Composing a Scripture

An Investigation into the Book of Mormon's Origins
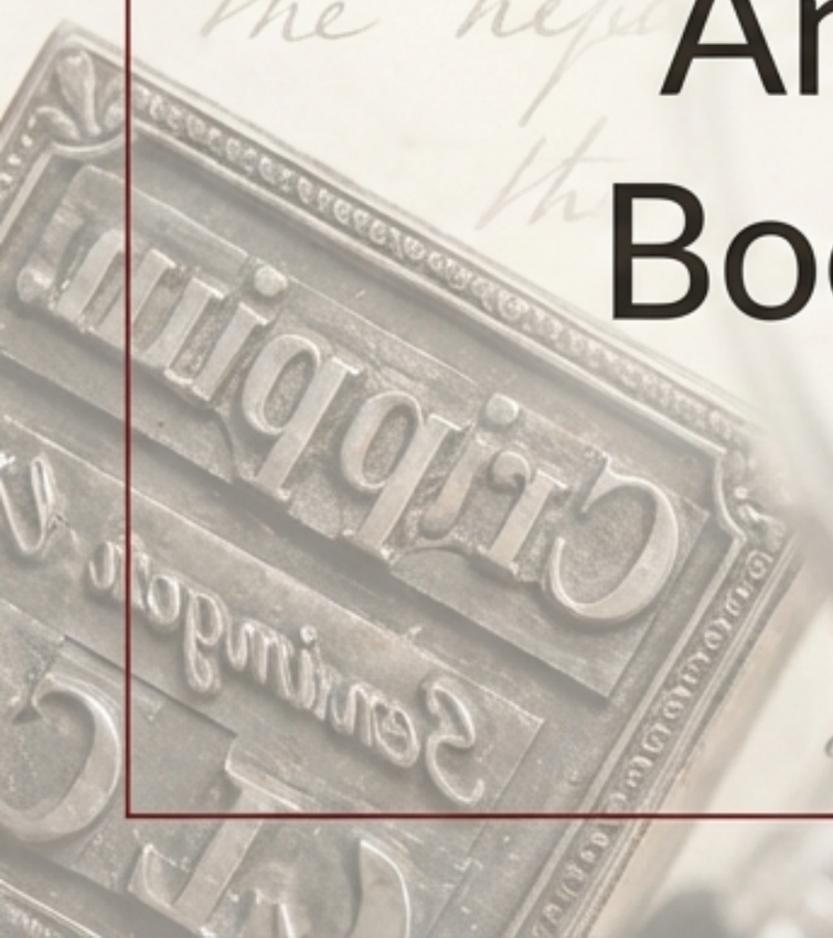
The Church Presents an 'Imbalanced Equation"

The official narrative frames the Book of Mormon's origin as a miracle that defies secular explanation. This argument starts with a pre-determined conclusion—that the book is divine—and arranges the "facts" to fit.

The Claim

"Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon at the rate of about 10 pages per day, completing the task in about 85 days."
— Russell M. Nelson

"[The] original argument [was] that Joseph Smith was incapable, too ignorant to write such a book. Now all of a sudden, Joseph is a skilled, creative writer with genius intellect. Why the flip-flop? Because all the previous explanations for a man-made book had failed."
— Tad Callister

The Investigation

CASE FILE
?

