Material Values in the Book of Mormon

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ABSTRACT - This article investigates material values in the Book of Mormon, the central volume of scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons). The Book of Mormon suggests that the acquisition of wealth reflects righteousness, but it also suggests that once people obtain wealth and material possessions, they turn away from God, who then punishes them by stripping them of their wealth. The paper concludes with an examination of structural constraints that may inhibit materialism among contemporary Mormons.

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INTRODUCTION

Consumer researchers have investigated materialism and material values in the comics (Belk 1987), in advertisements (Belk and Pollay 1985), in popular literature (Friedman 1985), and in biographies of- and publications targeted to very wealthy consumers (Hirschman 1990). Kluckhohn (1949) has noted that cultural values such as materialism can also be studied in religious documents. For example, scholars outside consumer research have investigated material values in the Bible (Boerma 1979) and the texts and traditions of Buddhism (Sizemore and Sweerar 1990). This article reports the results of a hermeneutical analysis of materialism and material values in the Book of Mormon, the central volume of scripture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Organized religions have produced the broadest and most sustained criticisms of materialism. Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have all condemned materialism both because it is difficult to be dedicated to God and to wealth and because preoccupation with material things may preclude other esteemed virtues such as charity (Belk 1983). However, recent research, reflecting the Calvinist conception of righteousness, has suggested that in the United States certain religious groups have successfully blended religion and materialism by teaching that the wealthy are loved and blessed by God (O'Guinn and Belk 1989). Such may be the case with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints-the Mormon church-because of its belief in the Book of Mormon. [Mormons are also referred to as "Latter-day Saints," or LDS for short.]

There are three principle reasons to believe that materialism has been incorporated into Mormonism. First, philosophical materialism is clearly a feature of Mormon theology. Thus, the ontology of Mormonism lays a foundation for positive attitudes toward the possession and consumption of material goods, for more than any other Christian religion, Mormonism is built upon materialist foundations (McMurrin 1965). Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet, rejected the concept of immaterial substance, an idea that has been extraordinarily important in western theological and philosophical thought (McMurrin 1965, p. 6). He claimed that even spirit is matter, writing in the canonized work, Doctrine and Covenants (hereafter D&C), "There is no such thing as immaterial matter. All spirit is matter, but it is more fine or pure and can only be discerned by purer eyes" (D&C section 131, verses 7 and 8). Prophets in Mormon scripture communicate with God through material objects such as the Liahona, a bail of finely-worked bran (II Nephi 16: 10-27). [This refers to verses in books within the Book of Mormon, and reads like Luke 2:10 would read in reference to a verse in the New Testament.] God himself is hold by Mormons to have a physical body (D&C section 130, verse 22), so the body and the deepest forms of spirituality are not seen as being at odds with each other. Indeed, Mormons believe that if human beings achieve perfection through works and grace, they may become like God, creating and populating worlds of their own (McConkie 1972), the ultimate form of production and consumption.

Second, Mormons have exemplified the protestant work ethic by working hard and becoming prosperous in the process (DePillis 1991). Brodie (1945) pointed out some time ago that Mormonism is a materialistic, not an ascetic religion. The Mormon church is widely regarded as...
O'Quinn and Belk (1988) suggested that such prosperity leads to the alignment of religions with the Now Right political movement, since conservatives view the accumulation of wealth as the just reward for industrious and hard working people, a potent rationalization for materialism. Again, this may be the case with the Mormon church. Ezra Taft Benson, the current prophet and president of the church, is known for his conservatism, having served for eight years as secretary of agriculture under President Eisenhower (Benson 1962; Dew 1987). Mormons as a whole are very conservative (Magelby 1992), and there is evidence that the church functions as a significant conservative reference group for residents of Utah, the majority of whom are Mormon (Wirthlin and Merrill 1968). As Magelby (1992, p. 1108) pointed out, church members in the United States in "the late 20th century are generally Republicans, often strong Republicans."

