

The Book of Mormon – A Review

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<http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion, and a man would get nearer to God by abiding by its precepts, than by any other book. Joseph Smith, History of the Church, Vol. 4, page 461

This review was first posted on Amazon.com on the date indicated above, and then lightly edited for reproduction on my website. I gave The Book of Mormon two stars in Amazon's five star system.

Since I have read The Book of Mormon from cover to cover more than twenty times, and can still quote large chunks of it from memory, I thought it might be helpful if I posted a few of my thoughts here. I was a faithful Mormon until my mid-forties, and served as a Bishop in the Mormon Church for a full five year term until I eventually began to read and question (violating the strong counsel of Mormon leaders that I not do so), and subsequently moved on to other, more expansive and inclusive, spiritual view points.

The Book of Mormon is alleged by its believers to be real history recorded by prophets who had direct communication with God. Hence, most Mormons believe that the lessons it teaches by recounting the relationship between God, His prophets and a people who lived in the Americas between roughly 600 B.C.E. and 400 C.E., can be relied upon to guide our lives. And most importantly, they believe that since Joseph Smith created The Book of Mormon, its literal truthfulness is proof that all of the other things foundational to Mormonism that Smith said are also true, including that God gave him the exclusive authority to lead God's only "true" church on Earth.

As time passes and science produces more evidence relevant to world the Book of Mormon says existed between 600 B.C.E. and 400 C.E. in the Americas (like recent DNA research related to the ancestry of native Americans - See Simon Sotherton "Losing a Lost Tribe"), it appears more and more probable that The Book of Mormon is not real history. This makes it, as things now stand, highly probable to be mythology in the classic sense - one of the sacred stories that are used by a people to explain the world in which they live, to provide meaning to individual life, and to act as social glue. Joseph Campbell, the respected comparative mythologist, said that to perform this function a mythology must answer the most important individual and collective questions the members of a social group have (why do we exist?; why do we suffer?; what happens after death?; etc.), and must be believable in light of all of the other ideas that the group accepts as "true". Campbell also said, with tongue only partly in cheek, that mythology is "other people's religion".

Virtually all of the people who insist that The Book of Mormon is real history and the word of God, are those whose vested interest in Mormonism makes it somewhere between difficult and impossible to accurately assess the relevant evidence. Medical doctors do not treat their own children for the same reason that faithful Mormons should not be relied upon for a realistic view of what The Book of Mormon means or is. That is, strong emotions are proven to interfere with the ability of human beings to process the information in front of them.

For quite a while times have been rough for mythologies in general. Religious historian Karen Armstrong explains that this is due to the fact that modern man has become science or logic oriented but still needs and uses mythologies because science and logic cannot answer the big "meaning" questions. Since mythologies are now written down, they can be analyzed in terms of their "truth" as defined by the accuracy of the description of the physical world they provide. When mythologies were not written down they could be modified from time to time as circumstances required by those within the society who were charged with the sacred responsibility of remembering and recounting these mythic histories, so helping to stabilize society. Plato referred to these elites as "philosopher kings" - those few, wise people whose task it was to deceive the masses as required to keep order and lead to them along the way they needed to go "for the greater good". The changes made to mythologies were essential to this endeavour, because as noted above mythologies need to make sense in light of the rest of what society believes in order to be relied upon to answer the "big" questions. It is interesting to note that these are precisely the questions most Mormons will tell you The Book of Mormon addresses, and definitively answers.

So, what does geology tell us about whether there was, or not, a worldwide flood, how old the Earth likely is and how it was created? What does the study of genetics and linguistics tell us about the origins of mankind, and of language? And how does all of this compare to what mythologies tell us about the same phenomena? Mythologies were not subjected to tests of this nature until relatively recently, and as a result of these tests most religious people to one degree or another believe that stories such as those contained in the Bible are not literally true. Was the earth created in seven 24-hour days, or was the story in Genesis some kind of metaphor, or myth? How about Noah and the Ark? The Tower of Babel? Abraham's near-sacrifice of Isaac? Jonah and the whale? The parting of the Red Sea? The Virgin birth? Jesus' miracles? The Resurrection?

You can learn a lot about a Christian sect by determining where its members tend to draw the mythology line (usually without calling it that). Christianity has been dealing with this issue for at least a couple of centuries and so many different approaches have been developed. Mormonism is just starting to deal with it in terms of The Book of Mormon. I predict that the Mormon Church will eventually follow the lead of the organization formerly called The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (now called The Community of Christ - Mormons who after Joseph Smith's death followed his family instead of Brigham Young) and recognize The Book of Mormon to be mythology in its entirety.

