the Book of Mormon) or new prophetic and glos-solalic utterances from the Pentecostal movement.¹⁵ The persecutions against which King Mosiah must pass laws to shield the believers anticipate those of the Mormon faithful while the false churches of 2 Nephi 28:3-6, which err by reason of too much fancy education, rejecting the possibility of new miracles and revelations, are plainly those stale Protestant sects of the Burned Over District with which young Joseph Smith had grown so disillusioned. And then, of course, Mormon prophetically predicts that in the days when his record is discovered, the churches will have sunk to the same lows, prizing treasure over repentance, stubbornly denying the possibility of new miracles (Mormon 8:26-33).

Finally, Joseph Smith has provided an ancient counterpart to himself in the person of Alma the church-planting high priest, the chosen vessel of the Lord (Mosiah¹⁶ 25-26). Not coincidentally, Alma baptizes his many converts in the waters of Mormon (Mosiah 25:18; 26:15), as if to make them Mormons before Mormonism.

THE REST OF THE STORY

There is, of course, much more to the Book of Mormon than the elements surveyed so cursorily here. But I venture to suggest that the rest of the book exists to support these featured elements and cannot be easily separated from them. The lion's share of the Book of Mormon narrative is taken up with a fictive American pre-history parallel, not to the actual history of Israel, but to that history as rewritten by the Deuteronomic redactors of the Old Testament. Some of the seventh-century writers of Deuteronomy, and their heirs, cooling their heels by the waters of Babylon during the Exile, undertook a retrospective history of the nation, rewriting it according to the reward-and-punishment schema of the Book of Deuteronomy. In this schema, fidelity to the covenant assures God's blessing while apostasy and backsliding call forth from God a series of wake-up calls, to put it mildly, in the form of famine, disease, military defeats, and finally deportation. The Deuteronomic historians gathered what scraps they could of tribal epic and saga, stories of local victories over Canaanite city states, the establishment of tribal independence from Amorite landlords and warlords,

15. See, for instance, Merrill F. Unger, *New Testament Teaching on Tongues* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1971), 148-149.

16. "Moses" by itself is half an Egyptian name, meaning "—has begotten" or "Son of—," as in *Ramses*, "Ra has begotten him," or *Thutmose*, "Thoth has begotten him." But "Mosiah," albeit a hybrid of Hebrew and Egyptian, would at least have the virtue of completing the fragmentary name as "Yahweh has begotten him."

and on this mixed bag, they superimposed, like an ill-fitting shoe, a theological framework of apostasy bringing judgment (enslavement to Canaanites) and of repentance bringing deliverance (at the hands of the Judges). If not for the redactional reminders (Judges 2:11-23; 3:7-9, 12-15; 4:1-3; 6:1-2, 6-8; 8:33-34; 10:6-16; 13:1) that the story was supposed to be tending in this direction, it would never be evident from the stories themselves. The scenario of "karmic" payback is already a foreign theological imposition on the original patriotic, nationalistic traditions.

Nonetheless, devout Christian readers created an additional layer of spiritual meaning by reading the Deuteronomic History, especially Joshua, as an allegory of the Christian "victorious life," in which one might attain any desired level of victory over personal sin as long as one yielded to the leading of "Joshua" (Jesus) in one's day to day life. Besetting sins might be conquered so long as one left the battle to the grace of God instead of trusting to one's own "fleshly" efforts. The only result of self-reliance or of cherished sins held back from God could be Ai-like disasters (Joshua 7:1-13). This allegorical reading was the only distinctly Christian relevance such a book, with its bloody genocide and "take no prisoners" militarism, could have.

The Book of Mormon actually takes things further in the same direction. In effect, it combines the Deuteronomic History with the Acts of the Apostles, producing an explicitly Christianized saga of the whelming of the Promised Land (America as Canaan, a familiar patriotic theme). The Book of Joshua is no more merely an allegory: The apostate Lamanites represent, quite correctly, the forces of sin and backsliding, the constant temptation for virtuous Nephites, whose virtue, however, is as fragile as the airy currents of the Spirit upon which the "victorious Christian life" of the Revivalist Christian floats. Spiritual setbacks in the Christian life (and the life of the church) are one and the same with the political and military reversals of the Camp of the Saints. The tribes of Israel have become one with, the very same as, the apostolic churches of Acts. The twin models of evangelical piety, Joshua's host, and the idyllic "Early Church," have combined, and the result is a potent paradigm of sectarian enthusiasm which early (and many, many modern) Latter-day Saints emulated.

The story of the Book of Mormon is that of a new and holy people who will not be satisfied with believing that once upon a time such things happened to some people, but rather who expect to live out such adventures—and do so. Without the elements considered above—the central role of Joseph Smith as Messiah ben Joseph, as Alma, and as Mosiah—the Book of Mormon would hang vaguely in space. The historical *Sitz-im-Leben* of such a book demands a fledgling movement such as that founded by Joseph Smith. The calm evening hours of leisurely writing in the study of some New England parson would not have produced such a book which resembles more than anything else a modern role-playing game scenario book: an elaborate sketch of a fantasy world into which the enthusiastic players enter as combatants in imaginary battles and dreamlike adventures of chivalry and courage. The Book of Mormon is a script,

not just a scripture, and it invites action. And the name of the drama is Mormonism. The Book of Mormon was written for that reason and purpose and no other. And it is no surprise to see that Joseph Smith assumes an important role in the play that bears such extensive traces of his creative hand.