Time Vindicates Hugh Nibley

William J. Hamblin

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol2/iss1/18
Title  Time Vindicates Hugh Nibley

Author(s)  William J. Hamblin


ISSN  1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)


**Time Vindicates Hugh Nibley**

Reviewed by William J. Hamblin

Hugh Nibley's *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* was originally published in 1957 as a Melchizedek Priesthood lesson manual. In the nearly quarter of a century since it was written, a great deal of new scholarship has appeared treating many of the topics which Nibley briefly investigated in this work. Nibley himself has been active in continually reexamining many of the ideas he first presented in *An Approach*, as can be seen especially in his 1967 work, *Since Cumorah*. Furthermore, Nibley's intellectual heritage has been taken up by many other scholars and by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, as manifested by the publication of numerous studies which examine in greater detail many ideas which Nibley first presented in embryo. An avid Nibleyophile reading *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* is therefore presented with a case of déja vu.

All the footnotes in this third edition have been checked and made easier to use. Also, the lesson format and questions of the 1957 edition, which were dropped in the 1964 edition, have been restored. This edition also has subject and scripture indexes, which were not found in the first two editions.

Continuing the methodology he utilized in *Lehi in the Desert*, Nibley focuses on examining the Book of Mormon as an ancient Near Eastern document to see if it fits into the cultural milieu of the pre-Hellenistic ancient Near East from which Lehi and his descendants were said to have migrated. Contrary to

---

3 Nibley's methodological assumptions are briefly explained on pages 3-14.
some modernist critics of Nibley’s works (who frequently claim Nibley is methodologically incompetent at best), he applies fairly traditional historical methodology of internal criticism of forgeries to the Book of Mormon, i.e., comparing a possibly forged document with its purported origins to determine whether the text fits its supposed cultural and historical setting. Nibley shows a methodological sophistication by clearly stating his subjective bias in favor of the Book of Mormon (p. 14) rather than attempting to feign some sort of impossible historical objectivity. Indeed, Nibley’s general attitude towards the nature of scholarship and academic “proof” is very much in line with modern studies of historiography and the sociology of knowledge.

Nibley’s chapters cover an amazingly broad range of times, places, cultures, and topics, through which he invariably manages to deepen our understanding of the Book of Mormon. I will present here just a few examples.

In Nibley’s view the ancient Near East at the time of Lehi was a cosmopolitan world of numerous interacting cultural zones, but with a fundamental cultural unity. Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Anatolian, Greek, and Israelite civilizations were all, in a sense, variations on a basic cultural theme (pp. 33-37). Although this idea was not broadly accepted in the 1950s, and still has major critics today, the evidence for such a view of antiquity is expanding rapidly, forcing us to rewrite much of ancient history. The revisionist view of ancient Near Eastern

---

4 I use the term “modernist” to refer to those who see the Book of Mormon as ahistorical and therefore deriving solely from the nineteenth century.


6 For an attack against the coherence of traditional assumptions on historical objectivity see Peter Novick, That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). This is a topic of such intense debate in Mormon historical circles that Peter Novick was invited to the 1989 Sunstone Theological Symposium to discuss how his interpretations of historical objectivity relate to Mormon historical scholarship. For an excellent study of the “sociology of knowledge” in the history of Classical studies, see Martin Bernal, Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization, vol. 1: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece, 1785-1985 (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).
history that is emerging among many scholars today is very similar to that espoused by Nibley a quarter of a century ago in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon.*

Nibley describes Lehi as a man of the "Axial Age," a term which he does not use in his first edition, but which he mentions in the preface to his second edition. The "Axial Age" is thought to have been a period extending roughly from the seventh through the fourth centuries B.C., in which a series of prophets and sages, including Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, the authors of the Upanishads, the Greek philosophers, and the great Israelite prophets, established fundamentally new paradigms of social and religious thought which formed the ideological basis for nearly all of the subsequent major civilizations of the world. The way in which Lehi perfectly fits the time, place, and model of an "Axial Sage" is little short of remarkable. Karl Jaspers, in *The Origin and Goal of History,* first coined the phrase "Axial Period." That work was published in 1953, shortly before the publication of *An Approach to the Book of Mormon.* Various versions of this idea have gained such widespread acceptance that it is now beginning to appear in standard world history textbooks.

