

The Book of Mormon among the Saints

EVOLVING USE OF THE KEYSTONE SCRIPTURE

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As the keystone of our religion, the Book of Mormon has always played an important role in the culture and thought of Latter-day Saints,¹ but the ways the Saints use the Book of Mormon have evolved throughout the history of the Church. While the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon became a central narrative of the Restoration during the first few decades of the Church's history, the contents of the Book of Mormon have been used in varying ways. Those converted to the restored gospel have long defended and cherished the book as proof of the divinity of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling. The story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon was often, and still is, cited as the primary miraculous proof of Joseph Smith's divine calling. In one address, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland declared, "Either the Book of Mormon is what the Prophet Joseph said it is or this Church and its founder are false, fraudulent, a deception from the first instance onward. Not everything in life is so black or white, but it seems the authenticity of the Book of Mormon and its keystone role in our belief is exactly that."² While the Book of Mormon has always held

a special place in our witness of the Restoration, one of the vital aspects of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon is the story of how it grew to become appreciated not just as an artifact, but as a fully utilized tool in teaching the pure gospel of Jesus Christ.

As the twentieth century progressed, the Book of Mormon truly came into its own as a doctrinal, literary, and spiritual guide for the Saints. The influence of the Book of Mormon in the wider world is steadily increasing, with the Book of Mormon even listed among the *New York Times* list of most influential books.³ In the last few years alone, the Book of Mormon has inspired songs, films, and even a Broadway musical.

This study will primarily focus on the life story of the Book of Mormon among the members of the Church and attempt to track its influence, its usage, and the general awareness of the Church regarding this sacred text. It is a story in which millions have played a part, though the experiences of only a few can be treated here. Most important, it is a story without an end, for the coming forth of the Book of Mormon among the Saints is a continual and vital part of the work of the Lord in the latter days.

This paper builds upon the excellent work of a number of other scholars, chiefly Noel B. Reynolds and his 1999 study “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century.” Reynolds’s work was pioneering in the way it analyzed Book of Mormon usage among members of the Church. I am in debt to Reynolds for providing the framework and a large amount of excellent research for this study. His general conclusion was that “the Book of Mormon was underutilized by most Latter-day Saints until interest in it surged during the second half of the twentieth century.”⁴ It is clear that the way the Book of Mormon has been used has changed over time. From its beginning as an item of objective evidence of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling, the Book of Mormon grew to become more utilized as a doctrinal, theological, and literary tool among the Saints.

A secondary aim of this study is to highlight some of the individuals who played a role in moving forward our approach to the Book of Mormon. The earlier study of Noel Reynolds built upon statistical analyses of scholars such as Grant Underwood and Alton Merrill,⁵ who sampled Church literature to examine the usage of the Book of Mormon. Behind these statistics are stories that illustrate the power of the Book of Mormon in the conversion process; this study will also provide a look at a few such stories.

Early Use of the Book of Mormon

Even before its publication, the Book of Mormon was important in rallying the support of Joseph Smith's friends and family to his aid. As related in his history, the young prophet first enlisted his father in the cause by relating to him the instructions given by the angel Moroni to locate the plates in the nearby Hill Cumorah.⁶ As Joseph continued his prophetic tutelage under the direction of Moroni, he told others in the family of his experiences with the work. One of the most poignant memories to emerge from the Smiths during these years is found in the death of Alvin Smith, the Prophet's older brother. On his deathbed, Alvin counseled his younger brother to "do everything that lies in your power to obtain the Record."⁷ Lucy Mack Smith later commented that Alvin Smith "ever manifested a greater zeal and anxiety if it were possible than any of the rest with regard to the record which had been shown to Joseph."⁸ Even before the record fully came forth, it possessed a power to draw people to it: first, the Prophet's family, and later, a small band of followers who formed the nucleus of the new religion. When Samuel H. Smith, the first official missionary of the Church, set out on his mission, he carried with him a knapsack full of copies of the new scripture, touting it as "a history of the origin of the Indians." He was met mostly with rejection, but did manage to place the book with John P. Greene, the brother-in-law of Brigham Young—possibly assisting in the conversion of the second President of the Church.⁹

When the Book of Mormon was published and the Church was organized, the Articles and Covenants of the Church (now D&C 20) declared that the book was "a record of a fallen people, and also the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and also to the Jews, proving to them that the holy scriptures be true, and also that God doth inspire men and call them to his holy work in these last days, as well as in days of old, that he may be the same God forever."¹⁰

In the months following the organization of the Church, the Book of Mormon produced a dramatic impact on the converts it reached. Among the most dramatic and most quoted of those touched by the Book of Mormon was Parley P. Pratt. Introduced to the book by an acquaintance, Pratt memorably wrote, "He began to tell of *a book*, a STRANGE BOOK, A VERY STRANGE BOOK!" He continues, "The next morning I called at his house,

where, for the first time, my eyes beheld the ‘BOOK OF MORMON’—that book of books—that record which reveals the antiquities of the new world.” Describing his eagerness to learn more, Pratt wrote, “I read all day; eating was a burden, I had no desire for food; sleep was a burden when the night came, for I preferred reading to sleep.”¹¹

Parley P. Pratt was just one among dozens who were deeply moved by their encounter with the book. Thomas B. Marsh, later the first President of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, heard rumors of a “Golden Book found by a youth named Joseph Smith” and was eventually led to the printing office in Palmyra from which he took home the first sixteen pages of the book. Within a year he moved to Palmyra to find fellowship with other members of his new faith.¹² Stories similar to this multiplied in the early days of the Restoration. Brigham Young, who obtained a copy of the Book of Mormon just a few weeks after the first printing, later recalled saying to himself, “Wait a little while; what is the doctrine of the book, and of the revelations the Lord has given? Let me apply my heart to them.” After “studiously” examining the book for two years, he concluded, “I knew it was true, as well as I knew that I could see with my eyes, or feel by the touch of my fingers, or be sensible of the demonstration of any sense.”¹³