Finally, as a lay church, most Mormon leadership is provided by members who already have full time jobs and not by a professional clergy. In the church hierarchy there is a strong correlation between success in secular endeavors and success in attaining positions of leadership (Knowlton 1989). This suggests that material achievements are an important factor determining who is chosen to lead and direct the church. This also suggests that wealthy members are held in high esteem by other Mormons. [An alternative interpretation for this correlation is that those chosen for positions of leadership are righteous and loved of God, and, hence, rich. Thus, they are selected for being righteous, and their success in secular endeavors is further indication of their standing before God.]

While there is considerable evidence that Mormons are materialistic, there is also evidence that they may be less materialistic than other populations. Belk (1985) found that Mormon students enrolled in a religious institute at the University of Utah were the least materialistic of five groups he surveyed. [Since Utah is predominately Mormon, another interpretation of this finding is that Mormon students enrolled in religious institute classes are less materialistic than other groups consisting predominately of Mormons.] Ozanne and colleagues found that Mormon missions for young men served as a powerful socializing force against materialism (Ozanne 1992; Ozanne, Hill, and Wright 1992). However, Ozanne et al. (1992) pointed out that Mormonism does not forbid the accumulation of material wealth, it only relegates wealth to a subordinate place in a person's life. As long as wealth is subordinate to other more important values, Mormons can expect and enjoy material comforts.

To see how this emphasis on materialism and material wealth is reflected in Mormon scriptures, [Mormons recognize three additional volumes of scripture in addition to the Bible, but the Book of Mormon is the central volume of Mormon scripture (Benson 1988).] we conducted a hermeneutical analysis of material values in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is described by Joseph Smith, the first Mormon prophet, as "the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion" (as quoted in Benson 1988, p. 10). The influence of the Book of Mormon in the United States is evident from two recent events. First, in a national survey by the Book of the Month Club on the most influential books respondents had read, The Book of Mormon appeared among the top ten books (Publishers Weekly 1991). Second, Orson Scott Card, an award-winning and widely read science fiction author, has recently begun a five volume series of novels directly based on the story-line of the Book of Mormon (Card 1992).

**METHODOLOGY**

Hermeneutical analysis views society as a “text” (Ricoeur 1981; Scholes 1982) and analyzes cultural artifacts, in this case the Book of Mormon, as an embodiment of cultural values and beliefs (see Hirschman 1990 for an application). This particular analysis of the Book of Mormon involved an iterative reading of the text, for instead of the fixed categories used in traditional content analysis (Kassarjian 1977), hermeneutical analysis uses evolving categories which expand as the data are iteratively analyzed.

We closely read the Book of Mormon, taking notes in the margins and marking pertinent verses. These marked scriptures were tagged and downloaded from LDSVIEW (1991), a computer program containing the Mormon scriptures, to produce a text containing all the references to material wealth, possessions, and riches. This text was then hermeneutically analyzed to identify and extensively exemplify specific themes. Several readings were needed to challenge and expand the evolving themes and to form from them a coherent interpretation. The following section details the themes that emerged from the analysis.

**OVERVIEW**

The Book of Mormon

The narrative in the Book of Mormon begins with Lehi, a resident of Jerusalem circa 600 B.C. (1 Nephi 10:4), who is commanded of the Lord to take his family and leave Jerusalem before it is destroyed. The family journeys across Arabia, builds a ship, and sails for a new promised land, the American continent. The Book of Mormon records the history of the Nephites and the Lamanites, two rival groups named after two of Lehi’s sons, Nephi and Laman. The book also contains a record of the Jaredites, a people who left the old world for the new at the time of the tower of Babel (Ether 1:33-43).

**RESULTS**

Material Wealth and the Land

In the Book of Mormon there is a clear link between material wealth and the land. Within this context, two subthemes emerged that are particularly important with respect to material wealth: 1) keeping commandments leads to prosperity in the land; and 2) disobeying the commandments leads to the cursing of the land.

