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### Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites; An Approach to the Book of Mormon; and Since Cumorah*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (1988); *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (1988); and *Since Cumorah* (1988), by Hugh Nibley.

Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites; An Approach to the Book of Mormon; Since Cumorah*. Salt Lake City: F.A.R.M.S. and Deseret Book, 1988. xviii + 462 pp., xvii + 541 pp., xv + 512 pp., subject and scriptures indexes. \$16.95, \$17.95, \$16.95.

Reviewed by Todd Compton

One approaches Hugh Nibley with a mixture of awe and anguish. He is a scholar who attempts to work in the German polymath tradition of Eduard Meyer, Mommsen, and Wilamowitz. You read all the primary sources; you read all the secondary sources; you produce more secondary sources all of your life, non-stop, all of them classics. Nibley has come close enough to achieving this ambition that the only reasonable way of regarding him is with an extremely healthy respect. I have seen his shorthand pencil marginalia throughout the vast library of the Patrologia Graeca and Latina at BYU. In *Lehi in the Desert*, he talks of reading sagas once a week for thirty years<sup>1</sup>; in "There Were Jaredites,"<sup>2</sup> he surveys twenty-two epics as a background against which to view the Book of Ether. You must read each epic as a whole; you cannot trust even first-rate scholars to read and analyze them for you, though you must read their interpretations. One also thinks of Nibley, spurred by the finding of the Book of Abraham Egyptian material, concentrating on Egyptian late in life, going through the plodding, undramatic steps of working through grammars, dictionaries, and texts to deal with those new documents.

In addition to this, Nibley is a master of synthesis—reading his work continually gives exhilarating overviews of history, ritual, religious symbolism, literature, even science. This combination of breadth and insight makes reading Nibley—or attending his classes—a never failingly stimulating and inspiring experience.

On the other hand, there is the anguish. Sometimes Nibley seems as unconvincing in the small picture as he is awe-inspiring in the large. When an important passage needs a close reading and careful interpretation, he may mention the text, listing it perhaps along with six other general citations, and slide on to the next subject. Yet fundamental to Nibley's

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1 Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert*, 385.

2 *Ibid.*, 405.

methodology is reading texts in their original languages, and the only reason to do that is so one can read texts carefully. Furthermore, Nibley treats Mormon scripture primarily through parallels. While we need not pay any attention to those shallow critics of Nibley who merely shout "Parallelomania," as if it were a magical incantation, and reject his whole methodology and corpus out of hand (drawing parallels is a necessary technique for any scholar; one must simply judge each parallel separately to see what validity it offers—and many of Nibley's parallels are convincing and valuable, while others are less persuasive or informative)—this technique requires careful analysis of the passages to be compared. And the difficulties of reading even a well-edited ancient text can be formidable. If many themes, motifs, rituals, and texts are as close as Nibley says they are—if they are that important—they deserve fuller analysis. The parallels will be more *convincing* and informative with fuller analysis. This is not to say that Nibley can't read texts closely; he has read the Book of Mormon, for instance, more closely than any person living, I think. But it often seems as if he has not treated the nonscriptural comparands with equal explanatory depth.

It is ironic that a man's very greatness will magnify his flaws; in Nibley's case his brilliance and depth make his limitations all the more frustrating. When my more skeptical friends criticize him, I have to admit that some, though certainly not all, of their complaints and criticisms are true. But I use the explorer metaphor to explain Nibley. As the first scholar to compare Mormon scripture systematically and exhaustively to the documents of antiquity, he is the great pioneer. Like the pioneer, he travels from untrodden wilderness to untrodden wilderness, never settling down to domesticate a territory and create a city—but, on the other hand, leaving useful maps and trails wherever he goes, which lesser explorers and immigrants will use in settling the land. Some of the places he judges to be prime city-sites will be shown to be inadequate by later settlers, but others will be accepted; and all future settlers will be indebted to him. Thus, it will, perhaps, be we lesser academics who will make the territory mapped out by Nibley habitable; who will check his footnotes and carefully analyze the texts and parallels he has considered only briefly. But this kind of explorer can be dangerous for a certain type of settler; while the explorer may get carried away in his enthusiasm for a newly discovered territory, and describe it in glowing terms, the settler

who lives there may see it more realistically, knowing its advantages and disadvantages, after years of daily familiarity with it; and even though it is still good, habitable land, he may feel disillusioned when it does not quite live up to the explorer's description. Perhaps the explorer should have a bit more of the settler in him, and vice versa; Nibley should be a bit more careful and thorough, and we should be a little more adventurous and energetic.