The Book of Mormon soon became a key tool in the work of spreading the gospel. Information on *how* the Book of Mormon was used in proselytizing is fragmentary yet frequently mentioned during the early years of the Church. William McLellin wrote in his journal about Parley P. Pratt rebuking a Methodist preacher who rejected the book because of its “provincialisms [*sic*] or Yankeeisms” by reading part of Moroni’s discourse that “the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing,” most likely adding the powerful warning: “fools mock, but they shall mourn” (Ether 12:23, 26).¹⁴ On another occasion, Elder McLellin reported Pratt reading several pages on “the personal ministry of Christ” on the American continent, as set forth in the Book of Mormon.¹⁵

Not all missionaries appeared to have taught the Book of Mormon with such enthusiasm. With a tone of slight annoyance, McLellin noted the sermon of a different companion, writing, “It was a fine discourse but he never mentioned the book of mormon once.”¹⁶ The Lord likewise expressed his dismay with the elders’ use of the book, chastising them in a revelation given on September 22–23, 1832 (D&C 84). The Lord warned the elders, “Your

minds in times past have been darkened because of unbelief, and because you have treated lightly the things you have received—which vanity and unbelief have brought the whole church under condemnation. And this condemnation resteth upon the children of Zion, even all. And they shall remain under this condemnation until they repent and remember the new covenant, even the Book of Mormon and the former commandments which I have given them, not only to say but to do according that which I have given.”¹⁷

The Book of Mormon in Early Church Publications

Was the Book of Mormon underutilized? While the story of the Book of Mormon remained a central part of the message of Mormonism, studies reveal that in some ways the book was underused. An extensive review of Church periodicals printed before 1846 reveal that there were 1,489 citations to the Bible and 77 to the Book of Mormon, or a 19:1 ratio.¹⁸ This is understandable given the newness of the Book of Mormon and the population of the Church, who were almost all converts, with no training or teaching in how to use the Book of Mormon as a text. While there are numerous examples in the minutes of Church meetings with members bearing testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, most of the early Saints felt more comfortable sharing doctrine pulled from biblical passages.¹⁹

At the same time, Church periodicals played a vital role in bringing the new scripture to members and potential converts alike. *The Evening and the Morning Star*, a Church newspaper printed in Independence, Missouri, published a number of passages from the Book of Mormon, announcing to its readers, “There are not a few honest enquiring persons who wish to learn the truth of the book of Mormon. To put them in possession of such testimony as may lead to truth is our duty.”²⁰ Later issues of the *Star* printed excerpts from the books of 1 Nephi, Jacob, Ether, and Moroni.²¹ W. W. Phelps, the editor of the *Star*, quoted liberally from the Book of Mormon, declaring that the book “opened a flood of light and might justly be called a wonderful volume.”²² The proprietors of the *Star* originally intended to publish the entire book in the newspaper, but instead declared their intention to publish the work anew as its own volume.²³

In a theological context, the Book of Mormon passages often quoted by the early Saints differ greatly from those frequently utilized today. The most commonly cited set of verses from early Mormon literature was Ether 13:4–8, which contained a prophecy “that a New Jerusalem should be built up upon this land, unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph.”²⁴ This emphasis highlights the concern felt by the early Saints for the building up of the city of Zion, a frequent topic in the revelations given to Joseph Smith.²⁵ Another frequently cited excerpt was 3 Nephi 21, with a close focus on verses 1–7, including the Savior’s dramatic prophecy of “a sign, that ye may know the time when these things shall be about to take place—that I shall gather in, from their long dispersion, my people, O house of Israel, and shall establish again among them my Zion” (3 Nephi 21:1).²⁶ The sign given by the Savior was the coming forth of the Book of Mormon itself. The frequent citation of these passages demonstrates the millennial mindset of the Saints, and their hope for the coming city of Zion. To them, the Book of Mormon was more than a scriptural text; it was a literal sign from heaven of the coming of the Savior.

Even the Prophet Joseph Smith, the instrument used in bringing forth the book, showed a tendency to favor biblical passages in his teachings. A study of the Nauvoo discourses of Joseph Smith revealed allusions to 451 different biblical passages compared to 22 references to the Book of Mormon, or a ratio of 21:1.²⁷ This should not imply in the least any insecurity on the part of the Prophet regarding the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon. During this same period, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his journal, “Joseph said the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any Book on Earth & the key stone of our religion & a man would get nearer to God by abiding its precepts than any other Book.”²⁸ Joseph’s marked propensity toward using the Bible was likely the product of his upbringing and his desire to build on the common beliefs already held by most new converts. The discovery of the Book of Mormon as a doctrinal gem was still in the process during the first generation of the Church, the Prophet included.

At the same time, Joseph Smith recognized the power of the Book of Mormon as a witness of the Restoration. Parley P. Pratt witnessed one of the most dramatic illustrations of Joseph Smith’s convictions concerning the book during a meeting held in Philadelphia with about three thousand people in attendance. Pratt records, “Brother [Sidney] Rigdon spoke first,

and dwelt on the Gospel, illustrating his doctrine by the Bible. When he was through, brother Joseph arose like a lion about to roar; and being full of the Holy Ghost, spoke in great power, bearing testimony of the visions he had seen, the ministering of angels which he had enjoyed, and how he had found the plates of the Book of Mormon, and translated them by the gift and power of God.” According to Pratt, Joseph commenced his discourse with a mild rebuke for Rigdon’s timidity. Pratt recorded, “If nobody else had the courage to testify of so glorious a message from Heaven, and the finding of so glorious a record, he felt to do it justice to the people, and leave the event with God.”²⁹

Further evidence of Joseph’s convictions concerning the Book of Mormon came in the final days before his martyrdom, when he and his close friends read and marked Ether 12:36–38, which reads in part, “And now I . . . bid farewell unto the Gentiles, yea, and also unto my brethren whom I love, until we shall meet before the judgment seat of Christ, where all men shall know that my garments are not spotted with your blood.” Elder Jeffrey R. Holland pointed out the conviction of the truth of the Book of Mormon demonstrated by the Prophet and his associates in Carthage Jail, saying, “I ask you: would these men blaspheme before God by continuing to fix their lives, their honor, and their own search for eternal salvation on a book (and by implication a church and a ministry) they had fictitiously created out of whole cloth?”³⁰

