



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title A Test of Faith: The Book of Mormon in the Missouri Conflict

Author(s) Clark V. Johnson

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/2 (2003): 84-87, 118.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract While imprisoned in Liberty Jail in Missouri in 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith directed the church members to gather statements and affidavits about the sufferings and abuses put on them by the people of Missouri. Of the surviving affidavits, five speak directly about the Book of Mormon as a test of faith. Several were offered their lives, property, and safety if they would deny the Book of Mormon and denounce the divine calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Those who refused to recant were robbed of their property, whipped, beaten, slandered, and jailed.

A Test of Faith:

THE BOOK OF MORMON IN THE MISSOURI CONFLICT



Saints Driven from Jackson County, Missouri, by C. C. A. Christensen. Courtesy of the Brigham Young University Museum of Art. All rights reserved.

WHILE HUDDLED WITH OTHER PRISONERS in the cold, dank Liberty Jail in March 1839, the Prophet Joseph Smith felt inspired to direct that church members gather

CLARK V. JOHNSON

a knowledge of all the facts, and sufferings and abuses put upon them by the people of this State [of Missouri]; and also of all the property and amount of damages which they have sustained, both of character and personal injuries, as well as real property; . . . and to take statements and affidavits . . . and present the whole concatenation of diabolical rascality and nefarious and murderous impositions that have been practised upon this people—that we may not only publish to all the world, but present them to the heads of government. (Doctrine and Covenants 123:1–2, 4–6)

The Prophet and the Saints had just passed through one of the most bitter persecutions in the history of the United States. At gunpoint, mobs and militias had forced members of the church from their homes, had beaten them and stolen their livestock, had burned their homes and raped women, had threatened them with extermination, and had driven them, in winter, eastward across the state of Missouri and over the Mississippi River into Illinois, as well as northward into the Iowa territory. The Book of Mormon was one of the contentious elements in this horrible picture of affliction.

Why did the citizens of Missouri respond with such hatred to the Latter-day Saints? The reasons are many. One of the chief objections had to do with Joseph Smith himself. He and his followers claimed that he was a prophet of God. But he was not an ordinary clairvoyant or charismatic religious thinker who spoke of promoting peace and doing God's will—his claim to be a prophet was inextricably tied to a written work of scripture: the Book of Mormon. For opponents, the quarrelsome issues had nothing to do with the *teachings* of the Book of Mormon. Instead, as a recent study points out, it was the existence of the book itself that drew angry responses from unbelieving Missouri neighbors as well as other, more distant detractors.¹

In a way, it was an old story. Conflicts over religion litter history. During the centuries before the establishment of the United States, many wars in Europe were fought over religious differences. At one point, thousands of devotees fled from religious persecution there and came to the New World with the hope of practicing their religious principles in an open, untrammelled setting. In a related vein, our earliest scriptural records report conflicts that arose at least in part from religious observances and beliefs, including conflicts between Cain and Abel (see Moses 5:18–21) and between Noah and the evil people in his society who “sought his life” (Moses 8:26). But the matter of Joseph Smith was different. He claimed to have a book that had come from real artifacts—golden plates no less—that he had translated from a religious record from the American past.

In a July 1831 revelation to Joseph Smith, the Lord identified “the land of Missouri” as “the land which I have appointed and consecrated for the gathering of the saints.” Moreover, the Lord designated this region as “the land of promise, and the place for the city of Zion” (D&C 57:1–2). Within months, church members were moving to Jackson County, Missouri, where Joseph had received that revelation. Almost predictably, local citizens first grew

suspicious and then resisted the immigrating Saints. By the summer of 1833, a mere two years after the revelation about “the land of promise,” resistance in Missouri had grown to such a pitch that local residents took matters into their own hands, looting and burning the homes and businesses of Latter-day Saints. Edward Partridge, then bishop of the church, was rounded up with other men and whipped before being tarred and feathered. In the same roundup, the mob grabbed Charles Allen and “stripped and tarred and feathered” him “because he would not agree to leave the county, or deny the Book of Mormon.”²

What is clear from this early incident is that the members of the mob had mobilized partly because of their antagonism toward the Book of Mormon. This observation points to an important subtext of the persecutions: in the back of some persecutors' minds lay the claims about the divine origin of the Book of Mormon. In addition, they offered their victims a way out of the threatened trouble—deny the Book of Mormon and thereby retain their properties and lives.³ In the case of Charles Allen, he refused the offer and suffered.

