

Reliable Church History:

The first question a student of church history should ask, is whether the history they are reading is reliable. The statement has been made over the years that after a struggle or clash of civilizations, “history is written by the victors”, and is therefore not necessarily a true reflection of the events from that vantage point of the losers. Religious histories are even more problematic in many ways, because they can tend to be used as tools for proselyting to a certain viewpoint.

Even if histories are well-intentioned to provide an accurate portrayal of events, as they generally seem to be, the omission of facts deemed “unimportant” or “embarrassing” to one party can skew the overall picture. The question arises then: How do we know if we’re getting a true picture? The answer is that we may not “know” in most cases if the history we are absorbing is true, but a good check is whether or not it is in agreement with God’s Word which, of course, is the truth.

“Jacob 3:19 Behold, my brethren, he that prophesieth, let him prophesy to the understanding of men; for the Spirit speaketh the truth, and lieth not.

20 Wherefore, it speaketh of things as they really are, and of things as they really will be; wherefore, these things are manifested unto us plainly, for the salvation of our souls.

21 But behold, we are not witnesses alone in these things; for God also spake them unto prophets of old.”

Since God’s foreknowledge of all things provides that all of history is known before it occurs, then we may rely on the historical passages of scripture as an accurate portrayal of past events and the prophetic portions as history that had not yet occurred, which was there revealed to the prophets. One particularly interesting prophetic passage which has great bearing on the restoration is that of the prophecy of a “sealed book” in Isaiah 29: (Read verses 1-16)

Verses 11-14 are the crux of the prophecy as regarding church history:

“11 And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed:

12 and the book is delivered to him that is not learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I am not learned.

13 Wherefore the Lord said, Forasmuch as this people draw near me with their mouth, and with their lips do honour me, but have removed their heart far from me, and their fear toward me is taught by the precept of men:

14 therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, even a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent men shall be hid.”

The following is an account of the fulfillment of this prophecy, as recorded in the 1800s: (History of Joseph Smith, volume 1).

63 Sometime in this month of February (1828), the aforementioned Mr. Martin Harris came to our place, got the characters which I had drawn off the plates, and started with them to the city of New York. For what took place relative to him and the characters, I refer to his own account of the circumstances, as he related them to me after his return, which was as follows:

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64 "I went to the city of New York, and presented the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof, to Professor Charles Anthon, a gentleman celebrated for his literary attainments. Professor Anthon stated that the translation was correct, more so than any he had before seen translated from the Egyptian. I then showed him those which were not yet translated, and he said that they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic; and he said they were true characters. He gave me a certificate, certifying to the people of Palmyra that they were true characters, and that the translation of such of them as had been translated was also correct. I took the certificate and put it into my pocket, and was just leaving the house, when Mr. Anthon called me back, and asked me how the young man found out that there were gold plates in the place where he found them. I answered that an angel of God had revealed it unto him.

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65 "He then said to me, 'Let me see that certificate.' I accordingly took it out of my pocket and gave it to him, when he took it and tore it to pieces, saying that there was no such thing now as ministering of angels, and that if I would bring the plates to him he would translate them. I informed him that part of the plates were sealed, and that I was forbidden to bring them. He replied, 'I cannot read a sealed book.' I left him and went to Dr. Mitchell, who sanctioned what Professor Anthon had said respecting both the characters and the translation."

We should notice from this account these comments particularly: “he said they were Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic... certifying ... that they were true characters...”

The importance of this statement has often been overshadowed by the pieces I have omitted in this quote, suggesting that the professor certified that the translation of

those characters was correct. Arguments have been forwarded, for instance, that since the Rosetta stone had only recently been discovered by which Egyptian was finally deciphered, that neither Professor Anton nor anyone else could have properly certified the translation of those characters. Interestingly, Joseph Smith's earliest diary account of these events omit anything about furnishing a copy of the English translation of those characters. Of course, the prophecy above does not say that the "learned" would be shown a copy of the translation of these characters, rather, it says that "the words [characters] of a book" which is "sealed" would be shown to the "learned".

According to the testimony of Joseph, there were bands which effectively sealed the larger portion of the plates that he received; what we have in the Book of Mormon is the lesser part which was not banded or "sealed". That sealed portion of the plates included the vision of the Brother of Jared: ***"Ether 1:90 And when the Lord had said these words, he shewed unto the Brother of Jared all the inhabitants of the earth which had been, and also all that would be; and the Lord withheld them not from his sight, even unto the ends of the earth; 91 For the Lord had said unto him in times before, that if he would believe in him, that he could shew unto him all things--it should be shewn unto him; therefore the Lord could not withhold anything from him; for he knew that the Lord could shew him all things. 92 And the Lord said unto him, Write these things and seal them up, and I will shew them in mine own due time unto the children of men. 93 And it came to pass that the Lord commanded him that he should seal up the two stones which he had received, and shew them not, until the Lord should shew them unto the children of men."***

The portion of text highlighted in verse 90, is to help explain why the prophet Isaiah would have called this "the vision of all" (verse 11).

As an additional assignment – the student should read the letter written by Professor Anton which was included in the famed 1834 anti-Mormon book entitled "Mormonism Unveiled" by E.D. Howe. Anton's letter, which actually seems to confirm the essentials of the prophecy and confirms that Professor Anton was convinced that the characters were genuine, as opposed to imagined: were published there, and can be read online at:

["http://utlm.org/onlineresources/anthonletter.htm"](http://utlm.org/onlineresources/anthonletter.htm)

Note especially the statement that: “This paper was in fact a singular scrawl. It consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets.” This statement seems to confirm statement from church history, that the characters appeared to be “genuine” or “from a book containing various alphabets”, and that the professor asserted this conclusion to Martin Harris. If he did indeed try to convince Martin Harris that he was mixed up in some kind of fraud, the actions of Brother Harris do not indicate so; for after his return from this visit, Martin engaged even more fervently in supporting the work of translating of the Book of Mormon financially and otherwise while testifying to the brethren that the professor had confirmed that what he was shown was authentic but would not allow for written certification to leave his office, as he wished to have the honor of doing the translation himself, if the book were brought to him.

Conclusions to take away from this lesson:

- 1) Even the “anti-Mormons”” accounting of these events seem to confirm the prophecy.
- 2) We may never know what really occurred in the interview between Martin Harris and Charles Anton. But statements from both sides of that exchange seem to confirm that Anton was convinced as to the authentic nature of the characters themselves.
- 3) Whatever occurred in that exchange, the truth of the Book of Mormon is not determined by the opinions of “experts”, but by the faithfulness of God, as those who live by these precious words continue to receive the fruit promised therein.