

## *Chapter 2*

# The “Most Perfect Book On Earth”

*Let's start with the Book of Mormon, which Joseph Smith described as “the most perfect book on earth, the keystone of our religion.”*

*This book, which Joseph Smith translated from gold plates, tells the story of the earliest inhabitants of the Americas. It has had phenomenal success. An astounding 130 million copies are in print, with another six million added to that number every year. You'll have to admit that's an impressive record.*

Indeed it is. Nobody can deny that.

*To imagine that such a remarkable success could come from the efforts of an unschooled youth is unthinkable. Borrowing a phrase from the Bible, we Mormons consider the book “a marvelous work and a wonder.”*

I'll concede that the phrase does seem to apply — *but it would also apply to many other books!* Take the Koran, for example. Like the Book of Mormon, it was produced by an uneducated man (Mohammed) who could barely write his own name. Like the Book of Mormon, it claims to be God's word, the “most perfect book on earth.” Like the Book of Mormon, it was not written, but was dictated to a scribe. And Mohammed proclaimed, as did Joseph Smith, that the book itself was proof of its divinity, because no mortal could have written so perfect a book! 1

Mohammed taught, as Joseph Smith did, that earlier scriptures were the word of God “as far as they were translated correctly,” but he explained they were incomplete, and had been corrupted.<sup>2</sup> And he announced, just as Joseph Smith did 1200 years later, that an angel had appeared to him and commanded him to dictate a book that would contain (although he did not use the phrase) the fullness of the Gospel.

*Look, you're not saying the Book of Mormon is comparable to the Koran, are you?*

No — except in the sense that both books demonstrate that a person with little education can produce a book that will convince many people that it is sacred scripture. In the case of the Koran, it has convinced more than one billion people!

***Well, that may be true, but the Book of Mormon is unique. Consider the speed with which it was produced — it has been estimated that Joseph Smith completed it in only sixty-five working days.<sup>3</sup> Even though he was dictating rather than writing, that is a remarkable pace.***

That figure is quite misleading. Joseph Smith said Moroni first showed him the gold plates in 1823, and finally gave them to him in 1827, so he had the book on his mind constantly for four years before he started dictating, giving him plenty of time to plan the work, which he completed in 1829.

***Well, no ordinary storyteller could come up with the kind of detail that he did.***

Joseph Smith was no ordinary storyteller. And what he did is not as rare as you might think. Have you ever heard of “automatic writing”?

***No. What is it?***

Sometimes it’s referred to as “channeling,” and it has produced some remarkable volumes. One example is the Seth books. A few years ago Jane Roberts dictated seven books at an incredible pace, without reference to notes or research, somewhat similar to the way Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon. She said she was merely serving as a “channel” for a person called Seth. Her books sold more than seven million copies.

***Wait a minute. The Seth books are not comparable to the Book of Mormon!***

No, but they do illustrate that it is possible for some people to produce complex books at an unbelievable pace. In an essay on “Automaticity and the Book of Mormon”<sup>4</sup> Scott C. Dunn listed a number of examples of this phenomenon, some involving books much longer than the Book of Mormon, and sometimes dictated with incredible speed. Pearl Curran, for example, serving as “channel” for a woman named Patience Worth, produced nearly 6,000 words at a single sitting, and was once timed at dictating 100 words per minute. Another example is Helen Schucman, who in 1976 published a 1,500 page book that she said Jesus Christ had dictated to her.<sup>5</sup>

***But the Book of Mormon is quite different from such books. It has the sound of scripture, and it has been able to convince many people that it is scripture.***

Well, consider the book written by one of Joseph Smith’s associates, James J. Strang. After Joseph Smith’s death, Strang (who claimed to be his successor) wrote a book in the same style, entitled *Book of the Law of the Lord*. Five of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon (Martin Harris, Hiram Page, David Whitmer, John Whitmer, and Jacob Whitmer) all pronounced

Strang's book just as inspired as the Book of Mormon. It was also accepted as scripture by Lucy Smith, the Prophet's mother, and by his brother, William Smith!<sup>6</sup>

***Well, they were wrong about the Strang book, but right about the Book of Mormon. In any case, the Book of Mormon is still an amazing document. An untrained person could hardly have come up with the kind of detail it contains.***

He could if he were sufficiently imaginative.

