

MI Podcast #126: Becoming a People of the Books (with Janiece Johnson)

Joseph Stuart: Welcome to the Maxwell Institute podcast. I'm Joseph Stuart. How did early Latter-day Saints read the Book of Mormon? And what did that book, which the Prophet Joseph Smith called "the most correct of any book on earth and the keystone of our religion," help Latter-day Saints make sense of their lives? In this episode of the Maxwell Institute podcast, Dr. Janiece Johnson, a Willes Center research fellow at the Institute shares more from her research into early Latter-day Saint readings of the Book of Mormon. This is the first episode in which I am hosting the podcast and I am anxious to hear your feedback. Please reach out at mipodcast@byu.edu with any questions or charitable feedback that you may have.

Stuart: Dr. Janiece Johnson, welcome to the Maxwell Institute podcast.

Janiece Johnson: Thank you. It's good to be here.

Stuart: Now, in your article, "Becoming a People of the Books: Toward an Understanding of Early Mormon Converts and the New Word of the Lord" in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, I was curious about your choice of phrase, "becoming a people of the book." What does that mean to you?

Johnson: So, the phrase actually comes from the Quran. It is a phrase used to describe religious people who believe in a book. The early Americans were mostly a people of the Bible. They were immersed in the biblical text. They often learned to read using the Bible. They were definitely a people of the book.

Stuart: Is this something that you see as a historian of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, that they are continually not only referencing the King James Bible but also the Book of Mormon?

Johnson: That's what I'm most interested in—understanding our early Latter-day Saints' relationship with the Book of Mormon. The Bible certainly did not lose importance as people developed a relationship with this new book of scripture, but I'm most interested in how they decided to expand beyond an idea of *Sola Scriptura* [scripture alone] that the Bible was the authority. To expand their notion of scripture to this new book of scripture—nearly 600 pages of new scripture. That's what I'm most focused on.

Stuart: Now, when you say, "*Sola Scriptura*" that's a phrase that goes back to Martin Luther. Could you tell us more about that?

Johnson: Yeah, Protestant Theologians post-Martin Luther developed the idea, and that becomes one of the foundational elements of Protestantism, but that the Bible is the highest authority. This is the authority that we go to for everything. In contrast to a Catholic idea of a historical line of authority and orders and different organizations to carry authority. Very closely related to *Sola Scriptura* is the idea of the priesthood of all believers. So, if you believe you receive the priesthood and the biblical text is that authority that you need. The Bible is the primary authority and the highest authority.

Stuart: Latter-day Saints are not *Sola Scriptura*. Latter-day Saints, like you and me, believe in a church priesthood body, right? And in Latter-day Saint parlance there are keys. Now, in "becoming a people of the books" as you say in your article, early Latter-day Saints approached the Book of Mormon in several different ways. Historians, whose work you build upon, spoke about the idea of the Book of Mormon as "sign." What did that mean?

Johnson: Beginning with about 1995, Jan Shipps makes an argument in the introduction for William McLellin's missionary journals. She says, "McLellin always wants a Book of Mormon in his hand, but he never seems to be preaching from it." And she says, "It seems to me that the Book of Mormon operates for William McLellin as a signal." Terryl Givens and Grant Underwood have built on this idea that Heavens were opened, that Joseph Smith was a prophet, that charismatic gifts of the Spirit had been restored, but perhaps isn't as focused on the content of the book. And while that is right, it certainly functions as a sign for many early Latter-day Saints. I have seen lots of additional ways that it functions. If we just focus on the book as "sign," it's insufficient, actually, to describe the full experience of Latter-day Saints, the full relationship of early Latter-day Saints with the Book of Mormon.

Stuart: Yeah, this is something that I think about how, say, Latter-day Saint missionaries teach about gaining a testimony of the Book of Mormon is to pray about it and, as you suggest, to see it as a sign of Joseph Smith's authority, that if the Book of Mormon is true, then Joseph Smith is a prophet, which means that President Russell M. Nelson is a prophet today. But if I understand what you were saying correctly, if we only focus on that top-down narrative and how people are taught to gain testimonies of the Book of Mormon, whether in the 19th century or now, we can miss some of those

rich experiences of individual Latter-day Saints engaging with the Book of Mormon and scripture.

