

Preface

I consider Joseph Smith's story an allegory that contains elements of historic events and imagination. This saga includes what Smith told others in his religious quest. According to the earliest story told outside the Smith family Joseph went with his wife Emma to a local hill. On the morning of September 22, 1827 he said he "obtained the plates" from its hiding place in the ground. Willard Chase, a neighbor, fellow treasure seeker, and friend of the Smith family, in 1833 recalled the story Joseph Smith told him in October 1827:

That on the 22d of September, he arose early in the morning, and took a one horse wagon, of some one¹ that had stayed over night at their house, without leave or license; and, together with his wife, repaired to the hill which contained the book. He left his wife in the wagon, by the road, and went alone to the hill, a distance of thirty or forty rods from the road; he said he then took the book out of the ground and hid it in a tree top, and returned home.

He then went to the town of Macedon to work.² After about ten days, it having been suggested that some one had got his book, his wife went after him; he hired a horse, and went home in the afternoon, staid long enough to drink one cup of tea, and then went for his book, found it safe, took off his frock, wrapt it round it, put it under his arm and ran all the way home, a distance of about two miles. He said he should think it would weigh sixty pounds, and was sure it would weigh forty.

On his return home, he said he was attacked by two men in the woods, and knocked them both down and made his escape, arrived safe and secured his treasure.—He then observed that if it had not been for that stone, (which he acknowledged belonged to me,) he would not have obtained the book.³

To summarize, Joseph Smith reported he went to the side of the hill, took the plates out of a box in the ground and hid them in a fallen treetop.⁴ They remained there until he retrieved them.⁵ It appears that Joseph brought something home to show his family and visitors on Monday, October 1, 1827.⁶ Then Lucy Mack Smith visited the home of Martin Harris. Martin's wife Lucy and their daughter also named Lucy visited the Smith home the next day which was on Tuesday.⁷ When they returned home Lucy Harris and daughter told Martin that the plates "were now in the glass-box, and my wife said they were very

¹ Joseph Knight Sr.

² Lucy Smith mentions the trip to Macedon. See Lavina Fielding Anderson, ed., *Lucy's Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith's Family Memoir* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 380.

³ Affidavit of Willard Chase, December 11, 1833, in E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, (Painesville, Ohio: E. D. Howe, 1834), 245-46. Chase did not make a chest.

⁴ Similar accounts are in *Lucy's Book*, 386, and an interview of Martin Harris in Joel Tiffany, "Mormonism--No. II," *Tiffany's Monthly. Devoted to the Investigation of the Science of Mind, in the Physical, Intellectual, Moral and Religious Planes Thereof* 5 (August 1859):165.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 5:165-66

⁶ Lucy Smith on October 8, 1845 indicated that "it was eighteen years ago last monday since she commenced preaching the gospel, being cal[l]ed upon by Joseph to go & tell Martin Harris & family that he [Joseph Smith] had got the plates." Ronald O. Barney, ed., *The Mormon Vanguard Brigade of 1847: Norton Jacob's Record* (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2005), 53.

⁷ Anderson, *Lucy's Book*, 398.

heavy. They both lifted them." Within a day or two Harris visited the Smith home and talked to Joseph's wife Emma and members of the Smith family who were at home about the plates:

I talked with them separately, to see if their stories agreed, and I found they did agree. When Joseph came home I did not wish him to know that I had been talking with them, so I took him by the arm and led him away from the rest, and requested him to tell me the story, which he did as follows. He said: "An angel had appeared to him, and told him it was God's work."⁸

When Martin Harris was at the Smith home it was after Joseph Knight Sr. and Josiah Stowell departed to return to their homes in southern New York. The two men stayed in the area about ten days. It was Harris who supplied Joseph Smith with money to pay his debts and move to northern Pennsylvania.

The first draft of the Book of Mormon, 116 manuscript pages, was written in 1828. Joseph Smith usually dictated the wording to his scribes. These pages were subsequently lost and not recovered. The dictation continued and was finished in June 1829. After obtaining a publisher the Book of Mormon was printed and available for sale in March 1830.

Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon under what he considered to be the inspiration of God. Whether there were gold plates, whether Smith used them at all, and whether any of the witnesses saw the physical plates in vision or in person does not matter. This is because the question of plates is a religious matter and not as important as the book itself and what it represents.