***I believe the prophet was inspired, not "imaginative."***

According to his mother, he was imaginative. Years before he dictated the Book of Mormon, when he was a teenager, Joseph Smith speculated in great detail about the ancestors of the American Indians, the people who would later be depicted in the Book of Mormon. Lucy Mack Smith, the Prophet's mother, said that beginning in 1823 the family began a long series of evenings in which Joseph would regale the family with such stories. Let me read you what she wrote:

I presume our family presented an aspect as singular as any that ever lived upon the face of the earth — all seated in a circle, father, mother, sons and daughters, and giving the most profound attention to a boy, eighteen years of age, who had never read the Bible through in his life....During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular, their mode of warfare; and also their religious worship. This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them."<sup>7</sup>

The implications of that statement are profound. Here is how LDS historian B.H. Roberts summed it up:

It must be remembered that the above took place before the young prophet had received the plates of the Book of Mormon: these were the evenings immediately following the first interviews with [the angel] Moroni. Whence came his knowledge for these recitals of "the dress," "the mode of the ancient inhabitants of America of traveling," "the animals on which they rode," "their cities," "their buildings," their mode of warfare," "their religious worship" ? And all this given "with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them." Whence indeed, since all this happened *before even the second interview with Moroni* had taken place, and between three and four years before the translation of the Book of Mormon began...These evening recitals could come from no other source than the vivid, constructive imagination of Joseph Smith, a remarkable power which attended him through all his life. It was as strong and varied as Shakespeare's and no more to be accounted for than the English Bard's.<sup>8</sup>

***Well, this is one of those situations where reason contradicts faith, and whenever that happens we are told to choose faith rather than reason. So although B.H. Roberts' statement seems convincing, I can't accept it.***

***One thing, however, puzzles me: B.H. Roberts was a General Authority, Senior President of the First Council of the Seventy, and Assistant Church Historian. How could such a high-ranking authority write criticisms of the Book of Mormon and still remain in the Church?***

That's a good question — and one for which there is no clear answer. Keep in mind that Roberts' study was not written for publication, but as a confidential analysis for the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. His public statements and his privately

expressed concerns are quite opposite. As Brigham D. Madsen notes in the Introduction to *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, “The record is mixed....Whether or not Roberts retained his belief in the Book of Mormon may never be determined. In his last conference address of April 1933 he referred to the Book of Mormon as ‘one of the most valuable books that has ever been preserved, even as holy scripture.’ Yet in his ‘A Book of Mormon Study,’ Roberts presents an intense and probing evaluation of the possibility that Ethan Smith’s *View of the Hebrews* furnished a partial framework for Joseph Smith’s written composition, that the Mormon prophet had the intellectual capacity and imagination necessary to conceive and write the Book of Mormon, and that internal contradictions and other defects added further evidence that it might not be of divine origin.”<sup>9</sup>

***What is the meaning of Roberts’ phrase, “internal contradictions and other defects”?***

There are many things in the Book of Mormon that seem to indicate that it’s far from being the “most correct of any book on earth,” as Joseph Smith described it.

***Such as?***

To take one small example, consider Ether 15:30: “And it came to pass that when Coriantumr had leaned upon his sword, that he rested a little, he smote off the head of Shiz. And it came to pass that after he had smitten off the head of Shiz, that Shiz raised up on his hands and fell: and after that he had struggled for breath, he died.” It is hard to imagine a headless man struggling for breath.

***Well, maybe that wasn’t meant to be taken literally.***

There are many other examples. For example: According to Alma, Jesus would be born at Jerusalem. Actually, of course, it was Bethlehem.

***Perhaps Alma meant a town near Jerusalem.***

Perhaps, but that isn’t what he said.

