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### Hugh Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of the *Prophetic Book of Mormon* (1989), by Hugh Nibley.

Hugh Nibley. *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch, vol. 8 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989. xi + 595 pp. with scripture and subject indexes. \$18.95.

Reviewed by Daniel C. Peterson

Many of the contributors to the recently published *Festschrift* honoring Hugh Nibley took the opportunity of paying explicit tribute to him at the commencement of their articles.<sup>1</sup> For no better reason than sheer inattentiveness, I did not, and I would like to remedy that defect, at least partially, here. I am only one of a number of scholars and amateurs in the Church who owe their interest in antiquity and comparative religions, and much of their approach to these vast subjects, to the example set by Hugh Nibley. He has always been an inspiration, even if his brilliance has not infrequently also been an intimidation. And although few of us still suspect that he has transcended human limitations, most of us—myself emphatically included—have found in the course of our own researches that his general orientation and indeed many of his particular insights have continued to hold up remarkably well.

The lengthy collection of Nibley's essays published as *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* gathers together in one convenient place pieces which had previously either been scattered in a multitude of different publications of varying accessibility or (in the cases of "Freemen and King-Men in the Book of Mormon," "The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After," and the title essay) not published at all. The essay called "The Book of Mormon: True or False?" features an important new addendum, based on remarks delivered in Portland, Oregon. These are interesting pieces, and the volume might perhaps serve as a good introduction to his thought on the Book of Mormon, since it spans virtually his entire publishing career—the first article appeared originally in 1953—and furnishes bite-sized samples of almost the whole range of his thought on the subject. "New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study" (pp. 54-126) is

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<sup>1</sup> See John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, eds., *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990).

probably the best statement of Nibley's methodology available in print.

Naturally, there is some repetition among the essays. But there is also impressive variety. In "The Boy Nephi in Jerusalem" (pp. 207-11), for example, we see Nibley as a writer for children—a role seldom associated with him, but highly indicative, I think, of his nonpublic character. "The Mormon View of the Book of Mormon" (pp. 259-64) includes a marvelously concise statement on the subject written originally for the multilingual Catholic journal *Concilium*. (I first ran across it as a missionary, in an elegant German translation, and actually used it with some of my more intellectually inclined investigators.) "Howlers in the Book of Mormon" (pp. 243-58) briefly discusses some of the apparently ridiculous elements in the book which are, in fact, "the best index to its authenticity" and which clearly demonstrate that "the book was definitely not a typical product" of the nineteenth century. On pp. 221-22, we find Nibley's challenge to his religion students to write their own Book of Mormon during the semester. The fact that nobody has yet accepted his challenge should give pause to those who glibly dismiss the Book of Mormon as—what else could it possibly be?—merely the work of a frontier yokel with "a measure of learning and a fecund imagination."<sup>2</sup> ("Mrs. Brodie," Nibley remarks on pp. 301-2, "saw in the Book of Mormon only the product of a completely untrained, unbridled, undisciplined imagination that ran over like a spring freshet.")

In essays such as "Just Another Book" (pp. 148-69), "The Grab Bag" (pp. 170-81), "What Frontier, What Camp Meeting?" (pp. 182-92), and "The Comparative Method" (pp. 193-206; cf. 230, 300), Nibley argues powerfully (if somewhat ahead of his time) against the currently blooming environmentalist explanation of the Book of Mormon, in which the entire Restoration is seen as the by-product of Joseph Smith's undisciplined imagination mixed either with (a) folk "magic," (b) scraps of rural Protestantism, (c) republican ideology, (d) socioeconomic insecurities, or (e) anything else you care to name.<sup>3</sup> "The Book of Mormon critics have made an

<sup>2</sup> The phrase is from Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2d ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 69, but the sentiment can be found in the writings of many others of similar inclination.

<sup>3</sup> Richard L. Bushman, *Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984), 128: "In recent

art of explaining a very big whole by a very small part," Nibley points out.

The game is to look for some mysterious person or document from which Joseph Smith might have got the few simple and obvious ideas and then cry triumphantly, "At last we have it! Now we know where the Book of Mormon came from!"

"If only someone will show me how to draw a circle," cries the youthful Joseph Smith, "I will make you a fine Swiss watch!" So Joachim or Anselm<sup>4</sup> or Ethan Smith or Rabelais or somebody takes a stick and draws a circle in the sand, and forthwith the adroit and wily Joseph turns out a beautifully running mechanism that tells perfect time!