The '85-Day Miracle' is a Red Herring

The claim of an 85-day creation deliberately ignores a well-documented development period of more than five years. Joseph Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, described how he was developing and rehearsing the book's stories long before any dictation began.
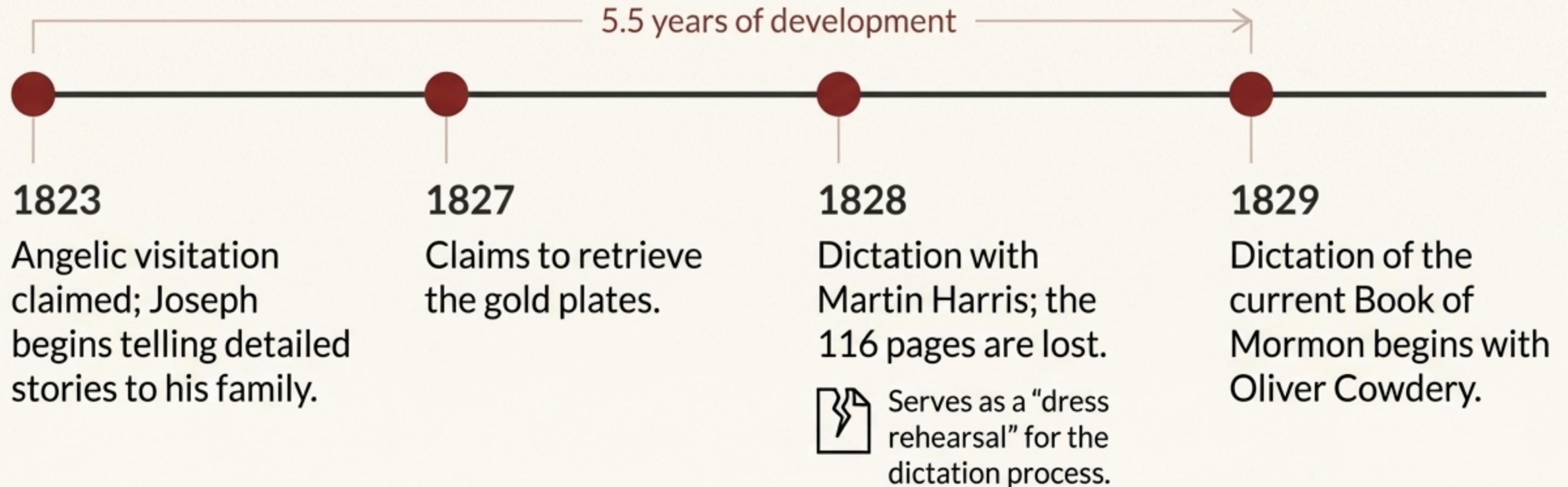
1823

"From this time forth [1823], Joseph continued to receive instruction from time to time… In the course of our evening conversations, Joseph gave us some of the most amusing recitals which could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, their manner of traveling… their mode of warfare, and and their religious worship as specifically as though he had spent his life with them."

— Lucy Mack Smith

Reconstructing the Full Production Timeline

The actual timeline reveals a long, iterative process, not a sudden burst of miraculous translation.

5.5 years of development

1823

Angelic visitation claimed; Joseph begins telling detailed stories to his family.

1827

Claims to retrieve the gold plates.

1828

Dictation with Martin Harris; the 116 pages are lost.

Serves as a "dress rehearsal" for the dictation process.

1829

Dictation of the current Book of Mormon begins with Oliver Cowdery.

NotebookLM

The Daily Pace Was Far From Miraculous

Breaking down the numbers reveals that the actual daily dictation time required was surprisingly short, leaving Joseph Smith significant time each day to plan, compose, and prepare.

The Calculation

- Total Words: ~273,000
- Timeframe: 85 days
- Words per Day: ~3,200
- Average Dictation Speed: 1,200 words/hour (per John Hamer)
- **Less than 3 hours of dictation were needed each day.**

Dictation Time

Preparation & Composition Time

Exhibit A: The Bricolage of Jacob 5

Jacob 5, the allegory of the olive tree, is often presented as proof of ancient knowledge beyond Joseph's reach. However, analysis reveals it to be a **"bricolage"** —a composite work created by weaving together available biblical sources.
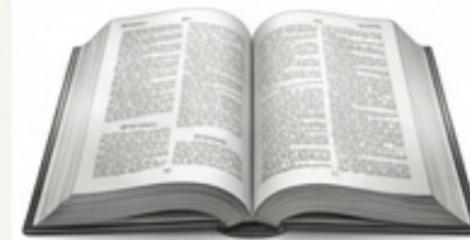
The Apologetic Claim

"It is hard to imagine that its author was not personally familiar with the minute details and practices involved in raising good olives in a Mediterranean climate... Joseph Smith probably had little knowledge of olive trees in New York."
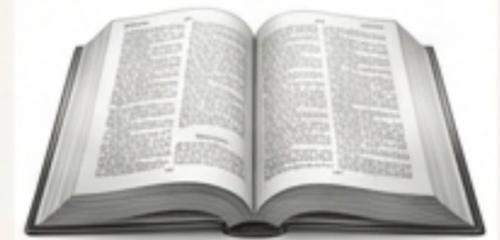
— Daniel C. Peterson

The Sources Identified

1. Old Testament: Isaiah 5
(The Parable of the *Vineyard*)

2. New Testament: Romans 11
(The Metaphor of the *Olive Tree*)

Jacob 5

Crucial Flaw: The New Testament source, Romans, would not have been available to the Book of Mormon authors. Its presence is a clear **anachronism**.