The first step in this process of settling the territory mapped out by Nibley is the extremely welcome and valuable *Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, published by F.A.R.M.S. and Deseret Book. Here, all of Nibley's footnotes have been checked for accuracy and relevancy—so simple errors such as wrong page numbers, confusing or incorrect bibliographical information, and so on, should be corrected (though as an editor of a former volume, I know that one cannot achieve anything approaching perfection in such a project). *Lehi in the Desert, An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, and *Since Cumorah* are Nibley's basic treatments of the Book of Mormon, and as such, occupy a central place in his work, and in Mormon studies.<sup>3</sup> They are especially timely now, when the question of the historicity of the Book of Mormon is being forcefully raised both by critics of Mormonism and by some of its adherents. These books exemplify well Nibley's great strengths, and also some of his limitations. *Lehi in the Desert* brilliantly puts the opening books of the Book of Mormon in a context of Semitic (mostly Arabic) desert culture; its Jaredite sections examine that most mysterious of Book of Mormon books, the Book of Ether, against the background of archaic Asia and against Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Iranian, Germanic, Celtic, and other epics. *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* was, believe it or not, a Priesthood manual, and combines aspects of *Lehi in the Desert* and *Since Cumorah*. *Since Cumorah* looks at the Book of Mormon in the light of new documentary discoveries such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. These books are classics, and serious students of the Book of Mormon, whether they agree with Nibley's approach and conclusions or not, ignore them at their peril. Naturally, some of the conclusions and bibliography in these books are now dated, especially in light of John L.

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<sup>3</sup> A volume of Nibley's Book of Mormon essays, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, is soon to be published in the Collected Works Series.



Sorenson's *Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*,<sup>4</sup> but the substance of Nibley's research is still valuable. Aside from its scholarly value, *Since Cumorah* is one of the most powerful interpretations of the meaning of the Book of Mormon that we have, still completely relevant to modern America. As part of his interpretation, Nibley skillfully disposes of a number of popular misconceptions about this book, e.g., that it is a story of good (white) Nephites against bad (dark) Lamanites. The Book of Mormon is much more subtle than that, of course, and Nibley shows how often the Lamanites are more righteous than the Nephites (or, sometimes, less wicked). Critics of Mormonism who continue to propagate such wishful reductionism have read neither Nibley nor the Book of Mormon.

Nibley has been vehemently attacked and defended as an apologist, one who tries to prove that Mormon scripture is true. He has persistently denied that he is trying to prove anything; he just wants to open a discussion, he says<sup>5</sup>—though sometimes he certainly seems to act as if his conclusions are proven. I personally would find him more convincing, even as an apologist, if he frankly admitted serious unsolved problems that obviously have cropped up in Book of Mormon studies (any historical field has serious unsolved problems; why not the Book of Mormon?<sup>6</sup>). But I find Nibley most valuable, in these books, not as an apologist, but as a close commentator on the Book of Mormon.

He has read the book extremely carefully and has seen significance in tiny details we've read repeatedly, but never noticed. One wonders why he has never written a commentary on individual books in the Book of Mormon; when such a book is written some day, Nibley's interpretations and textual readings will serve as an invaluable basis for such a commentary.

Finally, we may ask how these new editions compare with the earlier ones. As we have mentioned, the footnotes are significantly improved, standardized, corrected, sometimes with added bibliographic information (titles of articles and recent

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4 Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985.

5 E.g., *Since Cumorah*, xii-xiii.

6 See, for example, B. H. Roberts's book on Book of Mormon problems, *Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1985); cf. John W. Welch's critique in "B. H. Roberts: Seeker after Truth," *Ensign* 16/3 (March 1986): 56-62, and Review of B. H. Roberts, *Studies of the Book of Mormon*, *Pacific Historical Review* 55 (Nov. 1986): 619-23.

translations of books). In the original editions of *Since Cumorah* and *Lehi in the Desert*, footnotes appeared at the bottom of each page; unfortunately, in my opinion, in the Collected Works they have been gathered in the backs of the books, but this is only a minor inconvenience. *Lehi in the Desert* has a whole section, "There Were Jaredites," added to the text of the original book. *Lehi in the Desert* and *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* now have indexes, a vast improvement, and Scripture Reference sections as well. If one has not bought these books previously, these are the editions to get; if one already has the earlier editions, they will probably be adequate for the general reader; but for those settlers consulting these works as reference books and working through the footnotes of the great pioneer, the Collected Works editions are definitely the versions one should work with.