It was not until persecutions in Missouri stretched across 1838 and deep into the winter of 1839 that the Prophet saw fit to instruct the Saints “to take statements and affidavits,” as we have seen (D&C 123:4). In response, between 1839 and 1845 hundreds of Saints drew up affidavits with the intent of submitting them to government officials.⁴ Their bleak hope was that Missouri and U.S. officials would view them sympathetically and perhaps even provide compensation for lost properties. But it was not to be. Of the almost 1,000 affidavits sworn before government officers in Illinois and Iowa, 773 are currently known.⁵ These documents paint a picture of the terrible devastation that wrecked people's lives in Missouri during the 1830s.

Of the surviving affidavits, only five speak directly about the Book of Mormon as a test of faith. But we can be assured that the opponents of the Latter-day Saints thought of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as inseparably intertwined. An example from one of those five affidavits will suffice to show that the Saints' belief in Joseph Smith and his work lay at the heart of the calamities. It involves Caleb Baldwin, Alanson Ripley, and Joseph Smith when they were prisoners together.

In his 1843 affidavit, Caleb Baldwin reported that because of the abuses that he and his family had suffered, he sought and obtained an interview in November 1838 with Judge Austin A. King at Richmond, Missouri, prior to the court of inquiry

April the 11th 1839 to the assembly of states
 know ye by these presents that Truman Brace
 have been long & suffer much by the mother of
 me you may for the which I think I am entitled to some
 particular first time in from Jack county
 of ten being treated with the etc & was shot
 at being under the necessity of a lookout by
 being hit by a ray by which my family
 which consist of wife & six children suffer
 much by my absence through fear & want
 of my assistance we were not allowed to see the
 view in to day the fence being guarded in such
 or six numbers of us were obliged to look
 the gate & have our crops for the mob
 when we were forced to fatigue in fine with
 for the but it is from me on my flight into
 the wilderness I found some right church men
 belonging to our people wandering on the prairie
 porary with bare feet and they told me
 this is the beginning of our suffering & I
 in from Clay county located in Missouri well known
 me you may to know I have more than
 been on the account of the mob
 I P. 1839 C. M. Woods
 (Circuit Clerk) Adams County
 State of Missouri

Affidavit of Truman Brace recounting his family's suffering at the hands of mobocrats.

presided over by Judge King himself. Baldwin petitioned Judge King for a “fair trial,” whereupon the judge, Baldwin testified, replied that “there was no law for the Mormons” and that “they must be exterminated.” Baldwin explained to Judge King “that his family composed of helpless females had been plundered and driven out into the prairie and asked Judge King what he should do.” Judge King answered that “if he [Baldwin] would renounce his religion and forsake [Joseph] Smith he would be released and protected.” Baldwin further wrote that “the same offer was made to the other prisoners all of whom however [also] refused to do so and were in reply told that they would be put to death.” Alanson Ripley, who was with Baldwin

and Joseph Smith during the interview, also said that “the same offer was made to him [Ripley] by Mr. Birch the prosecuting attorney, that if he would forsake the mormons he should be released and Restored to his home and suffer to remain [in Missouri]; to which he returned.” Joseph Smith recorded that “he and Mr. Baldwin were chained together at the time of the conversation . . . recited by Mr. Baldwin, which conversation he heard and which is correctly stated.” Joseph also testified “that no such offer was made to him it being understood as certain that he was to be shot.” These two men who chose to continue their belief in the teachings of Joseph Smith as exemplified in the Book of Mormon were confined in Liberty Jail, Liberty, Missouri, from December 1838 through April 1839 by Judge King’s court of inquiry to await trial.⁶

