The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century

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Keywords
Book of Mormon, Parley P. Pratt, Harold B. Lee, Ezra Taft Benson, FARMS, LDS scripture, cultural Mormon

Abstract
I hope this study, however preliminary it might appear, will provide a sound first step toward developing our self-understanding as Latter-day Saints of the history of Book of Mormon use in the twentieth century and the phenomenal increase in understanding, appreciation, and study that has taken place over the last three to four decades. This study may also offer one useful perspective for the gradually emerging history of cultural Mormonism and its antipathy to the Book of Mormon. This study is grounded in the analysis of a number of possible indicators of intensity of interest in the Book of Mormon and in a dozen interviews with people who were directly involved in some of the more significant developments of the last half century. In the absence of any readily available scale that directly measures the phenomenon I wish to illuminate, I have collected a number of measures which would intuitively seem to be directly linked to it. These include statistical summaries of Book of Mormon references or citations in LDS literature and general conference addresses, as well as counts of publications related to the Book of Mormon. Almost no comparative statistical analyses have been attempted because of the incommensurability of the various indicators.

Original Publication Citation

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/1489

Document Type
Peer-Reviewed Article

Publication Date
1998-08-03

Permanent URL
http://hdl.lib.byu.edu/1877/3447

Publisher
BYU Studies, Brigham Young University

Language
English

College
Family, Home, and Social Sciences

Department
Political Science

University Standing at Time of Publication
Full Professor

Copyright Status
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As the twentieth century draws to a close, the Book of Mormon clearly holds center stage in Latter-day Saint scriptural study and appreciation. Congregations, the Church Educational System, individuals, and families are focusing on the Book of Mormon with unprecedented enthusiasm, largely because of the leadership of President Ezra Taft Benson. He also announced that “the Lord has revealed the need to reemphasize the Book of Mormon.” Latter-day Saints responded with an enormous and passionate effort to fully utilize the Nephite record. Such fervor did not always exist.

Early LDS converts were students of the Bible, and with no traditions concerning the Book of Mormon, they did not readily incorporate the new scripture into their devotions. The twenty-first century has given us access to a wealth of historical sources that were simply unavailable to the average Latter-day Saint in previous decades. Now one must ask the question: Which of these portrayals is correct? In searching for an answer, we start with a modern Church manual in order to provide us with our first clue. But the Prophet said, “It was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.” Joseph explained in an open letter to a newspaper editor in 1833 the heart of the matter, but he gave few particulars, stating that the Book of Mormon was “found through the ministration of an holy angel, and translated into our own language by the gift and power of God.” But the Book of Mormon is more. The book expands, explains and clarifies. It also validates many Biblical stories and personalities, and defends the truthfulness of the Bible. When I ask my students, “Okay, what then, specifically, does the Book of Mormon give us that is not already in the New Testament?” That’s when I get the blank stares. As an educator, I love blank stares – it means we have an opportunity to fill in the blanks! The fact that another book had come forth as a second witness to Christ’s divinity was regarded by many churches as being both superfluous and spurious. They said, We already have a Bible, why do we need another? (2 Ne. 29:3). But the nineteenth century was not the twentieth.