Nibley also explores the relationship of the Jews of the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. with the surrounding cultures. Nibley sees Lehi as a merchant engaged in caravan trade (pp. 59-70), with trading contacts in Arabia and Egypt. Nibley thereby maintains that the Arabs of the seventh century were far

---

7 Bernal, in *Black Athena,* discusses in detail the reasons why the models of ancient history of the past century are fundamentally flawed, and explores new models which are very reminiscent of Nibley. For another revisionist view of ancient Near Eastern history from a political and military perspective that also calls for a synthesis of all ancient cultures, see Robert Drews, *The Coming of the Greeks: Indo-European Conquests in the Aegean and the Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

8 For the basic description of Lehi as an "Axial Sage" see pp. 36-55. Nibley explicitly links his analysis of Lehi with Karl Jaspers's discussion of "Axial Period" on p. vii (2d ed.) and p. xi (3d ed.).


more important in the Near East than is often thought, and that Jews had extensive contacts with Arabia and Egypt in the sixth and seventh centuries B.C. (pp. 71-92, 225-52). Studies of Arabia during the first millennium B.C. have flourished in the past two decades, essentially confirming Nibley’s position.12

Nibley’s view of ancient civilization as fundamentally hierocentric (centered on sacred ideologies, rituals, and ceremonial centers) (pp. 157-67) has become fundamental to an entire school of thought on the ideologies of ancient civilizations through studies of such giants as Eliade.13 In a specific Book of Mormon context, his insight of seeing King Benjamin’s speech in a ritual setting (pp. 295-310) has been supported by extensive research by other Latter-day Saint scholars.14 Likewise, his analysis of the importance of military history in the Book of Mormon (pp. 209-21, 378-99)15 laid the foundation for a recent symposium and the publication of a book on the topic, which has confirmed and expanded upon many of his insights.16

Thus, An Approach is filled with numerous imaginative and provocative insights on the Book of Mormon which have laid the foundation for an entire school of Book of Mormon

---


13 The hierocentric nature of Pre-Modern human civilization is a theme that runs through nearly all of Eliade’s works. A good summary is contained in Mircea Eliade, The Sacred and the Profane (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959).


15 Nibley, Since Cumorah, 291-333.

NIBLEY, APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF MORMON (HAMBLIN) scholarship and interpretation. On the other hand, there are several problems in the book which need to be examined.

The first is methodological. Here Nibley is not really in error, but rather his presentation contains some methodological weaknesses which, if corrected, would have greatly strengthened his case. Before discussing these problems it is important to emphasize that Nibley is not trying to "prove" the Book of Mormon is true. "Our purpose is to illustrate, explain, suggest, and investigate. We are going to consider the Book of Mormon as a possible product . . . of the Ancient East. . . . Proving the Book of Mormon is another matter" (pp. 3-4). Thus when critics occasionally accuse Nibley of trying or failing to prove the Book of Mormon historical, it is the critics who have failed to understand what Nibley is trying to do.

Nonetheless, Nibley's method does contain some weaknesses. The first, and perhaps most important, is Nibley's view that the "East" is somehow unchanging (p. 123). In reality the Near East has witnessed some of the most tremendous periods of social, economic, technological, political, and cultural transformations in world history. An example of Nibley's unfortunate concept of the "unchanging East" is the chapter on Laban (pp. 120-31), in which he utilizes Egyptian sources of the fourteenth century B.C. (p. 121), the eleventh century B.C. (p. 125), Jewish documents from the sixth century B.C. (p. 127), medieval Arabic sources from the fifteenth century A.D. (p. 122), and European accounts of Arabian bedouin practices of the nineteenth century A.D. (p. 129), all to illustrate the role and position of Laban in sixth century B.C. Jerusalem. Although such virtuosity is impressive, it also obscures the fundamental context of the Laban story. Clearly the most significant evidence Nibley references is in the Lachish letters, which he quotes extensively. Indeed, that evidence, and other evidence which could be derived from Israelite culture of the same period, is

17 It is important to emphasize here that this problem is based on the methodological assumptions of several generations of "orientalists." For a general discussion of historiographical problems of nineteenth and early twentieth-century approaches to Near Eastern history and cultures, see Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). In this case Nibley is thus simply following the assumptions of his day, for which he really cannot be blamed any more than we should be blamed for being creatures of our own modern age by our descendants. Nonetheless, these "orientalist" assumptions cause methodological problems.
strong enough to make his point. To me his case is weakened by including these other marginal parallels.  