**Keeping Commandments Leads to Prosperity in the Land.** The promised land is described in the Book of Mormon as a choicest land, rich in gold, silver, and other natural resources (11 Nephi 18:22-25). However, inhabitants of the promised land must live righteously or their prosperity and their lands will be taken away from them (2 Nephi 1:9-11). This theme is manifest in dozens of passages, such as the following.

> Wherefore, because thou hast been faithful thy seed... shall dwell in prosperity long upon the face of this land; and nothing, save it shall be iniquity among them, shall harm or disturb their prosperity upon the face of the land forever (2 Nephi 1:31).

The Book of Mormon chronicles several cycles of in which righteousness leads to prosperity, prosperity to wickedness, and wickedness to the loss of prosperity. This cycle is described in the following passage.

> And thus we can behold how false and also the unsteadiness of the hearts of the children of men; yea, we can see that the Lord in his great infinite goodness doth bless and prosper those who put their trust in him. Yea, and we may see at the very time when he doth prosper his people, yea, in the increase of their fields, their
Members of the church were enriched materially because they shared their substance with one another and administered relief to the sick and afflicted. For example, Alma 33:24-28 indicates that it is acceptable to pray to the Lord for wealth if it is to be used for the above mentioned purposes. Mosiah 4:16-26 Instructs members not to turn away beggars, but to give liberally to them in order to retain a remission of sins.

In a vision, an angel shows Nephi the “great and abominable” church of the devil. It is instructive to note the attitude of members of this church toward material wealth and possessions.

Contrast this with instructions given to members of the church of the Lamb of God with respect to possessions. Jacob 2:17-19.

Members of the primitive church are here counseled to seek first the kingdom of God; riches they should seek only secondarily and with the intent to do good. The Book of Mormon contains other versions of this admonition to food the hungry, clothe the naked, liberate the captive, and administer relief to the sick and afflicted.

When people in the Book of Mormon use their wealth charitably, they become even wealthier, as the following passage illustrates.

Members of the church were enriched materially because they shared their substance with those who were in need. Notice that this was done for the above mentioned purposes. Mosiah 4:16-26 Instructs members not to turn away beggars, but to give liberally to them in order to retain a remission of sins.

PROPER USE OF MATERIAL WEALTH

In the Book of Mormon, there are explicit instructions about and many examples of the proper and improper use of wealth. This section will examine 1) the righteous use of wealth; and 2) the consequences of an unrighteous use of wealth.

Righteous Use of Wealth. The Book of Mormon teaches that there are two churches only; the one is the church of the Lamb of God, and the other is the church of the devil; wherefore, whoso belongeth not to the church of the Lamb of God belongeth to the church of the devil (1 Nephi 14:10).

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largely a classless society. They did not distinguish between different people based on class, gender, age, or membership in the church. They treated everyone more or less equally. This passage reflects a notion similar to the "seed faith" concept discussed by O'Guinn and Belk (1989 p. 235) whereby members "invest" a small amount of money for righteous purposes and yield a great return for their efforts. The return is evidence of their faith, obedience, and favor in God's eyes. The Book of Mormon also explains how the righteous should go about obtaining their wealth: by working with their own hands. Consider, for example, the words of Benjamin, a righteous king:

I say unto you that as I have been suffered to spend my days in your service, even up to this time, and have not sought gold nor silver nor any manner of riches from you.... and even 1, myself, have labored with mine own hands that I might serve you, and that ye should not be laden with taxes (Mosiah 2:12, 14).

This ethic of laboring with one's hands to earn wealth is also evident in discussion of the clergy (Alma 1:26; Mosiah 18:24) and other church members (Mosiah 27:3-4). In direct contrast, the Lamanites are often described as a wicked and idolatrous people who do not labor with their own hands.

Unlike the righteous Nephites, the Lamanites wanted to achieve gain without working for it, a theme that is repeated throughout the Book of Mormon.

Unrighteous Uses of Wealth. The unrighteous use of wealth is the mirror image of the righteous use, for when members of the church use their wealth unrighteously, they behave like members of the great and abominable church of the devil described above.

