

Book Review  
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*Understanding The Book of Mormon* by Ross Anderson, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan Publishing, 2009, 116 pp. ISBN: 978-0-310-28321-8. \$14.99.

Ross Anderson is a former Mormon and is the founding pastor of Wasatch Evangelical Free Church in Roy, Utah. He has served the church since 1983. Anderson was born in Utah and raised in California as an active member of the Mormon (Latter-day Saints—LDS) Church. He holds a MDiv from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a DMin from Salt Lake Theological Seminary.

Anderson attempts in every way to be fair, kind, and accurate in his statements regarding the beliefs and practices of the Mormon Church. In this respect, he attempts to model an approach to talking with and teaching Mormons.

The book consists of a preface, nine chapters, discussion questions, end notes and indexes. It covers 116 pages and is easy to read in one sitting. The brevity of the book and ease of reading makes it accessible to anyone with an interest in comparative religions.

The overall thesis of the book is to give an accurate account of the origin and content of the Book of Mormon and how it relates to the doctrine of the Mormon Church and the Bible.

Chapter one asks and answers the question: What is the Book of Mormon? The LDS Church answers this question affirming that the Book of Mormon is “a collection of writings and teachings of the ancient prophets and followers of Jesus Christ who lived in the Americas from approximately 590 BC to AD 421 (pp. 10-11). Joseph Smith, considered to be a prophet by the Mormon Church, translated the Book of Mormon by divine inspiration from gold plates that he received from the angel Moroni (p. 11). To Mormons, the Book of Mormon is a story of God’s people in the Americas, their response to God’s prophets, and their cycles of wickedness and repentance (p. 11). The climax of this history is the appearance of Jesus Christ in America.

The Book of Mormon is also known as the “Gold Bible.” The reason is that this book was supposedly translated from golden plates which contained the ancient record of the Americas. The plates were inscribed in a script called “reformed Egyptian.” Smith did not translate these plates in the strict sense. Mormons believe that God showed him by supernatural means what the archaic language meant in English and Smith dictated this “translation” to a scribe (p. 12). The Book of Mormon is believed to be the Word of God. It is superior to the Bible. It is a book that reveals God’s Will for the final era of human history. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints is the Lord’s kingdom once again established on the earth (p. 13). When first published, the Book of Mormon was received with great skepticism. Mark Twain called it “chloroform in print” and Alexander Campbell expressed the thought that it was full of every error and every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years (p. 14). Yet, around twelve million people belong to the Mormon Church. Can they all be wrong?

Chapter two explores the question, “What is the Book of Mormon About?” The Book of Mormon tells the story of the ancient peoples of the Americas. The Book of Mormon is really a collection of fifteen books, each named after its original author and divided by chapter and verse. Anderson states, “Authors of these books include generals, prophets, and kings. They wrote sermons, battle stories, poetry, travelogues, religious and political commentary, and more” (p. 16). The book covers about 1,000 years of history. About AD 385, a prophet named Mormon

abridged these extensive records onto a single set of gold plates. His son, Moroni, buried the plates in the hill called Cumorah to preserve them for the future. Anderson gives a summary of this history including Lehi and his family, the Nephites, Lamanites, and other –ites, a history of wars, cycles of repentance, and the climax of the book: Jesus in the Americas. According to the Book of Mormon, Jesus visited the Americas in AD 34. Jesus’ arrival was ushered in by a series of devastations. He descended from heaven and delivered a sermon similar to the Sermon on the Mount. He performed miracles and taught on various subjects. Jesus commissioned twelve apostles to lead his church. Three of the twelve received a special blessing. They would remain alive until the final day of judgment. They travel incognito among the peoples of the world to serve and perform miracles (p. 27). The work of the twelve resulted in the entire population of the land being converted in three years. A golden age of perfection was ushered in. This utopian society lasted for almost two hundred years. Eventually, this perfect society unraveled. Around AD 200, rebellion abounded and false churches began to appear. Massive wars erupted between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Just before AD 400, the Nephites were exterminated. The Lamanites who survived these wars became ancestors of the American Indians (p. 27). Toward the end of these struggles, the prophet Mormon condensed the contents of the Nephite records onto gold plates and gave them to his son Moroni. Moroni hid the plates around AD 421 in a hill called Cumorah. Joseph Smith claims that this same Moroni appeared to him as a resurrected being in 1823 to prepare him to receive the Nephite record.

