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Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*

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Title

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Reviewed by Stephen D. Ricks

Nearly every reader has either written down or, more frequently, keeps in his mind, a list of those books which have had the most influence on him. In my own list of such books are two by Hugh Nibley—*The World and the Prophets* and *Lehi in the Desert*. *The World and the Prophets* helped me to understand the course of early Christian history—the period of the apostasy—as the victory of the sophic tradition over the prophetic. *Lehi in the Desert* not only informed me about the first chapters of the Book of Mormon, but also introduced me in a significant way to Arabia in the pre-Islamic era, sparking an interest in this region and period that remains with me. But this book also contains some sage observations about method—even though Nibley sometimes disclaims an interest in it—as well as historical assumptions in the study of the Book of Mormon that retain their timeliness and deserve further examination. In this review, I deal only with *Lehi in the Desert*, which comprises the first third of this volume. Of the numerous topics that are treated in *Lehi in the Desert*, I wish to focus in this review essay on Nibley’s strategies and method in Book of Mormon studies, as reflected in *Lehi in the Desert* and elsewhere in his writings.¹

The chapters comprising *Lehi in the Desert* originally appeared in the *Improvement Era* in 1950,² and were published in a single volume in 1952 along with *The World of the Jaredites*. With his typical wit, erudition, and graceful writing style, Nibley reflects, in *Lehi in the Desert*, on various aspects of the first eighteen chapters of 1 Nephi: the troubled political

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conditions that prevailed in the ancient Near East at the beginning of Book of Mormon history, which ultimately brought all of the major powers in that area into conflict; some of the “strange names” in the Book of Mormon, which are explained in the light of cognate Egyptian names; a comparison of various elements found in the desert chapters of 1 Nephi with early Arab materials—life in a tent, the order of march, and day-to-day life in the wilderness, with its constant search for sufficient food, water, and shelter from the elements; a penetrating analysis of Lehi’s dream of the tree of life and a comparison with similar motifs in pre-Islamic and early Islamic literature; the affairs of the family of Lehi and Ishmael at home in Jerusalem and in the desert; and a review of the events and circumstances surrounding the end of the desert wanderings in the land Bountiful.

In Lehi in the Desert as well as in other works of his considerable corpus of writings on the Book of Mormon—which now include four volumes of The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley—composed over a period of some forty years, Nibley’s approach has reflected his own desideratum that one “give the Book of Mormon the benefit of the doubt,” granting that it is what it claims to be—an historically authentic ancient document of a people who originated in ancient Israel. Thereafter he tests those claims from the internal evidence of the book itself—names, historical details, and cultural concepts—against what can be known about the ancient Near East (or ancient America). When this is done, a picture emerges in the Book of Mormon that is strikingly consistent with what can be determined about the ancient Near East (and Mesoamerica). Most of his examples in Lehi in the Desert come from Arabia and ancient Egypt, as well as ancient Israel.

To show that the Book of Mormon is not inconsistent with what it claims to be, Nibley accepts—for purposes of argument—the criteria set forth by other scholars dealing with other ancient documents, and then applies those same criteria in considering the Book of Mormon. Thus, for example, at the outset of Lehi in the Desert, Nibley reviews the great American archaeologist William F. Albright’s criteria for determining the historical plausibility of the Middle Egyptian tale of Sinuhe,

3 I.e., vol. 5, Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites; vol. 6, An Approach to the Book of Mormon; vol. 7, Since Cumorah; and vol. 8, The Prophetic Book of Mormon.
which Albright considers to be "a substantially true account of life in its milieu" on the grounds (1) that its "local color is extremely plausible," (2) it describes a "state of social organization" which "agrees exactly with our present archaeological and documentary evidence . . . ," (3) "The Amorite personal names contained in the story are satisfactory for that period and region," and (4) "Finally, there is nothing unreasonable in the story itself" (p. 3). Nibley then asks about the story of Lehi: "Does it correctly reflect 'the cultural horizon and religious and social ideas and practices of the time'? Does it have authentic historical and geographical background? Is the mise-en-scène mythical, highly imaginative, or extravagantly improbable? Is its local color correct, and are its proper names convincing?" (p. 4).