From the Nineteenth to the Twentieth Century

After Joseph Smith’s martyrdom, the pattern of using the Book of Mormon chiefly as a miraculous witness of Joseph Smith’s prophetic calling continued. One study of Latter-day Saint literature from 1830 to 1855 found 232 references to the Book of Mormon. A close look at these references shows twenty-six different instances where just the translation of the plates was referenced, a number nearly equal to the thirty-two times from this period Church leaders referred to doctrine taught in the book.³¹

Although the Book of Mormon was not widely used as a theological tool in the early days of the Church, it is important to note the centrality of the book to the new faith. It is not an overstatement to say that for the early

Saints the coming forth of the book transcended theology; its existence was a testimony of the existence of God and proof of new revelation in modern times. The events of the early Restoration created a new fusion of history and theology, where the historic incidents, such as the First Vision and the inspired translation of the Book of Mormon, became an ingrained part of the belief of the Saints. It was just as important to tell the story of how the book came into the hands of Joseph Smith as it was to examine what the book taught. The book was new revelation, and the story of the book itself was as compelling as any found in sacred literature.

At the same time, part of the reason why the doctrinal teachings of this new revelation received less attention stemmed from its role as a defender of older revelation. In filling its role of “proving unto them that the holy scriptures be true,”³² the Book of Mormon was often used by the early Saints as proof of the veracity of the Bible. In so doing, many Church leaders emphasized the similarity of Book of Mormon doctrines to those found in the Bible. In an 1870 discourse, Brigham Young taught, “We do believe in the Old and New Testaments, and we have also another book, called the Book of Mormon. What are the doctrines of the Book of Mormon? The same as those of the Bible. . . . ‘What good does it do you, Latter-day Saints?’ It proves that the Bible is true, . . . and the two prove each other true.”³³

During the latter part of the nineteenth century, the Church leader who taught most often from the Book of Mormon was Orson Pratt. He spoke with greater frequency and emphasis on the Book of Mormon than the majority of his contemporaries, but he followed their lead in using the book as a second witness for the doctrines of the Bible, rather than as a primary source. In an 1859 discourse, Elder Pratt challenged his listeners to “try its [the Book of Mormon’s] doctrine and you will find that the gospel taught in ancient America 1800 years ago is like that taught in ancient Judea and the regions round about. . . . The ancient Apostles organized the church with miracles and gifts, with power to heal the sick, to cast out devils, to work miracles and with power over the elements. The Book of Mormon tells us that the Israelites on ancient America organized one after the same pattern.”³⁴ Elder Pratt authored a series of pamphlets collected under the title *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon*. Leaving no doubt as to his stance regarding the book, Elder Pratt declared, “The nature of the Book of Mormon is such, that if true, no one can possibly be saved and reject it;

if false, no one can possibly be saved and receive it. Therefore, every soul in all the world is equally interested in ascertaining its truth or falsity.”³⁵ He then proceeded to argue, almost exclusively from biblical sources, of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Near the end of his life, Elder Pratt made perhaps his most valuable contribution towards advancing Book of Mormon studies when he divided the book into chapters and verses, and added footnotes with scriptural commentary. Prior to this time, the Book of Mormon existed in a chapter-and-paragraph format similar to a novel, heightening the difficulty in finding and utilizing doctrinal passages.³⁶

During the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Church experienced severe persecutions due to the practice of plural marriage, and paranoia grew throughout American society concerning Latter-day Saint beliefs and practices. Ironically, these anti-Mormon crusades stimulated some of the first serious scholarship focused on the Book of Mormon. While locked in the Nebraska State Penitentiary for unlawful cohabitation, Elder George Reynolds filled his time conducting and writing a series of studies on the Book of Mormon. His articles included such titles as “Proper Names of the Nephites” and “Science and Literature among the Nephites.” He also wrote a series of thirteen biographical sketches of Book of Mormon personalities, and other articles focusing on Book of Mormon history. After producing approximately eighty articles one day out of sheer “psychological desperation,” he struck on the idea of writing the first complete concordance of the Book of Mormon. He spent the next several months in an intensive study of the book, sometimes copying out as many as 350 references per day. By the end of his labors, he had produced a manuscript with nearly 25,000 entries from the Book of Mormon text.³⁷

After he was freed from prison, Reynolds continued his analysis of the book, becoming an enthusiastic proponent of its study. He went on to write *The Story of the Book of Mormon*, featuring a simplified version of the story, complete with some of the earliest illustrations of the book. *The Story of the Book of Mormon* contained some of the earliest attempts to visually capture the content of the book, with illustrations depicting Nephi’s vision of the virgin Mary, Moroni raising the title of liberty, and others depicting ancient Mesoamerican culture.³⁸

Later, with the assistance of Janne M. Sjodahl, Reynolds authored a seven-volume commentary, the first extended study of the Book of

Mormon.³⁹ Reynolds's work began moving the public consciousness toward seeing the Book of Mormon as an independent work of literature and doctrine, able to stand on its own merits. In the introduction to his commentary, Reynolds wrote, "Every book has, or should have an objective. It may not be to impart knowledge of religion, of history, of pedigree, or whatnot; it may be to edify by mediation and essays; or it may be to instruct with poetry and by parable. The Book of Mormon, indeed, includes all these objectives and more, but its principal purpose, throughout, is similar to that of the Bible—to bring God and man together through the one great Mediator, Jesus Christ."⁴⁰

With the help of Reynolds and other supporters within the Church, the Book of Mormon slowly moved toward becoming a more recognized source of teaching and inspiration within Mormonism, but this journey was just beginning. In his 1999 study Noel Reynolds maintained that in Sunday School curriculum, the Book of Mormon did not become "a major element until the 1970s."⁴¹ Perhaps it was not a "major element," but analysis of curriculum produced by the Church does show a slow yet growing recognition in the early twentieth century. For instance, the 1889–90 lessons produced for Sunday School on the life of Christ featured thirty lessons from the New Testament and one from the Book of Mormon. Several years later, the Book of Mormon gained its own class with five lessons. By 1901, the Sunday School was producing a full course, with fifty-one lessons focusing just on the Book of Mormon.⁴²