Chapter three answers the question: “Where Did the Book of Mormon Come From?” Joseph Smith was born in 1805 and in 1816 moved with his family to Palmyra, New York. Both of his parents were heavily involved in folk magic. At the age of 14, Smith had his first vision. It was revealed to him by God that he was God’s chosen instrument to restore New Testament Christianity. Anderson points out several discrepancies in the accounts among Mormons of the First Vision (pp. 30-31). Smith’s second vision, when he was seventeen, introduced him to the Book of Mormon. An angel, Moroni, the same person who had buried the Nephite records, appeared to Joseph Smith in the night and told him God had a mission for him. Smith was selected to translate the Golden plates into English and give the world the Book of Mormon. Smith received the translation using the Urim and Thummim, a pair of crystals set in a metal frame like eyeglasses, provided by God as the means of translation. Smith looked into the Urim and Thummim where he saw the translation appear and then dictated it to a scribe. The first 116 pages of the initial translation were lost (pp. 33-34) but, Smith claimed that the Golden plates contained two different accounts of the same time period and he then translated the second record instead of reproducing the first. This is a very suspicious aspect of the translation process. By June of 1829, the Book of Mormon was completed and it was published in the spring of 1830.

Anderson challenges several aspects of the details of the production of the Book of Mormon. He questions the changing versions of the First Vision; the fanciful tales of treasure buried in a hill, the transformation of a magic peep stone into a translation device, suggestions by the witnesses that they saw the golden plates only in a vision, the possibility that Joseph Smith relied upon outside literary sources to produce the manuscript of the Book of Mormon and, also, his innate imagination (p. 38).

In chapter four, Anderson addresses the question of whether or not the Book of Mormon contains the fullness of the everlasting Gospel as it claims. Many Christians are surprised to learn that, on average, Jesus is referenced in the Book of Mormon about every two verses (p. 41).

The Book of Mormon contains several details of Jesus' life. But, this would have been hundreds of years in advance of Jesus' earthly sojourn. It seems that God revealed more detail about the life of Christ to the Nephites than He did to the Old Testament prophets. Further, the only details about the life of Christ found in the Book of Mormon are those found in the Bible (p. 42). Did Joseph Smith weave details about Jesus' life already known to him from the Bible into the Book of Mormon?

Mormonism denies the concept of a Triune God. Mormonism presents a Godhead of three separate beings—three gods—who are united in purpose but not in their essential being (p. 43).

The Book of Mormon's teachings about God differs from the teachings of Joseph Smith. Smith taught that God is an exalted man, who was once mortal like us before he became God. Mormonism teaches that God is married and Jesus is literally his spirit child. These concepts are not found in the Book of Mormon (p. 43).

The LDS Church teaches that we existed in a premortal state as spirit children of God before we were born into this world. It also teaches that we are the same kind of being as God—only less advanced—and that, as such, we have the inherent capacity to become gods ourselves (p. 44). The Book of Mormon does not teach these doctrines.

Mormonism affirms the necessity of faith, repentance, baptism and obedience in order to be saved. Joseph Smith added several innovations. He taught that there are three heavens with different degrees of glory; that in the highest heaven men and women can become exalted as gods, and that eternal marriage is required for this exalted position. Mormonism teaches that a person has a second chance to repent and turn to Christ after death. The Book of Mormon does not teach any of these ideas (p. 46).

The Book of Mormon teaches the promise of personal revelation. People are encouraged to read the Book of Mormon and believe that God will show them that it is true. Are Mormons Christians? Anderson does not believe that they are. The LDS Church stands outside the historic, biblical Christianity (p. 47).

In view of the above analysis, how can the Book of Mormon be the "fulness of the everlasting gospel?" Many doctrines of the LDS Church are not found in the Book of Mormon.

The fifth chapter tackles the question, "How Does the Book of Mormon Relate to Other LDS Scripture? What are the "other" LDS scriptures? The Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price together with the King James Version of the scriptures are considered divinely inspired and are the standard works of the LDS Church. Mormons do not view the Bible as containing all of God's words. They believe that God is continuing to reveal things pertaining to the kingdom of God. The LDS Church claims to have prophets that speak for God today. The substance of what they speak is scripture. Every LDS Church president is viewed by Mormons as a prophet.