There are a number of stories in the Book of Mormon that seem implausible. For example, we are told that when the Nephites became wicked their flocks were herded southward by poisonous snakes, and that this process continued until “the Lord did cause the serpents that they should pursue them no more.”<sup>10</sup>

Another story that seems rather fanciful is the account of the Jaredites, who crossed the ocean in eight “barges,” which apparently resembled submarines: They were “tight like unto a dish” both top and bottom. When the brother of Jared pointed out to the Lord that the voyagers could not breathe, the Lord said: “Behold thou shalt make a hole in the top, and also in the bottom; and when thou shalt suffer for air thou shalt unstop the hole and receive air. And if it be so that the water come in upon thee, behold, ye shall stop the hole, that ye may not perish in the flood.”<sup>11</sup>

The hole in the bottom of these ships puzzles me. It doesn't seem like a very good idea for an ocean-going vessel.

But more important than such oddities is the fact that many changes have been made in the Book of Mormon, both during the Prophet's lifetime and afterwards, indicating that the book is not, as Joseph Smith claimed, "the most correct of any book on earth."<sup>12</sup>

***Well, that's easy to explain. Every book is likely to have a few typographical errors. And in the case of the Book of Mormon errors by the person taking the dictation were possible. Surely the correction of such mistakes should not be considered a problem.***

Of course not. And most of the nearly 4,000 changes that have been made were either typos or correction of grammatical errors in such phrases as "...they was angry with me," "...those that was with him," "...they did not fight against God no more," etc.<sup>13</sup> Such grammatical errors — which were found throughout the original Book of Mormon — are perhaps to be expected, given Joseph Smith's lack of formal education, and although disconcerting they probably shouldn't be used as evidence against the authenticity of the book.

***So what's the problem?***

The problem is with changes that are neither typographical nor grammatical. For example, the 1830 Book of Mormon stated that "...king *Benjamin* had a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings..."<sup>14</sup> This has been changed to read "...king *Mosiah* had a gift from God, whereby he could interpret such engravings..."<sup>15</sup>

***I don't understand why such a change would have been made.***

It was made because Benjamin was dead at the time the incident occurred.<sup>16</sup> These names were also changed in the Book of Ether: the phrase "...for this cause did king *Benjamin* keep them..." was later changed to "...for this cause did king *Mosiah* keep them..."<sup>17</sup> A pretty substantial change, you must admit.

Another interesting name change occurs not in the book itself, but in Joseph Smith's account of how he obtained the gold plates. In several early references he said the angel who told him about the plates was named Nephi.<sup>18</sup> He later said the angel's name was Moroni.

Another textual change is the addition of a reference to baptism in I Nephi. Originally the quote read: "Hearken and hear this, O house of Jacob, which are called the name of Israel, and are come forth out of the waters of Judah, which swear by the name of the Lord..." Later editions were changed by adding the words "*or out of the waters of baptism*" after the phrase "waters of Judah."<sup>19</sup> There are other examples of changes that alter the meaning of various passages.

A far more serious problem, however, in B.H. Roberts' view, was the question of warfare in the Book of Mormon.

***Why is that a problem? Ancient people, like modern ones, often resorted to warfare.***

Yes, but Roberts points out that in the Book of Mormon the whole matter of war seems to be treated from the amateurish notion that the wicked are almost always defeated and punished, while the righteous are almost always victorious. He says, “The whole treatment of war and battles, some will say, bears evidence of having originated in one mind and that mind pious but immature.”<sup>20</sup>

One example which Roberts may have had in mind when he used the term “immature” is the great battle between the armies of Shiz and Coriantumr, in which the fighting continued until only two men — the leaders of each army — were left alive, to finish off the battle man-to-man.<sup>21</sup>

***Well, it could have happened.***

It could. But surely it is unprecedented in the history of the world for two huge armies to wipe each other out, down to the last man on each side, who just happened to be the two generals. It’s certainly dramatic, but I think you’ll have to admit it also seems quite theatrical.