Around this same time, there began to appear hints of a growing sophistication in the approach taken toward the Book of Mormon. Rather than just as a token of Joseph Smith's prophetic calling, the book began to be studied as a significant doctrinal work in its own right. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the Church operated a network of academies throughout the Intermountain West. A sampling of the courses taught at these schools reveals a rigorous course offered in the Book of Mormon, focusing on the "history of its coming forth" and "external evidence of its divine authenticity," but also promising that "the doctrinal aspects of its teachings will be especially dwelt upon."⁴³

Book of Mormon teachings at the Church academies inadvertently led to the establishment of another unique form of Latter-day Saint education—the seminary program. In 1912, Joseph F. Merrill, a newly called

counselor in the presidency of the Granite Stake in the Salt Lake Valley, sat in a family home evening meeting listening to his wife, Laura, tell their children stories from the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Afterwards, Merrill asked his wife where she learned all the stories. She told him the stories came from her experiences in the religion classes taught by James E. Talmage at the Salt Lake Stake Academy.⁴⁴

Concerned over the steadily increasing population of students in his stake who were attending the growing number of public schools in Utah, Merrill struck upon the idea of building a theological seminary nearby, where students could attend religion classes on a released-time basis during the school day.⁴⁵ Working in tandem with Thomas Yates, a member of the Granite Stake selected to be the first teacher, Merrill worked out a curriculum for the first class based on the study of the Bible, the Book of Mormon, and Church history.⁴⁶ Merrill negotiated with the Utah State School Board and managed to secure high school credit for Old and New Testament studies, a boon for the fledgling institution. Most early seminary programs combined the study of Church history and the Book of Mormon into one non-credit class taken by students their senior year. Unfortunately, this tended to de-emphasize the Book of Mormon. Textbooks in early seminary classes focused on the story of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, but it was less utilized as a doctrinal text. One seminary textbook from the early twentieth century devoted only six out of one hundred chapters to the Book of Mormon. Of these six chapters, one covered the story of the book, one dealt with its doctrinal message, and the remaining four focused entirely on the translation, publication, and witnesses of the book.⁴⁷

The missionary tracts used in the early twentieth century devoted themselves primarily to biblical arguments for the Restoration. “A Friendly Discussion,” the tract used most frequently in missions during the first decades of the century, consisted of a fictional dialogue between several men on a veranda. The Book of Mormon is only mentioned peripherally, in relation to Joseph Smith and the Restoration.⁴⁸ One notable exception during this time is found with German E. Ellsworth, the president of the Northern States Mission. In a general conference address, Ellsworth shared a spiritual experience that impressed on his mind the importance of the Book of Mormon in missionary work: “I remember while standing on the Hill Cumorah, of hearing these words, ‘Push the distribution of the record

that was taken from this hill, for it will help bring the world to Christ.” Invigorated by this experience, Ellsworth arranged to launch a new effort to distribute the Book of Mormon, eventually placing 130,000 copies throughout the northern United States during his mission.⁴⁹ However, when Ellsworth departed as mission president, the use of the Book of Mormon in missionary work was considerably reduced, as missionaries returned to more traditional methods of proselytizing.⁵⁰

One of the more prominent General Authorities who lamented the state of Book of Mormon scholarship in the early twentieth century was the eminent Latter-day Saint historian B. H. Roberts. Within the first decade of the century, he produced *New Witnesses for God*, a short defense of the Book of Mormon and its origins. Later, in a move still surrounded by controversy today, Roberts undertook a study concerning difficult issues in regards to the Book of Mormon. He later presented the study to the First Presidency and Quorum of the Twelve. Roberts unflinchingly confronted alternate-origin theories of the book. He analyzed literary and historical speculations common in the nineteenth century and asked if Joseph Smith could have absorbed them, reproducing them later in the Book of Mormon.⁵¹ Roberts was acting as devil’s advocate in presenting these arguments, but while he never doubted the divine authenticity of the book, he was concerned with the lack of serious study performed on it. In a letter to Church President Heber J. Grant, he urgently wrote, “It is not necessary for me to suggest that maintenance of the truth of the Book of Mormon is absolutely essential to the integrity of the whole Mormon movement, for it is inconceivable that the Book of Mormon should be untrue in its origin or character and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints be a true Church.”⁵² In another letter he wrote, “I am most thoroughly convinced of the necessity of all the brethren . . . becoming familiar with these Book of Mormon problems, and finding the answer for them, as it is a matter that will concern the faith of the Youth of the Church now as also in the future.”⁵³

Beginnings of the Second Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon

Roberts voiced legitimate concerns in regards to the use of the Book of Mormon in the Church. Neglect of the book was not deliberate, just

a gradual drift away from one of the foundational documents of the Restoration. It is also likely the drift came about as an unintended side effect of the transitional period following the end of the practice of plural marriage in 1890, and the gradual transition of the Church into more direct contact with mainstream American culture. In public settings, particularly educational programs, leaders may have been less likely to mention something as alien to the general public as the Book of Mormon. The discussions sparked by Roberts among the hierarchy of the Church tend to indicate not a lack of faith in the book itself, but anxiety about how to defend and utilize the book, particularly in scholarly circles.

However, around the same time that Roberts lamented the state of scholarship on the book, a renaissance in Book of Mormon scholarship and teaching began to emerge. It started gradually, moving from a trickle to a steady flow, eventually becoming a downpour. While it is impossible to name every individual responsible for this rise in the use of the Book of Mormon, there are several key individuals who merit special attention.