The Doctrine and the Covenants is believed by Mormons to be a collection of divine revelations given primarily by Joseph Smith. This book was published in 1835. Of the 138 chapters in the book, 135 were given by Joseph Smith (p. 51). The book also contains two official declarations, from 1890 and 1978 which give direction for important LDS issues. The Doctrine and the Covenants contain a number of unique teachings of Mormons including eternal marriage, polygamy, salvation for the dead, and the LDS priesthood.

The Pearl of Great Price contains three shorter works: the Book of Moses, the Book of Abraham, and three works by Joseph Smith in the final section.

Of interest to most outsiders of Mormonism is the fact that Joseph Smith made his own translation of the Bible in 1833. All in all, more than three thousand individual verses were changed from the King James Version. Smith made the changes based on what he claimed was direct revelations from God. The LDS Church has never published the Joseph Smith Translation (p. 56-57).

Anderson explores another question in chapter six, *How Does the Book of Mormon Relate to the Bible?* The LDS Church accepts both the Bible and the Book of Mormon as divine scripture. However, the Book of Mormon presents the Bible as a deficient document. It contains errors, mistranslations, and omits important truths. LDS members believe that the Bible refers to the Book of Mormon (John 10:16; Isa. 29:11-12; Ezekiel 37:16-17). The Book of Mormon contains extensive material in common with the Bible. There are direct quotations, interpretative changes to a biblical text, and structural parallels with the Bible such as literary forms, common motifs, character types, and similar types of events (pp. 64-65). This shared content raises the question as to whether Joseph Smith copied from the Bible. For example, Jesus' address to the Nephites contains much in common with the Sermon on the Mount. The Book of Mormon contains more than nineteen complete chapters in common with Isaiah. Did Joseph Smith plagiarize?

The ancient veracity of the Book of Mormon is questioned by Anderson in chapter seven. Archaeology has failed to unearth any concrete evidence for the Book of Mormon (p. 68). Anderson quotes one Brigham Young University professor as saying, "No one has found any inscriptional evidence for, or material remains that can be tied directly to any of the persons, places or things mentioned in the book" (p. 69). Anderson points out that the Book of Mormon contains anachronisms—that is, events or objects that appear out of the proper time period in which one would expect them to be present (p. 70). For example, the Book of Mormon mentions synagogues twenty-five times, but synagogues were not developed by the Jews until four hundred years after Lehi left Jerusalem. How could the writer have known how the Jews built their synagogues? (p. 70).

Another area of concern relates to DNA studies. The predominant hypothesis of mainstream science is that all Native Americans are of Asian origin. This view is supported by extensive DNA sampling of American Indian populations. The LDS view is that, as children of Lehi, Native Americans are of Semitic origin (p. 71). This incongruity is a challenge to the credibility of the Book of Mormon.

In chapter eight, Anderson investigates the question, "How Do Latter-Day Saints Use the Book of Mormon?" The Book of Mormon shapes the identity and culture of the LDS Church. Mormons view the Book of Mormon as the most correct book with which they can draw closer to God and grow in righteousness. The Book of Mormon is the LDS Church's most important missionary tool. Others are encouraged to read the Book of Mormon and gain their own testimony as to its truthfulness. Subjective experience, however, is an inadequate foundation for truth. Most of the time, an experience validates what we already expect it to mean (p. 84).

The final chapter addresses how to talk with LDS members about the Book of Mormon. Anderson emphasizes a gentle approach. He reveals that the greatest fear of a faithful LDS member is apostasy. LDS members will guard their testimony about the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon and reject all arguments against it. Another area of sensitivity is the credibility of Joseph Smith as a prophet. Anderson reveals that several of Smith's prophecies have failed (p. 90). He has proved himself an inadequate translator with a spurious method of translation. He

openly practiced polygamy having thirty-three women as wives some of whom were already married to other men (p. 91).

Anderson appends study questions for each chapter at the end of his book. He gives notes for each chapter and a scripture index as well as an index for the Book of Mormon. The book concludes with a Subject Index.

Ross Anderson provides many good insights into the Book of Mormon, the doctrine of Joseph Smith and the teachings of the LDS Church. The book is compact and easy to read. Overall, it is a good introduction to the Book of Mormon and devastating to its veracity.