While most of us don't think of mythology in these terms, science has become the mythology - or is central to the mythology - of many people. Some people use science in this way by erroneously believing that it provides answers to questions that it cannot answer, or by according to science more certainty than it is capable of delivering. The worst of this is seen in the quasi or pseudo-sciences that are really little more than religion dressed in mysticism. The recent film "What the Bleep Do We Know" provides an interesting (if irritating) look at a classic in this genre. See the web address above for a review.

Many religiously inclined people use science to answer the big questions to the extent they can, and use religion (or new age philosophy, or common sense, etc.) to deal with what they believe science cannot. To the extent that there is conflict between science and a religious belief (such as with regard to the age of the Earth), science takes precedence and the religious belief is reinterpreted as metaphor (or ignored and forgotten) as it competes with science's presumably more reliable knowledge. This is how much of the Bible has come to be understood in metaphoric terms by most of the Western world. But this process of religious belief giving way to science happens slowly and painfully, and usually over generations. This approach has been advocated at least since Galileo and Bacon. It therefore has had plenty of time to become part of the unconscious background of our society - our wallpaper. Many religious or quasi-religious mythologies such as Mormonism expressly incorporate as much science as they can without contradicting their core beliefs.

And finally, we have a growing number of people who accept the imperfect understanding science can give us of "reality" as the most reliable information we have; accept that science cannot answer the big questions related to meaning; accept that meaning is a human choice; and create what still might be called a mythology around ideas of this nature. Evolutionary theory is usually near the foundation of these mythologies. See www.naturalism.org and www.iras.org for examples of this kind of thinking. The people who espouse this kind of worldview are often uncomfortable with the word "mythology" because it implies to them something that is not true.

My response to that is that all peoples believe their mythologies to be "true", and no doubt future generations will look at some of the scientific notions now accepted in most quarters with the same kind of patronizing smile as we display when considering our ancestors seemingly naïve beliefs. This does not mean science will be overturned and current Mormon or other religious views proven "right" any more than the accumulation of knowledge since Galileo's day has proved the Catholic authorities right and him wrong. Rather, things like Newtonian physics will continue to apply with seeming greater force as the years pass and I attempt to dunk a basketball, lift weights or run long distances. But as science expands the boundaries (both large scale and small) of what we know and so our perspective changes, our current, accurate, understanding of many basic principles may be at some point be cast in such strange light that they will mean radically different

things for our descendants than they do for us. There are many ways in which this can happen.

Think, for example, of how mariners used to navigate from place to place using Ptolemy's understanding of the solar system, which included the idea that the Sun revolved around the Earth. Despite this basic theoretical error, Ptolemy had worked out a system that used the placement of the stars in the sky to produce information that facilitated accurate navigation and map-making. For over 1,000 years most of the Western world was comforted in its assumption that the Sun revolved around the Earth as the Bible said it did by the accurate information Ptolemy's system produced.

This chapter from the history of science highlights the difference between correlation and causation. Ptolemy had discovered a correlation between the placement of stars in the sky and the location of observers on the ground, and from that inferred the cause of this correlation in the form of his theory as to how the solar system worked. The broader perspective provided by Copernicus, Galileo, Kepler and others placed the correlation noticed by Ptolemy's system in a different context and eventually made it more accurate (though it took until Kepler for the theory to develop that far), while falsifying Ptolemy's theory.

Scientists sometimes confuse correlation with causation, and lay people do this constantly when using scientific concepts. The process that Ptolemy, Copernicus et al illustrate will continue to occur as scientists observe new types of data at the macro and micro levels. Old data will be infused with new meanings as presumed causation is sometimes discovered to have been mere correlation. And so the most basic elements of what is now perceived to be a purely science based "mythology" should be expected to change as science progresses.

And what about the meaning of the most basic building block of our mythology, such as what it means to be "human"? Science has already changed that in some positive ways. Genetics, for example, helped to establish the close kinship of all races, do away with slavery, establish a firm foundation civil rights, etc. What will happen when gene technology makes it possible to manipulate the human genome to both rid ourselves of many permanent diseases the symptoms of which form part of the identity of the people who have them (such as various mental disorders) and to otherwise change our capabilities? This process of acquiring and learning to use this power will force ethical and other questions upon human society that have a high probability of reshaping how we think about some of the most basic issues of human individual and social life, and so radically changing our mythology.

So, how does The Book of Mormon fare as mythology? In my view, not well.

First, those who created it set expectations high by trying to sell it as real history. As the evidence against this (as noted above) mounts, many former believers come painfully to the conclusion that they have been sold a grotesquely expensive bill of goods in that regard.