This is not an exaggeration. The Book of Mormon in structure and design is every bit as complicated, involved, and ingenious as the works of a Swiss watch, and withal just as smoothly running. With no model to follow and no instruction of any kind (Where was the model? Who could instruct?), the writer of that book brought together thousands of ideas and events and knit them together in a most marvelous unity. Yet the critics like to think they have explained the Book of Mormon completely if they can just discover where Joseph Smith might have got one of his ideas or expressions! (p. 175)<sup>5</sup>

decades the environmentalist explanation of the Book of Mormon has replaced the Spalding hypothesis among non-Mormon scholars."

<sup>4</sup> I have corrected, here, an obvious typographical error ("Anslern," for "Anselm"). There are a few too many of these, but they can be corrected in a future printing.

<sup>5</sup> From another perspective, the words of a distinguished American historian who happens to be a Latter-day Saint, Professor Richard L. Bushman of Columbia University, are relevant here: "It is important to recognize that the Book of Mormon was more than a patchwork collection of theological assertions, or a miscellany of statements about the Indians. . . . We may miss the point if we treat the Book of Mormon as if it were that kind of hodgepodge. Sometimes we employ a proof text method in our analyses, taking passages out of context to prove a point. We seek to associate a few words or an episode with Smith or his time, the Masons

Taking aim at one of the favorite weapons in the environmentalist arsenal, Nibley rejects close parallel passages as proof of fraud (p. 88). Yet he does not repudiate the search for parallels altogether. (How could he, since it is his own approach?) "The comparative method as such is neither good nor bad. It can be abused (what tool cannot?), and to condemn it outright because of its imperfections would put an end to all scholarship" (p. 193). (Oddly, in my experience it has always been those hostile to Nibley's enterprise who have summarily dismissed what they like to term "parallelomania." Then they often turn right around and point out purportedly damning parallels to Joseph Smith's nineteenth-century environment without the slightest apparent sense of incongruity.) But there are other, more fundamental flaws in the environmentalist project. Among these is the fact that Joseph Smith and Mormonism, which we are now supposed to regard as quintessentially American, were regarded by their contemporaries as anything else but that. "We know exactly," Nibley observes (p. 407; cf. 152), "how his neighbors reacted to the claims of Joseph Smith, and it was not (as it has become customary to insist) with the complacent or sympathetic tolerance of backwoods 'Yorkers,' to whom such things were supposedly everyday experience: nothing could equal the indignation and rage excited among them by the name and message of Joseph Smith."

Still, even this does not exhaust the fundamental weaknesses of the environmentalist position. "For many years," Nibley says (p. 537), "critics of the Book of Mormon fondly believed that if they could find some striking parallel in the Bible or in U.S. history to a situation in the Book of Mormon, they had proven that Joseph Smith had plagiarized the whole thing. But when equally striking parallels are found to things of which the ancient Book of Mormon writers, had they existed, would

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here, republican ideology there, then a touch of Arminianism or of evangelical conversion preaching. While that kind of analysis may have its uses, it has had disappointing results, and the danger is that we will lose sight of the larger world which the book evokes." Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon in Early Mormon History," in Davis Bitton and Maureen Ursenbach Beecher, eds., *New Views of Mormon History: Essays in Honor of Leonard J. Arrington* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 5.

surely have been aware, but of which no one in Joseph Smith's day could have had an inkling, they were ignored."

Nibley's use of the past tense notwithstanding, such refusal to consider ancient evidence continues to the present.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I would contend that it is actually growing in strength in certain circles, where it is considered a token of methodological sophistication. But Nibley will have none of this. He calls upon "the well-established rules of textual criticism" (p. 54) to argue that serious study of the Book of Mormon requires "examination of its claims *as if* they were valid" (p. 127, emphasis in the original; cf. 499). "To begin with, says Blass, 'We have the document, and the name of its author; we must begin our examination by assuming that the author indicated really wrote it.' You always begin by assuming that a text is genuine. What critic of the Book of Mormon has ever done that? One can hear the screams of protest: 'How unscientific! How naive! How hopelessly biased!' . . . Why not assume that it is false, as its critics regularly do? Because, says Friedrich Blass, once you assume that a document is a fake, no arguments and no evidence to the end of time can ever vindicate it, even if it is absolutely genuine" (pp. 55-56). Once Othello had begun to listen to Iago's insinuations, virtually no evidence could have proven Desdemona's innocence. All pointed to her guilt. Yet Desdemona *was* innocent, and Othello was tragically, fatally wrong.

