



Stone box with gold and silver plates of Darius (516–151 BC) found at Persepolis (in modern Iran); viewed at this angle, the inscription is upside down.

Courtesy Harold B. Lee Library

The Book of Mormon Reference Companion

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[Editors' note: Because the Book of Mormon Reference Companion is one of the most useful teaching reference books in recent years, we asked the general editor of this volume to describe the purpose of this book as well as some things he learned while compiling it.]

The idea for the *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* originated in spring 1996. For some time, biblical scholars have produced encyclopedic dictionaries of the Bible. *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, *Holman Bible Dictionary*, *The New Ungers Bible Dictionary*, and *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* are just a few. Where was the dictionary-encyclopedia for the Book of Mormon? There was not one!

My intention, therefore, was to create a Book of Mormon reference book similar to the encyclopedic Bible dictionaries biblical scholars have published for many years. The “stick of Joseph,” one of the most published and influential books in the world, should have a reference book comparable to its scriptural companion, the “stick of Judah.”

I started by making a list of topics I thought should be included. I began with the index in the Book of Mormon and listed every Book of Mormon person and place, and I then compared my list with lists others had made so that my final list could be considered comprehensive. I then added a list of doctrines I thought should be included and cross-checked it with subject titles in the Bible's Topical Guide and Elder Bruce R. McConkie's *Mormon Doctrine*. With such projects, it often happens that ideas come in the process. By 1996, I had taught Book of Mormon classes at BYU—Hawaii and at BYU for seventeen

years. Based on my teaching experience, I selected Book of Mormon words and phrases where a concise explanation would be helpful to readers. My excitement grew as I contemplated adding more and more topics, listed alphabetically, under one cover. Thus came the inclusion of articles dealing with themes and purposes of the Book of Mormon, historical background of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, Isaiah commentary on each Book of Mormon Isaiah chapter, and articles of general interest such as “archaeology,” “olive trees,” “tree of life in ancient cultures,” “Stela 5,” and “Quetzalcoatl.”

A colleague of mine at BYU—Hawaii had maintained that university students should take a class in the Old Testament before taking classes in the Book of Mormon. He reasoned that an Old Testament background (for example, the history of the house of Israel) was essential in understanding the Book of Mormon, a book whose authors presuppose such understanding. Agreeing with my colleague, I added articles to the *Reference Companion* that dealt with Old Testament background relating to the Book of Mormon. These entries act as prerequisite reading to reading the Book of Mormon. They provide a short course in relevant Old Testament matters.

Essentially, then, the *Reference Companion* could be seen as books within a book—a book on Isaiah, a book on people and places, a book on doctrines of the Book of Mormon, a book on the historical background of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, a book on literary elements of the Book of Mormon, and so forth.

All in all, the *Reference Companion*, written and edited to serve a general English-speaking Church audience from new convert to seasoned member, contains 924 articles covering over fifteen hundred topics, a three-section appendix, as well as tables, outlines, illustrations, and photographs. The *Reference Companion* has 850 pages, with a two-column, reference-style format and subject headings and with color graphics throughout the book.

A key to completion of the *Reference Companion* was the work of associate editors Marilyn Arnold, Terry B. Ball, Larry E. Dahl, Donald Parry, David R. Seely, and Clyde J. Williams. In addition to helping shoulder the large workload, each editor brought a unique background that enabled quality review of articles. This team of editors—all professors or former professors at Brigham Young University—came from the departments of English, Ancient Scripture, Church History and Doctrine, and Asian and Near Eastern Languages.

Professor Arnold’s background in English was particularly valuable as she worked with character articles, books of the Book of Mormon,

and articles that dealt with the Book of Mormon as literature.

Professor Ball's extensive experience in teaching the Book of Mormon and the Old Testament, as well as the knowledge gained from earning degrees in ancient Near Eastern studies and botany, enabled critical assistance in many areas, including the Isaiah chapter reviews, doctrinal entries, and scientifically oriented articles such as "Agriculture in the Book of Mormon" and "Gems, Stones, and Rocks."

Professor Dahl's expertise in Church history, as well as his ten-year period of service on the Church Correlation Committee, was especially helpful in his reviewing of historical articles that dealt with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and the many doctrinal topics addressed in the *Reference Companion*.

Professor Parry's extensive research and writing on Isaiah were invaluable, as was his language background in Hebrew.

Professor Seely's training in biblical studies assisted greatly with Old Testament background articles, Isaiah chapter reviews, and the chronology entries.

Professor Williams's breadth of knowledge gained in many years of teaching Book of Mormon classes at BYU helped with doctrine, history, and application of the text to modern life.

Additionally, Richard Neitzel Holzapfel, BYU associate professor of Church history and doctrine, served as graphics editor; he helped find and gain permission for the use of the graphic images in the book. Professor Holzapfel's wide experience was most helpful.