In anticipation of the criticism that his approach to the material constitutes a sort of special pleading and lacks "objectivity" (still the elusive—and unreachable—will-o'-the-wisp of many in the historical profession), Nibley responds directly, then, with a parable:

But haven't we been decidedly partial in dealing with Lehi? Of course we have. We are the counsel for the defense. Our witnesses have all been of our own choosing, but no one can deny that they are competent and unprejudiced. We invited the prosecution to examine them. To date they have not done so, but instead have brought their own witnesses into court, up-to-date intellectuals who can tell us just exactly what the accused was thinking when he wrote the Book of Mormon. Such evidence

4 The question of objectivity among American historians is dealt with in detail by Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). David Hackett Fischer, in *Historians' Fallacies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 4, cites the "Baconian fallacy," which Fischer describes as "the idea that a historian can operate without the aid of preconceived questions, hypotheses, ideas, assumptions, theories, paradigms, postulates, prejudices, presumptions, or general presuppositions of any kind. He is supposed to go a-wandering in the dark forest of the past, gathering facts like nuts and berries, until he has enough to make a general truth. Then he is to store up his general truths until he has the whole truth. This idea is doubly deficient, for it commits a historian to the pursuit of an impossible object by an impracticable method."
is not evidence at all—it is bad science, bad history, and even bad newspaper reporting and would be rejected by any court in the land. But it might impress the half-educated jury, and that is its purpose. We can best explain the new trend in Book of Mormon criticism by a little parable.

A young man once long ago claimed he had found a large diamond in his field as he was ploughing. He put the stone on display to the public free of charge, and everyone took sides. A psychologist showed, by citing some famous case studies, that the young man was suffering from a well-known form of delusion. An historian showed that other men have also claimed to have found diamonds in fields and been deceived. A geologist proved that there were no diamonds in the area but only quartz: the young man had been fooled by a quartz. When asked to inspect the stone itself, the geologist declined with a weary, tolerant smile and a kindly shake of the head. An English professor showed that the young man in describing his stone used the very same language that others had used in describing uncut diamonds: he was, therefore, simply speaking the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists' assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. A clergyman wrote a book to show that it was not the young man but someone else who had found the stone.

Finally an indigent jeweler named Snite pointed out that since the stone was still available for examination the answer to the question of whether it was a diamond or not had absolutely nothing to do with who found it, or whether the finder was honest or sane, or who believed him, or whether he would know a diamond from a brick, or whether diamonds had ever been found in fields, or whether people had even been fooled by quartz or glass, but was to be answered simply and solely by putting the stone to certain well-known tests for diamonds. Experts on diamonds were called in. Some of them declared it genuine. The others made nervous jokes about it and declared that they could not very well jeopardize their
dignity and reputations by appearing to take the thing too seriously. To hide the bad impression thus made, someone came out with the theory that the stone was really a synthetic diamond, very skilfully made, but a fake just the same. The objection to this is that the production of a good synthetic diamond 120 years ago would have been an even more remarkable feat than the finding of a real one.\(^5\)

Lest we fail to see “the moral of the story,” Nibley makes it perfectly clear: “the testimony brought out by the prosecution, however learned, has been to date entirely irrelevant and immaterial.”\(^6\) Unhappily, things are scarcely better today, and the approach of the Book of Mormon’s critics is hardly more sound—or more relevant—now than when Nibley first wrote these words in 1950. While today some critics may actually look at the text of the Book of Mormon, their analyses are generally restricted to showing how it reflects elements from Joseph Smith’s own environment,\(^7\) an issue that Nibley takes on squarely elsewhere in his writings on the Book of Mormon.\(^8\)


\(^6\) Nibley, *Lehi in the Deseret*, 122.

\(^7\) Environmentalist explanations are, of course, nothing new in Book of Mormon studies. Alexander Campbell (1788-1866), the founder of the Disciples of Christ, composed a response to the Book of Mormon that was published on February 7, 1831, in his paper, the *Millennial Harbinger*, and was reprinted as a pamphlet in Boston in 1832 (with “Prefactory [sic] Notes” by Joshua V. Himes) under the title *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon; with an Examination of Its Internal and External Evidences, and a Refutation of Its Pretences to Divine Authority*. The book, according to Campbell, is solely the product of the mind of Joseph: “There never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers, nor more certainly conceived in one cranium since the first book appeared in human language, than this same book.” Further, Campbell claims that the Book of Mormon represents the reflections of Joseph (whom Campbell, in *Delusions* [Boston: Greene, 1832], 11, characterizes as a “knave” who is “ignorant” and “impudent”) on the social, political, and religious controversies of the day: “infant baptism, ordination, the trinity, regeneration, repentance, justification, the fall of man, the atonement, transubstantiation, fasting, penance, church government, religious experience, the call to the ministry, the general resurrection, eternal punishment, who may baptize, and even the question of freemasonry,
In order to provide an alternative explanation of the Book of Mormon as the product of the nineteenth century on sound historical grounds, it is necessary to demonstrate that the various elements of the book that have ancient analogues could have

