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The Records Come Forth

Author(s): John A. Tvedtnes

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The Records Come Forth

For, behold, saith the Lamb: I will manifest myself unto thy seed, that they shall write many things which I shall minister unto them, which shall be plain and precious; and after thy seed shall be destroyed, and dwindle in unbelief, and also the seed of thy brethren, behold, these things shall be hid up, to come forth unto the Gentiles, by the gift and power of the Lamb. And in them shall be written my gospel, saith the Lamb, and my rock and my salvation. (1 Nephi 13:35–36)

A number of Book of Mormon passages speak of the coming forth of ancient records in the last days. Nephi noted a vision in which he “beheld other books, which came forth by the power of the Lamb” (1 Nephi 13:39) and noted that God had shown others “all things, and they have written them; and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb” (1 Nephi 14:26). Nephi was permitted to see the same vision given to the apostle John, as recorded in the book of Revelation, but allowed to write only part of what he saw. The Lord instructed him, “But the things which thou shalt see hereafter thou shalt not write; for the

Lord God hath ordained the apostle of the Lamb of God that he should write them. And also others who have been, to them hath he shown all things, and they have written them; and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel” (1 Nephi 14:25–26).

Among the books to come forth was the Book of Mormon, which Nephi wrote about when likening the prophecy found in Isaiah 29 to his own people and their records. He wrote of a sealed book that would be “kept . . . until the own due time of the Lord, that they may come forth” (2 Nephi 27:10). This book, he noted, “shall come forth, and be written unto the Gentiles, and sealed up again unto the Lord” (2 Nephi 30:3). The Lord directed Nephi to write to Joseph Smith, the future translator of the work, “Touch not the things which are sealed, for I will bring them forth in mine own due time,” then instructed him to “seal up the book again, and hide it up unto me, that I may preserve the words which thou hast not read, until I shall see fit in mine own wisdom to reveal all things unto the children of men” (2 Nephi 27:21–22). Referring to Isaiah 29:4, Nephi wrote that “those who shall be destroyed shall speak unto them out of the ground, and their speech shall be low out of the dust, and their voice shall be as one that hath a familiar spirit” (2 Nephi 26:16). He noted in the farewell at the end of his record, “I speak unto you as the voice of one crying from the dust” (2 Nephi 33:13).

A later Nephite prophet, Mormon, noted “that wickedness will not bring them forth unto them; and they are to be hid up unto the Lord that they may come forth in his own due time. And this is the commandment which I have received; and behold, they shall come forth according to the commandment of the Lord, when he shall see fit, in his wisdom” (Mormon

5:12–13). The Lord made a similar comment regarding the Jaredite record, instructing the brother of Jared to “show them in mine own due time unto the children of men” (Ether 3:27; see 3:24).

On the title page of the Book of Mormon, Moroni described his father’s abridgment as a record “*to come forth* by the gift and power of God unto the interpretation thereof—Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, *to come forth* in due time by way of the Gentile.”

Speaking of the future prophet Joseph Smith, who would translate the Nephite record, Moroni wrote, “And blessed be he that shall bring this thing to light; for it shall be brought out of darkness unto light, according to the word of God; yea, it shall be brought out of the earth, and it shall shine forth out of darkness, and come unto the knowledge of the people; and it shall be done by the power of God” (Mormon 8:16; see 3 Nephi 21:3–6). He further noted, “And no one need say they shall not come, for they surely shall, for the Lord hath spoken it; for out of the earth shall they come, by the hand of the Lord; and none can stay it; . . . and it shall come even as if one should speak from the dead” (Mormon 8:26).¹

Discovery of Ancient Texts

When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, the concept of ancient records hidden away for future generations was foreign to Christians, who believed that the Bible was the most ancient of books and the most authoritative record from antiquity. All that was to change over the next century and a half, as new discoveries were made.

Because ancient records had been revealed to the prophet Joseph Smith (the Book of Mormon and the records of Enoch, Moses, and Abraham, plus portions of the Doctrine and

Covenants), early Latter-day Saints became very interested in extrabiblical books. Lost books such as *Jasher* and *Enoch* were subjects of speculation in the earliest days of the restored church.² The discovery and translation of the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* and the English publication of the thirteenth-century midrashic book of *Jasher* (from the Hebrew meaning “book of the righteous [one]”) was also noted in early LDS periodicals, with some extracts from the latter.³ Indeed, one of the first English translations of *Jasher* was published by J. H. Parry and Company of Salt Lake City in 1887 and is still available in reprints. The first English version of the pseudepigraphic *Apocalypse of Abraham* was published in the *Improvement Era* in 1898.⁴

Early Latter-day Saint interest in such books is also evidenced by the English version of the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The book was published by Samuel Downes, an elder of the church, in Manchester, England, in 1843 and dedicated to an LDS patriarch, John Albitson (read “Albertson”). A copy of the book is found in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, and a notice of the publication was included in the *Millennial Star*.⁵

Documents from the Near East

Large numbers of ancient Near Eastern documents have been discovered since the publication of the Book of Mormon. The largest collections are the clay tablets known from dozens of sites in Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, some of which date to the third millennium B.C. The number of known tablets is in the tens of thousands, while untold numbers lie beneath the earth waiting to be discovered.

Biblical and other documents have been discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls and at nearby sites such as Masada, Naḥal

Ḥever, Naḥal Ṣe'ēlīm, Wadi Murabba'at, Khirbet Mird, and Wadi Daliyah.