Johnson: Yeah, definitely. And you know that language that we hear as Latter-day Saints so often, "I know that the Book of Mormon is true." That language has a very early beginning. We have people using that language in the 1830s when they are first introduced to the Book of Mormon: this pattern of following that promise from Moroni at the end in the last chapter of the Book of Mormon. Samuel Smith, the earliest, first missionary who was called, we have this fantastic account from the brother of Brigham Young, Phineas Young, as he met Samuel Smith, the first missionary for the church. And Samuel says, "Will you take this book?" and he uses Moroni's language, "...and will you ask God sincerely if this is true?" Now Phineas [Young] says, "Well, I said I would, but I intended to do this so I could figure out if there were any errors in it, or that I could understand the errors in it." He's coming at it from a negative perspective, but he did take that step to ask. We see lots of early Latter-day Saints gaining a testimony of the book, but recently President Nelson has said, "It's not just enough to know that the Book of Mormon is true. We need to gain a relationship with the text. We need to learn from the book itself."

Stuart: I was really struck by the words of an early convert named Sarah DeArmon Pea Rich, and she wrote that it, meaning the Book of Mormon, "left an impression upon my mind, not be forgotten. For, in fact, the book appeared to be open before my eyes for weeks." And then as you write, "at the outset, Sarah had no expectation of joining a new church, but her connection to the book blossomed. She became a Latter-day Saint as a result of the relationship." What does it mean to you to have a relationship with a text like the Book of Mormon rather than to have a knowledge of the Book of Mormon?

Johnson: They are both connected, right? My source material for this larger project is looking at personal writings of early Latter-day Saints, but also at the material record of the books themselves. And what writing people have left in books, what marginalia—scribbling in the margins—and what that tells us about how people develop their relationship with it. Some of the most common marginalia that I see in the 19th century is just keeping track of a complicated narrative. There is the step of deciding, "Okay, this is scripture" that happens for different people in different ways and in different timelines. It doesn't work the same way for anyone. But then there is this really trying to learn of the text and learn more of the word of God. I think that on the first level of this, it's the narrative that stands out to people.

There are little stories in the Book of Mormon that you can see that they feel a kinship to. One of my favorite random examples is Brigham Young, who, his most recent biographer said, it took him about a decade to quote as easily from the Book of Mormon as he did from a Bible. That's another element here: it takes time for people to develop this relationship. But in 1841, so this is about a decade after Brigham has joined the church, he writes to his wife, Mary Ann Angell, he is serving as a missionary. He says, "I feel like the charity of Aminadab."

Our listeners may or may not get the reference, but I think this is one of the more obscure references in the Book of Mormon because Aminadab is only mentioned once in Helaman 5. He is an apostate Nephite, who was living with the Lamanites, who then is reconverted and begins to share the gospel with the Lamanites. So, when Nephi and Lehi are in jail and all these exciting things happen in the jail, Aminadab actually tells the Lamanites around how to understand what's going on. He begins to teach them and convert them.

I think that this is fantastic for multiple reasons. One, just because he doesn't even explain it. It's the shorthand, like quoting a movie, that he assumes that Mary Ann is going to get, and I wouldn't be surprised if she did get it because I think she knew the Book of Mormon better than Brigham did. But this piece stuck with him so much that in the next maybe 10 years, there are 5 or 6 different public sermons, where he uses the same reference. In some instances, his scribe did not get the reference, clearly, because his scribe wrote down, "The chariot of Abinadab." Now, Abinadab is in the Bible. Abinadab is the one who owns the cart that carries the Ark of the Covenant, which is definitely not a chariot in the text. But that was the only thing that made sense to him because he didn't know the reference.

Stuart: I think that there are certain ways of speaking in Latter-day Saint culture that reflect the Book of Mormon being a part the air that we breathe in. So, for instance, it's one thing to echo what Elder Bednar said about the tender mercies of the Lord. It's another thing for someone to jokingly say something is tight like unto a dish. There is a difference between understanding doctrinally what something is, and to understand and see something in the world around you that the Book of Mormon has completely altered how you approach the world. I'm curious, how did these sources change the story of the early Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints for you? What does it add to our perspective to know that early Latter-day Saints did not just see the Book of Mormon as a signal, but as a text to be read and loved and consumed, as well as to be appreciated as a signal of Joseph Smith's prophetic authority?