In similar incidents, the Saints’ persecutors gave them a specific choice: deny the Book of Mormon, deny Joseph Smith, and live in peace with neighbors and friends. In a second affidavit, Truman Brace testified, “As I was hauling a load of wood I saw a number of armed men on the prairies. When the[y] saw me two of them came up to me. They ordered me to Stop or they would Shoot me. One of them named J Young asked me if I believed the book of Mormon; I told them that ‘I did.’” Because of Brace’s belief, the men told him that he “must leave the County.” Brace explained that he had “neither team or means” to do that, to which “Young then Said he would shoot me and immediately made ready to Carry his threat into execution but the other man persuaded him not to do so.” The rest of the men, about 50 in number, rode up. Brace recounted that “John Young then took an axe gad [a tool for breaking rock] which I held in my hand and commenced beating me with the same. I suppose I received about fifty strokes after breaking it he got a Raw Hide and Commenced whipping me with it he cut my Hat nearly all to pieces.” This and other brutal acts apparently took place near Brace’s homestead in 1833, for he recalled, “[S]eeing me thus situated [my wife and daughter] came and entreated the mob to spare my life.”⁷

But the horrors continued. Brace reported that he made his way into his house and, not surprisingly, “the mob . . . came into the House. I sat me down on a chair when one of them thrust the muzzle of the Gun against my neck and thrust me against the wall and then kicked me on the mouth with his foot.”⁸ In the process of this persecution, Brace was separated from his “famaly which consisted of wife & six children [who] suferd much by my absence through fear

& for want of my assistance.” Continuing, Brace reported, “[W]e suferd cold & fategue in fine i wisht for dett [death] but itt f[l]ed from me on my flight into the wilderness.” Thus driven from his home, Brace “found some eight o ten children belonging to our people wandring on the frozen porary [prairie] with bair feet much bluddy tired out.”⁹

A third affidavit that mentions the Book of Mormon comes from Barnet Cole. A certain Moses Wilson and Robert Jonson called at Barnet Cole’s home and invited him “to go out a pace with them said they some gentleman wished to see him.” Once they were away from his home, Cole found himself in the presence of 40 or 50 armed men. One of the men said, “[I]s this mister Cole the reply was yes.” At this moment they asked Cole if he believed the Book of Mormon, to which Cole replied, “Yes.” They then took off his “Coat and Jaccoat and laid on ten lashes and then told me I mite go holme,” wrote Cole. A little over a month later, a “Mob headed by Wilson & Jonson . . . Came into his [Cole’s] house and gave him a second Whiping and ordered him to leave the County or it would be worse for him.”¹⁰

In another affidavit, Lyman Wight said that “some time in the summer of 1833, . . . a strong prejudice among the various sects arose, declaring that Joseph Smith was a false prophet, and ought to die.” Subsequently, “mobs assembled in considerable bodies, frequently visiting private houses, threatening the inmates with death and destruction instantly, if they did not renounce Joe Smith as a prophet, and the book of Mormon.” Concerning his personal experience, Wight reported that he and his family had been separated while the mobbers searched for him. During the separation, Harriet, his wife, had “loaded her three small children, in a skiff [and] passed down Big Blue river, a distance of fourteen miles, and crossed over the Missouri river.” She borrowed a piece of carpet from a friend in order to make a tent for shelter. Wight later found them in that squalid condition. He reported that he “had been hunted throughout Jackson, Lafayette, and Clay counties, and also the Indian Territory.” Wight further wrote, “Having made the inquiry of my family why it was they [the Missourians] had so much against me, the answer was, ‘He believes in Joe Smith and the Book of Mormon, G ——— d ——— him; and we believe Joe Smith to be a ——— rascal!’”¹¹

The fifth account comes from John P. Greene’s notable collection titled *Facts Relative to the*

