

CHAPTER XX

An Answer to Budvarson's Criticisms of the Book of Mormon

In 1961 a sixty-three-page brochure entitled *The Book of Mormon—True or False?* was issued by the Zondervan Publishing House of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The author is Arthur Budvarson of La Mesa, California, and it is to be noted that the copyright (1959) was issued to the Utah Christian Tract Society. We do not know anything personally about Mr. Budvarson, but judging from the foreword of the brochure, his purpose is to show (1) the many changes that have been made in the Book of Mormon since originally issued in 1830, (2) that the major doctrines and teachings of the Mormon Church are contrary to the teachings of the Nephite record, and (3) that the claims made for the Book of Mormon are archaeologically unsound, as well as being out of harmony with the Word of God, the Holy Bible. The work is presented "with the earnest prayer that sincere people everywhere may perceive the fallacy and danger of Mormonism and will not become entangled in it, and that the dear Mormon people who are unfortunately deceived by it may be reclaimed and find the true way of salvation in the Bible and the blessed Savior whom it reveals (John 14: 6) ."

At first glance one is duly impressed with the apparent scholarly job done by Mr. Budvarson. The abundant illustrations, not to mention quotations from authorities of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, present a facade of learning that is calculated to carry conviction to the uninitiated. But unfortunately for Mr. Budvarson, no Book of Mormon scholar will be deceived by his work. Frankly, the gentleman is out of his depth in writing about the sacred Mormon book. And The Utah Christian Tract

Society is simply wasting its money if it believes that any thinking, "dear" Mormon is going to be "reclaimed" by its representative, Mr. Arthur Budvarson. Let us now see why.

On pages 6 and 7 of the brochure much is made of the late Orson Pratt's statement that the Book of Mormon "must be either *true* or *false*," that if it is an imposition, those who continue to publish the delusion should be exposed and silenced. So Mr. Budvarson proposes to present evidence, "clearly and logically stated," to quote Elder Pratt, that will expose and silence those of us who still proclaim to the world that the Nephite record is a divine work.

The claims made by the Mormon people for the Book of Mormon are now considered on pages 9 to 23. Mr. Budvarson quotes Joseph Smith, the *Doctrine and Covenants*, the Three Witnesses (especially David Whitmer), President W. Aird MacDonald and Elder James E. Talmage in order to show that extraordinary claims are made for the Nephite record. We may summarize these as follows:

1. It is a unique, distinctive, God-given book.
- 2 It was translated by the gift and power of God.
3. A miraculous device, the Urim and Thummim, supplied by God and delivered by an angel, was used to perform the supernatural wonder of translation from "Reformed Egyptian Hieroglyphics."
4. An angel was sent from God to make certain "that this book was properly translated and printed." (Quote from Pres. MacDonald)
6. Testimonies and revelations attested, after the book was translated and printed, that the work was from God, was genuine and true, and that it contained the fulness of the everlasting gospel.

Now Mr. Budvarson thinks that the word "evidence," used by the aforementioned Mormon writers relative to the

genuineness and accuracy of the Book of Mormon, "becomes questionable and doubtful, perhaps even ambiguous and nonsensical, when the real evidence is examined." (p. 13) When he compares the later editions of the Book of Mormon with the Original (1830) Edition, he finds that "over three thousand changes have been made in the God-given, supernaturally translated, angel-protected book—the 1830 Original Edition!" Through photo reproductions, comparisons and items of special interest, Mr. Budvarson reveals that "major textual changes, as well as thousands of changes and corrections in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, have been made. But all changes regardless of how minor, are disallowed and unauthorized if the 1830 Original Edition of the Book of Mormon is what leaders of Mormonism claim it to be!"