As time passes, the distinction between the reality of the Americas during the relevant time period as most non-Mormons (and some Mormons) perceive it and the picture painted by The Book of Mormon becomes more stark and so harder to ignore. This, along with the wealth of easily accessible information available over the Internet, is what eventually drew my attention. Even leaders of the Mormon Church close to a hundred years ago, unbeknownst to most Mormons, are on record to the effect that the book is poorly written; inconsistent with the best of what science had to say about the Americas during the relevant period of time; shows clear signs of plagiarism and immature authorship; etc. (See B. H. Roberts, "Studies of The Book of Mormon").

This means that The Book of Mormon will fail Campbell's second test – it will not be believable in light of the rest of what we know about our world. Some other myths are so old that their literal truth cannot be tested. And still others do not purport to be literally true. They have long been presented as metaphoric wisdom, or as relating to a "dream time" or parallel reality that is non-scientific by its nature.

Second, the book does not contain literary wealth resembling what the Bible, the Koran, the Upanishads or other classic myths have to offer. This is not surprising since these books are compilations of oral traditions that had centuries or millennia to develop with the ebb and flow of many human groups before being recorded. The possible exception to this is the Koran, which if produced as Muslim tradition indicates, was dictated by Mohammed over a period of years. If so, it is a work of genius. I am told in Arabic that is some of the most moving poetry known to man.

C.C. Jung, Joseph Campbell and others who study the myths that have held humankind's attention over long periods of time describe them as "collective dreams". That is, they spring from our common biology and existential circumstances, as do our private dreams, and so the similarity between the dreams people of different cultures and times report is no more surprising than the similarities between the great myths.

The Book of Mormon is not in this league. Mark Twain referred to it as "chloroform in print". Others have been similarly flattering. It was likely put together by Joseph Smith with the assistance of either one or a few colleagues, over a short period of time using a few unremarkable literary sources available to them, the markings of which the book clearly bears.

In sum, there are countless books in the western canon, and many movies, that are in my view far more important in terms of their mythic contribution to our society than is The Book of Mormon.

I continue to believe that it is important that we find our "whys"; answers to the big questions that satisfy us. Hence, I place a high value on good mythology. However, my experience with Mormonism taught me some hard lessons about how a few people tend to use whatever means they can lay their hands on to control the large group around them. I now take special care to avoid those who attempt to use any mythology to control me, and seek out those who will try to help me understand

myself and exercise more control over my life as I explore this wonderful experience that we in the democratic west have the privilege to live.

So why, might one ask, did I give The Book of Mormon two stars? First, it forms the basis for a religion that continues to grow, though more slowly than in the past due to issues such as those I mention above. That religion also boasts many well-educated members who continue to believe, against the odds, that this book is real history. This, in and of itself, makes The Book of Mormon a matter of significant curiosity.

The second star is for a few ideas that the book contains that the book's co-authors should be at least credited with collecting. These include ideas related to the joy mankind should experience and the central role we may choose to give joy in life. Various philosophers had been saying that for a long time before Smith produced The Book of Mormon, but it was not part of the Christian canon and so IF The Book of Mormon had been the word of the Christian God (as Mormons claim it to be), this would have been an innovation. It also contains some nice passages regarding how faith works, the importance of humility and personal agency, and the role of suffering in life. But again, none of this was new when one considers the work of the countless thinkers who preceded Joseph Smith. It appears likely that the book's authors either copied these ideas from the other sources mentioned above, or that they came to the same kind of conclusions about the human predicament that many before them had already reached. It is far from clear how large a role Smith himself played in this process.

Regrettably, a person who wishes to understand The Book of Mormon's power will not likely be helped by reading it. Its power rests not in its texts, but in the emotional responses that result from being a member of the close-knit Mormon community. That is, when a Mormon or someone looking into Mormonism feels good things as a result community participation, being paid significant attention of one kind or another, etc. they are told that these feelings come from their study Book of Mormon - that God is telling them by the good things they feel that The Book of Mormon is indeed His word, and that by extension the Mormon Church is His one and only true church on Earth. The Book of Mormon is no more than an important prop in the socialization process Mormonism uses. Many other organizations use similar process to achieve similar results without any props that resemble The Book of Mormon. Scientology, the Moonies and the Hare Krishna, for example, use more concentrated versions of the same socialization forces.

In short, I don't think that this book would be useful to the vast majority of people who purchase books on Amazon. But for the curious few who are interested in modern mythologies and how they work, don't mind turgid prose, and have plenty of time on their hands, The Book of Mormon might be just the thing. Overall, my advice even to those few is that they wait for the Cliff Notes version (or Coles Notes for Canadian readers). That will be as enlightening, and much less painful to read.

My further thoughts regarding The Book of Mormon and Mormonism can be found at <http://mccue.cc/bob/spirituality.htm>