Sidney B. Sperry was a recently returned missionary from the southern states when he was invited by the head of Church schools, Adam S. Bennion, to teach seminary in 1922. Sperry's work as a seminary teacher allowed him to devote his time to gospel study, and he soon became concerned over the state of scriptural scholarship in the Church. At his own volition and expense, he enrolled in the divinity school at the University of Chicago, receiving his master's degree in 1926.⁵⁴ When he returned, he was asked to teach the entire corps of seminary teachers during their summer trainings. Impressed by his scholarship, Church leaders asked Sperry and a number of teachers to travel to the University of Chicago to obtain training in religious studies.⁵⁵ Methods of higher biblical criticism had been introduced into Church teaching at BYU in 1911, resulting in a controversy ending in the dismissal of several professors,⁵⁶ but Sperry was determined to put the tools of scholarship to use in defense of the Restoration. While at the university, he engaged in vigorous debates with his fellow divinity students. He later commented, "As a 'Mormon' . . . I either made enthusiastic friends or enthusiastic enemies."⁵⁷ But Sperry was delighted at the prospect of finding solutions to critical issues in Restoration scripture, writing to one colleague, "You and I are going to have a lot of pleasure doing Book of Mormon and Pearl of Great Price problems."⁵⁸

After his arrival at the newly formed Religion Department at Brigham Young University in 1932,⁵⁹ Sperry soon launched a remarkably fruitful career applying scholarly techniques to Restoration scripture. *Our Book of Mormon* (1947), his first major book on the topic, began a rigorous exploration of the Book of Mormon as a historical, literary, and doctrinal work. His writings not only dealt with the origins of the book, but also included an in-depth study of its teachings. His research demonstrated thorough treatments of key doctrines in the book, including “The Church among the Book of Mormon Prophets,” “The Concept of God in the Book of Mormon,” and “The Teaching Concerning Death and the Hereafter in the Book of Mormon.” He also tackled long-standing issues used by critics to attack the book, including the Book of Mormon’s use of biblical passages such as Isaiah and 1 Corinthians 12 and 13. Beginning in his preface, Sperry declared, “In sending forth this volume, I do so with a strong conviction that the Book of Mormon is a translation of a document of Semitic provenience. . . . The Nephite scripture needs no defense; its message is one of which every Latter-day Saint may be proud.”⁶⁰

Sperry’s work is even more compelling considering it took place in an era when even some scholars within the Church neglected or even felt open disdain for the book. As the number of students clamoring to take classes in Book of Mormon studies increased, one institute teacher lamented to a colleague, “I find too that Book of Mormon is in much greater demand than ‘Bible.’ We do succeed admirably in displacing real volumes.”⁶¹

Faced with doubts presented by other scholars, Sperry remained firm in his convictions. One of Sperry’s students recalled being in his office when a skeptical visitor came in. Learning that Sperry was currently writing on the Book of Mormon, the skeptic cynically asked, “Oh, Sid, you don’t believe that stuff about the Book of Mormon, do you?” “Dr. Sperry,” his student recalled, “in a courteous and respectful manner, but in firm and unmistakable terms, bore a resolute testimony concerning the Book of Mormon.”⁶² When another colleague wrote a book about the Old Testament but failed to include any commentary or connections to the Book of Mormon, Sperry wrote to him, “Inasmuch as the Book of Mormon is one of the foundation stones of the Church I cannot see how a man who professes to be a Latter-day

Saint can fail to use it as a source, when it has so many valuable points to give us with respect to the Old Testament.”⁶³

Sidney Sperry’s work was emblematic of a growing wave of Book of Mormon scholarship in the 1930s and ’40s. In 1938, the first Book of Mormon course for institute appeared, promising as one of its objectives to “acquaint the student with the Gospel plan presented in the book and its outstanding evidences that Jesus is the Christ.”⁶⁴ The Sunday School manual for adult courses produced by the Church in 1947 was authored by Sperry and focused entirely on a sequential study of the Book of Mormon.⁶⁵

The first seminary class devoted solely to the Book of Mormon appeared as a happy accident. In the Salt Lake City school district, the practice of releasing students for religious studies was not allowed, so LDS students took classes in the morning instead. At West High School, a volunteer teacher, Marion D. Hanks, began teaching a course using the Book of Mormon. The class became so popular it came to the attention of the Church Commissioner of Education, Franklin L. West. Hanks’s recollection of Commissioner West’s interrogation concerning the class highlights what a pleasant surprise the growing eagerness to study the Book of Mormon was. He recalled, “‘How many come?’ asked [Commissioner] West. ‘Sixty,’ said Brother Hanks. ‘What do you teach them?’ asked West. ‘Book of Mormon,’ Brother Hanks said. ‘How do you teach it?’ West asked. ‘I just open up the book, we read and discuss what we read.’ ‘How many come each day?’ asked West. ‘All of them,’ Brother Hanks said.”⁶⁶

In missionary work too, the Book of Mormon began to move back to the forefront. While serving as president of the European Mission, Apostle Joseph F. Merrill, the former Church Commissioner of Education, counseled mission presidents to use the Book of Mormon to a greater extent in their labors. “The coming forth of the Book of Mormon is for the latter-day Church analogous to the resurrection of Christ for the primitive Church,” Merrill wrote. He continued, “We stand or fall with the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. We must use it more than we have been doing.”⁶⁷ Merrill was so concerned over the lack of Book of Mormon materials, he dispatched a young returning missionary, Gordon B. Hinckley, to meet with the First Presidency to begin the development of slideshows and other media to more effectively tell the story of the Book of Mormon.⁶⁸

Accelerating Awareness

The spark lit by Sidney Sperry and his contemporaries grew into a flame because of the work of Hugh Nibley and a new generation of scholars. Nibley arrived at BYU in 1946 and immediately began publishing a series of groundbreaking works on the Book of Mormon. Nibley was interested in the Book of Mormon during his youth. While serving in the army in World War II, he wrote home to his mother, “When I can snatch a moment or two off it is devoted to a single engrossing item: at this late date I have discovered the Book of Mormon and live in a state of perpetual excitement—that marvelous production throws everything done in our age completely into the shadows.”⁶⁹ Nibley’s work refocused LDS apologetics away from their traditional approaches on the coming forth of the book and archaeological searches, instead focusing on the internal evidences within the book itself. His first study, “The Book of Mormon: A Mirror of the East,” appeared in the *Improvement Era* in April 1948, noting similarities between the Book of Mormon and early Middle Eastern cultures.⁷⁰ He followed up this work with a series of articles entitled “Lehi in the Desert,” focusing on the Middle Eastern parallels found in the journey of Lehi’s family in 1 Nephi. He followed up with a second series, “The World of the Jaredites,” comparing the book of Ether with other early Asiatic cultures.⁷¹