One hundred eleven authors made contributions to the volume. It was truly a team effort that combined the expertise of scholars from Brigham Young University, the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts, and the Church Educational System. Authors with significant expertise in particular areas were obviously asked to write on those subjects. Therefore, one contribution of the *Reference Companion* is in having these scholars distill decades of their research for a general Church audience. For example, Richard L. Anderson wrote on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon, Garth V. Norman on Stela 5, Larry C. Porter on the printing and publication of the Book of Mormon, Royal Skousen on Book of Mormon editions and manuscripts, John W. Welch on chiasmus, and H. Curtis Wright on ancient writing on metal plates. Additionally, trusted and experienced authors such as Robert J. Matthews, Robert L. Millet, and Joseph F. McConkie wrote on vital doctrinal subjects, including the Atonement, the Resurrection, the Fall of Adam and Eve, and the priesthood.

One challenge of multiauthored books is the inevitability of unevenness in style and variation in content contribution from author to author. Desiring to limit this unevenness, we gave each author an “instructions to contributors” document outlining our intention for each article type—person, place, doctrine, word, books of the Book of Mormon, and so forth. This guiding document put authors and editors on the same page and provided a measure to judge whether incoming articles met the stated standard of research and completeness.

Authors were challenged to be comprehensive as to what the Book of Mormon says about their assigned topics. As a teacher at the BYU Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies, I took students on field trips throughout the Holy Land. Standing at biblical sites, I tried to tell my students about all that had occurred at a particular location, including the biblical characters who either lived, fought, visited, died, performed a miracle, or were in some way associated with that place. The *Reference Companion* articles that deal with people and places were written to accomplish a similar goal: to tell all that we know from the text of the Book of Mormon about its people and its places. Similarly, doctrinal articles were designed to represent all that the Book of Mormon teaches about that particular subject. The service of the contributor, then, was to look up every reference concerning his or her assigned doctrinal topic and write a comprehensive, yet concise, explanation of that doctrine—not what the author thought but what the Book of Mormon prophets actually taught about that subject. Articles on words or phrases were also written to give this same comprehensive view.

Each article was reviewed by two to five members of the editorial team. A lead editor was then assigned to work with the author to incorporate necessary changes. Selected articles received additional review by noted scholars who were outside the *Reference Companion* editorial board and who possessed expertise in particular subject areas. For example, Larry C. Porter, emeritus professor of Church history and doctrine, and Calvin Stevens of the Church Educational System were employed to review all Church history-oriented articles that dealt with the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Similarly, other scholars, such as Bruce Warren, BYU emeritus professor of anthropology, and Dana Griffen, BYU professor of geology, reviewed articles that contained material within their specialized fields of study. These procedures added another tier of review for accuracy beyond the Reference Companion editors and Church history professors who wrote the original articles.

Editors gave attention to the comprehensiveness and the soundness of doctrine. Caution was given to avoid speculation and not to

set in concrete what we do not know for certain. Consequently, the prudent use of such words as “perhaps,” “likely,” and “apparently” was utilized to weight judgments of certainty or the lack thereof. All references were double or triple checked.

The *Reference Companion* contains several unique features, such as the comprehensive yet concise treatment of Book of Mormon doctrines, words, and phrases; the Isaiah place-name maps that contain every place name mentioned in the Book of Mormon Isaiah chapters; outlines of each book of the Book of Mormon as well as the Isaiah chapters, Malachi quotations, and Nephi’s vision; tables comparing differences between the Book of Mormon Isaiah and the King James Version of Isaiah; and an appendix containing selected excerpts of definitions from Webster’s 1828 *American Dictionary of the English Language*, featuring 169 words or phases that may have changed in meaning or usage since the original publication of the Book of Mormon or that may be unfamiliar to readers of the twenty-first century. In 1892, George Reynolds published *A Dictionary of the Book of Mormon*, which was limited to entries on people and places in the Book of Mormon. Margaret Bingman of the Community of Christ (formerly the RLDS Church) did essentially the same thing with her *Encyclopedia of the Book of Mormon*, published in 1978. The *Reference Companion*, however, is unique in that it contains just about anything a reader would want to know about the Book of Mormon under one cover. The “all-under-one-cover” feature makes the book a convenient, time-saving resource. Thus, the scope of the *Reference Companion* is unique.

Because so much was put into the volume that we thought would be helpful to students of the Book of Mormon, there is much diversity in articles. For example, a reader can read an entry on the Atonement, then turn to an article dealing with pre-Columbian oceanic voyages, then turn to an entry that compares Christ’s sermon at the temple in Bountiful with the Sermon on the Mount in the Holy Land, and then turn to a detailed article on Moroni’s visits to Joseph Smith. In this example, the reader has traversed from doctrine to anthropology, to textual comparison, and to Church history.