This is a point with which environmentalist critics of the Book of Mormon simply must come to terms. Yet I see no sign of their doing so. Instead, my own experience validates precisely what Nibley says. I have been told countless times that my position, which assumes the Book of Mormon to be what it claims to be, is hopelessly irrational and unscholarly. At the same time, I have been informed repeatedly that the other position, which assumes the Book of Mormon to be at best a pious fraud, is the ultimate in scientific objectivity (whatever that

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<sup>6</sup> Compare the refusal of most Mesoamericanists to consider the possibility of any ancient contact between the Old and New Worlds, mentioned by Nibley on p. 267. The idea that scholarship, as actually practiced, is objective and value-neutral has long since perished among most of those who monitor what goes on in practical reality. See William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (Garden City: Anchor Doubleday, 1978), 3-117, for evidence that even mathematics and symbolic logic—surely the purest of purely theoretical disciplines!—are not exempt from this judgment.

may be). Nibley did not overstate the situation when he said that anyone who undertakes to examine Mormonism's claims from a faithful perspective is "automatically branded as prejudiced merely by taking the job" (p. 127). Indeed, one of his very vocal critics even went so far on one occasion as to link friends of mine with the forces of irrationalism—among whom he specifically listed the Ayatollah Khomeini and Plato (!)—merely because they argued (plausibly, in my opinion) that elements of Freemasonry have ancient parallels. No attempt was made to refute their logic; indeed, scarcely any reference was made to their arguments. It was a *tour de force* of historical and philosophical misinformation, not to say of *ad hominem* illogic, but it did make one point clear beyond cavil: To be on the Wrong Side is to ally oneself with darkness and superstition, and, one almost feels, to risk the attention of the environmentalist Thought Police. Yet it seems obvious to me that the two assumptions, for and against the Book of Mormon, are at worst equally unobjective, and that the negative assumption cannot by any reasonable standard be regarded as somehow privileged. Indeed, Nibley makes a most intriguing case that the positive assumption is actually the more methodologically sound.

The lengthy book review entitled "Bar-Kochba and Book of Mormon Backgrounds" (pp. 274-88) is well worth reading for its depiction of believable Near Eastern elements in the Nephite record. Among other things, it shows that the masculine personal name "Alma," still the object of much ignorant snickering among anti-Mormons, fits perfectly into an ancient Near Eastern setting (p. 282; cf. 310). The discussion of "The Lachish Letters," found at pp. 380-406, illustrates how well the first chapters of the Book of Mormon match what we are only now coming to know from other sources about the Jerusalem of Lehi's day. Referring to those letters and the Book of Mormon, Nibley notes that "both records paint pictures which are far removed from those supplied in any other known sources, and yet the two pictures are as alike as postcards of the Eiffel Tower" (p. 383). "Joseph Smith was either extravagantly lucky in the opening episodes of his Book of Mormon," Nibley concludes, "or else he had help from someone who knew a great deal" (pp. 401-2).

Some essays represent Nibley in his role as the loyal critic of modern Mormondom. Usually, in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*, while he criticizes clearly he does so by indirection:



"We must not forget those Book of Mormon super-good guys, the Zoramites—hard working, independent, fiercely patriotic, brave, smart, prosperous Zoramites—strictly attending their meetings and observing proper dress standards. What a perfectly wonderful self-image!"<sup>7</sup> (p. 488; cf. 521). In this respect, his is one of the most challenging of contemporary Latter-day Saint voices, and many have come to see his social and ethical writings as among his most important.<sup>8</sup> Some of those, in fact, who reject his theological and historical beliefs, but who nonetheless seem possessed of a residual admiration for him, profess to see in his "progressive" politics the one feature of his thought that is destined to last. Indeed, for a few who repudiate every other aspect of Mormon belief it has seemed a godsend to find Nibley apparently on their side in criticizing institutional and social Mormonism. But Nibley is not on their side, and he gives cold comfort to those who denigrate the leaders of the Church. Instead, he offers "the Book of Mormon admonition to be more patient with the imperfections of the church and less patient with our own. The church is a training school in which everyone is there for the training. So don't waste time criticizing the authorities" (p. 564). He insists throughout his voluminous writings that it is we, with our ideologies and habits, who will be judged according to the revelations of God. The Church and the scriptures are not to be judged according to human ideologies, with beliefs picked and chosen according to how they suit our own inclinations. Our first loyalty is to God and his kingdom, and not to any corporation or sociopolitical movement or scheme of material enrichment.