republican government, and the rights of man," ibid., 13. Further, Campbell asserts that the Book of Mormon not only demonstrates a fundamental misunderstanding of Israelite and Jewish history (the Book of Mormon portrays some of the Nephites as Christians hundreds of years before the birth of Christ) but an abysmal grasp of English grammar as well. Delusions is significant among studies of the Book of Mormon since it is not only one of the earliest extensive attacks on the book but in many ways it sets the agenda for future environmentalist critiques of the Book of Mormon (i.e., a position that sees the Book of Mormon deriving from, or responding to, various trends in early nineteenth-century upstate New York). Subsequently, however, according to Richard Bushman, in Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1984), 231 n. 37, Campbell, writing in the Millennial Harbinger, reversed his position entirely, adopting the Spalding-Rigdon theory, according to which Sidney Rigdon purloined a copy of a manuscript by Solomon Spalding, developed from it what became the Book of Mormon, which he passed on to Joseph Smith, in the late 1820s, while later pretending to have met Joseph for the first time in 1830.

8 Thus, in discussing Thomas O'Dea's environmentalist explanation in "What Frontier, What Camp Meeting?" in The Prophetic Book of Mormon, vol. 8 in The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 185-86, where O'Dea claims that "The book is obviously an American work," Nibley asks, how obviously? Well, "American sentiments permeate the work." For example? " 'Taxation is oppressive, and lawyers are not to be trusted.' In what nation is that not true? Has Dr. O'Dea never heard of Molière or Aristophanes or Rabelais? Again the obligation of the clergymen to work in Alma's church is right out of New England: But why not right out of Cluny, or the Qumran Community, or the Didache? Alma's going 'from one body to another, preaching unto the people repentance and faith on the Lord' (Mosiah 25:15) is for O'Dea 'a scene strongly reminiscent of the camp meeting,' though he admits elsewhere that camp meetings belong to the post Book of Mormon period. But Dr. O'Dea's job as a critic is not simply to report what Book of Mormon scenes and incidents suggest to his mind, but to prove, when he suggests a source, that the matter concerned could not possibly have come from any other source. After all, the man who by some mysterious process can borrow the ideas of thirteenth-century monks, Brahmin sages, French satirists, and Washingtonian reformers may at any given moment be stealing from any conceivable source, so that no critic can ever be sure of his ground."
been known to Joseph Smith. To do this, Nibley asserts, it would be necessary to explain, point by point, how Joseph could have obtained his information so as to provide an accurate and convincing ancient setting for the Book of Mormon. At the end of *Lehi in the Desert*, Nibley makes this point: "Another thing, the prosecution must prove their case to the hilt: it is not enough to show, even if they could, that there are mistakes in the Book of Mormon, for all humans make mistakes; what they must explain is how the 'author' of the book happened to get so many things right."

Nibley's point is well taken. Simply adducing parallels between the Book of Mormon and life in nineteenth-century upstate New York, or any other era or place besides the one from which the book claims to derive, is methodologically problematical, unless it can be shown at the same time that these various features of the book could not possibly have been known in the ancient Near East and in Mesoamerica—a formidable task, indeed, given the relative paucity of our evidence from these areas (about which more below). To my knowledge, though, no one who has challenged the historical authenticity of the Book of Mormon as an ancient document has looked in a serious and systematic way at the ancient evidence adduced by Nibley (and now many others), or attempted to deal with—and disprove—that evidence point by point. One solemn opponent of the Book of Mormon grants that Nibley has adduced a fair bit of ancient evidence for the Book of Mormon, but then dismisses hundreds of pages of this evidence with the mere flick of a wrist by saying that Nibley has failed to take into consideration the nineteenth-century material. Thereafter, this author devotes many pages to nineteenth-century parallels to the Book of Mormon, without ever seriously examining—and refuting—the ancient analogues. Such a critique is simply insufficient and is methodologically wanting as well: as long as no discussion is provided for the ancient evidence relating to the Book of Mormon, the critique remains incomplete.