The Fatal Flaw: Confusing the Metaphors

While dictating, Joseph Smith appears to lose track of his primary metaphor. He begins with Paul's olive tree but then switches to Isaiah's vineyard when he begins borrowing heavily from that source. **This clumsy transition is a clear fingerprint of human authorship.**

The Breakdown

- **The Start (Borrowing from Romans):** The allegory begins with Israel as a single **olive tree** located in a vineyard.

- **The Switch (Borrowing from Isaiah):** Halfway through, the metaphor suddenly switches to the **vineyard itself.**

- **The Result:** "From this point on, the author repeatedly refers to the **trees of the vineyard**, apparently forgetting that the parable started out with the **olive trees** as the primary metaphor..."
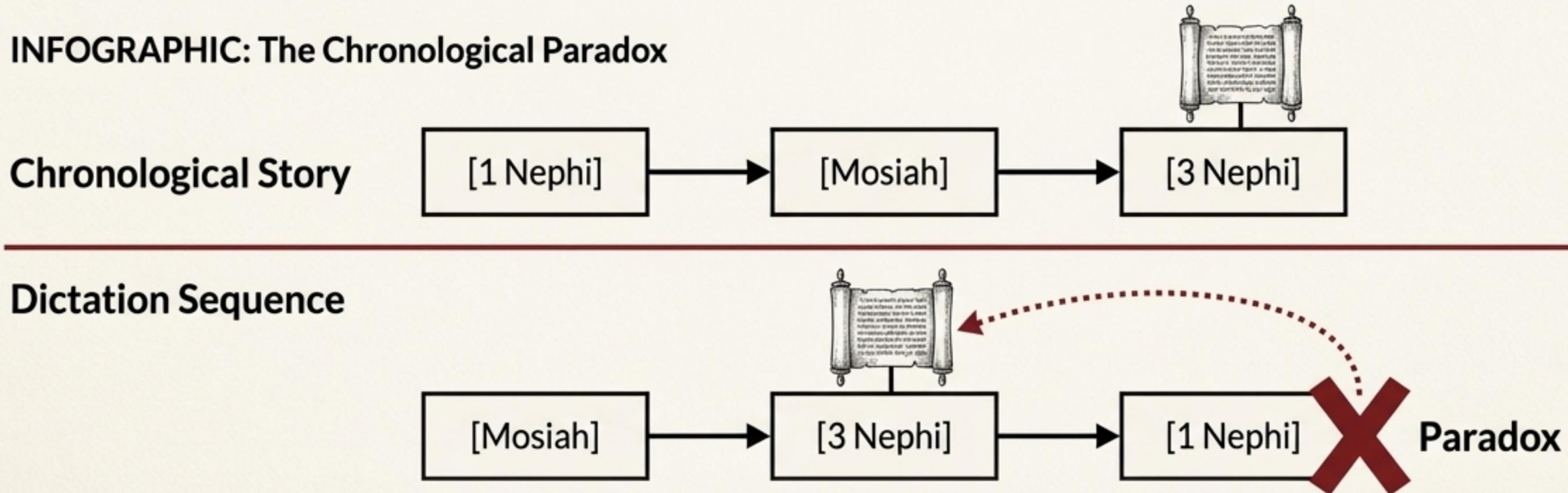
Infographic

Romans: Olive Tree   **Isaiah:** Vineyard

CRITICAL ERROR

Jacob 5

Exhibit B: The Malachi Continuity Error

The Book of Mormon creates a chronological paradox with the prophecies of **Malachi**—a mistake that directly reflects the order in which Joseph Smith dictated the book, not the book's internal timeline.

— **The Setup (3 Nephi):** After his resurrection, Jesus visits the **Nephites and gives them Malachi's prophecies**, explicitly stating, *"These scriptures, which ye had not with you, the Father commanded that I should give unto you."*

— **The Contradiction (1st & 2nd Nephi):** However, direct quotes and paraphrases from Malachi appear in 1st Nephi and 2nd Nephi—books that are chronologically set *hundreds of years before* Jesus's visit.

— **The Inescapable Conclusion:** 1st and 2nd Nephi were dictated *after* 3rd Nephi (as part of the replacement for the lost 116 pages). Joseph Smith forgot the plot point that the Nephites shouldn't have had access to Malachi's words.

INFOGRAPHIC: The Chronological Paradox

Chronological Story

[1 Nephi] → [Mosiah] → [3 Nephi]

Dictation Sequence

[Mosiah] → [3 Nephi] → [1 Nephi] ✗ **Paradox**

NotebookLM

Corroborating Evidence: Fingerprints of Oral Dictation

The original manuscripts are filled with **errors** and corrections typical of spoken, unscripted storytelling, not a carefully engraved ancient record.

