

The Church makes many specific claims about matters of history (both its own, and that of other peoples), the migration of people from one continent to another, the translation of ancient documents, etc. These are perfectly legitimate subjects to be examined using the tools and logic of Science.

I do recognize that some claims the Church makes (for example, concerning the existence and nature of God), like similar claims made by a variety of other religious institutions, are not readily addressed with the Scientific Method. But for better or worse, many of the Church's claims go beyond these more difficult subjects, in making empirically testable statements about people and places.

I don't wish to duplicate the wealth of information and research that is readily available with some brief searching of the Internet. For that kind of comprehensive information, one can go to places like [MormonThink](#), [20 Truths about Mormonism](#), or read through the [CES Letter](#). My goal here is to summarize what I see as the most central and foundational matters, and refer the reader to those and other sites for a more complete picture.

1. The Book of Mormon and the Ancestry of the Native Americans

Joseph Smith claimed to have been directed by an Angel to dig up a set of Golden Plates, which were supposed to contain a written record of the original inhabitants of the Americas. He eventually published a book, the Book of Mormon, which he claimed was the translation of this ancient record, from the 'Reformed Egyptian' in which it was originally written. The importance and centrality of the Book of Mormon is indicated in this quote from Joseph Smith:

"I told the brethren that the Book of Mormon was the most correct of any book on earth, and the keystone of our religion,"

History of the Church, Volume 4, P. 461

Ezra Taft Benson, Church President from 1985 to 1994, said:

"The Book of Mormon is the keystone of our religion... Just as the arch crumbles if the keystone is removed, so does all the Church stand or fall with the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon... if it can be discredited, the Prophet Joseph Smith goes with it. So does our claim to priesthood keys, and revelation, and the restored Church."

[Ensign, November 1986, 'The Book of Mormon—Keystone of Our Religion](#)

The following is quoted from the Introduction to the Book of Mormon, from the official LDS Website:

"The record gives an account of two great civilizations. One came from Jerusalem in 600 B.C. and afterward separated into two nations, known as the Nephites and the Lamanites. The other came much earlier when the Lord confounded the tongues at the Tower of Babel. This group is known as the Jaredites. After thousands of years, all were destroyed except the Lamanites, and they are among the ancestors of the American Indians."

[Book of Mormon Introduction](#)

One point to be noted here is that the Church changed the wording of this Introduction around 2006: whereas before it stated that the Lamanites were the **principal** ancestors of the American Indians, it now states that they are **among** the ancestors. No explanation or acknowledgment of this change was published by the Church, to the best of my knowledge, for the next 8 years. It was finally acknowledged around 2014, in a [footnote](#) in a recent set of Church Essays on various topics.

In recent years, a wealth of DNA evidence has been gathered, which demonstrates that the Americas were peopled by migration from Asia, around 15,000 to 25,000 years ago, over the Bering Strait land

bridge that existed at that time. There is absolutely no evidence of the genetic signature of Israelite or Middle Eastern people from 600 B.C., which is when the Book of Mormon claims these people came over.

People defending the Church's claims often refer to 'Haplogroup X', which is a European genetic marker found in certain Native American populations. But the problem here is that the evidence shows that these genes entered the Native American populations anywhere between 12,000 and 36,000 years ago, long before the purported arrival of the Nephites and Lamanites. For additional details on the DNA evidence, please go to [Simon Southerton's blog](#).

It seems reasonable to conclude that the reason the Church altered the wording of its Introduction to the Book of Mormon was an attempt to change its claims and positions to be more consistent with the evidence that had become too compelling to simply ignore.

The Book of Mormon speaks of a wide variety of animals, plants, tools, materials, and other cultural practices, often in great detail. Extensive Archaeological evidence is now available, which describes a wide variety of animals, plants, tools, materials and other cultural practices, which are completely different from what is reported in the Book of Mormon. Most of the animals, plants and so forth that the Book of Mormon describes are simply not present in the Archaeological record, and the animals, plants and so forth that actually were present and abundant during the years the Book of Mormon is purported to cover, are simply not mentioned in the text of the Book.

There is a wealth of information on the Internet concerning this topic, but I would like to reference one in particular. It is a Podcast Interview with Dr. Michael Coe:

"Dr. Michael Coe is the Charles J. MacCurdy professor emeritus of Anthropology at Yale University and curator emeritus of the Division of Anthropology at the school's Peabody Museum of Natural History. He is an expert on the Maya, who inhabited the same part of Mexico and Central American where Mormon scholars say the events of the Book of Mormon took place."