Johnson: We have a book first. The book comes before anything else—before there is a church. For most of those early converts that's their first interaction with Joseph Smith—through this book. W. W. Phelps stated his conversions to the 9th of July, 1830, which was the day he got a Book of Mormon. He didn't meet Joseph Smith for another year. Didn't get baptized for another year. But his conversion began when he got a Book of Mormon.

I think you're right. Sometimes the ubiquity of the Book of Mormon that we're immersed in it, that we don't recognize it as much. Some of the early scholarship counted times that the Book of Mormon vs. the Bible were cited in early periodicals. They cite the Bible a lot more than they cite the Book of Mormon. But, they are also paraphrasing the Book of Mormon. They are echoing it, they are alluding to it, it's shaping how they read the Bible. For many of these early Latter-day Saints, the Book of Mormon became a key to unlock the Bible. There's a 19-year-old girl in England, who is really sick. She's been converted to the Book of Mormon, she's a member of the church, but she gets really sick and she's stuck in a hospital for, what sounds like, a long time. She begins teaching people from the Book of Mormon and she records in her journal. She is teaching this minister, teaching him how to unlock the biblical text from what she finds in the Book of Mormon. Part of this is the signal that the Book of Mormon and the appearance of the Book of Mormon is going to begin the end times and begin the march to the Millennium. But also, the book itself can function as a key. The narrative can offer the saints comfort. Drusilla Dorris Hendricks talks about how she felt like the Nephite women whose burden was lightened on their backs. Her husband was paralyzed in the battle of Crooked River. She's taking care of a large family on her own. She sees a kinship with these women in the Book of Mormon text. They don't necessarily treat the Book of Mormon differently. They've already been doing this with the biblical text. The biblical text functions in a lot of different ways in early America, but many of these early saints already are likening scripture unto themselves before Nephi ever asked them to.

Stuart: I find that absolutely lovely because of the passage in Second Nephi chapter 29, where the Lord is speaking and he says that some will say, 'a Bible, a Bible, we have a Bible, and need no more'. But saying that the Book of Mormon will prove the truth of the Bible, that the two will work in tandem to bring people to faith in Christ. I'm also very interested in what you said about likening the scriptures or what some scholars call scripturalization. How would you describe what it means to liken the scriptures or to scripturalize in a general sense?

Johnson: I think that there are some kind of narratives like Brigham Young or Drusilla Hendricks, and likening scripture unto themselves in that way, but there is also an American practice beginning with—well it's not just an American practice (it certainly began long before that)—but with the early church fathers. You have them offering sermons and they will weave the biblical text, even perhaps before it is canonized into a biblical text. They're weaving books and phrases into their speaking and this is certainly, this continues to be a practice down to the First Great Awakening. You have pastors and ministers who will give sermons and they will weave the text into that sermon. Then sophisticated learners will do the same thing and you can tell that they are paying attention to this text because it changes how they speak.

Stuart: I'm really interested in the idea that those early readers of the Book of Mormon are marking up the text in the same way that you or I would with a favorite novel or book that we're studying. They're adding notes or drawing pictures or things like that. Are there few examples of that marginalia, as it's called, that stick out to you as particularly interesting?

Johnson: There are a few that I really like. Certainly, not every book gets written in. And it seems to me that early on people aren't writing in their book because they may not have their own book. They're either sharing it with their own family or they borrowed it from someone—they just have it for a time. I think that as time moves on through the 19th century, and there is maybe an expectation that they might get a second book or that they might actually have their own book, then you begin to see more writing in the books. You have people creating reading charts, this is something that the Bible would provide often when people bought a Bible, it would have a chart. And it would say how many chapters are in each book of the Bible. So, you can make a plan if you want to read the Bible in a year, this is how many chapters you need to read a day. I found one 1837 Book of Mormon, where the person who own this book has created their own reading chart. So, they can divide it up so they can read the Book of Mormon in a year. Lots of people kind of write page numbers in the flyleaves or inside the cover, lots of people write dedications, give books as gifts.