Nibley will have no part of any view of the gospel that does not acknowledge its absolute claims upon us. Nor is he willing to accept halfway views of the Book of Mormon as, say, inspired fiction or a nineteenth-century pseudepigraph. "Joseph Smith was either telling the truth or he was a criminal—not just a fool—and no sentimental compromises will settle anything" (p.

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<sup>7</sup> For more direct criticism, see Hugh Nibley, *Approaching Zion*, vol. 9 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1989).

<sup>8</sup> It is as a social critic—as "the Mormon essayist Hugh Nibley"—that he was quoted recently in a piece by the noted non-Mormon writer Wendell Berry. See Berry's *What Are People For?* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), 99.

65). And Nibley leaves no doubt as to where he stands on the matter:

The only alternative to Joseph Smith's explanation is to assume . . . the existence of a forger who at one moment is so clever and adroit as to imitate the archaic poetry of the desert to perfection and supply us with genuine Egyptian names, and yet so incredibly stupid as to think that the best way to fool people and get money out of them is to write an exceedingly difficult historical epic of six hundred pages. Endowed with the brains, perseverance, and superhuman cunning necessary to produce this monumental forgery, the incredibly sly genius did not have the wit to know, after years of experience in the arts of deception, that there are ten thousand safer and easier ways of fooling people than by undertaking a work of infinite toil and danger which, as he could see from the first, only made him immensely unpopular. This is the forger who never existed. (p. 59)

Nibley is not infallible. Surprisingly enough, given his legendary command of the Book of Mormon, he occasionally even makes mistakes in reporting what it distinctly says. (This should serve as a cautionary example to those critics of the Book of Mormon who have nowhere near Nibley's control of the text, and who often leap to utterly unfounded judgments. The book is dauntingly rich and frightfully complex.) For example, contrary to the assertions on pp. 466-67 and 547, Alma the Younger did not give up the leadership of the church to serve as "a simple missionary." He relinquished his political offices, "but he retained the office of high priest unto himself" (Alma 4:18; cf. 8:11, 23; 16:5). (And how, by the way, can Nibley be certain that Samuel the Lamanite held no ecclesiastical or other office? See p. 547. We know next to nothing about Samuel, or any other Lamanite.) Furthermore, Zeniff's return to the land of Nephi did not occur during the days of Mosiah the Second, son of Benjamin, but, contrary to Nibley's aside on p. 486, during the days of Mosiah the *First*, who was the father of Benjamin. (Or, perhaps, at the very latest, during the early reign of Benjamin himself. See Omni 1:23-30.) Finally, on pp. 359 and 552, Nibley mistakenly reverses the positions of Gadianton and Kishkumen. It is the latter who is the "professional hit man" (see Helaman 1:9-12; 2:3-9).

But Hugh Nibley is far more often right than wrong. (Perhaps it is significant that all of the three errors I have just identified come when he is engaged not in purely historical exegesis, but in social polemic.) Indeed, the experience of climbing laboriously to a new vista, only to find that Nibley has already been there—or, less metaphorically, of tracking down a new and exciting article only to realize, from Nibley's characteristic marginal notations, that he has already read it—has become depressingly familiar. The retrospective essay on "The Book of Mormon: Forty Years After," for instance, sheds fascinating light on the harlot "Isabel," alluded to in Alma 39:3. Surely I must have read the essay before, but I ran across it again only after submitting the final copy of my own labored discussion of the subject to the publisher.<sup>9</sup> On an earlier occasion, while still in graduate school, I decided for a term paper to review and extend the Arabic research Nibley had done in his 1964 article, "Qumran and 'The Companions of the Cave.'" <sup>10</sup> Arabic, I reasoned, was my specialty, not his, and so it would be comparatively easy and perhaps even useful to build on the foundation he had laid down. I soon found, however, that it would be the undertaking of more than a mere academic quarter even to read and assimilate the Arabic sources Nibley had already used, to say nothing of finding further ones. References abounded in his article not only to his favorite Arabic writer, al-Tha'labī of Nīshāpūr, but also to al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, al-Qurṭubī, al-Damīrī, al-Bayḍāwī, al-Nasafī, al-Ḥijāzī, al-Zamakhsharī, al-Shirbīnī, and others. I was deeply impressed, and my high estimate of his work grew all the more as I saw how accurately he had interpreted his sources. Once again, he had beaten me to the prize. But I was not alone. As my research progressed, I noticed that Nibley had also scooped Marc Philonenko, a prominent European scholar of Near Eastern studies. An undeveloped throwaway line in a footnote, in which

