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Part 1: The Nineteenth-Century Origin of the Book of Mormon

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PART ONE



THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY ORIGIN OF THE BOOK OF MORMON

The publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830 posed a problem for anyone unwilling to believe Joseph Smith's account of its divine origin. If they could not accept Joseph's statement that he was given an inspired translation of a genuinely ancient record, they needed another explanation in terms of contemporary events. All these alternative approaches must address the clearly documented facts describing the process by which Joseph translated and published the Book of Mormon. Several people were first-person witnesses of the translation as it developed over many months with some interruptions, and eleven respected men signed affidavits stating that they had seen and examined the golden plates from which the book was translated. Most anti-Mormon attacks on the Book of Mormon avoid these basic facts that constitute the first level of evidence that must be considered in the authorship debate.

The three contributors to this section treat the principal documentary evidences surrounding the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. Richard L. Bushman examines

surviving accounts of participants in these events, investigating their statements for credibility and coherence. Richard L. Anderson compiles and gives context to the personal statements of the seven Book of Mormon witnesses, including Joseph Smith, who left written accounts of their experience with the gold plates. Royal Skousen reports a painstaking analysis of the original manuscript, the transcription of the Book of Mormon text produced in the translation process. The consistent and convincing picture that emerges from these accounts and manuscripts makes stories of fraud and delusion seem impossible. The plain and simple words of all participants, though some witnesses later became bitter enemies of the church or of Joseph Smith, support Joseph's story in fact and in spirit. Only wishful thinking and determination could produce the idea that Joseph created the book and the experiences reported by these people on his own. This leaves his assertion of the ancient authorship of the Book of Mormon as the only remaining credible theory.