[Michael Coe Interview](#)

I'd like to include a couple of quotes from a PBS Interview of Dr. Coe, from May 16, 2006, that summarize his perspective on the Book of Mormon:

"The Book of Mormon is very explicit about what the Nephites brought with them to this land: domestic animals, domestic crops, all of Old World origin; metallurgy, the compass, things like that. Just take domestic animals, for example. I mentioned horses and cattle. Nobody has ever found the bones of horses and cattle in these archaeological sites. Horses were already in the New World, all right, but were wiped out about 7000 B.C. by people coming in from Asia. They never found horse bones in these early sites between the prime period, which is 500 B.C. to A.D. 200; never found cattle bones there; never found wheat or rye and these other things that they grow in the Middle East. Plenty of evidence for all kinds of other things that are Native American, but nothing there. And that's the problem: They simply haven't shown up..."

"I don't really know how my friends that are Mormon archaeologists cope with this non-evidence, the fact that the evidence really hasn't shown up — how they make the jump from the data to faith or from faith back to the data, because the data and the faith are two different worlds. There's simply no way to bring them together."

[PBS Interview, 2006](#)

2. The Book of Abraham as a Translation of Ancient Papyri

A number of Mummies, along with several Papyri, were found in Egypt by Antonio Lebolo, between 1818 and 1822. Lebolo later arranged to have them sold, and these were shipped in 1833 to Michael Chandler, in New York, for this purpose. He traveled around the Eastern U.S., displaying and selling some of these objects. In July of 1835 Chandler brought the remaining 4 Mummies and associated Papyri to Joseph Smith, in Kirtland, Ohio. Joseph's claims as a Translator, relative to the Book of Mormon, were well known, and Mr. Chandler was curious to see what Joseph would have to say about them.

These objects were purchased by the Church, and Joseph said this about them when he first started his examination:

"[W]ith W.W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery as scribes, I commenced the translation of some of the characters or hieroglyphics, and much to our joy found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc. — a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them."

[History of the Church, Volume 2, P. 236](#)

Joseph eventually published his translation of these Papyri, giving us what we now know as The Book of Abraham. The Introduction to this volume of scripture, from the official LDS Website is quoted here:

"A Translation of some ancient Records that have fallen into our hands from the catacombs of Egypt. The writings of Abraham while he was in Egypt, called the Book of Abraham, written by his own hand, upon papyrus."

[Book of Abraham Introduction](#)

See also [History of the Church Volume 4, P. 524](#)

As with the Book of Mormon, the Church has indicated the importance of the Book of Abraham as a demonstration of the Prophetic calling of Joseph Smith. B.H. Roberts, a much respected Scholar and early Church Leader (serving in the Presidency of the First Council of the Seventy, and as Assistant Church Historian from 1902 until 1933), said this with reference to the Book of Abraham:

"...if Joseph Smith's translation of the Egyptian parchment could be proven discredited, and proven false, then doubt would be thrown also upon the genuineness of his translation of the Book of Mormon, and thus all his pretensions as a translator would be exposed and come to naught."

[Comprehensive History of the Church 2:138](#)

The original Papyri were thought to have been burnt and lost in the great Chicago Fire, but 10 fragments, including Facsimile 1, were discovered in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, in 1966, and were acquired by the Church in 1967.

First, it turned out that the Papyri themselves dated to around 200 years before Christ, at least 1500 years after Abraham is purported to have lived. This is acknowledged by LDS scholars, as well those outside the Church. This completely contradicts what Joseph said about the Papyri, creating significant difficulties for the LDS scholars trying to reconcile this clear-cut fact and the claims of the Church.

High resolution reproductions of the remaining Papyri have been exhaustively studied by several Egyptologists, and the universal consensus is that Josephs' 'translation' bears no relationship what-

soever to the contents of the Papyri. In fact, the Papyri are a common example of the “Book of Breathing,” a funerary document, for a deceased Egyptian Priest named Hor, with absolutely no connection to Abraham.

Robert Rittner, perhaps the most knowledgeable scholar on this matter, Professor of Egyptology at the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, has completely translated all available Papyri connected with the Book of Abraham. This book is available here:

[The Joseph Smith Egyptian Papyri: A Complete Edition](#)

He has referred to the Book of Abraham as:

“a perhaps well-meaning, but erroneous invention by Joseph Smith... Despite its inauthenticity as a genuine historical narrative, the Book of Abraham remains a valuable witness to early American religious history and to the recourse to ancient texts as sources of modern religious faith and speculation. The book still has its uses and significance, but not for the ancient world of Egypt and Abraham.”

[A Response to “Translation and Historicity of the Book of Abraham”](#)

For a more comprehensive information on the Book of Abraham, Kevin Mathie’s website, [Examining the Book of Abraham](#), is quite useful, as is Charles Larson’s book, [By His Own Hand Upon Papyrus](#).

