

Book of Mormon Authorship

Diane E. Wirth

Many studies have investigated Book of Mormon authorship because the book presents itself as a composite work of many ancient authors. Those who reject Joseph Smith's claim that he translated the book through divine power assume that he or one of his contemporaries wrote the book. Various claims or arguments have been advanced to support or discount these competing positions.

Disputes about the book's authorship arose as soon as its existence became public knowledge. The first general reaction was ridicule. Modern minds do not easily accept the idea that an angel can deliver ancient records to be translated by an untrained young man. Moreover, most Christians in 1830 viewed the canon of scripture as complete with the Bible; hence, the possibility of additional scripture violated a basic assumption of their faith. Opponents of Joseph Smith, such as Alexander Campbell, also argued that the Book of Mormon was heavily plagiarized from the Bible and that it reflected themes and phraseology current in New York in the 1820s. Many critics have speculated that Sidney Rigdon or Solomon Spaulding played a role in writing the book (see Spaulding Manuscript). It has also been suggested that Joseph Smith borrowed ideas from another book (see View of the Hebrews). Though these varieties of objections and theories are still defended in many quarters, they are not supported by modern authorship studies and continue to raise as many questions as they try to answer (e.g., CWHN 8:54-206).

Some have suggested that Joseph Smith admitted that he was the author of the Book of Mormon because the title page of the first edition lists him as "Author and Proprietor." This language, however, comes from the federal copyright statutes and legal forms in use in 1829 (1 Stat. 125 [1790], amended 2 Stat. 171 [1802]). In the preface to the same 1830 edition, Joseph Smith stated that he translated Mormon's handwriting "by the gift and power of God" (see Book of Mormon Translation). The position of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has invariably been that the truth of Joseph Smith's testimony can be validated through the witness of the Holy Ghost.

Scholarly work has produced a variety of evidence in support of the claim that the texts of the Book of Mormon were written by multiple ancient authors. These studies significantly increase the plausibility of Joseph Smith's account of the origin of the book.

The internal complexity of the Book of Mormon is often cited as a strong indication of multiple authorship. The many writings reportedly abridged by Mormon are intricately interwoven and often expressly identified (see Book of Mormon Plates and Records). The various books within the Book of Mormon differ from each other in historical background, style, and distinctive characteristics, yet are accurate and consistent in numerous minute details.

Historical studies have demonstrated that many things either not known or not readily knowable in 1829 about the ancient Near East are accurately reflected in the Book of Mormon. This body of historical research was expanded by the work of Hugh W. Nibley (see Book of Mormon Studies), who has recently discovered that ancient

communities, such as Qumran, have many characteristics parallel to those of Book of Mormon Peoples (CWHN 5-8). The Jews at Qumran were "sectaries," purists who left Jerusalem to avoid corruption of their covenants; they practiced ablutions (a type of baptism) before the time of Christ and wrote one of their records on a copper scroll that they sealed and hid up to come forth at a future time. One of Nibley's analyses demonstrates that King Benjamin's farewell speech to his people (Mosiah 2-5) is a good example of the ancient year-rite festival (CWHN 6:295-310). Subsequent studies have suggested that King Benjamin's people might have been celebrating the Israelite festival of Sukkoth and doing things required by Jewish laws not translated into English until after the Book of Mormon was published (Tvedtnes, 1990).

Structural studies have identified an artistic literary form, chiasmus, that appears in rich diversity in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon (see Book of Mormon Literature). The most significant structural studies of the Book of Mormon derive from John W. Welch's analysis (Reynolds, pp. 33-52). Little known in 1829, this literary form creates inverted parallelism such as is found in this biblical passage in Leviticus 24:17-21:

He that killeth any man...

 He that killeth a beast...

 If a man cause a blemish...

 Breach for breach,

 Eye for eye

 Tooth for tooth.

 As he hath caused a blemish...

 He that killeth a beast...

He that killeth a man....

And from the Book of Mormon, in Alma 41:13-14 (cf. Welch, pp. 5-22):

Good for that which is good

 Righteous for that which is righteous

 Just for that which is just

 Merciful for that which is merciful

 Therefore my son

 See that you are merciful

 Deal justly

 Judge righteously

And do good continually.

Although chiasmus can appear in almost any language or literature, it was prevalent in the biblical period around the early seventh century B.C., the time of the Book of Mormon prophets Lehi and Nephi 1. The especially precise and beautiful crafting of several Book of Mormon texts further supports the idea that their authors deliberately and painstakingly followed ancient literary conventions, which is inconsistent with seeing the New England born Joseph Smith as the author of these passages.

Other stylistic studies have examined the frequency of Hebrew root words, idioms, and syntax in the Book of Mormon (Tvedtnes, 1970). Some Book of Mormon names that have no English equivalents have Hebrew cognates (Hoskisson; CWHN 6:281-94). There are also discernible differences between the vocabularies and abridging techniques of Mormon and his son Moroni (see Keller).

Extensive statistical studies, including stylometry (or wordprinting), have been conducted on the Book of Mormon (Reynolds, pp. 157-88; cf. Hilton). Blocks of writing were analyzed to identify the writers' near-subconscious tendencies to use noncontextual word patterns in peculiar ratios and combinations. Wordprinting has been used to ascertain the authorship of such works as twelve disputed Federalist Papers and a posthumously published novel by Jane Austen. When applied to the Book of Mormon, wordprinting reveals that the word patterns of the Book of Mormon differ significantly from the personal writings of Joseph Smith, Solomon Spaulding, Sidney Rigdon, and Oliver Cowdery, who served as Joseph Smith's scribe. Furthermore, patterns of Nephi 1 are consistent among themselves but different from those of Alma 2. The results of objectively measuring these phenomena indicate an extremely low statistical probability that the Book of Mormon could have been written by one author. The introduction of new vocabulary into the text is at a low rate, which is consistent with the uniform role of Joseph Smith as translator.

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- D. BRENT ANDERSON
DIANE E. WIRTH