Another implausible event happened at the same site a thousand years later. The Nephite leader, Mormon, wanted to do battle with the Lamanites, but instead of attacking them, thereby gaining the advantage of surprise, he wrote a letter asking them to fight! Here is how he describes it: “And I, Mormon, wrote an epistle unto the king of the Lamanites, and desired of him that he would grant unto us that we might gather together our people unto the land of Cumorah, by a hill which was called Cumorah, and there we could give them battle. And it came to pass that the king of the Lamanites did grant unto me the thing which I desired.”<sup>22</sup>

That seems like a strange way to fight a war, asking the enemy’s permission to meet at a prearranged spot. It’s like what happens between a couple of squabbling schoolboys: “Meet me at the playground after school, and we’ll duke it out!”

Another disturbing element, as Roberts points out, is the *scale* of warfare in the Book of Mormon. Literally millions were killed in the battle between Coriantumr and Shiz. We are told that “He [Coriantumr] saw that there had been slain by the sword already nearly two millions of his people, and he began to sorrow in his heart; yea, there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children.”<sup>23</sup> So besides Coriantumr’s 2,000,000 casualties we must add probably a comparable number of the armies of Shiz, plus wives and children, and we have about three or four million people killed in one battle at a small hill in New York called Cumorah — and they and their weapons all vanished without a trace!

And in a second battle at Cumorah, in 385 A.D., again the numbers are astounding: 240,000 Nephites, and presumably a comparable (or larger) number of Lamanites, plus the women and children accompanying the armies, for a total of about a half-million people, and again they vanished, together with their swords, shields, and chariots. As a matter of fact, we don’t find even *one* sword, shield, or chariot!

To get an idea of the incredible scale of Book of Mormon warfare, consider the following:

In all of World War II, American deaths totaled 291,000. In just two Book of Mormon battles an estimated 4,500,000 were killed — that's 15 times more Nephites and Lamanites killed than the United States lost in four long years of continual fighting!

To put it another way, the number of Americans killed in *all the wars in history* is under 700,000. In the Book of Mormon more than *six times* that number were killed in just a couple of battles at Hill Cumorah! And remember, they were all victims of hand-to-hand combat, in contrast to the mass casualties in modern warfare resulting from use of bombs, machine guns, grenades, rifles, artillery, tanks, rockets, and torpedoes.

Or consider the most devastating weapon ever used, the atomic bomb, which killed 138,000 people in Hiroshima. It would require 32 Hiroshima bombs to kill the number who died in just those two Book of Mormon battles!

***That does seem excessive, I must admit.***

And speaking of scale, another incredible event in Book of Mormon history is the building of Nephi's temple.

***Why is that incredible?***

Because according to Nephi it was comparable to Solomon's temple.

***So?***

Well, consider Solomon's temple: According to the Bible, Solomon drafted 30,000 laborers from all over Israel, and rotated them to Lebanon, ten thousand a month. He also had 70,000 additional laborers, 80,000 stonecutters in the hill country, and 3,300 foremen. That makes a total of 183,000 men involved in the project. And it took them seven years to complete it.<sup>24</sup>

***Wow! That was quite an undertaking. How many Nephites did it take to build a temple "like unto" Solomon's?***

A few dozen. B.H. Roberts put it this way: "Nephi with his less than one hundred people, many of whom must have been children, built a temple 'after the manner of Solomon's temple' — the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceeding fine! Is it not pertinent to ask, is this statement from a great historical document, by one who knew Solomon's temple through all his boyhood and young manhood [Nephi], or is it the reckless statement of an undeveloped mind that knew not what he was saying — which?"<sup>25</sup>

*A “reckless statement of an undeveloped mind” — that’s pretty strong language, isn’t it?*

Yes, but those aren’t my words; they are the words of a General Authority of the LDS Church, one of the church’s most distinguished historians, and the foremost authority on the Book of Mormon during his lifetime.

