

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

A Biblical Scholar Looks at the Book of Mormon

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According to Hugh Nibley, the “father” of contemporary Mormon scriptural and theological scholarship, “The Book of Mormon can and should be tested.”¹ Although there are more ways than one to go about doing so, many of the best tools for testing the Book of Mormon are methods used routinely in biblical scholarship. Biblical scholars investigate such questions as the manuscript history of the biblical texts, the origins of the books of the Bible (who wrote them, where and when, and why), the sources used by the authors, historical information outside the Bible of relevance to its narratives about past events, and the literary forms and style used in the composition of those books.



The use of scholarly methods for studying these questions is not hostile to the Bible (although they are often misused by nonbelievers who are hostile to it). Rather, they are tools that help us understand better how the books of the Bible came to be written and what they actually mean in their original historical and cultural context. Because the books of the Bible are historically authentic writings, such investigation poses no threat to Christian confidence in the Bible.²

We can use these same methods in investigating the origins and historical significance of the Book of Mormon. If it were truly a collection of authentic ancient scriptures translated by Joseph Smith by divine revelation, the proper, fair use of these methods would tend to confirm or support its claims (though not, of course, to prove everything it said). On

¹ Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed., Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 6 (Salt Lake City: Deseret; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988), 16.

² For an overview of such issues pertaining to the Bible, see Robert M. Bowman Jr., “[The Reliability of the Bible](#)” (IRR, 2013), and the references cited there.

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the other hand, the same use of these methods, again applied in a fair-minded way, might show that the Book of Mormon is not what it claims to be.

As someone trained in the methods of biblical scholarship, I have sought to approach the Book of Mormon in this sort of even-handed, open-minded way, applying those methods fairly to see where the evidence leads. My doctoral dissertation showed that a sermon supposedly preached by Jesus to the Nephites (3 Nephi 12-14) was actually copied by Joseph Smith from the King James Version (KJV) translation of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), with small changes that Joseph made himself.³

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Since completing that dissertation, I have been working on a number of writing projects on other issues pertaining to the Book of Mormon. Many of these are now available on the Institute for Religious Research website. We recently completed a major reorganization of the [Book of Mormon part of our website](#), adding a lot of brand-new content and organizing the materials into six major categories. One work in progress on the site is a new [study edition of the Book of Mormon](#), based on the first printed edition of 1830, with textual notes. Rather than discouraging people from studying the Book of Mormon, we want to encourage people to study it more carefully and with greater understanding and discernment. As they do so, I believe they will come to see very clearly that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century fiction.

Here are some questions that careful students of the Book of Mormon should ask. Many of these questions are discussed in detail on our website, and more will be addressed in forthcoming articles.

1. Why did Joseph claim that he used stone spectacles found with the gold plates in 1827 to translate the Book of Mormon, when it is known that he dictated the manuscript using [the same treasure-seeker's seer stone](#) he had used throughout most of the preceding five years as a divining tool to search for buried treasure?
2. Joseph Smith claimed that in 1823 [an angel appeared to him in his bedroom](#) three times during the night, in extremely bright light, each time waking him up and talking with him at length. How could Joseph's brothers, several of whom slept in the same room and one or two in the same bed as Joseph, have been unaware of Joseph staying up most of the night talking to a brilliantly shining angel?
3. How could [classics scholar Charles Anthon](#) have validated a translation of characters copied from the gold plates, as Joseph claimed in Pearl of Great Price

³ Robert M. Bowman Jr., "The Sermon at the Temple in the Book of Mormon: A Critical Examination of Its Authenticity through a Comparison with the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew," Ph.D. diss. (South African Theological Seminary, 2014).

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that Anthon did? No one in America at the time could read ancient Egyptian; the Egyptian of the gold plates was supposedly “altered”; and the Book of Mormon claims that the “learned” man would not be able to read it.