On-the-Fly Self-Corrections

"...they buried their weapons of peace—**or they buried their weapons of war for peace**." (Alma 24:19)

"...and their bands were loosed; and they stood before the king, and were permitted, **or rather commanded**..." (Mosiah 7:8)

Clumsy Mistakes & Forgotten Details

The narrator introduces a Lamanite woman as "Abish," then 12 verses later forgets her name, referring to her as **"the woman servant** who had caused a multitude to be gathered." (Alma 19)

An antichrist is introduced as Nehor. The next chapter refers to a new character as being "after the order of **the man that slew Gideon**," momentarily forgetting Nehor's name. (Alma 1 & 2)

The Author's Profile: A Product of the 19th Century

The Book of Mormon is saturated with the theology, preaching styles, and cultural debates of Joseph Smith's immediate environment.

Exhibit 1: 19th-Century Methodist Sermons

Parallels to Methodist Revivals

Grant Palmer and other historians note stunning parallels between Book of Mormon sermons (like King Benjamin's) and Methodist revival meetings of the 1820s.

- Speaking from a tower
- Congregations in tents
- A "feeble condition"
- Crowds "falling to the ground" to commit to Christ

Exhibit 2: The "Laying Down Heads" Technique

Methodist Preaching Composition

Dr. William Davis identifies Joseph's use of a common Methodist preaching technique where a sermon is built extemporaneously from a few key points, or "heads." The Book of Mormon even describes this method itself.

> "…that I, Jacob, should engraven **the heads of them** upon these plates, and **touch upon them as much as it were possible**…"
>
> — Jacob 1:4

Deconstructing the "Hundreds of Unique Names" Argument

The claim of immense complexity in the book's names collapses under scrutiny. Most unique names are used in a single, localized context and then immediately discarded, requiring no long-term memory or intricate world-building.

The Pattern: Create, Use, Discard

NEPHI, MORMON

Used frequently throughout the narrative.

Multiple characters

Mentioned in a single chapter, then discarded.

Example: The Book of Jarom
The name **Jerem** appears 20 times, but *only within the single-page Book of Jarom*. It is never mentioned before or after.

Creating names and using them only once is not a sign of complexity; it is a feature of linear, improvisational storytelling.
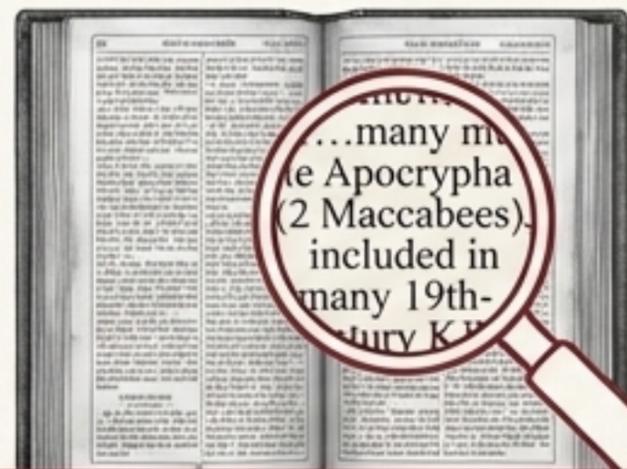
The Names Come from Joseph's World, Not an Ancient One

Many of the "unique" names in the Book of Mormon are not unique at all, but variations of names found in Joseph Smith's immediate surroundings and available texts.

Laman & Lemuel

Nephi

Alma

Moroni & Cumorah

While now common as a female name, **Alma** was a known male name in Joseph's time and region.

Laman & Lemuel

Joseph's treasure-digging associate was Luman Walters, who went by **Layman** Walters. His uncle was named **Lemuel** Walters.

Nephi

Found in the Apocrypha (2 Maccabees), included in many 19th-century KJV Bibles. "...many men call it **Nephi**."


Moroni & Cumorah

Variations of these names appear on maps of the Comoros Islands in books about Captain Kidd, a known fascination of Joseph Smith's.