*Well, Roberts wasn’t necessarily giving his own opinion; he was merely suggesting how this incident would appear to a skeptic. It seems to me that he was acting as “devil’s advocate.”*

True, but if you’ll read Roberts’ own words — and I hope you will — you will sense the distress in his comments. He simply couldn’t account for the incredible figures in the Book of Mormon.

Let’s do a little math: Let’s assume that Nephi’s colony (still in its first and second generation) had 100 people, as Roberts estimates. Let’s forget about women and children; assume we have 100 adult males. We don’t know exactly how long it took them to build the temple, but they completed it during Nephi’s lifetime. In Solomon’s case, it took seven years for 183,300 men to build his temple. That totals 1,283,100 man/years. Now, if Nephi’s 100 men were as productive as Solomon’s it would take them 12,831 years — that’s 128 centuries, or more than twelve millenniums — to do a comparable job.

*Look, I’ll admit that it’s impossible for 100 men to do what 183,300 men did, but perhaps Nephi’s people just made a tiny scale model of Solomon’s temple.*

There’s nothing in the story to suggest that. The only difference mentioned by Nephi is in the materials: “And I, Nephi, did build a temple; and I did construct it after the manner of the temple of Solomon save it were not built of so many precious things; for they were not to be found upon the land, wherefore, it could not be built like unto Solomon’s temple. But the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine.”<sup>26</sup>

Incidentally, the statement about a lack of “many precious things” is surprising, because it contradicts the statement in the preceding verse: “And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, *which were in great abundance.*”<sup>27</sup>

*Well, obviously they weren’t abundant enough.*

One more thing: Those 100 men weren’t all working on construction. Some must have been mining and refining the iron, the copper, the gold, and the silver; some must have been smelting the steel; some must have been cutting down, transporting and milling “all manner of wood” from the forests; some must have been doing a lot of intensive farming and hunting — after all, those workers had to be fed and housed and clothed. That doesn’t leave many to do the



actual building. You'll have to admit, as B.H. Roberts pointed out, that the story really strains credulity — which is a nice way of saying it doesn't appear to be factual.

***I'll admit that some of the things in the Book of Mormon are hard to explain. But offsetting such problems we have tangible evidence of the authenticity of the book in archaeological excavations in Mexico and Central America. A number of objects and drawings have been unearthed which are similar to things mentioned in the Bible.***

Of course. That is true of any archeological excavation — whether in China or Borneo or Timbuktu. There are only so many geometrical shapes available: circles, squares, triangles, pentagons, hexagons, crescents, crosses, stars, spirals, etc. And there are only so many animals that an artist can depict: snakes, birds, cats, jackals, wolves, fish, lions, bears, and fictitious creatures such as dragons and monsters. It is inevitable that any excavation anywhere in the world will come up with some carvings and symbols that overlap other cultures.

What's really striking, however, is what is *missing* from the archeological record. To take one example, consider chariots, which are mentioned in the Book of Mormon a number of times, playing an important part in warfare. Chariots must be pulled by horses (or, conceivably some other draft animal), and they must have wheels. No chariot or other wheeled vehicle has ever been found.

***But some wheeled toys have been discovered, indicating that the Mayans were aware of the principle of the wheel.***

It's true that some toys with clay wheels have been discovered, but making a wheel large enough and strong enough to provide transportation is quite another matter. According to the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies there were “absolutely no horses and no chariots” in ancient Mesoamerica.<sup>28</sup> The absence of wheeled vehicles among ancient artifacts is quite convincing, but even more convincing is the fact that among the tens of thousands of drawings and bas reliefs and sculptures and figurines unearthed in Mesoamerica there is not one representation of a chariot or any other vehicle being pulled by a horse or any other animal.