Expulsion of the Mormons from the State of Missouri, Under the “Exterminating Order” (1839). In his appendix, Greene recorded that in 1833 a mob took several prominent church members—including Isaac Morley and David Whitmer—from their homes. The ruffians drove these men by “the point of the bayonet to the public square” of the city of Independence, where they “stripped and tarred and feathered them.” In this condition, the men stood while the mob cocked “their guns . . . at the prisoners’ breasts,” the leader “threatening them with instant death, unless they denied the book of Mormon and confessed it to be a fraud.” The leader declared that “if they did [deny the Book of Mormon], they might enjoy the privileges of citizens” of Missouri. To this invitation, “David Whitmer . . . lifted up his hands and bore witness that the Book of Mormon was the Word of God.” Astonishingly, “the mob then let them go.”¹²

A final example, from the aforementioned Wight affidavit, occurred “some time in the summer of 1833,” after two years of peace between church members and their neighbors. At that time, Lyman Wight affirmed, “a strong prejudice among the various sects arose, declaring that Joseph Smith was a false prophet, and ought to die.” Subsequently, “mobs assembled in considerable bodies, frequently visiting private houses, threatening the inmates with death and destruction instantly, if they did not renounce Joe Smith as a prophet, and the book of Mormon.” These threats came as a prelude to “operations of mobocracy” wherein people of ill will united for the purpose of driving church members from Jackson County.¹³ Like the other instances, this conflict involved the Book of Mormon as a test of faith for the Saints in the face of threats against their lives and property.

In sum, members of the church living in Missouri in the 1830s suffered the same persecution as their ancient counterparts. They were robbed of their property, whipped, beaten, slandered, and jailed because of their belief in the Book of Mormon and in the divine calling of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Those who chose to deny the Book of Mormon escaped the tribulation heaped upon those who refused. For, as a mob had assured several men whom they held at bayonet point, if “they denied the Book of Mormon, and confessed it to be a fraud . . . they might enjoy the privileges of citizens.”¹⁴ The Book of Mormon had indeed become a test of faith. ■

Zedekiah” spoken of in 1 Nephi 1:4 does not refer to 21-year-old Zedekiah’s installation by Nebuchadnezzar, but to the year 609 BC, theorizing that following the death of Zedekiah’s father, Josiah (see 2 Kings 23:29–30), and the Egyptian removal of Zedekiah’s older full brother Jehoahaz from the throne (see 2 Kings 23:30–34), the young 8-year-old Zedekiah was recognized by Judah as legitimate heir to the throne, even though the Egyptians installed his older half brother Jehoiakim (see 2 Kings 23:34). This solution further theorizes that the exilic or postexilic composer of the last segment of 2 Kings (comprising 2 Kings 23:26–25:30) was unaware of the situation with young Zedekiah and reported only the tenure of the Egyptian vassal Jehoiakim, first mentioning Zedekiah at his installment by the Babylonians at age 21. However, it would have been the young 8-year-old Zedekiah in a 609 BC context of whom Nephi was speaking in 1 Nephi 1:4, with Lehi prophesying some three years in the context of 1 Nephi 1 before leaving Jerusalem in 605 BC.

25. John L. Sorenson, “The Mulekites,” *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 8.

26. Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 8.

27. One interpretation of Lachish Letter III is that the commander of Judah’s army went to Egypt during this window of opportunity. See John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 330.

28. Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 9.

29. See Sorenson, “Mulekites,” 9.

30. Although the northern Sinai trail to Egypt was a desert, the Bible does not generally refer to the relatively short trip from Judah to Egypt along that route as a “wilderness” event. Since Omni 16 uses the term *journeyed*, a longer and more arduous desert trek could be indicated, and North Africa would represent a wilderness journey as difficult and long for Mulek’s party as Arabia had been for Lehi’s party. Sorenson suggests Carthage (in modern Tunisia) as a possible port of embarkation for America (see “Mulekites,” 9). But perhaps the journey in the wilderness went all the way across the continent, past the Atlas Mountains. The further west Mulek’s party traveled across North Africa, the shorter the sea voyage would

have been, so that a port west of the Straits of Gibraltar, on the coast of modern Morocco, would have spared Mulek’s party a complicated sail across the Mediterranean.