Some of my favorite writing in the books that I've seen are personal indexes that people have created. They have crafted their own index. The first published index was published in 1835—today, they are the most rare first editions, but actually have that index sown into them. Even in some of those books that have an index sown into them, people have created their own index. One of those belongs to Patience Cowdery, Oliver Cowdery's sister-in-law. Oliver bound a special series of books for the Cowdery family.

They were in bright red, Moroccan leather. He did a number of Books of Mormon, plus some Doctrine and Covenants first editions, 1835 editions. Patience, her book, she's kept her own list and she wanted to remember the page number where you have the 2000 Stripling Warriors talking about their mothers. She's keeping track of the women mentioned in the text.

Stuart: This is outstanding because I think the most readers of any sacred text or any text that is special to someone, have favorite passages or figures/characters, lines that really stick out to them. I think that this presents a way of us identifying with early Latter-day Saints as sort of devotional creativity, as you call it. How do you see early Latter-day Saints being devotionally creative? Are they reading into the text, for instance? Or are their particular lines that many of them would turn to?

Johnson: Yeah, so I think that we get with the intertextuality.

Stuart: Sorry, what's intertextuality?

Johnson: So, intertextuality is any time someone uses a paraphrase, or an allusion, or an echo is short, from the text and just use it into their own text. And when I started talking about this before, some of the prior scholarship had counted actual quotations, but most of the evidence I find of people reading the text and developing a relationship with the text is just in these paraphrases. Very rarely do they have quotation marks and a citation. It's the language that becomes their own and becomes a part of how they would express themselves. But also I think that we've got some examples of people living out the narrative, or trying to replicate the narrative.

Actually I want to tell one story. And this comes from Parley Pratt's autobiography. Parley is in Columbia jail with Morris Phelps and King Follett. They ended up there after the siege at far west. Most of the men there (about 50 or so men that were arrested) originally went to Richmond jail. Then Joseph and some of the others went to Liberty and Parley and Morris and King went to Columbia jail. And they were actually there for longer than Joseph and the others were in Liberty [jail]. Morris Phelps' wife, Laura Clark Phelps, had visited them multiple times. She drove her own team 200 miles to get to the jail. She writes one fantastic letter and she says that she took her two children with her and she said, "the wagon turned over, but once." And I think it hurt them, but a little. She is planning to visit her husband and she has a dream of how they are going to escape because nothing's happening. She gets there and she tells them of the dream that she's had. Parley says he's had the same dream. They consider that as a second

witness, so they make a plan. Just about this time, Orson Pratt, Parley's brother shows up and they tell him the plan and he's got his Book of Mormon with him and he lets his Book of Mormon fall open and it falls open to in the narrative where Ammon is trying to get his brother Aaron out of jail. Parley says, "There is no other place in this 600 page book that fit our circumstance so specifically." A brother in jail, not in Madoni, but in Missouri. They saw this as a good omen that they should proceed with the plan.

And what they are doing is practicing is bibliomancy. Bibliomancy is something that from the time of the Iliad in the Odyssey, people have chosen an important book. Today, if you go to the Bodleian Library in Oxford, there is a certain place that you can stand and you can open up the Iliad and you're supposed to put your finger down on a certain place on a page, and it's supposed to define your future. But people have been doing this with the Bible since they had Bibles. John Wesley said that when all else fails, when rational means fail to get an answer, that this is an acceptable way of trying to understand God's will.

Stuart: Yeah, just open the book and say a little prayer that God will lead you, put your finger down, and that's the sort of message you're supposed to take away. Right?

Johnson: Yeah, exactly! And they did this and saw it as a good omen. So, they moved forward with the plan. The next day is the fourth of July. They raise a flag that is a white shirt with red stripes and an eagle on it and it's their own Title of Liberty. Like they have the language that matches up with Captain Moroni's Title of Liberty. The plan is that Laura is going to go and talk to the jailor and his wife. Between that and the commotion that's going because it's the fourth of July and people are celebrating, the men are going to be able to escape. They've hidden horses in some bushes nearby. It goes as planned. The men are able to escape. King Follett draws the short straw and ends up on Laura's side saddle. He's not quite as able a rider as she is on the side saddle and gets caught.