The Book of Mormon represents Joseph Smith as a religious prophet, seer, and revelator. His book became a vehicle that launched him into the religious circle. The book's original composition was dictated to a number of scribes by Joseph Smith during the period of 1828-1829. Its purpose was to convince Jews that Jesus is the Jewish Messiah and Gentiles that Christ is the Eternal God (see title page).

Since Joseph Smith told his story of gold plates and the angel revealing where they were buried, he has always had a following. Since Smith is the author of this religious work those who have accepted it have looked to him as a prophet who speaks for God. Therefore his story about the gold plates is accepted as reliable and accurate. To the believer, the witnesses had to view the actual gold plates. They may not accept the story as an allegory.

Like any author Smith crafted the Book of Mormon to reflect his views at the time of its production and composition. The plot line of the book, mainly about the native population of the Americas, the record of the doctrines taught, and the wars fought, places the book among the most interesting in the life of American literature. The best example of how Joseph Smith wrote the book is when he projected Jesus visiting the believers after his crucifixion.

Using as a current printing of the King James Bible Smith modified the text of the teachings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew. Those modifications of Matthew 5 show a revised text which is crafted to fit into what Jesus would say to the people in America. By producing a text that has some similarities to the teachings of Jesus in Palestine but with emphasis for a new world audience, Joseph Smith as author gives his personal touch in producing what he believed Jesus would have taught.

The Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's best known and least understood writing. The work presents itself as an ancient record kept by historians and prophets who lived on the American continent. It quotes from the Bible and becomes a prophetic voice for its believers. The origin of this book comes from the experiences of Joseph Smith Jr. It was written in a period of religious excitement, explorations regarding the Native Americans, and political ideals in New York and northern Pennsylvania. It is out of

⁸ *Tiffany's Monthly* 5 (August 1859):168-69.

this background we can understand the work of Smith.

The Book of Mormon was written at a time of speculation on the origin of the ancient inhabitants of America. It responds to the idea that God does not speak and proposes that God spoke to the ancestors of the tribes who were being replaced by white settlers. The book contains teachings regarding the fall of man (Adam) in the beginning of civilization. Its doctrinal position is in response to various doctrinal controversies taking place in America. The book projects a basic Protestant focus following New Testament teachings regarding salvation in what is represented to be an ancient book.

The disappearance and reported murder of William Morgan in September 1826 (who was preparing to print an exposé of Masonry) is reflected the Book of Mormon's denouncement of secret combinations. Morgan's work was published afterward as *Illustrations of Masonry by One of the Fraternity who has devoted Thirty Years to the Subject* (Batavia, New York: Printed for the Author, 1826).

America was foreseen in the context of political debate. Concerning John Quincy Adams (1767-1848) the following is a summary regarding the election of 1824:

Within the one and only party--the Republican--sectionalism and factionalism were developing, and each section put up its own candidate for the Presidency. Adams, the candidate of the North, fell behind Gen. Andrew Jackson in both popular and electoral votes, but received more than William H. Crawford and Henry Clay. Since no candidate had a majority of electoral votes, the election was decided among the top three by the House of Representatives. Clay, who favored a program similar to that of Adams, threw his crucial support in the House to the New Englander. Upon becoming President, Adams appointed Clay as Secretary of State. Jackson and his angry followers charged that a "corrupt bargain" had taken place and immediately began their campaign to wrest the Presidency from Adams in 1828.⁹

Adams served four years from 1825 to 1829. The election in 1828 and then the inauguration on March 4, 1829 of Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) was an important event as Jackson became the seventh President of the United States. Jackson was a Mason who was looked upon by some citizens as an embodiment of evil.

In those troubling times Joseph Smith authored the Book of Mormon. Smith did not need ancient gold plates to be inspired by the revelation of the mind of God. Smith said he was shown where the plates were located in a hill and they were part of his story. He repeated having gold plates to his family and associates such as Willard Chase, Joseph Knight Sr., and Martin Harris. It appears that Joseph Smith did not have a physical ancient artifact in his possession but he told others he did. His first recorded revelation was received in July 1828.

⁹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/about/presidents/johnquincyadams/> (accessed November 19, 2011).