3. The Church’s Version of its own History vs Historical Facts

This covers a large number of topics, which are discussed in great detail on various websites. I will again restrict myself to a couple of foundational issues.

a. The First Vision

Perhaps the most important one concerns what is referred to as ‘The First Vision’, during which Joseph reportedly had some type of divine encounter. The Church publishes and officially endorses the version apparently written in 1838, although not published until 1842. It states that Joseph was 14 at the time, and that it occurred in the midst of a generalized religious revival in his home area at that time. He was supposed to have endured persecution from his public reporting of this encounter. The actual records of that period do not describe any such revival that year, nor is there any evidence that anyone was even aware of this experience, let alone persecute him for it.

The Church’s official version states that Joseph saw 2 personages in this vision, while multiple earlier accounts either omit any mention at all of this experience (mentioning only the Angel Moroni and Book of Mormon visions), or his seeing either a ‘spirit’, an Angel or Angels, or the Savior.

In general, historical sources recorded closer in time to the actual event tend to be the most accurate, with later accounts more likely to be less reliable. Church Apologists try to smooth over what are major discrepancies and overt conflicts in the various versions, but these efforts seem strained and ultimately unsuccessful, in my opinion.

For very comprehensive information, from those both inside and outside the Church, see the [First Vision](#) section on MormonThink’s website. But the bottom line here is that the Church’s claims about The First Vision are contradicted by the historical record.

b. The Mechanics of Dictating the Book of Mormon

The Church has consistently described this process, for the last 180+ years, in both word and picture, showing Joseph looking at the characters on the plates, typically separated by a curtain from the scribe, who would write down what Joseph said.

Going back to the actual historical records describing how this was done, a very different picture emerges. Joseph would place his 'seer stone' (a physical stone, brown in color, dug up from a well in 1822 during one of his 'treasure hunting' ventures) at the bottom of his hat, put his head into it, drawing the brim around his head to exclude light, and dictated from what he saw there.

Besides the obvious contradiction with the official account, one enormous problem here is that Joseph did not even use the 'plates' in the process of his dictating the text of the Book of Mormon. This is a huge red flag. If he didn't even need the plates to produce the Book of Mormon, then what was the point of the purported ancient Nephites creating them in the first place? Why all the drama about Joseph's obtaining them, protecting them from being stolen, etc., if they weren't even needed? The whole story simply falls apart, and makes no sense whatsoever.

It is worth pointing out that, just as the Church changed the wording in the Introduction to the Book of Mormon, it is now altering its presentation on how the Book of Mormon was produced. In one of the recent Church essays, it is now reporting the 'head in hat' process, which had typically been dismissed by innocent Church members as anti-Mormon lies:

"According to these accounts, Joseph placed either the interpreters or the seer stone in a hat, pressed his face into the hat to block out extraneous light, and read aloud the English words that appeared on the instrument."

Church Essay titled 'Book of Mormon Translation'

Other areas could be covered here (see the Kinderhook Plates, Greek Psalter, the purported visit of Peter, James and John to restore the Melchizedek Priesthood, etc.), and in each and every case, the story the Church portrays as a true account of history is contradicted by the evidence contained in the actual historical records.

Just as the Church altered the wording in the Book of Mormon Introduction, it is now starting to change the history it presents on its website. I suspect the Church will be gradually changing quite a lot of what it is saying and publishing on a wide variety of topics, as the easy availability of information through the Internet basically leaves them with no alternative.

Summary for the Factual Claims Section:

The evidence is overwhelmingly against the Book of Mormon being a history of ancient peoples. And considering that the Church speaks of this as being the *keystone* of the religion, this is a major blow against its truth claims.

The evidence is overwhelmingly against the Book of Abraham being a translation of an ancient document. This speaks to B.H. Roberts quote above, that if Joseph's translations were shown to be false, it would undermine any pretensions that he had as a translator of any ancient or sacred documents.

The Church's portrayal of key, foundational events in its history, such as The First Vision, or the 'translation' of the Book of Mormon, are also completely contradicted by the historical facts.

Lastly, I would like to include reference to a process called the "Backfire Effect." The following is quoted from RationalWiki on this subject:

*"The **backfire effect** occurs when, in the face of contradictory evidence, established beliefs do not change but actually get stronger."*

RationalWiki

People on all sides of any given issue need to be aware of this, and conscientiously try to eliminate this, as well as other cognitive biases, from their thinking, if they really want to get to the bottom of

whatever topic they're studying. If you find yourself simply dismissing any evidence that contradicts your beliefs, without seriously considering whether or not it could be legitimate, on whatever subject, it would be advisable to stop, and ask yourself if you're being affected by the backfire effect, or other cognitive bias.

Hans Mattson's story is relevant here. He was a fully believing and devoted member of the Church in Sweden, serving as an Area Authority, in the 3rd Quorum of the Seventy, from 2000 to 2005. He eventually became aware of some of the factual problems with the Church's claims, and was shocked by what he discovered. He addresses this in a poignant [interview](#) with Laurie Goldstein of the New York Times, on July 20, 2013. Despite his upbringing and beliefs, he was able to somehow realize that there were very real problems with the Church's claims.