Now we will grant that certain textual changes have been made in the Nephite record and that numerous changes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization appear in later editions, but when Mr. Budvarson says that "all changes regardless of how minor, are disallowed and unauthorized if the 1830 Original Edition of the Book of Mormon is what leaders of Mormonism claim it to be!" he flies in the face of reason, common sense, and history. No responsible authority of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has ever claimed that God or an angel dictated the physical format of the 1830 edition of the Book of Mormon, or directed what the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and capitalization of the text should be. Nor has any responsible authority of the Church, past or present, said in specific terms that the translation in the Book of Mormon was dictated word for word to Joseph Smith by divine means. Let us examine four quotations offered by Mr. Budvarson (pp. 10-11) which he seems to believe point to the contrary. The first is from David Whitmer, one of the "three witnesses" to the Book of Mormon, in his booklet, *An Address to All Believers in Christ*, in which

he purports to give a detailed account of how the Nephite record was translated:

Joseph Smith would put the seer stone into a hat, and put his face in the hat, drawing it closely around his face to exclude the light; and in the darkness the spiritual light would shine. A piece of something resembling parchment would appear, and on that appeared the writing. One character at a time would appear, and under it was the interpretation in English. Brother Joseph would read off the English to Oliver Cowdery, who was his principal scribe, and when it was written down and repeated to Brother Joseph to see if it was correct, then it would disappear. Thus the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not any power of man.

Now, be it known that when David Whitmer issued his statement, he was not even a member of the Church, let alone being a responsible officer thereof. Moreover, the statement was issued in 1887, about fifty-seven years after the appearance of the first edition of the Book of Mormon. David Whitmer's account of the method of translation makes it appear to have been nothing but a mechanical process in which Joseph Smith had little to do except to read off the God-given translation which would automatically appear under each character.¹ Whitmer's explanation would seem to make God responsible for the faulty English grammar which appears in the 1830 edition of the Nephite record! But the Mormon people do not accept as true Whitmer's views of a mechanical translation of the Book of Mormon. In the first place, it should be noted that Joseph Smith gives us precious little first-hand information about the manner in which the Urim and Thummim were used. He even refused to tell his beloved brother Hyrum the details. Indeed, he says that "it was not intended to tell the world all the particulars of the coming forth of the Book of Mormon."² And if Hyrum was not permitted to know "all the particulars," why should we believe that David Whitmer or anyone else was in pos-

session of them? There are some matters that are kept sacred between a prophet and his God, and the details of the use of the Urim and Thummim are among those things known only to the seer in whose custody they are.

There is another important historical event to consider which proves for all practical purposes that the translation of the Nephite records was not dictated to Joseph Smith word for word by divine power. During the course of the work of translation Oliver Cowdery, the prophet's amanuensis, desired to have the gift of translation conferred upon him. The Lord promised him the gift under conditions that one can read at his leisure in Section 8 of the *Doctrine and Covenants*. However, Oliver failed to exercise the gift properly, and in a revelation to him through the prophet the Lord explains his failure:

Behold, you have not understood; you have supposed that I would give it [the gift of translation] unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But, behold, I say unto you, that you must study it out in your mind [what every competent translator does]; then you must ask me if it be right, and if it is right I will cause that your bosom shall burn within you; therefore, you shall feel that it is right. But if it be not right you shall have no such feelings, but you shall have a stupor of thought that shall cause you to forget the thing that is wrong; therefore, you cannot write that which is sacred save it be given you from me. Now, if you had known this you could have translated; nevertheless, it is not expedient that you should translate now. (D. & C. 9:7-10)

Briefly explained, Oliver Cowdery, could leave translated if he had not expected the Lord to give him the translation word for word. He was expected to exert his own faculties and attempt to express a translation in words that would convey the essential meaning of the original. And isn't it common sense to believe that Joseph Smith translated essentially under the same conditions set forth for Oliver Cowdery in the revelation from which we have

quoted? True, the Lord would aid the prophet by means of the Urim and Thummim to get the ideas expressed by the characters on the Gold Plates, but He left it to His servant to express those ideas in the best language at his command. The Lord seldom does for man what man can do for himself. Consequently the Almighty is not to be held responsible for faulty grammar and diction in the First Edition of the Book of Mormon. As long as the prophet Joseph Smith was able to convey to men in understandable English the ideas expressed in the sacred Nephite record, the Lord was satisfied. He was not too concerned with the beauty of the language. His servant was not an English scholar; he was a simple man with little formal education.