Nibley’s work soon caught the attention of Church President David O. McKay, who suggested a series of lessons on the Book of Mormon for the 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood manual. The manual almost didn’t make it to print, because members of the review committee felt that Nibley’s intellectual approach was too sophisticated for lay audiences. However, President McKay intervened, and the manual was published to wide praise. Nibley himself commented, “The evidences for the Book of Mormon are simply overwhelming; they leave me breathless.”⁷² Nibley’s studies generated excitement and raised the bar for scholarship on the Book of Mormon. Commenting on the accelerating pace of Book of Mormon scholarship, Nibley said, “This is the very beginning of Book of Mormon research, not the end. . . . On to the fray!”⁷³

Nibley’s work took place in the midst of a steadily growing wave of enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon in the Church. In Brigham City, Utah, another young seminary teacher named Boyd K. Packer began teaching an

early-morning class just for senior students with the Book of Mormon as the text. Packer later described his approach toward using the Book of Mormon as a doctrinal text: “I announced to begin with that if they wanted to know about the wars and rumors of wars and the migration of peoples and the cities and the narrow neck of land and all else about the Book of Mormon, this wasn’t the class they should be in. I told them that we’d approach the subject on the basis, ‘Who is speaking through this book and what is it He wants to say?’”⁷⁴ Within a few years Packer became one of the supervisors over the seminary program, integrating the Book of Mormon into seminary curriculum. In 1961, the Church Board of Education approved a new policy that “all students at both seminary and institute levels must take a full year of Book of Mormon in order to graduate.”⁷⁵ A similar movement took place around the same time at Brigham Young University to make the Book of Mormon a required course for freshman students. In his third decade of teaching by this time, Sperry helped bring about this change. One of the teachers from the time remembered of Sperry, “He was a total believer in the Book of Mormon, and he encouraged us more than anybody else to go ahead.”⁷⁶

During this same time, the Book of Mormon became more central to the missionary work of the Church. When the first Churchwide missionary discussions appeared in 1952, they featured seven sequential topics, with the fourth focusing entirely on the Book of Mormon. A decade later, a further revision of the missionary lessons moved the Book of Mormon to the place of the second discussion.⁷⁷

Among the leadership of the Church, the Book of Mormon was used with a rising frequency as well. In 1949, Elder Marion G. Romney gave a key address in general conference, beginning by quoting the Lord’s warning concerning the Book of Mormon in the Doctrine and Covenants, and adding, “I recommend that every person within the sound of my voice read the Book of Mormon. . . . It will enrich the life of every person who will read it, unless he is in rebellion against the truth; and in that event it will advise him of his awful fate unless he changes his ways.”⁷⁸ Talks focusing on the doctrine of the Book of Mormon began appearing with greater regularity in general conference with Elders Milton R. Hunter, Mark E. Petersen, Gordon B. Hinckley, and Bruce R. McConkie all delivering addresses focusing on the Book of Mormon throughout the 1950s and ’60s.⁷⁹ The Book of Mormon

was also quoted with greater emphasis as not just a witness of Joseph Smith's calling, but as a source of testimony in Jesus Christ. In a 1961 conference address, Elder McConkie said, "The Book of Mormon is a new, living, modern witness of the divine Sonship of Christ. It testifies of him and of the doctrines of the gospel."⁸⁰

In the early 1970s, another key event occurred when Church auxiliaries began to emphasize the scriptures as the direct source for gospel teaching. Truman G. Madsen, a member of the general board of the Sunday School, recalled, "We were determined, in the early 1970s . . . to put the scriptures at the center of the Gospel Doctrine curriculum and to rewrite manuals so they enhanced rather than replaced the scriptures. . . . We kept hammering the point in conferences and publications, 'The manuals are the scriptures themselves.'⁸¹ Scholarship in all of the standard works benefitted from this move.

President Benson's Emphasis of the Book of Mormon

The growing surge of interest in the Book of Mormon reached new heights due in large measure to the influence of Elder Ezra Taft Benson. Well known outside of the Church because of his service as the secretary of agriculture under US president Dwight D. Eisenhower, Elder Benson was never shy about his convictions concerning the Book of Mormon, and he was not afraid to mix the secular and religious. A letter from President Eisenhower sent to Elder Benson read, "Thank you for drawing on your wide knowledge of the Book of Mormon to send me certain prophecies and revelations. The quotations I have read with the greatest of interest, with special application to the growth and problems of America."⁸² One of Elder Benson's sons later recalled a business acquaintance telling him how many different copies of the Book of Mormon he had received from Elder Benson on multiple occasions.⁸³

In 1975, Benson, then the President of the Quorum of the Twelve, delivered a seminal address in general conference entitled "The Book of Mormon is the Word of God." In the talk he re-emphasized the Lord's condemnation to the Church given in section 84 of the Doctrine and Covenants (vv. 54–57) and added his own voice of warning: "Now, we have not been using

the Book of Mormon as we should.” President Benson saw the book as an effective tool to “combat the false educational, political, religious, and philosophical concepts of our time.”⁸⁴

President Benson also emphasized the Book of Mormon as a tool to bring people to Christ. He taught that the book “contains the words of Christ, and its great mission is to bring men to Christ and all other things are secondary. The golden question of the Book of Mormon is ‘Do you want to learn more of Christ?’”⁸⁵ He also stated that “Our homes are not as strong unless we are using it to bring our children to Christ.” When new editions of the scriptures were published in 1979 and 1981, they came with an extensive system of footnotes connecting the Book of Mormon with the other standard works. In addition, the Book of Mormon received a new subtitle, “Another Testament of Jesus Christ.”⁸⁶

When Ezra Taft Benson became President of the Church in 1985, he immediately reiterated his counsel concerning the Book of Mormon, this time with prophetic authority. For the first few years of Benson’s presidency, nearly every general conference featured an address on the Book of Mormon from President Benson.⁸⁷ Even as his health declined, President Benson continued to push the distribution and study of the Book of Mormon. He published a collection of Book of Mormon messages, *A Witness and a Warning*, and arranged with publishers to put his royalties toward the distribution costs so that the work could sell at the lowest possible price.⁸⁸ In addition, he developed the Family-to-Family Book of Mormon program, where Church members gave copies of the Book of Mormon with personalized messages inside for use in the mission field.⁸⁹