Other interesting collections of documents have been found in Egypt, including the Bodmer and Anastasi papyri, the *Pistis Sophia* and *1 and 2 Jeu*, and, of course, the Nag Hammadi collection. As late as February 1998, Canadian archaeologists unearthed a collection of about two thousand papyrus rolls at Esment el-Kharab, near the Dakhla oasis in western Egypt.

Unfortunately, some documents were lost after their original discovery. Some went down in ships at sea, while others fell victim to the ravages of war. Codex Berolensis 8502, a Coptic collection on papyrus dating to the fifth century, was acquired in Cairo in 1896 by Dr. Rheinhardt and taken to Germany, where it disappeared during the fall of Berlin in 1945. It contains the Gospel of Mary, the Secret Book of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Acts of Peter. Though its whereabouts are unknown, it is possible that it may someday reappear on the black market.

The *Copper Scroll*, one of the most famous of the Dead Sea Scrolls, indicates that there are still buried treasures and records to be found. It lists various buried artifacts and written documents, including a copy of the *Copper Scroll* itself. To date, none of these have been unearthed.

Other Ancient Records

In 1899 a Chinese Taoist monk named Wang Yuan-lu was renovating a large chapel in the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas at Ch'ien Fo Tung oasis in the province of Kansu in Chinese Turkestan when he discovered that a frescoed wall was hollow. Breaking down the wall, he discovered a small room packed with some fifteen to twenty thousand manuscripts, paintings, and other sacred artifacts. Dating between the sixth

and seventh centuries A.D., the manuscripts—most of them scrolls—had been walled up about A.D. 1035, probably in anticipation of an invasion by the barbarous Tangguts of Tibet. The documents, comprising many Buddhist scriptures and commentaries, along with some historical texts, were written in Chinese, Tibetan, Sanskrit, and other languages, including some hitherto little-known central Asian tongues. Many of them had been brought to the site from India and Tibet centuries earlier by a monk named Hsüan Tsang. Among them was the oldest known block-printed book, from A.D. 868.

In 1907 Sir Aurel Stein was exploring central Asia and visited the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas. Having heard rumors about the manuscripts, he contacted Wang and managed to acquire twenty-nine cases of materials in return for a large donation of silver to continue the restoration work. The following year, French professor Paul Pelliot headed an expedition to the region and purchased many of the remaining manuscripts and paintings. In 1911 the Chinese government ordered that the rest of the manuscripts be sent to the capital, but en route many of them were stolen by handlers and officials. Wang managed to hold back some of the manuscripts and later sold them to Stein.⁶

A ruined Chinese Buddhist tower in Gilgit also contained a great number of manuscripts, some dating to perhaps the fourth century. As late as 1996, a collection of thirteen birch-bark scrolls from the ancient Buddhist kingdom of Gandhara on the Pakistani-Afghan border were found in pottery jars. Written in the Gandhari language, the first-century-A.D. scrolls are thought to be the oldest known Buddhist writings.

Summary

Nephi wrote of his vision of the future, “I beheld other books, which came forth by the power of the Lamb, from the Gentiles unto them, unto the convincing of the Gentiles and the remnant of the seed of my brethren, and also the Jews who were scattered upon all the face of the earth, that the records of the prophets and of the twelve apostles of the Lamb are true” (1 Nephi 13:39). Since the publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830, many more documents have been discovered, some of them discussed in this chapter and some in earlier chapters of this work. While the documents that were discovered are not all scriptural, they nevertheless lend support to the concept that records were hidden up to come forth in the last days. It is as the Psalmist declared: “Truth shall spring out of the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven” (Psalm 85:11).

Notes

1. Moroni drew the idea of speaking from the dead from the Isaiah 29:4 passage cited by Nephi in reference to the latter-day coming forth of the Nephite record. The term rendered “one that hath a familiar spirit” in the King James Version of the Bible derives from the Hebrew term for “ghost.”

2. See Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:363; William W. Phelps, “Letter No. 8,” *Messenger and Advocate* 1/9 (June 1835): 130; “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 6/3 (February 1845): 800.

3. See “The Book of Jasher,” *Times and Seasons* 1/8 (June 1840): 127; “Fulfillment of a Prophecy,” *Times and Seasons* 6/9 (May 1845): 902; “Ancient Ruins,” *Times and Seasons* 6/1 (December 1844): 745–46; “The Apocryphal Book of Enoch,” *Millennial Star* 1/3 (July

1840): 61. A poem commemorating the finds was published in Samuel Brown, “Inspired Writings,” *Times and Seasons* 2/14 (May 1841): 421.

The book of Jasher has been found,
And many more hid in the ground;
All these, with Enoch’s book, unfold
And spread true light from pole to pole.

4. See G. Nathanael Bonwetsch, “The Book of the Revelation of Abraham,” trans. Edward H. Anderson and R. T. Haag, *Improvement Era*, August 1898, 705–14, 793–806. Hugh Nibley reprinted part of the text in his *Abraham in Egypt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981), 10–20.

5. See “Notices,” *Millennial Star* 4/6 (October 1843): 96. I am indebted to Gordon C. Thomasson for bringing both the book and the notice to my attention.

6. For an account of the discovery, see Irene Vongehr Vincent, *The Sacred Oasis: Caves of the Thousand Buddhas, Tun Huang* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1953), 12–14, 17–19, 33–35, 70. The story is also noted in André Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls: A Preliminary Survey*, trans. E. Margaret Rowley (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 17; Jean Doresse, *The Secret Books of the Egyptian Gnostics* (New York: Viking, 1960), 121 n. 7. From 10 December 1999 to 15 March 2000, some of the documents from the Caves of the Thousand Buddhas were on display at the Queens Library Gallery in Jamaica, New York.