But wo unto the rich, who are rich as to the things of the world. For because they are rich they despise the poor, and they persecute the meek, and their hearts are upon their treasures; wherefore, their treasure is their god. And behold, their treasure shall perish with them also (2 Nephi 9:30).

When the peoples in the Book of Mormon set their hearts on treasures and turn away from the Lord, pride creeps into the church; they begin despising the poor and withholding their substance from them, and class distinctions re-emerge. Consider again the church that became very rich by sharing their wealth. A mere six years later, many members of the church had once again become wicked.

And it came to pass in the eighth year of the reign of the judges, that the people of the church began to wax proud, because of their exceeding riches, and their fine silks, and their fine twined linen, and because of their many flocks and herds, and their gold and their silver, and all manner of precious things, which they had obtained by their industry; and in all these things they were lifted up in the pride of their eyes, for they began to wear very costly apparel.... [The people of the church began to...] set their hearts upon riches and upon the vain things of the world, that they began to be scornful, one toward another, and they began to persecute those that did not believe according to their own will and pleasure. [And there was] great inequality among the people, some lifting themselves up with their pride, despising others, turning their backs upon the needy and the naked and those who were hungry and those who were athirst and those who were sick and afflicted (Alma 4:6-12).

Another example in a different time (one hundred years later) and place illustrates the same wicked use of wealth. As in the previous example, the once righteous members of the church again become wicked because of their many possessions. This time, however, the covetousness of the people leads to the downfall of the church.

And the people began to be distinguished by ranks, according to their riches and their chances for learning; yea, some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches. And thus there became a great inequality in all the land, insomuch that the church began to be broken up.... Now the cause of this iniquity of the people was this-Satan had great power, unto the stirring up of the people to do all manner of iniquity, and to the puffing them up with pride, tempting them to seek for power, and authority, and riches, and the vain things of the world (3 Nephi 6:12-15).

The unrighteous use of wealth results in pride, the creation of class distinctions, the turning away of the poor and needy. And these developments bring down upon the Nephites the wrath of the Lord. In the Book of Mormon context, "the wrath of the Lord" usually means that the Lamanites make war against the Nephites and destroy their prosperity (Helaman 4:12-14). Here the Book of Mormon doctrine on materialism closely resembles that of other organized religions (Belk 1983). Setting their hearts upon the treasures of the world leads the formerly righteous Nephites away from virtues such as charity.

Summary. The righteous use of wealth comes after members of the church have obtained a faith in Christ. It involves administering relief to the poor, sick, and hungry. When members do this, their investment yields a great return and they become even wealthier. But wealthy members who do not use their wealth righteously become prideful and stop sharing their abundance with the less fortunate. They begin to create class distinctions by wearing costly apparel and become "riffs for destruction" (Helaman 13:14) at the hands of the Lamanites.

THE PROPER RELATIONSHIP OF HUMANKIND TO MATERIAL WEALTH

The Book of Mormon develops a basic paradox when it discusses material wealth. The Lord bestows material bounty on the righteous; however, this prosperity generally leads to their downfall. Members of the church are instructed to be generous with their wealth, to share with the less fortunate. When they do this, their investments yield great returns and they become even wealthier. But when they become wealthy, they stop needing the Lord and start relying on their own industry and endeavors for success. They become prideful, withhold their abundance from those in need, and turn away from the church. Consequently, the Lord humbles them through wars and other tribulations. Given this cycle, wealth is paradoxically both a blessing and a curse at the same time, both a reward and a stumbling block. In the context of this cycle, it is difficult to say whether wealth is a good or a bad thing.