In one of his final addresses, President Benson spoke of his struggle to bring forth the Book of Mormon: “Moses never entered the promised land. Joseph Smith never saw Zion redeemed. Some of us may not live long enough when the Lord lifts His condemnation (D&C 84:54–58). But, God willing, I intend to spend all my remaining days in that glorious effort.”⁹⁰

Ezra Taft Benson’s presidency was the culmination of a long journey to bring the Book of Mormon from obscurity to primacy in Church doctrine and teaching. Partially as a result of his urgings, there was an explosion in the use of the Book of Mormon within the Church. Noel Reynolds’s 1999 study showed the skyrocketing use of the Book of Mormon by exploring three categories: first, before Ezra Taft Benson’s presidency, the number of

scriptures from the Book of Mormon used in conference hovered consistently around 12 percent. After President Benson's first challenge in 1986, the number shot to 40 percent, then it gradually leveled off to 25 percent. Other statistics—measuring not just the references to scriptures but the topics of the talks themselves—also showed a peak in Book of Mormon topics during 1986–89, when President Benson sparked the new emphasis on the Book of Mormon.⁹¹ Even before President Benson's tenure, the number of publications, both in favor and polemical, experienced a dramatic increase during the latter part of the 1980s.⁹²

Among the missionary materials of the Church, the Book of Mormon reemerged as the primary tool for conversion. The Book of Mormon was made part of the first discussion with investigators in 1973. When a new series of lessons was introduced in 1986, the Book of Mormon, along with a challenge for investigators to begin reading it, was the first lesson given by the missionaries. The Book of Mormon was used as an integral part of all interactions, as missionaries were instructed to follow up and encourage their investigators to continue a study of the book.⁹³

President Benson's successors continued to emphasize the Book of Mormon, most notably in August 2005, when President Gordon B. Hinckley issued "a challenge to members of the Church throughout the world and to our friends everywhere to reread the Book of Mormon." He added, "If you will read a bit more than one and one-half chapters a day, you will be able to finish the book before the end of this year."⁹⁴ The challenge again produced remarkable results. One BYU professor surveyed students on campus and found that 62 percent of students completed the entire book before the end of the year, and 36 percent completed a partial reading. While many did not complete the Book of Mormon before the deadline, the same survey found that only 12 out of the 1,303 students surveyed failed to read any of the Book of Mormon. A similar survey among adults in a nearby congregation produced encouraging results, with 41 percent completing the book and 56 percent carrying out a partial reading.⁹⁵

The Book of Mormon reached another milestone during President Hinckley's administration when the hundred millionth copy of the book rolled off the presses in February of 2000.⁹⁶ The same year, the Book of Mormon was printed in its hundredth language. Out of the hundred million copies, the majority were printed in English, though a significant number of

copies in other languages were produced. By the end of the twentieth century, Book of Mormon translations existed in every major European language. It was also found in a multitude of other languages such as Arabic; Hindi; African dialects, including Efik, Lingala, Shona, and Urdu; and even in languages only found in Mexico and Central America, like Tzotzil, Mam, and Kekchi.⁹⁷

More recently, a change in eligibility age for both men and women to serve full-time missions, announced by President Thomas S. Monson in 2012, resulted in a significant surge in the missionary population of the Church. The growing missionary force, along with the continued emphasis on the Book of Mormon as the primary proselytizing tool, offers the promise of an ever-increasing number of young people steeped in the knowledge of the book. Additionally, in 2014 a new set of required courses for religious education in Church colleges and institutes of religion was presented. The new curriculum proposed the replacement of the two Book of Mormon courses then taught (still available as electives) with one class focusing on the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon (rather than a sequential study of the text). The discussions surrounding the change demonstrated how central the Book of Mormon has become within the minds of the religious educators of the Church. Only a generation earlier, battles were fought to include the Book of Mormon in the curriculum of Church colleges; now a concerned number of teachers asked if the move meant a step back from emphasizing the Book of Mormon. With these concerns in mind, discussions surrounding the new course of study centered on charting the best way to promote a greater understanding of the doctrine contained in the Book of Mormon. According to one participant, “The guiding principle in all the curriculum discussions was, ‘What will elevate Book of Mormon scholarship and understanding?’”⁹⁸

Chad Webb, the administrator of seminaries and institutes, felt the teaching of the Book of Mormon within the Church has progressed to the point where college students could dive directly into the doctrinal teachings of the Book of Mormon. “We wanted to build on what they already have. . . . They have had seminary, been on missions, and studied the scriptures in Church and by themselves. Their previous experiences have brought them to a point where we can say, ‘Let’s go directly to the sermons of Lehi and his children, and really study the doctrines in the Book of Mormon.’”⁹⁹ Brent L.

Top, dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, added that the intent of this change was to help students understand the Book of Mormon text “on a deeper level,” deeper “than we ever have before.”¹⁰⁰ The increasing literacy in the Book of Mormon among the young people of the Church, combined with different approaches toward its study, offers the possibility of an ever-greater emphasis on the book in the future.

The Future Challenge of the Book of Mormon

The use of the Book of Mormon throughout the history of the Church in many ways mirrors the way an individual might approach the book over the course of a lifetime. A first reading of the book reveals a dramatic world of heroes and villains, exciting battles and grand adventures. Over time and through repeated study, the reader comes to appreciate not only the vivid history of the Book of Mormon but also the sublime doctrinal and philosophical teachings contained in its covers. When I was a young man, I thrilled over the heroic exploits of Captain Moroni. Now the reasoning of Jacob, the philosophy of Alma the Younger, and the hopeful discourse of Mormon are just as moving. Likewise, as a people, the Saints have matured in the understanding of the Book of Mormon. Our early writings and teachings focused on the high drama of the book’s narrative. As time went on, we began to discover the Book of Mormon as a fully alive book of philosophy, literature, and theology.