It might be possible, I suppose, for someone to write a book dealing solely with nineteenth-century parallels to the Book of Mormon, but if no conclusions are drawn, then it becomes an exercise in methodological frivolity, on a par with taking the phone book, cutting it up, and putting it back together in a higgledy-piggledy fashion. A volume of nineteenth-century

parallels to the Book of Mormon that provides no conclusion can, at the very least, be charged with methodological sloppiness, if not also some slight disingenuousness.

The historian who does accept the internal claims of the Book of Mormon and who wishes to deal with the book as an historical document has two possible avenues of approach: (1) to show that the suspicion or accusation of forgery is ungrounded; or (2) simply to “contextualize” the book, attempting to understand its content better by understanding better the ancient Near East and ancient America, the areas and periods from which it claims to derive. One who takes the former approach must show both that the Book of Mormon reflects, in its general outline and in its details, the ancient world from which it claims to derive and that these details (or at least some of them) were not available to Joseph Smith at the time of the translation. This approach to the Book of Mormon is, in general, the one taken by Nibley in Lehi in the Desert (where he describes himself as “the counsel for the defense”). Nibley will frequently clinch a point with such statements as (in this case, with reference to the taking of oaths): “In such a situation there was only one thing Nephi would possibly have done, both to spare Zoram and to avoid giving alarm—and no westerner could have guessed what it was,” or “virtually all that is known of the world in which Lehi is purported to have lived has been discovered within the last hundred years—mostly within the last thirty.”

Should the historian wish to dispute the charge of forgery against a document, he would be expected to show that features of the work in question accurately reflect the world from which it claims to derive in ways that could not have been known to the purported forger. It is not, of course, necessary to show that every element in the document is unique to the period of time from which it claims to derive, nor is it necessary to explain how there might be parallels between features of the document and other periods of time. Indeed, given the nature of human

10 It is, of course, possible—and perfectly legitimate—to deal with the doctrine and teachings of the Book of Mormon without particular regard to its historical setting.

11 Ibid., 120. In An Approach to the Book of Mormon and Since Cumorah, on the other hand, Nibley generally takes the second, “contextualizing” approach.

12 Ibid., 102.

13 Ibid., 4.
experience, it would be surprising if there was nothing similar to what is known from other times and places. To take a parallel, hypothetical example from the classical world: a manuscript that deals with the end of the Republic and rise of the Empire is discovered in a monastery in Venice that dates, ostensibly, from the twelfth century, and appears to be a history written in the first century A.D. by an otherwise unknown Roman historian. It contains some information that is already known, and some that is new. It is known only in this manuscript (this fact should surprise no one, since many of the works of classical authors are extant in only one late manuscript). Some doubt the genuineness of the manuscript, believing that it was actually produced in Venice. Those supporting the authenticity of the document would be expected to show that it reflected, in its broad outline as well as in its details, the period from which it claimed to derive, and that it contained material that could not have been known in medieval Venice. It would be no more necessary to explain why there are similarities to late medieval Venice than to explain why it shows similarities to ancient Myra or early medieval Bari or downtown Manhattan of the twentieth century—that is not a part of his task in refuting the charge of forgery.

In comparison with what is known of nineteenth-century America, the documentary remains from the ancient world are meager. In dealing with the presence of Greek words in the book of Daniel, a biblical scholar has noted:

Only a fraction of the possible [classical and ancient Near Eastern] sites have been surveyed, and only a fraction of the surveyed sites have been excavated. In Greece over 300 Mycenaean sites are known. But this number could be readily multiplied by more intensive and more extensive surveys. In 1944 the Palestine Gazette listed a total of about 3,000 sites in Cis-Jordan and several hundred in Trans-Jordan. In 1963 the total of known sites increased to about 5,000. Paul Lapp estimated that of this total there had been scientific excavations at about 150 sites, including 26 major excavations. “To be sure, many of the sites on record would not merit extensive excavation, but if only one in four were promising, major excavations have till now been carried out at only two per cent of the potential sites.” Seton Lloyd notes that by 1949 more than 5,000 mounds had been
located in Iraq. As of 1962 Beek’s atlas records twenty-eight major excavations in Iraq.14

By this estimate, only a tiny fraction of what could be known archaeologically from ancient Israel or the classical world has been uncovered (and surely we know more about the ancient Mediterranean world than we do about Mesoamerica). Documentary finds have hardly fared better.