***Well, there may not be much physical evidence validating the Book of Mormon, but there is a legend among the Mayans and Aztecs substantiating the story of Christ appearing to residents of the Americas. The Aztec historian Ixtlilxochitl told of a great leader named Quetzalcoatl who reportedly had a white skin and could have been Jesus.***

J. Reuben Clark, who was a member of the LDS First Presidency and former U.S. ambassador to Mexico, warned against accepting such fables at face value, pointing out that one must “be most careful to see that these traditions of the Indians are not the result of the early teachings of the Catholic priests.”<sup>29</sup> Ixtlilxochitl, though an Indian, was a Christian, working for Spanish padres, and he was anxious to merge Aztec beliefs with biblical themes to satisfy his employers. In the words of University of Utah Anthropology Professor Charles Dibble, every native source subsequent to 1492 dealing with native cultures is potentially able to reflect Christian ideology. The Quetzalcoatl story must be taken with a grain of salt.

***But Thomas Stuart Ferguson, who first popularized the Quetzalcoatl theory, wrote several books showing connections between the Book of Mormon and Central America. His research is very convincing.***

Not to Ferguson himself.

***What do you mean?***

Ferguson was originally a devout believer in the Book of Mormon, and made many trips to Mexico and Central America to unearth evidence supporting it. He even persuaded the LDS Church to allocate \$250,000 to his New World Archeology Foundation, and his book *One Fold and One Shepherd* 30 was popular with members of the Church. But after 20 years of searching Ferguson reluctantly conceded that the archeological evidence just wasn't there.

***That's hard to believe. I don't recall hearing that he ever left the Church.***

He didn't, because he decided that although Mormonism was not true it was a comfort for many people, and he didn't want to disillusion them. But in letters that came to light after his death he disclosed that he could no longer believe.<sup>31</sup> I imagine no one has devoted as much time, effort, and money to validating the Book of Mormon as Tom Ferguson did, but in the end he decided the book was just a product of Joseph Smith's "vividly strong, creative imagination."<sup>32</sup>

***Well, I think Ferguson was wrong. But there is one evidence of the Book of Mormon that we haven't considered yet, and that is chiasmus. I don't know if you are familiar with it (most people aren't), but it's a literary device in which several words or phrases are listed, such as ABC. after which they are repeated in reverse order, CBA. For example,***

(A) *Whoever sheds*  
(B) *the blood*  
(C) *of man*  
(C) *by man shall*  
(B) *his blood*  
(A) *be shed.*

I'm aware of chiasmus, but I've never understood how it proves anything in connection with the Book of Mormon.

***The technique is found in Hebrew writing, and in a number of places in the Book of Mormon, making it likely that the Book of Mormon was written by people having a Hebrew background. According to LDS writer John Welch, "There exists no chance that Joseph Smith could have learned of the style through academic channels."***

But it's found in the Bible.

***Yes, but not often. Joseph Smith probably wasn't aware of the technique, so it must have come from the gold plates he was translating.***

I have several problems with this idea. In the first place, since chiasmus is found in the Bible, Joseph Smith may have picked it up there, consciously or unconsciously.

Secondly, if chiasmus proves the Book of Mormon to be an ancient document, then the *Book of the Law of the Lord*, published in 1851 by James J. Strang, is also an ancient document. Strang, who said he had been chosen by Joseph Smith as his successor, claimed to have translated some brass plates which contained one of the “lost books of the Bible.” Written in the style of the King James Bible, like the Book of Mormon, Strang’s 38-chapter book has notable examples of chiasmus.<sup>33</sup>

Thirdly, the device is not all that unusual. As Mormon writers themselves admit, it may occur in ordinary speaking or writing. Joseph Smith used the technique at least a couple of times in his diary — which certainly wasn’t an ancient document.

But the clinching demonstration of the chiasmus fallacy is a book known to millions of children, the classic *Green Eggs and Ham*, by Dr. Seuss. By applying the “chiasmus and Hebraicisms” test, Dr. Robert Patterson has proven (with tongue in cheek) that *Green Eggs and Ham* is a translation of an ancient Hebrew document!<sup>34</sup>

So much for chiasmus.

There is another aspect of the Book of Mormon that I find troubling, although it has received little attention either from Mormons or from critics of the Church, and that is the book’s treatment of women. Let’s take a look at that next.