At the same time, it must be noted that no prophetic leader of the Church has yet received revelation indicating that the condemnation issued by the Lord early in the Restoration has lifted. While this study highlights some of the more dramatic events in the life of the Book of Mormon among the Saints, the backstory is a steady increase in awareness and use of the book and its teachings. However, it took generations for the Saints to truly realize the value of the Book of Mormon as a source for inspiration, doctrine, and a witness that “JESUS is the CHRIST, the ETERNAL GOD, manifesting himself unto all nations” (Book of Mormon title page).

Yet what does the coming forth of the Book of Mormon truly mean? One of the prophecies in the Book of Mormon favored by the early members of the Church was found in 3 Nephi 21. The Savior told the Nephites,

“I will give unto you for a sign—for verily I say unto you that when these things which I declare unto you . . . shall be made known unto the Gentiles . . . it shall be a sign unto them, that they may know that the work of the Father hath already commenced unto the fulfilling of the covenant which he hath made unto the people who are of the house of Israel” (3 Nephi 21:2, 7). In the same vein, the condemnation issued by the Lord in 1832 and reiterated by President Benson exhorted the Saints “not only to say, but to *do* according to that which I have written” (D&C 84:57; emphasis added). For all the possible metrics to consider in measuring the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, the most significant change is one impossible to measure: the number of individuals changed, converted, and moved to action by the Book of Mormon. Millions of stories about how the Book of Mormon has changed lives have already been told, and there are millions more to come. The miracle of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon happens one individual at a time, when men and women accept the timeless invitation issued by the book to “come unto Christ, and be perfected in him” (Moroni 10:32).

Notes

1. I am heavily indebted to Noel B. Reynolds for the generous use of portions of his research in this study. In addition to consulting with me and offering suggestions, Dr. Reynolds provided a wealth of analysis and research to augment this study. This study also draws from previous work performed by Grant Underwood, Allison Clark, Alton D. Merrill, Jan Shipps, John W. Welch, and many others. Dr. Reynolds’s seminal article “The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century,” *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999), provided a rich cache of data for scholars to draw from contained in the Noel B. Reynolds Book of Mormon research collection in the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU.
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3. Esther B. Fein, “Book Notes,” *New York Times on the Web*, November 20, 1991.
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5. Grant Underwood, “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” *Dialogue* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 1984); Alton D. Merrill, “An Analysis of the Papers and Speeches of Those Who Have Written or Spoken about the Book of Mormon, Published during the Years of 1830 to 1855 and 1915 to 1940, to Ascertain the Shift in Emphasis” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University, 1940).
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 12. Thomas B. Marsh, "History of Thomas Baldwin Marsh," *Millennial Star*, June 4, 1864, 359, 375.
 13. Brigham Young, Discourse in the Salt Lake Tabernacle, August 8, 1852, Deseret News, in *The Complete Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. Richard S. Van Wagoner (Salt Lake City: Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2009), 558.
 14. Jan Shippo and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin, 1831–1836* (Provo, UT: BYU Studies; Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 103; original spelling and grammar preserved.
 15. Shippo and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 110.
 16. Shippo and Welch, *Journals of William E. McLellin*, 148; original punctuation preserved.
 17. Matthew C. Godfrey, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Grant Underwood, Robert J. Woodford, and William G. Hartley, eds., *Documents, Volume 2: July 1831–January 1833*, vol. 2 of the Documents series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Dean C. Jessee, Ronald K. Esplin, Richard Lyman Bushman, and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2013), 298 (hereafter *JSP*, D2); original spelling and punctuation preserved.
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 19. Minutes from *Far West Record: Minutes of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1830–1844*, ed. Donald Q. Cannon and Lyndon W. Cook (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 22–23; and *Kirtland Council Minute Book*, ed.

- Fred C. Collier and William S. Harwell (Salt Lake City: Collier's Publishing, 1996, 2002), 37, 128.
20. "The Book of Mormon," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, June 1832, 8; original spelling and punctuation preserved.
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 22. "The Book of Mormon," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, January 1833, 1.
 23. "The Book of Mormon," *The Evening and the Morning Star*, July 1833, 224.
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 25. Only a small sampling of the early revelations concerning the building of the city of Zion includes Revelation, 7 December 1830 [D&C 35:24], in *JSP*, D1:223; Letter from Oliver Cowdery, 8 April 1831, in *JSP*, D1:291; Revelation, 10 March 1831 [D&C 48:6], in *JSP*, D1:288; Revelation, September 1830 [D&C 28:9], in *JSP*, D1:185–86; Revelation, 20 July 1831 [D&C 57:1–2], in *JSP*, D2:7–8; and Revelation, 22–23 September 1832 [D&C 84:2], in *JSP*, D2:223.
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 29. Pratt, *Autobiography*, 362.
 30. Jeffrey R. Holland, "Safety for the Soul," *Ensign*, November 2009.
 31. Merrill, "Analysis of Papers and Speeches," 16. For this study Merrill reviewed over 1,950 articles, drawing his sources from the *Millennial Star*, *Deseret News*, the *Seer*, *Times and Seasons*, and Conference Reports.
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 33. Brigham Young Discourse, May 29, 1870, *Deseret News*.
 34. Orson Pratt Discourse, January 2, 1859, *Deseret News*, January 12, 1859, 1.
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 37. Bruce A. Van Orden, *Prisoner for Conscience' Sake: The Life of George Reynolds* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1992), 96, 107–8.
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 40. Reynolds and Sjodahl, *Commentary*, 1:v.
 41. Reynolds, "Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," 18.

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43. Beaver Branch of the Brigham Young Academy, Circular, 1903–1904, Beaver Branch of the Brigham Young University Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, 9.
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45. A. Theodore Tuttle, "Released Time Religious Education Program of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints" (master's thesis, Stanford University, 1949), 56–57.
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49. German E. Ellsworth, in Conference Report, June 1919, 95–96.
50. "FARMS Preliminary Report," 2.
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58. Sperry to Swensen.

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81. Truman G. Madsen, interview, March 12, 1996, 6, Reynolds Collection, box 1, folder 12, L. Tom Perry Special Collections.
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85. Benson, in Conference Report, April 1975, 63–66.
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