The resolution of this paradox is found in the doctrine of stewardship. While the Book of Mormon repeatedly condemns the Nephites for making their treasures their gods, it also shows that people do not inevitably begin to worship their wealth. The founder, Lehi, provides an example of the proper relationship between a person and his or her possessions. [Other examples include Anulek (Alma 5), King Benjamin (Mosiah 2:4), Coriantum (Ether 9), and Morienton, Levi, and Lib (Ether 10.)] Lehi was a wealthy Jewish merchant living in Jerusalem around 800 B.C. His wealth was so great that it made Laban, a wealthy but minor Jewish governor (Nibley 1987), "lust" after it and attempt to kill Lehi's sons in order to obtain his it (1 Nephi 3:25-25). However, when the Lord commanded Lehi to leave his wealth behind and flee into the wilderness, he left it and fled with no second thoughts.

And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should depart into the wilderness. And it came to pass that he was obedient and took his family and went into the wilderness. And it came to pass that the Lord commanded my father, even in a dream, that he should leave his wealth behind and flee into the wilderness. And it came to pass that he was obedient and took his family and departed into the wilderness. And it came to pass that he was obedient unto the word of the Lord, wherefore he
Although very wealthy, Lehi relied on the Lord and not on his own abilities and wealth. He was not so attached to his possessions that he hesitated to leave them when asked to do so by God. Of course, Lehi was told by the Lord that if he would leave his riches behind, he would be sent to a new promised land of abundance (1 Nephi 2:20). So he may have been sacrificing present wealth and delaying present consumption for the promise of even greater wealth and consumption in the future. Leaving his riches behind would thus be yet another example of seed faith, with an interval of several years between investment and return. But regardless of whether he focused on the return or not, Lehi realized that “since God created the earth and its resources, all things belong to God and man is merely a custodian or steward rather than an owner of ‘possessions’” (Belk 1983, p. 515).

Lehi's life thus reveals the central message of the Book of Mormon with respect to riches and abundance. It is “stewardship,” rather than conspicuous consumption, that constitutes the proper relationship of humankind to material wealth (Benson 1987a). As stewards, the people in the Book of Mormon were obligated to responsibly manage the material riches and possessions given to them and to promote the temporal welfare of others. When they faithfully did this, their efforts yielded even greater wealth. Like Lehi, they needed to be “righteous” enough to accumulate great wealth, but humble enough to use it as the Lord commanded.

This message is hold to be important for Mormons in today's materialistic world. Moroni, a Book of Mormon prophet, saw a vision of modern times and spoke directly to contemporary Mormons.

Behold, I speak unto you as if ye were present, and ye are not. But behold, Jesus Christ hath shown you unto me, and I know your doing. And I know that ye do walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel. For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, more than ye love the needy, the sick and the afflicted. Why do ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy, and the naked, and the sick and the afflicted to pass by you, and notice them not? (Mormon 8:35-39).

Here Moroni is chastising the modern world in general and modern Mormons in particular for their love of things and their unrighteous use of wealth. According to these verses, contemporary Mormons are not wise stewards over the Lord's possessions for they and have not learned the lesson Lehi learned. Thus, Mormon scripture condemns the contemporary church for ignoring the teachings found in the Book of Mormon (D&C 84:55-60).

DISCUSSION

We come, then, to the paradox of contemporary Mormonism. Unless they are able to manage their riches wisely, it is better for Mormons not to be wealthy. And the central religious text of the church, the “keystone” of the religion, declares that many contemporary Mormons do not use their wealth wisely. Unsurprisingly, Mormon leaders have ambivalent feelings about the wealth of their prosperous, materialistic, middle-class members.

Responding in part to warnings in the Book of Mormon, Mormon leaders have established a number of cultural and structural constraints which inhibit church members from accumulating and ostentatiously consuming material wealth. Thus, members are actively counseled by the president of the church, whom they revere as a latter-day prophet, to avoid conspicuous consumption and to stay out of debt (Benson 1987a). All members are urged to give ten percent of their income to the church as a tithe (D&C section 119) and to contribute money beyond the ten percent to help less fortunate people both inside and outside the church (Kimball 1982, pp. 144-146).