The Contemporary Verdict: A Time Capsule of the 1820s

Prominent religious leader Alexander Campbell reviewed the Book of Mormon upon its publication. He did not see an ancient text; he saw a clear reflection of every major religious and political debate happening in New York during the 1820s.
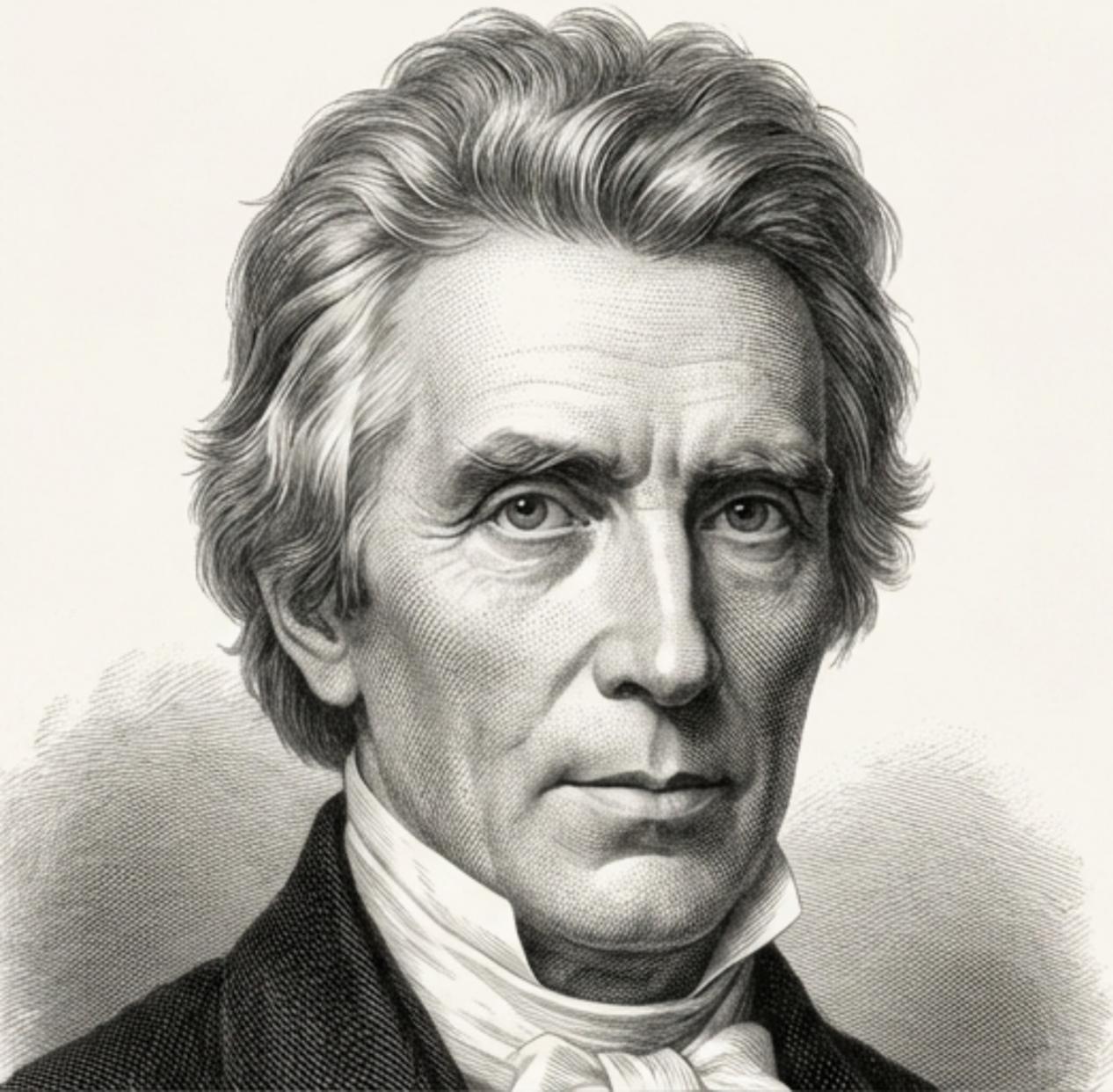
> "This prophet Smith... wrote... every error and almost every truth discussed in New York for the last ten years. He decided all the great controversies—infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement.. even the question of freemasonry, republican government, and the rights of man."

— Alexander Campbell, 1831

The Case File Conclusion: A Coherent Theory of Human Authorship

The evidence overwhelmingly supports a conclusion of human authorship over divine translation. The secular model provides a comprehensive explanation that accounts for every feature of the text—both its narrative achievements and its pervasive flaws.

