

Write a Sacred History of Ancient Tibet

You must write a sacred history of ancient Tibet covering a period from 2200 BC to AD 400. Why Tibet? Because you likely know no more about ancient Tibet than Joseph Smith, or anyone else, knew about ancient America in 1829.

Suppose you were to sit down to write a history of ancient Tibet. What details would you include? You would probably mention mountains. Tibet is famous for the snow-capped Himalayas. Yaks may appear in your book. These shaggy beasts have been an important part of Tibetan life for centuries. You should say something about Tibetan Buddhism with its monks and monasteries. Religious influence is strong in contemporary Tibet as it was anciently. But how much do you really know about ancient Tibet? Could you write biographical sketches of important people? Would you include accurate geographic descriptions of cities and lands? Could you write extensively about wars? And then weave the whole thing into a coherent narrative that will captivate readers for generations ever after?

A Remarkably Complex Book

The description of ancient America in the Book of Mormon contains all of these historical elements and many more. Joseph Smith was divinely inspired as he dictated details of agriculture, hunting, mining, warfare, and destructive natural disasters. The Book of Mormon contains long genealogies and short annual summaries. We read of noble heroes and base villains. Topographical details are interwoven with scenes of religious rituals and trans-oceanic migrations. There is shipbuilding and commerce. We read of architecture, textiles, and jewelry. Monetary systems of exchange and judicial proceedings are described in considerable detail. The Book of Mormon contains notable stories of dynasties, palace intrigues and hardy explorers tramping through uncharted wilderness. Human slavery and governmental systems are discussed along with astronomical observations correlated with sophisticated calendars. People, places, things and ideas—the stuff of history—all feature prominently in the pages of the Book of Mormon.

How many nuances would you get right if you wrote in detail about ancient Tibet or ancient America? Could you call people by their right names? The Book of Mormon has nearly 200 proper names that impress modern scholars.¹ Could you correctly place dozens of battles in appropriate seasons of the year based on climate and planting/harvest cycles? The Book of Mormon times war episodes precisely to coincide with agricultural requirements in rainy and dry seasons.² Could you accurately describe a calendar system that measures time in base 20 numbers? Fractions and multiples of 20 are prominent throughout the Nephite text. (See Helaman 14:2, Mormon 3:1, 3 Nephi 5:7-8, 2 Nephi 5:34, 4 Nephi 1:22, Mormon 8:6.) The Book of Mormon consistently gets so many little details right that bright, well-informed readers are awed by its uncanny historical accuracy.

In addition to minute details, the Book of Mormon paints the big picture precisely. It tells the story of four nations, three of whom left the Near East during the axial period ca. 600 BC and sailed to the New World. Two of the nations amalgamated ca. 200 BC but only one remained intact after ca. 400 AD amidst constant warfare. The nations inhabited a land with northward and southward components. The southward part was nearly surrounded by water and had a narrow east-west strip running coast to coast separating contentious rivals north and south of the line. Ca. 50 BC large scale migrations began moving northward. The Book of Mormon describes advanced societies with city states constantly shifting alliances. Ca. 30 AD the text describes failed governments deteriorating into tribalism. All of this fits comfortably into what we now know about ancient America.

Sixty Things No Longer Preposterous

Eminent anthropologist John E. Clark gave a powerful presentation at the Library of Congress in 2005 as part of the celebration of Joseph Smith's 200th birthday. Clark called his presentation "Joseph Smith, Archaeology, and the Book of Mormon." In it, he lists 60 things described in the Book of Mormon that most people found preposterous when the book first appeared for sale on March 26, 1830. Things like highways, buildings of cement, thrones, and Egyptian-like script evoked howls of laughter from critics. No one could have written accurately about these kinds of things in Joseph Smith's day when Native Americans were generally considered barbaric tepee dwellers living on the frontier. Fast forward to our day when archaeology reveals exactly what the Book of Mormon describes. Clark explains that historical forgeries are disproven over time, while authentic ancient documents such as the Book of Mormon have their contextual details confirmed by future scholarship.

Here is a good example of historical confirmation at work. The Book of Mormon contains the curious idea that trees can grow in and from humans (see Alma 32:28, 41; 33:23). Page 3 of the pre-Columbian Dresden Codex shows a

tree of life growing from the cleft heart of the Mayan maize god spread across a sacrificial altar. So, a notion totally alien to the world of Joseph Smith turns out to be an authentic belief in ancient America. And when a copy of page 3 of the Dresden Codex, published in 1831 by Lord Kingsborough, in his *Antiquities of Mexico*, The Book of Mormon, published in 1830, was corroborated on this point the very next year, but only in a very expensive limited-edition book published in London.