The patterns of Mormon family life also play an important role in inhibiting wealth accumulation. Mormons are encouraged to marry young and not to put off having children. Spencer W. Kimball, a recent prophet of the church, has said:

In America and elsewhere in the world, the family limitation program is gaining much strength. Latter-day Saints do not believe in this. We believe in following the admonition of the Lord in having large families and rearing them righteously. We hope that our Latter-day Saints will not trade children for accommodation and luxury (Kimball 1982, p. 325; see also p. 308).

Following this counsel, Mormons do have large families. They marry younger than most other groups, and among them fertility rates are higher than among any other major religious group in the United States (Heaton 1992). Because of their high fertility rates and because church leaders recommend that mothers not work outside the home (Benson 1987b), Mormons also have a lower per capita income than most other American religious or ethnic groups (Heaton 1992). This is true even though many Mormon mothers either choose or are compelled by the expense of their large family to work outside the home (Thomas 1992). In addition to the usual expense of a college education, faithful Mormon parents must bear the cost of the proselyting missions on which they are commanded to send all of their sons and many of their daughters (Russell 1991). Taken altogether, these structural constraints usually mean that Mormon families have low income to spend on material possessions than other middle class families. Though there are exceptions, e.g. the family of J. Willard Marriott of Marriott hotel fame most Mormon families find it difficult to amass a great deal of wealth.

These constraints on the accumulation of wealth may be an effective way of keeping church members from, in Book of Mormon terms, failing into disfavor with the Lord. As Ozanne et al. (1992) have suggested, the constraints encourage Mormons who follow the counsel of church leaders to subordinate material goals to spiritual goals. Faithful Mormons are free to enjoy the comforts provided by a materialistic society such as the one that exists in the United States, but only after they have demonstrated the priority of spiritual goals in their lives by sacrificing much of their wealth on the altar of their faith.

CONCLUSION

The Book of Mormon suggests that the righteous are blessed materially but that this blessing often turns into a cursing when those who are blessed are seduced by the wealth their righteousness has won for them. It is safe to be wealthy only if one is willing to sacrifice one's wealth for one's faith and for the well being of others. The Mormon tradition seeks to reinforce the priority of the spiritual over the material by requiring a substantial sacrifice of material wealth. Members are free to enjoy without moral anguish any wealth they may have beyond that which is necessary to meet their obligations to the church and the poor.

We acknowledge, finally, an important limitation of this study: the method was generally hermeneutic, not ethnographic. An ethnographic study might produce different results, since it is common for ethnographic research to uncover contradictions between what is said and believed to occur and what actually happens (Hammersly and Atkinson 1983).

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Thus, anti-Mormons insist that the Book of Mormon must be evaluated on the basis of modern metallurgical terminology and science, which has categories and distinctions completely foreign to ancient peoples such as the ancient Egyptians and Hebrews, who had a single term covering what now is divided into many different categories. If the failure of the Book of Mormon to match modern semantic categories on types of iron proves there were no Nephites, shouldn’t the failure of the Hebrews and Egyptians to match modern semantic categories likewise demonstrate there were not Hebrews or Egyptians? Or... Or is this a tale of a great cultural hero miraculously making a unique weapon out of celestial materials-the “metal from heaven” (meteoric iron)? If the Book of Mormon was translated by the “power of God,” it is reasonable to assume that it would be completely free from error. The fact is, however, that the original edition is filled with many mistakes. That this is true is evident from the fact that, through the years, numerous Mormon writers have tried to explain why the mistakes exist, and why thousands of changes have been made in subsequent editions of the Book of Mormon. Various suggestions have been made in an attempt to explain the errors, including such things as Joseph Smith’s poor education, his lack of communication with the Book of Mormon is a sacred text of the Latter Day Saint movement, which adherents believe contains writings of ancient prophets who lived on the American continent from approximately 2200 BC to AD 421. It was first published in March 1830 by Joseph Smith as The Book of Mormon: An Account Written by the Hand of Mormon upon Plates Taken from the Plates of Nephi, who claimed that it had been written in otherwise unknown characters referred to as “reformed Egyptian” engraved on golden plates.