The other men are able to escape successfully, but their revelatory plan did not include what Laura would do. Word gets out that Latter-day Saints have escaped and townsfolk begin to gather and begin to say really abusive things towards her. Then this little boy shows up and grabs her hand and pulls her away and says, "My mother taught me that no one should ever be treated like this." This family, their last name is Richardson takes care of her for two weeks and she said that she sang hymns with them and she read her Book of Mormon with them. These were the things that were valuable to her that she had with her and she read with them. When things had finally settled down enough for

her to be able to leave, she left the hymnal and the Book of Mormon, those things that were most important to her, with this family who had taken care of her.

Stuart: That truly sounds like the “widow's mite.” Others may have been able to give something that was worth more in money, but she left something that was of eternal value to her. I'm also struck by the idea of leaving something material or something physical, like religious “stuff” behind. Are early Latter-day Saints, are they interested in the types of binding that goes into the Book of Mormon or covers? Are they decorating them? I know that as a Latter-day Saint missionary, or a lot of my fellow missionaries I should say, were very interested in decorations or adding their own art or in other ways making their set of scriptures their own. Are there instances of that in the early church?

Johnson: Some of what I have mentioned with Oliver Cowdery binding. So Oliver is a book binder, he has this skill and so he binds these special copies of the Book of Mormon for his family. With the Book of Mormon, most of the time you bought it with in what it would look like paperback to us today. The book history term is that they were in papers and then you would choose which binding you wanted. So if you wanted a cloth binding or you wanted calf or half calf, or Moroccan binding, which is the nicest kind of leather. People would choose how they would bind their book and then some people would additional things to that. I think some of this rises a little bit later in the 19th century and through the 20th century. I've seen woven Tongan editions of the Book of Mormon with a woven cover on it. People start putting their names on them. Patience Cowdery's 1837 Book of Mormon says “P. Cowdery” on it. That's how I figured out it belonged to her. So some of these practices that we see in the late 20th and early 21st century have actually originated much earlier than that.

Stuart: I think as long as people have had things that meant something to them, they try and find a way to make it theirs. And this is something that as you close your article, you talk about Lucy Mack Smith, Joseph Smith's mother. And how she incorporates the idea of Nephi's goodly parents into her own family history of the Smith family. And you write, “as Lucy Smith incorporated the Book of Mormon text into her own record, she sacralized the Smith family history and tacitly acknowledged the earned place of the Book of Mormon as scripture.” What do you mean by the earned place of the Book of Mormon as scripture for early Latter-day Saints like Lucy Mack Smith?

Johnson: For the Smith family, the language of the King James translation of the Bible really becomes their mother tongue. They speak that language and Lucy has all sorts of

biblical references and paraphrases and allusions that weave in and out of her voice, but very quickly, with Lucy, she writes this letter. I think this letter is the only extant early writing we have from Lucy. And she writes it in January 1831, so it's 9 months after the Book of Mormon was published. She's writing to her brother and sister-in-law and she's telling them about the Book of Mormon. This was actually the thing that first made me think about this project. Because as I read about that argument of the Book of Mormon operating as a sign, I had just finished my Master's thesis and I had used this letter from Lucy Mack Smith to look at women's religious experience. It was all about the Book of Mormon, and so I kind of scribbled in the margins "Lucy Mack to Solomon Mack 1831."

Today, I know that more than half of this letter is directly from the Book of Mormon. It's these paraphrases or allusions or echos, sometimes she is telling the narrative. She is telling the narrative of all first and second Nephi to her brother and sister-in-law. Interestingly, she doesn't focus on Joseph as much. I don't know if they know him as a punk kid and wouldn't believe because it came from him or through him. But it's all about the Book of Mormon, and the Book of Mormon is in nearly every sentence. As it enters her vocabulary, we see how it has gained this place as scripture.

Now, it's possible that you wrote that letter with her Book of Mormon in front of her and she was pulling those phrases and there's a part where it maybe came directly from the title page of Book of Mormon. She continues to do the same thing and the next major source that we have of Lucy's writings is the manuscript for her history of her son, Joseph Smith. She first dictated that, beginning in 1846, to Martha Jane Coray (and she is dictating this, not writing it down). We can see how the Book of Mormon has just become a part of how she talks and how she expresses herself. Not very many people have as dense a scripturalism as Lucy Mack does. But we can see how much it has become part of how she expresses herself and who she is.