A Monumental Challenge

The Book of Mormon has hundreds of points that have been and can be verified by archaeologists, botanists, geographers, geologists, linguists, paleontologists, etc. The more time one spends in its inspired pages the more one stands in awe of its magnificence. Hugh Nibley as a US Army Intelligence Officer with a fluent command of German was in the first wave of Allied troops wading ashore on Utah Beach on D-Day. In the autobiographical film *Faith of an Observer* Nibley talks about what was going through his mind on that fateful day surrounded by battlefield commotion. All he could think about was how marvelous the Book of Mormon is.

Later, while spending much of his remarkable scholarly life studying and writing about this new American scripture, Nibley summarizes the unimaginable challenge of producing a book comparable to the Book of Mormon:

Where will you find another work remotely approaching the Book of Mormon in scope and daring? It appears suddenly out of nothing—not an accumulation of twenty-five years like the Koran, but a single staggering performance, bursting on a shocked and scandalized world like an explosion, the full-blown history of an ancient people, following them through all the trials, triumphs, and vicissitudes of a thousand years without a break, telling how a civilization originated, rose to momentary greatness, and passed away, giving due attention to every phase of civilized history in a densely compact and rapidly moving story that interweaves dozens of plots with an inexhaustible fertility of invention and an uncanny consistency that is never caught in a slip or contradiction.³

Could you create a history of ancient Tibet containing hundreds of accurate contextual details interwoven with a compelling story line? Joseph Smith did it for ancient America as a 21 to 23-year-old in 1827–1829. The young prophet translated authentic ancient records by the gift and power of God. The Book of Mormon is still in print almost 200 years after its first press run of 5,000 books. Good first edition copies are currently worth well over one hundred thousand dollars on the rare book market. The book has been translated into 110 languages making it available to about 89% of the world's population in their native tongue. Four and a half million copies are published annually with many more copies distributed digitally.

Filled with the Savior's Love

The Book of Mormon is a manifestation of the love of God for His children no matter their nation, kindred, or tongue. Reading and praying about the Book of Mormon causes people's lives to change. Its power to teach the gospel in plainness and assist in freeing the sin-bound soul through the Savior's atonement is inexhaustible. One way of understanding the efficacy of a written work is known as reception history. This discipline is not concerned with whether a particular individual or group correctly interprets a given text, but rather focuses on the influence of that text over time without judgment. The Book of Mormon has its own rich reception history, as the following brief accounts illustrate: first, how the book affected members of the Church in the Baltics when it became available to them in their own language, and second, how it was received by three non-Latter-day Saints, each on different continents.

R. L. and Evelyn Benson were serving as missionaries for the Church in Lithuania in 2001 when the Book of Mormon was published in Lithuanian. Previously, the only edition available to the people was in Russian, a language many could not read. At a special meeting the Lithuanian edition of the book was distributed to Church members. "It is difficult to express the feelings and emotions of the evening," Evelyn recalls. "There were tears and smiles and more tears and more smiles. Church members were so busy leafing through their newfound treasure that they did not want to stop for refreshments. No one wanted to leave the building. What a night—one never to be forgotten!"⁴

In the early 1970s, the Church determined that the Book of Mormon needed to be translated into Afrikaans, approached Felix Mynhardt, a language professor at Pretoria University, South Africa, and a non-Latter-day Saint, to do the translation. Professor Mynhardt, who had undoubtedly been given the gift of languages in his youth and was fluent in more than sixty languages, agreed to take on the project. Commenting on this experience, Mynhardt said he "didn't know who Joseph Smith was before he translated this book, but while he translated it, he was a prophet of God! He could have been nothing else! No person in 1827 could have done what he did. The science did not exist. The knowledge of ancient Egyptian did not exist. The knowledge of these ancient times and ancient peoples did not exist. The Book of Mormon is scripture." He further testified that "it is scripture of the same caliber as the Old Testament, or for that matter, the New Testament."⁵

Southern Baptist minister Lynn Ridenhour agrees: "Reared in a small conservative Baptist church back in the hills of the Ozarks, I was taught with strong convictions that [Latter-day Saints] were . . . [not Christians] and to believe that the Book of Mormon was a lie. We have the Bible and no man was to add to the scriptures lest his soul be damned." But when Ridenhour gave the Book of Mormon a try, he couldn't deny its truth. He found "the central message of the

