

“ONE OF THE GREATEST
LITERARY CURIOSITIES
OF THE DAY”

The following note is reprinted from *Times and Seasons*, Feb. 1, 1841, which in turn had reprinted it from a contemporary magazine called *New Yorker*. “Josephine” was not a Mormon.

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D. C. SMITH, EDITOR, From
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2:305–6.

THE BOOK OF MORMON

One of the greatest literary curiosities of the day, is the much abused “Book of Mormon.” That a work of the kind should be planned, executed and given to the scrutiny of the world by an illiterate young man of twenty—that it should gain numerous and devoted partizans, here and in Europe, and that it should agitate a whole State to such a degree that law, justice and humanity were set aside to make a war of extermination on the new sect, seems scarcely credible in the nineteenth century, and under this liberal government; yet such is the fact.

The believers in the Book of Mormon now number well nigh 50,000 souls in America, to say nothing of numerous congregations in Great Britain. They style themselves Latter Day Saints, as it is a prominent point in their faith that the world is soon to experience a great and final change.—They believe, and insist upon believing, *literally*, the Old and New Testament; but they also hold that there are various other inspired writings, which in due season, will be brought to light. Some of these (the Book of Mormon for example) are even now appearing, after having been lost for ages. They think that in the present generation will be witnessed the final gathering together of all the true followers of Christ into one fold of peace and purity—in other words, that the Millennium is near. Setting aside the near approach of the Millennium and the Book of Mormon, they resemble in faith and discipline the Methodists, and their meetings are marked by the fervid simplicity that characterizes that body of Christians. It is in believing the Book of Mormon *inspired* that the chief difference consists; but it must be admitted that this is an important distinction.

This is their own declaration of faith in that point: A young man named Joseph Smith, in the western part of New York, guided, as he says, by Divine Inspiration,

found, in 1830, a kind of stone chest or vault containing a number of thin plates of gold held together by a ring, on which they were all strung, and engraved with unknown characters. The characters the Mormons believe to be the ancient Egyptian, and that Smith was enabled by inspiration to translate them—in part only, however, for the plates are not entirely given in English. This translation is the Book of Mormon, and so far it is a faint and distant parallel of the Koran. In much the same way Mahomet presented his code of religion to his followers, and on that authority the sceptre-sword of Islamism now sways the richest and widest realms that ever bowed to one faith. But the Mormons have a very different career before them: their faith is opposed to all violence, and, from the nature of their peculiar doctrines, they must soon die of themselves if they are wrong.—If the appointed signs that are to announce the approach of the Millennium do not take place immediately, the Latter Day Saints must, by their own showing, be mistaken, and their faith fall quietly to the ground. So, to persecute them merely for opinion's sake is as useless as it would be unjust and impolitic.

The Book of Mormon purports to be a history of a portion of the children of Israel, who found their way to this continent after the first destruction of Jerusalem. It is continued from generation to generation by a succession of prophets, and gives in different books an account of the wars and alliances among the various branches of the lost nation. The Golden Book is an abridgment by Mormon, the last of the prophets, of all the works of his predecessors.

The style is a close imitation of the scriptural, and is remarkably free from any allusions that might betray a knowledge of the present political or social state of the world. The writer lives in the whole strength of his imagination in the age he portrays. It is difficult to imagine a more difficult literary task than to write what may be termed a continuation of the Scriptures, that should not only avoid all collision with the authentic and sacred word, but even fill up many chasms that now seem to exist, and thus receive and lend confirmation in almost every book.

To establish a plausibly-sustained theory that the aborigines of our continent are descendants of Israel without committing himself by any assertion or description that could be contradicted, shows a degree of talent and research that in an uneducated youth of twenty is almost a miracle in itself.

A copy of the characters on some of the golden leaves was transmitted to a learned gentleman of this city, who of course was unable to decipher them, but thought they bore a resemblance to the ancient Egyptian characters.

If on comparison it appears that these characters are similar to those recently discovered on those ruins in Central America which have attracted so much attention lately, and which are decidedly of Egyptian architecture, it will make a strong point for Smith. It will tend to prove that the plates are genuine, even if it does not establish the truth of his inspiration, or the fidelity of his translation.

In any case our constitution throws its protecting aegies over every religious doctrine. If the Mormons have violated the law, let the law deal with the criminals; but let not a mere opinion, however absurd and delusive it may be, call forth a spirit of persecution. Persecution, harsh daughter of Cruelty and Ignorance, can never find a home in a heart truly republican. Opinion is a household god, and in this land her shrine is inviolate.

JOSEPHINE.