Stuart: The Book of Mormon, as an earned place in Lucy Mack Smith's heart and testimony, speaks to how much she loved the Book of Mormon. It was not something sterile that was evidence of her son's prophetic nature. Although as you said, it certainly served in that capacity for some. For her, it was a text that was alive and that meant something to her in her life.

Johnson: This project started with Lucy Mack Smith. And as I have continued this project, I have worked to incorporate the voices of women along with men and to have a more equitable view of this past. It functions differently for everyone. It has been

really interesting seeing how including women's voices. When we try and have a more balanced or more equitable view of the past, it changes the narrative. Those early studies that were done, were done almost exclusively using sources that came from men. As women's voices enter in, it changes the narrative.

Stuart: I think this is something as a historian, you see as recovering voices from the past giving us not only a more complete view of the past but also a more rich and textured view that has the potential to hold appeal for a wider audience. Now, I know that this research project is continuing, what sort of copies of the Book of Mormon would you like to look at if listeners have a lead on where you could examine one?

Johnson: As I said before, a major source for this project is looking at 19th-century copies of the Book of Mormon that are extant. I have gone to a number of different archives across the US and into Europe looking at 19th-century copies. I have seen around 750 19th century copies of the Book of Mormon right now. If you have an early copy of the Book of Mormon, that has writing in it, one practice of Latter-day Saints, as they would hand down a family bible, many families of early Latter-day Saints handed down Books of Mormon. Particularly, those first editions or some of those early editions.

Sometimes they will give the provenance, how it's been handed down. Joseph Holbrook was an early Latter-day Saint, who we have journals from, wrote extensively about his conversion to the Book of Mormon. And he is the one who you can see that relationship in how he expresses himself and how he talks. Then the Church History Library actually has his first edition Book of Mormon and there are names. It was handed down until it got down to Spencer W. Kimball. In the 1980s, Spencer W. Kimball gave it to the Church History Library. I've seen other editions—an 1850 edition—that came from England that was handed down through women in a matrilineal line, which is really a remarkable, lovely thing. I haven't seen another like it. Writing is really useful for me to see and understand how people developed a relationship with this new scripture.

Stuart: That's fascinating in the way that different repositories, different libraries or archives, are keeping track of individual copies of the Book of Mormon. But as you noted, archives and libraries collect these copies of the Book of Mormon as well as other things so that historians like you can take a look at them. But as you noted, President Kimball donates that copy of the Book of Mormon in 1980, more than a hundred years after his ancestor owned it. So, I'm appealing to our listeners, if you have a 19th-century copy of the Book of Mormon to please reach out to Janiece and tell her

about it. Especially, if you're comfortable with her looking at it. How can they do that, Janiece?

Johnson: I can be reached just via the Maxwell Institute: maxwell_institute@byu.edu. I would say that if you think that maybe there isn't anything interesting or your book might be in really bad shape—I've seen a lot that are in bad shape—some of those things are the markers that are most important. For a long time, archives and certainly booksellers collected books that they wanted the copy that was most pristine. Certainly, some booksellers are still very interested in that, but today, we're more interested in the material record. Those books that were most well-loved, we don't have any more cause they don't exist anymore. But a book that is barely holding together, but shows us some of these markers of how this book was used and loved, are actually the most valuable.

Stuart: Thank you. And listeners, please do reach out if you know of a copy or own one yourself. Now, Janiece, you and I are also starting a new podcast of the Maxwell Institute called Abide. Could you tell us more about the podcast and what we hope to accomplish with it?

Johnson: Sure! I am excited about this venture. We're starting it halfway through the Doctrine and Covenants, but our goal is to just talk about pieces of the Doctrine and Covenants that might be helpful as we go through Come, Follow Me this year. We're not trying to be comprehensive and talk about every piece of context and every verse, but we want to give you a few highlights that we see as really fruitful areas to think about and maybe discuss and ponder.

Stuart: Thank you. Look for that as a new feed coming soon in the first week of July. Dr. Janiece Johnson, thank you for coming by the Maxwell Institute podcast.