4. Why wasn't Joseph able to find out [what happened to the 116 manuscript pages](#) that Martin Harris lost? He supposedly had a seer stone, frequent meetings with an angel, and revelations from God.
5. What are [the four seas](#) surrounding the Book of Mormon lands (Helaman 3:8)?
6. If the Lehites and Mulekites were (as LDS scholars today argue) only a very small subculture of Israelites living in a predominantly pagan civilization for a millennium, why are there [no references in the Book of Mormon to the other peoples or nations](#), no accounts of the Nephites evangelizing pagans, and no polemics against polytheism, idolatry, human sacrifice, and the like?
7. If the Book of Mormon was written by ancient Israelite prophets living in a Native American society, why do they address so many theological and cultural issues of early nineteenth-century Anglo-American society (atheism, Calvinism, costly apparel, Deism, infant baptism, whether the age of miracles and revelations is past, paid clergy, secret societies, Unitarianism, universalism, etc.) but not issues that have dominated Christianity in the past two centuries since it was published (evolution, religious pluralism, biblical criticism, socialism and Communism, abortion, homosexuality, environmentalism, feminism, genetic engineering, Islam and Islamic terrorism, nuclear war, relativism and postmodernism, etc.)?
8. If writing space on the gold plates was at a premium (there are some forty passages in the Book of Mormon about the need to save space), why does it quote Isaiah at such length (especially all of Isaiah 2-14 in 2 Nephi 12-24) when we are told that the book of Isaiah was on the brass plates?
9. If the Book of Mormon was written by prophets carefully engraving their words in scarce precious metal plates, why are there so many stream-of-consciousness corrections (“or in other words,” “or rather,” etc.) and extremely repetitious passages (e.g., 4 Nephi 1:6)?
10. Why are the Book of Mormon passages quoting Isaiah more than 96 percent verbally identical to the KJV, with a disproportionate number of the small changes of one or two words each associated with italicized words in the KJV (i.e., words added in the KJV to complete the sense in English)?

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11. When Jesus preached to the Nephites (3 Nephi 12-14), why did he make *some* changes to the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., no explicit references to the Pharisees) but leave so many other things unchanged that presupposed the cultural and religious context of first-century Jews in Galilee and Judea, such as going two miles when forced to go one, the “jot and tittle” of Scripture, swearing by substitutes for the name of God, “dogs” as a metaphor for Gentiles, knocking on the door, entering a city by a road through a narrow gate, wolves in sheep’s clothing, and on and on?
12. Why are there so many passages throughout the Book of Mormon that contain clear verbal echoes of the New Testament (e.g., 1 Ne. 5:8 = Acts 12:11; 2 Ne. 9:39 = Rom. 8:6; Alma 5:51-52 = Matt. 3:2, 10; 3 Ne. 20:23-27a = Acts 3:22-26; Mormon 9:22-24 = Mark 16:15-18; Moroni 7:44-48 = 1 Cor. 13:38, 13 and 1 John 3:1-3; Moroni 10:8-17 = 1 Cor. 12:4-11)?
13. The Book of Mormon gives a great deal of attention to establishing a “chain of custody” of the gold plates, informing the reader of the identity of the custodian of the plates from Nephi in the sixth century BC to each successive prophet down to the fifth-century AD Moroni, who buried the plates and later revealed their location to Joseph Smith. In order to establish this chain of custody, ten of the eleven Book of Mormon authors introduce themselves right at the beginning of their writing. However, [Mormon does not](#) introduce himself until more than 270 pages (122 chapters) after his writing begins (3 Nephi 5). Why is that, and does this anomaly tell us anything about who really wrote the Book of Mormon?
14. In light of Moroni 10:4-5, how does one explain the fact that there are Christians who have faith in Christ and who have read the Book of Mormon sincerely wanting to know if it was from God and have become convinced that it is not? Are they all insincere?

Our website also features a number of new articles responding to Mormon arguments that claim to show positive evidences in support of the Book of Mormon. Most notably, we have about ten new articles, all written within the last year or so, that address the claim that the [language and style of the Book of Mormon](#) reveals its ancient Israelite origins. Specifically, these articles respond to the claim that the Book of Mormon contains complex examples of chiasmus (a specific type of literary parallelism) and of woodenly translated Hebrew grammatical forms. Here again, I approach these claims as a biblical scholar familiar with these literary and grammatical issues in the context of the study of the Bible.

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If you have questions about the Book of Mormon and you don't find what you need on our website, please contact us. We want to help people know the truth about the Book of Mormon, not to tear down faith in Christ, but to establish it on the solid foundation of the authentic word of God in the Bible.

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http://mit.irr.org/biblical-scholar-looks-book-of-mormon#_irr_end1.

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