Church members can use the *Reference Companion* in several ways. As a typical dictionary-encyclopedia reference work, the *Reference Companion* can be used to simply assist readers as they read the Book of Mormon. We use the Bible Dictionary in a similar manner—sometimes we use the dictionary to answer questions and other times to learn more of the historical background and so forth. Another way to use the book is to study by subject. A reader could pick a topic of

interest and read the article plus all the scriptural references included. A large number of scriptural references are added, not merely to validate statements made but for study purposes. The *Reference Companion* also contains scriptures from other standard works that readers can look up and compare with Book of Mormon references. Additionally, an extensive cross-referencing system links related articles, further assisting readers in studying a particular topic.

Gospel Doctrine teachers, seminary and institute teachers, and parents can use the volume as an information source for their lessons. Obviously, as readers' content mastery of a subject increases, their abilities to help those they teach increases. The volume is filled with information that can help answer important questions. Additionally, appendix A gives a suggested study guide for combining Book of Mormon sequential reading with *Reference Companion* use. For example, the study guide suggests a reading block such as 1 Nephi 1–7 and then lists *Reference Companion* articles that augment these chapters. Both teacher and student can benefit from this approach. Those preparing for missionary service can learn more about the primary book they will be using in their proselyting. Still another way to benefit from the *Reference Companion* is just to pick it up and read it according to any particular interest.

I learned a great many things over the seven years it took to create the *Reference Companion*. Readers would have a difficult time studying a topic and reading every reference without having their understanding enlarged in some way. I experienced a tremendous learning experience by being pushed so deeply in studying so many varied subjects—subjects that dealt with the text of the Book of Mormon as well as matters that relate to it.

The process of creating the book was also enlightening. As editors, we were always asking the question, “Is this what the text really says?” Writing about the scriptures in a book that others will read and study creates a healthy fear of errors. Sometime near the beginning of the *Reference Companion* project, Robert J. Matthews, former dean of Religious Education at BYU, told me of a lesson he was taught by William E. Berrett, who for many years was the head of the Church Educational System. Brother Berrett gave the assignment for his teachers to write down everything a particular scriptural passage said and then to write down what the passage did not say. Brother Matthews said the lesson was valuable in learning to critically analyze what any particular verse is really saying. This thought was helpful in our editing of the *Reference Companion*. Even the seemingly simple task of retelling a scriptural

story can become inaccurate unless the necessary time is taken to think deeply about all the words used in both the scriptures and in the retelling of the scriptures. This was an editorial challenge for us.

A writing pitfall is to teach beyond the given verses being used to back up statements or to use words that overstate or understate the situation. For example, in retelling a story when the original text says the character was *angry*, the writer could retell the story, noting that she or he was furious. Another example occurs when the text says the people were killed and the writer records that they were *slaughtered*. Although the words *angry* and *furious* or *killed* and *slaughtered* may be nearly synonymous, the adjectives used to retell the story do not necessarily represent with 100 percent accuracy what was really felt or what really happened. Though such examples may seem to be a matter of minute detail, the process does pose a concern when accuracy is paramount. Since many *Reference Companion* articles contain a retelling of events, we tried to give critical attention to correct word choice. Similar errors can occur in anyone's writing about Church historical matters. Errors can be perpetuated when authors fail to consult original sources in favor of quoting other more accessible works. This procedure can be acceptable if the author of the secondary source was correct; however, scholarly authorship still requires authors to check the primary source.

Many decisions had to be made over the course of our work that also added to our ongoing education in writing about scripture, such as trying to be inclusive instead of exclusive in viewing the prophecies of Isaiah (for example, 2 Nephi 15 is a judgment prophecy as well as a prophecy of restoration); not taking a position when something is unclear (for example, the perpetuation or removal of the so-called Lamanite mark among Lamanites throughout Book of Mormon history or whether the Words of Mormon were written on space remaining on the small plates of Nephi or on an additional plate or plates added by Mormon); being careful to have an academically balanced approach referencing differing views (for example, the plausibility of Stela 5 or views concerning Jaredite chronology); and making certain that readers are not left with a fragmented view of any particular doctrine when the Book of Mormon does not give the complete picture (for example, Book of Mormon teachings concerning the spirit world or the Resurrection).

The *Book of Mormon Reference Companion* was created by a family of faithful people from varying backgrounds who love the Book of Mormon and believe it is the word of God. The pages bespeak faith and testimony of Jesus Christ and an absolute belief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon account. The *Reference Companion* was designed to

help increase Book of Mormon literacy among Latter-day Saints. But knowing more facts about the Book of Mormon or information on how it was translated can never be an end in itself. The purpose of the Book of Mormon is to persuade readers to come unto Christ. So our efforts to offer enlightenment on the Book of Mormon were done with that ultimate goal in mind. If answering questions about the Book of Mormon or clarifying concepts helps members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to more fully appreciate the Book of Mormon, the “keystone of our religion,” and therefore draw closer to the Savior Jesus Christ, our hope and our purpose have been accomplished. **RE**