

Witnesses of the Book of Mormon — Insights Episode 32: To be a Witness

A movie scene fades in: ... that the Lord your God should come out in the fullness of his wrath upon you. That ye be cut off and destroyed forever.

Paul Wuthrich, Narrator of *Undaunted: Witnesses of the Book of Mormon*: Joseph Smith claimed that he was given priesthood power to restore Christ's church here on Earth. Through the gift and power of God, he translated the historic record that became the Book of Mormon.

Terryl Givens, Professor of Literature & Religion, Brigham Young University: I think one of the most remarkable things about Joseph Smith's account of his first vision is that he describes a scene of religious confusion and contention. And then he says this, he says, 'I discovered that I could not settle the question by an appeal to the Bible, because the Bible had been so very variously interpreted by the various partisans that it ruined any chance to settle the question by an appeal to the Bible.' And what the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith's story represented was an alternative way of grounding truth and authority, and that is to go to the Source itself.

Richard Bushman, Professor of History, Emeritus, Columbia University: He said, 'I can speak scripture as Peter and James and Paul spoke scripture. I have the revelation and the priesthood power that was granted to those early apostles.' And that really set him apart, and I think, thrilled people who heard that that form of Biblical power was on the earth again.

Camry Bagley Fox: Welcome to our series on the witnesses of the Book of Mormon. My name is Camry Bagley Fox, and we are joined today by Daniel Peterson, president of the Interpreter Foundation, and executive producer of the *Witnesses* project. Thank you for being here.

Daniel Peterson: Thank you.

CBF: So, Dan, can you share your witness with us?

DP: My witness of the Book of Mormon is multi-faceted, multi-layered. I will say, on one level, that one of the elements of evidence for the Book of Mormon that struck me for a long time has been the witnesses. I don't know any real way around them. Here you've got eleven witnesses plus Joseph, that's twelve. I think that may not be coincidental; that's the standard number of a jury in Western law.

Then you have the unofficial witnesses. You've got at least 16, 18, maybe more, but you've got a host of people there really, a small, but not insubstantial group, who claim to have had real experiences with angels, plates, the voice of God. It varies from witness to witness and group to group. I don't know an easy way around them.

If you have that many witnesses in a legal trial testifying to some criminal action, if you had 18 people who said, “Yeah, I saw him do it,” it would be hard to talk your way out of that one. I think you’d go to jail.

The Lord has given us only one, what you might call secular evidence, a bit of secular evidence, for the Book of Mormon, that is the witness testimonies. I say secular in the sense that it’s not your internal, spiritual witness; it’s witness you can sift and evaluate, the way you would evaluate historical evidence or any other kind of evidence in a criminal trial, or something like that. And it’s important to him, because he’s giving it to us. They’re mentioned in the Book of Mormon, they’re mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants; those testimonies have appeared in every edition of the Book of Mormon, so far as I know, in every language that the Book of Mormon has ever been published in since 1830. This project was partly an attempt to overcome what I thought was the neglect of the witnesses, a little bit. But it goes beyond the witnesses.

DP cont’d: To me, the Book of Mormon is impossible to explain in any non-divine way. The only explanation that works for me as a comprehensive explanation of the Book of Mormon is the one that Joseph Smith gives. People say, “Well, Joseph wrote it himself.” Well then, what about the witnesses? ‘Well, I don’t deal with the witnesses.’ Well, you HAVE to deal with the witnesses. You can’t just ignore them. The existence of the Book of Mormon is almost impossible to account for. Joseph Smith has maybe 2 1/2 months of formal education, and here he is producing a book. That’s amazing. And producing it in a really short period of time, 2 1/2 months maybe of dictation. That’s a rapid pace. It’s been calculated; we know roughly what his schedule was and the days he missed. It’s 7 to 11 printed pages a day in our current English edition. That’s a really rapid translation pace; that’s hard to keep up with if you’re an educated writer.