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<sup>9</sup> See Daniel C. Peterson, "Notes on 'Gadianton Masonry,'" in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 215-16 n. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Hugh Nibley, "Qumran and 'The Companions of the Cave,'" *Revue de Qumran* 17/5 (October 1964): 177-98; now reprinted as "Qumran and the Companions of the Cave: The Haunted Wilderness," in Hugh Nibley, *Old Testament and Related Studies*, vol. 1 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1986), 253-84.

Nibley suggests a parallel between the Qur'an and a passage in the Dead Sea Scrolls, had preceded by three years an article on the subject by an internationally famed scholar who had evidently not done his homework well enough to know that his own discovery was not original.<sup>11</sup> This was comforting, somehow.

The Book of Mormon's links to antiquity are astonishing, as Nibley has demonstrated at impressive length. "But if such a performance was beyond the capacity of anyone living in the 1820s, what is even more fantastic is the picture painted by the Book of Mormon of another world entirely, even more removed from the imagination of anyone living in 1830, namely our own world of the 1980s. And this is the world with which the Book of Mormon is primarily concerned" (p. 500; cf. 262). Nibley concludes the essay which gives this volume its title with the statement that, "only a few years ago," what he has just said "would have sounded like the most extravagant science-fiction or futuristic horror-fantasy; it would have been quite unthinkable. In my youth I thought the Book of Mormon was much too preoccupied with extreme situations, situations that had little bearing on the real world of everyday life and ordinary human affairs. What on earth could the total extermination of nations have to do with life in the enlightened modern world? Today no comment on that is necessary" (p. 468; cf. 496, 526). "Suddenly, we find ourselves there," he says at the conclusion of "Last Call: An Apocalyptic Warning from the Book of Mormon." "Scenes and circumstances that not long ago seemed as distant as Nineveh and Tyre suddenly come to life about us. Could Joseph Smith have made all this up?" (p. 531).

It is a very good question. One thing is clear: Hugh Nibley's urgent advocacy of the contemporary relevance of the Book of Mormon, shared most notably with President Ezra Taft Benson, has revealed the fatuousness of efforts made by certain environmentalist critics of the book to limit its relevance and scope to the immediate period of its coming forth.<sup>12</sup> Their

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Nibley, "Qumran and 'The Companions of the Cave,'" 196 n. 113, with Marc Philonenko, "Une Expression Qoumrânienne dans le Coran," *Atti del Terzo Congresso di Studi Arabi e Islamici* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1967), 553-56.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Vogel is a prominent instance of this. For an example of these efforts, see his *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 5, and his "Mormonism's 'Anti-Masonick Bible,'" *John Whitmer Historical Association Journal* 9 (1989): 17-30.

motivation for doing so is manifest. Whole areas of discussion and entire categories of evidence would thereby be ruled inadmissible, and the battle would be fought on grounds entirely of their choosing. In fact, the battle would be over. But the powerful message of the Book of Mormon—increasingly relevant to our times—cannot be contained in so small a bottle.

Publication of Hugh Nibley's *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* will, I hope, extend the scholarship and insights and moral passion of one of the book's greatest students to yet wider audiences. It is to be enthusiastically welcomed.

11. Compare Nibley, "Quinn and The Composition of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Mormon History*, 1987, 337-38.

12. Dan Vogel is a prominent instance of this. For an example of this effort, see his *Book of Mormon: The Sacred Text* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1985), 2, and his "Introduction," *Annals of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1989), 17-20.