Book of Mormon is—to repent and come unto Christ, which means to establish a covenant with Him. And that message is coming to light in these latter days. And that’s why I embrace the Book of Mormon. Our generation knows very little, if anything, about establishing a covenant with Christ.” Ridenhour believes the whole Book of Mormon, finding that “there is absolutely nothing in it that contradicts the Bible.”⁶

Alfred R. Young (1919–2012) was introduced to the Book of Mormon by a fellow prisoner while enduring hellish years of captivity in a Japanese prisoner of war camp during World War II. His posterity are now members of the Church. Many times, he repeated his testimony that if enduring incarceration and torture was the only way he could receive the Book of Mormon, he would do it all again because the book brought light into his world of darkness.⁷

An Overview of the Challenge

A brief summary of the scope and structure of the Book of Mormon should help you determine if writing a similar book is something you are ready to attempt. For starters, the Book of Mormon is an abridgment by Mormon of the writings of many prophet-historians compiled over more than a thousand years on many metal plates.

The Book of Mormon consists of 15 books beginning with the writings of Nephi, who tells of keeping two records: the small plates of Nephi, devoted to spiritual matters, focuses on the ministry and teachings of ancient American prophets, and the large plates of Nephi contain the secular history of his people. The narrative begins with the prophet Lehi (Nephi’s father and a contemporary of Jeremiah) leading his family and others on a flight from Jerusalem in approximately 600 B.C. to escape the impending destruction of the city by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. After a difficult eight-year passage through the Arabian wilderness, the group reaches the shore of the Arabian Sea where Nephi is commanded by the Lord to build a ship to carry them to their Promised Land in the Western Hemisphere.

Upon arriving in the New World, and with the death of Lehi, Nephi’s brothers Laman and Lemuel rebel against him, threatening to kill both him and his followers who are compelled to flee. This division establishes the setting for much of the book’s future history in which two distinct nations, the Nephites and the Lamanites, will often be at war. At Nephi’s death, his younger brother Jacob takes up the story and the plates. Other prophets follow Jacob, faithfully maintaining the written records. The small plates are the source of the books of 1st and 2nd Nephi, Jacob, Enos, Jarom, and Omni, comprising the first 142 pages of our present-day Book of Mormon.

Throughout the following centuries, in the pattern of the Old Testament, the people prosper when they are obedient to the Lord and suffer chastisement and affliction when they rebel—the book is a testament of the temporal



"Christ Blesses the Nephite Children"

and spiritual blessings of righteousness. It tells of evil kings, corrupt judges, secret combinations, famine, war, pestilence, persecution of the righteous, the tender mercies of the Lord, faith in God, miracles, repentance, and hope through the Atonement of Christ, among other vital doctrines and instruction. The crowning event of the sacred record is found in 3rd Nephi with the appearance and ministry of the Savior to the Nephites following His resurrection in Judea. The account of the Savior's visitation to ancient America was taken from the Plates of Mormon, an abridgment by Mormon of the large plates of Nephi that includes many commentaries by both Mormon and his son Moroni. After the book of Omni, the Words of Mormon, a short editorial insert, appears, followed by Mormon's extract from the large plates containing the books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman, and 3rd and 4th Nephi, consisting of 324 pages, the heart of the book.

Near the end of the Book of Mormon we find the Book of Ether, which is the record of a people known as the Jaredites, who, led by their prophet-leader, the brother of Jared, journeyed from the Tower of Babel and were shown how to build barges. The Jaredites were driven on the sea by God to a Promised Land in the New World, many centuries before Lehi's arrival. The Jaredites eventually self-destructed in a brutal civil war.

After the Nephites and Lamanites descended into utter depravity, the Book of Mormon story ends early in the fifth century AD with a final battle between the two great nations. Even though the Nephites gathered hundreds of

thousands of warriors, they were annihilated by an even larger army of Lamanites. Moroni was the only Nephite survivor. After wandering for about 21 years, adding a few concluding chapters, he buried the gold plates in a stone box in the Hill Cumorah sometime about 421 AD near present-day Palmyra, New York. Moroni would return as a resurrected being to deliver the plates to the Prophet Joseph Smith for translation in 1827. The final three books are: Mormon, Ether, and Moroni, consisting of 63 pages. The Book of Mormon in its current edition totals 531 pages.

Joseph Smith could not have produced the Book of Mormon without divine aid. Could you?