MEANS

A 5+ year development period, extensive use of the King James Bible as a source text, and familiar 19th-century composition techniques.
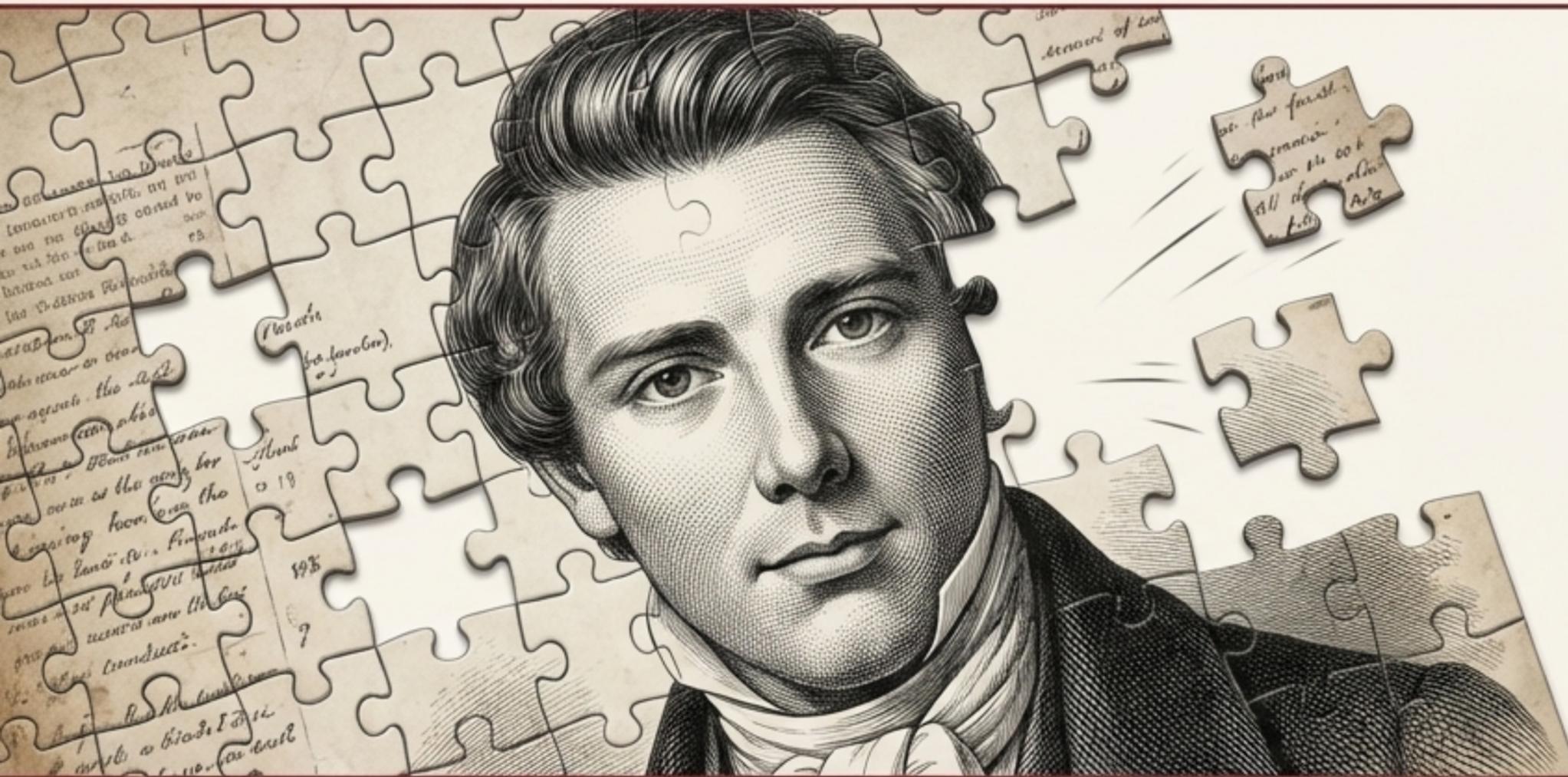
MOTIVE

An attempt to resolve the pressing religious and social controversies of his time and place.

OPPORTUNITY

A manageable daily dictation schedule of under 3 hours, leaving ample time for creative work.

The Puzzle Fits, But Not the Picture on the Box

THE GOLD PLATES

When we stop forcing the evidence to fit the pre-determined conclusion of divinity, the pieces of the puzzle assemble into a clear and coherent picture: the Book of Mormon is one of the most remarkable literary creations of 19th-century America. Its origins are not found on ancient plates of gold, but in the fertile mind of a creative, religiously-preoccupied, and gifted storyteller: Joseph Smith.