31. A theophoric element means a word particle that utilizes all or part of a divine name. The theophoric element *-yahu* is an adumbrated form of the full divine name *Yahuweh* (יהוה), which is rendered in King James English as Jehovah.
32. For example, *Ge’alyahu ben hamelek*, who seems to have owned at least two different seals (*Corpus* nos. 412 and 413), and *Neriyahu ben hamelek*, who seems to have owned at least three (*Corpus* nos. 17, 18, and 415). See Avigad and Sass, *Corpus*, 55–56, 174–75, and endnote 14 above.

A Test of Faith: The Book of Mormon in the Missouri Conflict
Clark V. Johnson

1. Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 62–88.
2. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1951), 1:390–91; also cited in Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 68.
3. Consult the account of John P. Greene in Clark V. Johnson, ed., *Mormon Redress Petitions: Documents of the 1833–1838 Missouri Conflict* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1992), 22.
4. The affidavits used in this paper describe the settlement and persecution of the Mormons in western Missouri from 1831 through 1839. These 773 documents were written and sworn before county officers in ten counties in Illinois and two in the Iowa territory between 1839 and 1845. The documents used in this paper are sometimes referred to as “affidavits” or “petitions.” When Joseph Smith presented them to the United States Congress in 1839–40, he referred to them as “claims.”
5. The known petitions are in the Family and Church History Department Archives in Salt Lake City and in the National Archives in Washington, D.C. All quotations in this study are exactly the same as the original

petitions, including the punctuation and spelling.

6. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 685–86.
7. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 423.
8. In addition to the personal abuse that Truman Brace suffered, the mobbers took from him two horses, one steer, a sheep, two guns, four pistols, and household furniture, and they destroyed his crops and garden (Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 45).
9. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 144–45.
10. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 431–32. By Cole’s account, he and his family lost 40 acres of land as a result of persecution.
11. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 652–54.
12. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 22.
13. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 652–53.
14. Johnson, *Mormon Redress Petitions*, 22.

[What’s in a Word?]

The Language of the Scriptures
Cynthia L. Hallen

1. Marion G. Romney, address given at Seminary and Institute of Religion Coordinators’ Convention, 3 April 1973, quoted in *Book of Mormon (Religion 121–122) Student Manual*, 2nd ed. rev. (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981), 437–38.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Cambridge: Oxford Univ. Press, 2003), <http://dictionary.oed.com/>.

[New Light]

The Book of Mormon as a Written (Literary) Artifact
Grant Hardy

1. Both the original and the printer’s manuscripts have verse 16 placed exactly where it has always been in all printed editions of the Book of Mormon; there is no indication of an error in the dictation or the transcription. For more information on the transmission of text of the Book of Mormon, see George A. Horton Jr., “Book of Mormon Transmission from Translator to Printed Text,” in Paul R. Cheesman, ed., *The Keystone Scripture* (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 237–55; and M. Gerald Bradford and

Alison V. P. Coutts, eds., *Uncovering the Original Text of the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2002).

2. For more details about the discipline of textual criticism, see Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992); or L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).
3. Daniel Ludlow has suggested that the strange reading in Alma 24:19—“they buried their weapons of peace, or they buried the weapons of war, for peace”—might be the result of an engraving error that could not be erased but was nevertheless immediately corrected. Other possible examples he points to include Mosiah 7:8, Alma 50:32, Helaman 3:33, and 3 Nephi 16:4. See Daniel H. Ludlow, *A Companion to Your Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 210. Another instance may occur in Alma 13:16, the subject of this essay, when the writer decides midsentence that the manner of priesthood ordinations is not just a type or symbol of God’s order; it is actually the order of God itself.
4. See Robert J. Matthews, “The New Publications of the Standard Works—1979, 1981,” *BYU Studies* 22/4 (Fall 1982): 387–424.
5. By chapter, the references are as follows: *New Revised Standard*—Exodus 18, 22; Judges 20; Ezekiel 21, 22; Zechariah 5; John 8; Romans 16; 1 Corinthians 14; *Revised English Bible*—1 Samuel 9; 2 Samuel 14; Judges 20; Job 3, 14, 20, 24, 29, 31 (twice), 33, 34, 35, 37; Ecclesiastes 2; Isaiah 10, 38, 40; John 8; Romans 16.