Speaking of Greek literature, Baldry notes: “Of scores of epic poems, we have a mere half dozen; of thousands of plays, forty-five; of countless speeches, enough to fill a few volumes.” This is true of even the works of the three greatest Greek dramatists—Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles. Only about ten percent of their works have been transmitted to us. Of all the Greek lyric poets who wrote in the seventh and sixth centuries we have manuscripts only for Theognis and Pindar. Even for Pindar all but the victory odes are fragmentary. From Sappho, apart from fragments, we have only one complete poem.

If so little of highly prized literature survived, it is no surprise that even a smaller portion of mundane writing survived. To take an extreme example from the Roman world:

In the first three hundred years of the empire there were never less than twenty-five Roman legions, and each legion had five thousand men. The legions were paid three times a year, so that there were 375,000 pay vouchers a year. Multiply that by three hundred, and the result is 112.5 million.

Of this grand total of pay vouchers we have recovered only six and a fragment of a seventh.15

Has the documentary evidence that would illuminate the ancient setting of the Book of Mormon fared much better? I doubt it. Further, given the vast amount of material, relatively

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15 Ibid., 171.
speaking, available from the nineteenth century and the repetition of certain themes throughout history, it is not surprising that parallels—some of which are linguistic, as well as conceptual—can be drawn between the Book of Mormon and that period of time.

Another approach to the Book of Mormon may be "contextualization": understanding the text better through understanding better the milieu from which it came. Such an approach may not be intended as, and should not necessarily be construed as, an apologia for the internal claims of the Book of Mormon. Just as comparisons with the ancient world are made in biblical studies primarily to elucidate the text of the Bible, with no apologetic agenda intended, so the same may be done in the case of the Book of Mormon. The forthcoming volume on warfare in the Book of Mormon takes this approach.16 In general, the essays in this volume treat the ancient origins of the Book of Mormon as a given, without any apologetic intent, and attempt to understand the Book of Mormon better in the light of these other materials.

Subsequent studies of 1 Nephi 1-18 by the Astons, Brown, England, the Hiltons, and Tvedtnes17 have all tended to validate the evidence that Nibley presents in Lehi in the Desert. Indeed, this whole section squares well with what is known of the life and geography of the Arabian Peninsula, much of which was scarcely known to the West until the twentieth century. There were few vade mecums in the early nineteenth century that could have provided Joseph Smith a thorough and accurate picture of the Arabian Peninsula. The outstanding geographic studies by Adolf Sprenger and Forster in the 1840s were among the first to describe the Arabian Peninsula in any detail, but even these would have provided no help for the place name Nahom,

now in the Arab Republic of Yemen, recently visited by Warren Aston, which is in a location that plausibly corresponds to what is known about the site in the Book of Mormon.

In recent months, I have heard several methodological objections raised to looking at—or taking seriously—evidence for the Book of Mormon as an ancient document. Most of these objections are not new, but are simply variants on issues dealt with by Nibley at one point or another in his writings. Thus, for instance, evidence for an ancient setting for the Book of Mormon has been dismissed by some because the authors were not specifically trained in the field of Book of Mormon studies. But the logical correlative to ignoring evidence in a discussion about the Book of Mormon on the basis of the author’s purported training in that field would, for example, be that there can be no legitimate Ugaritic studies because nobody knew anything about Ugarit until 1929, no legitimate study of Assyriology since no one knew a thing about the subject a couple of generations ago, no legitimate Egyptology for the same reason, and so forth. But any field that impinges on the topics that are discussed in the Book of Mormon—and there are a whole host of them—has already provided training in the skills and techniques that will facilitate study of the Book of Mormon—unless Book of Mormon studies are absolutely different from other academic endeavors. Objecting to (or refusing to take seriously) evidence because of the training and background of the one presenting the evidence constitutes a kind of credential checking—something that Nibley has frequently deplored—which is more concerned with looking at degrees than seriously dealing with issues raised in support of the antiquity of the Book of Mormon by that evidence.