So we see thus far that David Whitmer is not a safe guide to follow as far as his mechanical views of translation are concerned. To sum up, we may say that God provided the key for the proper understanding of the ideas expressed on the plates of the sacred Nephite record, but left it to His prophet Joseph Smith to convey those ideas to men in the best English at his command. Now, while we are about it, let us also dispose of the notion that the Lord, the Angel Moroni, or other divine beings are responsible for the punctuation, spelling, capitalization and other details of the dress in which the Book of Mormon appeared in 1830. The principal compositor of the Book of Mormon at the time of its printing, John H. Gilbert, says:

Martin Harris, Hyrum Smith and Oliver Cowdery were very frequent visitors to the office during the printing of the Mormon Bible. The manuscript was supposed to be in the handwriting of Cowdery. Every chapter, if I remember correctly, was one solid paragraph, without a punctuation mark, from beginning to end.³

A good notion of the state of the manuscript described by Mr. Gilbert can be obtained by examining pages 214

and 216 of Dr. Francis W. Kirkham's book, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Third Enlarged Edition. If we can believe Mr. Gilbert, punctuation was placed in the manuscript under the following circumstances:

After working a few days, I said to Smith on his handing me the manuscript in the morning; "Mr. Smith, if you would leave this manuscript with me, I would take it home with me at night and read and punctuate it." His reply was, "We are commanded not to leave it." A few mornings after this, when Smith handed me the manuscript, he said to me:—"If you will give me your word that this manuscript shall be returned to us when you get through with it, I will leave it with you." I assured Smith that it should be returned all right when I got through with it. For two or three nights I took it home with me and read it, and punctuated it with a lead pencil.... Names of persons and places were generally capitalized, but sentences had no end. The character or short &, was used almost invariably where the word and, occurred, except at the end of a chapter. I punctuated it to make it read as I supposed the Author intended, and but very little punctuation was altered in proof-reading.⁴

Mr. Gilbert's account of the punctuating of the manuscript is probably correct in most respects. Someone punctuated it and there is no good reason to doubt his truthfulness in writing as he did. So we conclude that neither the Lord nor one of his heavenly agents was responsible for the literary dress or format in which the Book of Mormon appeared. The Lord was rightly concerned about the correctness of the ideas expressed in Joseph Smith's translation but left it to the prophet's good sense to see to it that the Book of Mormon appeared to the public in as decent a form as he could bring about.

But Mr. Budvarson may say, What about the claims set forth for the Book of Mormon by the other Mormon writers I have cited? If David Whitmer's statement can't be used as authority, what about the other Mormon author-

ities, namely, President W. Aird MacDonald, Joseph Smith himself, and Dr. James E. Talmage? Let's deal with President MacDonald and Dr. Talmage first. These two men were well acquainted with most of the facts we have already set forth about the Book of Mormon. At least the writer can speak in that way for Dr. Talmage, having been well acquainted with him and knowing firsthand his views about the Nephite record and the way in which it was translated. The writings of these men have to be viewed in the light of the facts already presented. They were writing to a general audience and were not attempting to impress hypercritics like Mr. Budvarson. President MacDonald is still in the land of the living; he can speak for himself. But here is the quotation that Budvarson extracts (p. 11) from President MacDonald's *Address on the Book of Mormon*:

It is the only book in the world, out of all the millions of books in the libraries of the world, which was brought to the earth by an angel from the throne of God. That makes it different from all other books. The angel made fifteen trips to this planet from the throne of God to see that this book was properly translated and printed, so that it might be given to the world.

Now, if we judge correctly, Mr. Budvarson is taking that part of President MacDonald's words very literally where he says, "The angel made fifteen trips . . . to see that this book [The Book of Mormon] was properly translated and printed," assuming that President MacDonald meant that the angel Moroni personally supervised the translating and printing of the Nephite record, doing such a job that the First Edition (1830) could be called God's production in every respect. Hence there could be no need to change any succeeding editions. If this isn't Mr. Budvarson's interpretation of President MacDonald's words, how are we to explain his (Budvarson's) statement (pp.