I wrote a book a number of years ago, my first book which I wrote about the Middle East. One of the things that intrigued me about it was, they gave me a very short time to write the book. And I thought, OK, this will be interesting, see if I can do it in that short of period. And I wrote it in about two months or thereabouts. And I was so impressed with myself. I did a calculation on the computer—easy to do—to find out how long it was. Well, it was about 165,000 words long. I thought, wow, I really, really moved on that. But the thing is, I have a PhD, it was a subject in which I have a PhD. And so I was just kind of thinking through the lectures I normally gave and transcribing into the book. And I’m a fast writer, so it went pretty rapidly.

So I thought, OK, I wonder how long the Book of Mormon is. It’s about 100,000 words longer than my book, and it was dictated in the same amount of time that I wrote mine. And some would argue it’s a more important or influential book than mine. So, to me, I look at that—I hear people say, as Fawn Brody once said, the famous unbelieving biographer of Joseph Smith, she said, ‘Well, Joseph just had a great imagination. It just flowed out of him like a spring freshen.’

I think, right, well just try it. Sit down and write a book like this, 250,000 words, roughly, a quarter of a million words, in about two months. Just let it gush. And have it be

structured, all the things that the Book of Mormon is. It's not just stream of consciousness, it's carefully structured.

DP: There are other things, and I would say, it touches the Middle East in so many ways. It makes sense against the proclaimed background, the Middle Eastern background, and now, increasingly the American background of the book as we're learning more about these areas, it makes sense, and seems to me, beyond the capacity of Joseph to have made up. And the richness of the doctrines and so on, in the book, it's just amazing. The fact that so many people, for so many generations, have found spiritual sustenance in this book. People do, and have found great comfort in, found great power for when they're in times of doubt or when they're in times of sorrow. That's an amazing product.

To have come from a guy who shouldn't, by all odds, be writing a book in it the first place. This is just not the kind of person who produces books. Some people discovered that Joseph didn't cite the Book of Mormon very much, in his lifetime. I think it's because, in a way, he didn't know it that well. He'd grown up on the Bible, and the Book of Mormon passed through him. But it wasn't his, so to me, it's like a gift that was given to him, and he maybe didn't even recognize, even himself, how powerful it was, and we're only beginning to treasure it for what it is now.

Finally, I certainly don't want to neglect the spiritual witness which the Book of Mormon offers to everybody who reads it sincerely, and which many thousands of people, tens, hundreds of thousands, historically, millions of people, I think, can testify that they've received, to one degree or another.

When I read it, my feeling is, "This is true." It comes to me very powerfully, sometimes, this is true. My life has been spent reading ancient and medieval history, and chronicles and so on. And the Book Mormon READS, to me, like real history. It speaks, not only to how humans really behave, but to how humans ought to behave. It points to the truth of the claims, the fundamental claims, of the gospel. If the Book of Mormon is true, then there is a God. God intervenes in our affairs, God is interested in us. God sent his only begotten Son to die on our behalf. Jesus rose from the dead. People see him in the New World after he's been killed in the Old World. It's the most important message, I think, that anybody can hear, which is: Life has purpose. Death isn't the end. There is a God who cares about us. Salvation is possible for all of us. The universe isn't random, it's not pointless, it doesn't come to a meaningless end when we die. And there's hope for all of us. That's a really important thing to know, and the Book of Mormon stands as a witness of that, a second witness of that, along with the Bible.

DP cont'd: In an age when a lot of people wonder, well, you know, is the Bible really true, or if the Bible's really true... well, why do those things only happen anciently? That's not true, because the Book Mormon says, I think importantly, that if you seek wisdom, you can get wisdom from God. If you ask if these things are true, God will reveal it to you. That means these things continue even still today, that God speaks still today, that the Church has been restored, that the Church today is led by living prophets

and apostles. This is at the foundation of it all, and the witnesses are foundational to the truth claims of the Book of Mormon. So, the importance of the Book of Mormon and of the Book of Mormon witnesses, simply CANNOT be overstated.

CBF: Thank you so much, Dan. Thanks for chatting with me about the witnesses.

DP: Thank you.