A second methodological problem is that in attempting to draw parallels between ancient Near Eastern cultures and the Book of Mormon, Nibley often ignores equally significant differences. What is important here is not that the differences between the Book of Mormon and ancient Near Eastern cultures somehow threaten to undermine the historicity of the Book of Mormon, but rather that the differences are often just as important evidence as parallels in obtaining a more complete understanding of the ancient historical setting. For example, Nibley tends to see the Jaredites as typical Central Asian nomads transported to the Great Plains of America (pp. 329-36). Now, while it is true that many elements of Jaredite culture parallel ancient patterns of Central Asian kingship and society, there are also equally significant differences. Thus the rise of Central Asians to global military and social significance did not really begin until the development of the war-chariot and mounted archery. The war-chariot, which gave the Indo-Europeans a significant military advantage over sedentarists, did not become significant until the seventeenth century B.C. in the Caucasus, reaching China only by the thirteenth century B.C. Central Asian horse nomadism of the Turko-Mongolian style also did not begin until the second millennium B.C. and had spread through Central Asia only by the end of that same century.  

18 Another example of the problem of the "unchanging East" is Nibley's attempt to utilize medieval Islamic poetry and customs as evidence for conditions in Arabia in the sixth century B.C. (pp. 225-52). Nonetheless, many of Nibley's points are well taken since bedouin society was more static than many other Near Eastern cultures. Furthermore, owing to the limited nature of pre-Islamic Arabian sources, Islamic records must serve as a major source for pre-Islamic times.

19 This topic is much more fully developed in Nibley's The World of the Jaredites, pp. 153-282 in Lehi in the Desert.


Jaredites, which place their departure from Mesopotamia in the third millennium B.C., both of these developments were too late to have been a part of Jaredite cultural characteristics transported to the Americas. While these facts in no way undermine many of the authentic ancient elements Nibley has found in the Jaredite records, they do undermine Nibley's general description of the Jaredites, especially when we remember that neither the chariot nor the horse are mentioned as being fundamental to Jaredite societies or warfare in the Book of Mormon. Thus, although Nibley has been able to establish parallels in literature, ritual, and kingship between the Jaredites and the ancient Near East, he is in error when he then seems to assume that there were extensive socioeconomic parallels (e.g., horse and sheep nomadism) as well.

Thus Nibley's methodology consists more of comparative literature than history. Of course the two methodologies overlap in many ways. However, in the textual and literary analysis of ancient documents, it is generally thought sufficient to establish that textual, linguistic, or literary parallels exist to establish that two cultural traditions were in some sort of contact, even though it may be impossible to establish the exact historical nature of such contacts. I feel that Nibley's case would be strengthened if he had paid more careful attention to the historical characteristics of his evidence such as the chronological, geographical, and cultural details of the parallels he analyzes.

Another problem appearing throughout Nibley's work of the fifties and sixties is the seemingly fundamental assumption that the Book of Mormon describes continent-wide events (pp.


22 Horses are mentioned only once in the Jaredite record, in Ether 9:19: "And they (the Jaredites) also had horses, and asses, and there were elephants and cureloms and cumoms; all of which were useful unto man, and more especially the elephants and cureloms and cumoms." It is clear from this reference that, completely unlike all post-chariot Central Asian nomadic societies, the horse was not considered a significant animal among the Jaredites, being less useful to the Jaredites than "the elephants and cureloms and cumoms."
Those following the Sorenson school of limited geography have now demonstrated that the text itself describes events occurring within ranges of well under 1000 miles, centering almost certainly in Mesoamerica. As Nibley himself admits, he is not well read in pre-Columbian American history and archaeology (pp. 3-4, 442). He is thus at his weakest when he turns from drawing upon ancient Near Eastern sources to illuminate the text of the Book of Mormon to speculating about the relationship of the text to the geography, history, and archaeology of pre-Columbian America. Here one is much better off turning to Sorenson and Clark.

Finally, there are occasional factual errors in the text. One of the most obvious is Nibley’s statement that Humbaba was Gilgamesh’s boon companion, whose death sends Gilgamesh on his quest for the plant of immortality (pp. 355-56). In fact, Enkidu was Gilgamesh’s companion, and Humbaba was a demonic monster which Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed. Such errors are perhaps forgivable, however, in a book utilizing sources covering all of ancient and medieval history and most of the major cultures of the world.

In conclusion, despite these problems, Nibley’s ideas have been extensively supported by later researchers both in general concepts and in many specific details. In a field as controversial and rapidly changing as ancient Near Eastern studies (which is stable and placid compared to Book of Mormon studies), one would certainly expect to find numerous topics on which Nibley was in error after a quarter of a century. The fact that many of the insights which he discusses in only a few pages have yielded research which has developed into entire books is vindication enough for Nibley’s genius. The fact that he has unintentionally and almost single-handedly spawned an entire intellectual “cottage industry” in the form of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies is remarkable.

My overall reaction to An Approach to the Book of Mormon can best be stated as follows: When in this age of correlation and manuals written by committees will we see another Melchizedek Priesthood lesson manual as exciting and insightful as this one?