13, 16) that "all changes regardless of how minor, are disallowed and unauthorized if the 1830 Original Edition of the Book of Mormon is what leaders of Mormonism claim it to be!"? We are sure that President MacDonald did not mean that Moroni personally supervised the translating and printing of the Book of Mormon to insure its perfect presentation, any more than he meant literally that the Nephite sacred record "was brought to the earth by an angel from the throne of God." The Nephite record was already on earth, and Mr. Budvarson presents President MacDonald's words in the way he does because of the fact that he has failed as a scholar to catch the spirit of the Mormon people and particularly their writings on the Book of Mormon. Had he read (as he should have done before writing his brochure) extensively in such Mormon works as Roberts' *New Witnesses for God* (3 vol.), Kirkham' *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Nibley's *Lehi in the Desert*, and many others, he would have been able to interpret more accurately the words of the Mormon authors he quotes. If the gentleman has read the works cited, we are frankly at a loss to explain the direction his brochure has taken. Mr. Budvarson misses the real point of view of Dr. Talmage's words as taken (p. 11) from his *The Vitality of Mormonism*, p. 127:

It is noticeable that we make no reservation respecting the Book of Mormon on the ground of incorrect translation. To do so would be to ignore attested facts as to the bringing forth of that book. Joseph Smith the prophet, seer, and revelator, through whom the ancient record has been translated into modern tongue, expressly avers that the translation was effected through the gift and power of God, and is in no sense the product of linguistic scholarship.

Doubtless Mr. Budvarson misunderstands Dr. Talmage's first sentence, particularly "we make no reservation respect-

ing the Book of Mormon on the ground of incorrect translation," assuming that he meant perfection, English and all. On that basis Mr. Budvarson can then proceed to show how "ambiguous and nonsensical" Mormon claims are by the changes that have been made in editions of the Book of Mormon since 1830. But Dr. Talmage had no such views in mind, as Mr. Budvarson should have known had he studied Mormon works as he should have done before undertaking his critique. The writer happens to know that Dr. Talmage was a stickler for good English and a close student of the text of the Book of Mormon. He knew as well as anyone the imperfections of the literary dress of the First Edition of the Nephite record and took a prominent part in correcting many of them in a later edition of the work (1920). Notice in the last sentence of Budvarson's quotation that Dr. Talmage said that the Book of Mormon "is in no sense the product of linguistic scholarship," meaning that it was in no wise a critically correct production as might have been expected from a scholar, had the Lord chosen one to bring forth the work. The Book of Mormon itself says, quoting from its text of Isaiah 29:

Then shall the Lord God say unto him [Joseph Smith]: The learned shall not read them [the words of the Nephite record], for they have rejected them, and I am able to do mine own work; wherefore thou shalt read the words which I shall give unto thee. (2 Nephi 27:20)

So the Lord chose Joseph Smith, a more humble and amenable servant, to do His work.

Now let us see how Mr. Budvarson handles his quotation from Joseph Smith. Here again he uses (or misuses) the prophet's words, failing to understand their true meaning. We quote the words of the prophet and the gentleman's introduction to them:

As a further testimony for the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith, on November 28, 1841, made this statement concerning its perfectness [notice the word`]:

. . . 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. (Recorded in *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, page 194).

Joseph Smith is not here speaking of the literary "perfectness" of the Book of Mormon, its format, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar and the like; he is talking about its ideas, its religious precepts that will enable a man to "get nearer to God." The prophet was quite aware of the literary weaknesses of the Book of Mormon, not to mention his own lack of polish in so-called "polite" society:

I am like a huge, rough stone rolling down from a high mountain; and the only polishing I get is when some corner gets rubbed off by coming in contact with something else, striking with accelerated force against religious bigotry, priestcraft, lawyer-craft, doctor-craft, lying editors, . . . all hell knocking off a corner here and a corner there.⁵

Mr. Budvarson deserves to be roundly criticized for not understanding better the Mormon authorities he quotes. His case fails on that account. Mormon leaders have never understood the First Edition of the Book of Mormon to be the perfect production he attempts to make them represent. Our leaders are generally well justified in making the changes that have appeared in later editions of the Nephite sacred book.

¹ Martin Harris, another of the "three witnesses," makes a statement somewhat similar to that of David Whitmer's, but it cannot be supposed that even he was in possession of all the facts of what went on when Joseph Smith was translating. See *Mill. Star* XXIV, 86, 87.

² *Far West Record*, p. 16. The full quotation is readily available in Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Enlarged Third Edition, p. 194.

³ Wilford C. Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*, I. No page number is given, but it would be about p. 28. See also Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness for Christ in America*, Enlarged Third Edition, p. 412.

⁴ Wilford C. Wood, *op cit*.

⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, p. 304.