Another objection to the Book of Mormon as an historically authentic ancient document centers on its supposedly anachronistic Christian elements. This is a form of the environmental argument and rests on a kind of question begging, assuming (here, that the Christian elements are anachronistic, and the book is thus not genuine) what one sets out to prove (that it is not genuine because of such Christian elements), a point that is particularly problematical since the Book of Mormon claims for itself a Christian component. To accept only those elements of the Book of Mormon—or any other document, for that matter—that accord with what is already known is to refuse it any primary evidentiary value and to render the Book of Mormon—or any other document—
superfluous. Yet each new document of religious content has changed our perception of the ancient religious world, often radically: the Ugaritic tablets have given us our first detailed glimpse into the Canaanite pantheon by "true believers," the Dead Sea Scrolls are the first documents written by actual Essenes, the Nag Hammadi codices provide insights into, among other matters, Gnosticism so called, by adherents rather than opponents. Is it so unreasonable to envision a "Church of Anticipation" of a Messiah in the pre-Christian era? Or are we to expect no further documents that would necessitate paradigm shifts? To single out the Book of Mormon, among documents that purport to deal with the ancient world, is, again, almost certainly the result of a kind of question-begging. If the Book of Mormon has been slower in being accepted than these other documents, it is probably because of its origin and the means and mode of its translation.

An even more extreme methodological objection to taking seriously an ancient setting for the Book of Mormon comes from a rather prolific writer on the Book of Mormon from an environmentalist perspective who recently claimed, in my hearing, that translations only inform the reader about the period of time in which the translations were made. The implications of such a deconstructionist position are simply astonishing: where we had imagined that in reading the Bible in the King James Version, Revised Standard Version, New International Version, or the Jewish Publication Society Translation we would learn something about ancient Israel or the life of Jesus and the early Church, we were actually learning about the England of James I or of Victoria, or America of the twentieth century. Indeed, in this view all translations, whether they be of ancient literature or not, may appropriately be tossed out. While such a position may—justifiably—strain our credulity, this claim is useful in justifying ignoring evidence for the Book of Mormon as an ancient document.

Assertions of "objectivity" and accusations of partisanship have sometimes been brought to bear in discussions of the Book of Mormon. Some of the misunderstandings on the matter of "objectivity" have resulted from conflicting definitions, other misperceptions from an uncareful use of words. The issue of objectivity, as it occurs in discussions concerning the writing of history, does not revolve around whether events actually occurred at a given time and under given circumstances. No one on either side of the discussion concerning the historicity of the
Book of Mormon disagrees that events did occur—that something happened—in 600 B.C. or A.D. 1829. Rather, what is at stake in discussions of “objectivity” centers on recognizing that everyone approaches events with presuppositions, assumptions, and preunderstandings that aid him in selecting and categorizing those events in a coherent fashion. “The question,” according to Arthur H. King and C. Terry Warner, “is not whether the historian, like other craftsmen, colors what he makes with his own personality, for inevitably he does. Rather, the question is what sort of colors he gives it.”18 The quest for assumptions and preunderstandings—one’s own or those of others—remains perennially relevant. King and Warner further warn that history written with the pretense of “objectivity” becomes merely an “affectation, a style deliberately adopted with an eye for professional legitimacy and success.”19

It is, then, hardly correct to state that those who claim that the Book of Mormon is ancient are not being “objective” while those who deny such claims are. The very fact that many of those who make the latter assertion have not even looked at the ancient evidence in any sort of systematic fashion is itself an indication that there has been a hardy lack of objectivity on their part. Nor is the enterprise of writing history involved in “proving” or “disproving” but in sustaining, enhancing, or questioning plausibility. Here, again, those who would question or impugn the historicity of the Book of Mormon do not hold the higher ground—the realm of “proof”—while those who support its historical authenticity labor in the realm of mere plausibility, although this has been suggested.20 While the Book of Mormon can be studied without any particular regard to its truth claims, the window is fairly narrow: such a study would have to deal with the way in which the work has been used in the community of believers and outside of it, and what influence it may have had.

19 Ibid., 486.
In *Lehi in the Desert*, as elsewhere in his writings, Nibley has shown us that a knowledge of the original sources—in the original languages, where possible—is desirable, if not indispensable, since it is in the original sources that we gain the clearest and most direct picture of the world from which the Book of Mormon claims to derive. An unabashed partisan himself, Nibley has shown that partisanship, explicit or implicit, admitted or denied, is in the nature of the historiographical enterprise. He has shown that academic writing need not be dull but can be witty, graceful, and interesting (in contrast to many academics, who write with the grace of an elephant). One senses here, as everywhere, Nibley’s excitement for learning and his enthusiasm for putting knowledge at the service of illuminating faith.

In most discussions of the historicity of the Book of Mormon heretofore, the interlocutors have tended to talk past each other. They may still do so, but they should at least address the issues. Nibley’s *Lehi in the Desert* lays out what some of those issues are.