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Abstract Review of *Since Cumorah* (1988), by Hugh Nibley.

Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, gen. ed. John W. Welch, vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 2d ed. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988. xv + 486 pp., scripture reference list and index. \$16.95.

Reviewed by John A. Tvedtnes

During the past half of a century, Hugh Nibley has become the apologist laureate of the Book of Mormon. One of his primary goals has been to show that criticism of the Book of Mormon has been premature and superficial. The loudest critics are typically those who have spent the least time examining the contents of the book. In their haste to condemn, they have not only failed to see what the book really says, but they have also failed to perceive that the Book of Mormon truly conforms to the milieu from which it claims to derive. Their lack of study of the book has led to an oversimplification of its complex history and culture.

Since Cumorah is one of Nibley's finest attempts to elucidate the ancient Near Eastern background of the Book of Mormon. First printed in 1967, it was released in a new edition in 1988 as volume 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* being jointly published by Deseret Book and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (F.A.R.M.S.).

Nibley's principal message is that the *Sitz im Leben* of the Book of Mormon is authentic. He points to the volcanic nature of the destructions which took place at the crucifixion of Christ, the precise detail of the olive culture discussed in Jacob 5, and ancient Near Eastern precedents for such customs as temple building, the order of battle, treading on garments as a sign of covenant, the use of the Rameumptom, methods of execution, the concealment of treasures and books, dancing maidens, the Liahona, and royal coronation rites. Over the years, other Latter-day Saint scholars have built on these ideas first discussed by Nibley.

Nibley also notes the many parallels between the Book of Mormon people and the Dead Sea Covenantors of Qumran, the Mandaeans, and the proto-Christian "Gnostics." From ancient documents, he elicits evidence to support the Book of Mormon view that a knowledge of Christ and of the principles of the gospel was had prior to the coming of the babe of Bethlehem.

For a more complete view of Nibley's researches on the historico-cultural background of the Book of Mormon, one must

also consult some of his other books, of which the following are especially important: *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*; *Lehi in the Desert*, *The World of the Jaredites*, *There Were Jaredites*; *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*; *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless*; and *Old Testament and Related Studies*.

Readers of the 1967 edition of *Since Cumorah* will find few major changes in the body of the text in the 1988 printing. What, then, justifies calling it a "second edition"? The answer lies in the history behind the book. Most of *Since Cumorah* originally appeared in articles written for the *Improvement Era* during the years 1961 and 1964-66. An appendix on pp. 409-14 makes a comparison of the location of all the materials in the magazine version, the 1967 book edition, and the present edition. When the material was gathered for the book, some was omitted. The 1988 edition restores the major deletions in the footnotes, and it is an invaluable tool to those who seek an in-depth view of Book of Mormon scholarship. There have been minor changes in the illustrations used, and a scripture index has been added.

Although Nibley was involved in the preparation of the second edition of *Since Cumorah*, he chose not to incorporate new findings in this work. However, had he done so, he would undoubtedly have added much new material now available. A good deal of additional information appears in some of his other works, all of which are scheduled for publication in the new F.A.R.M.S. series.

Unfortunately, as in nearly all works of scholarship or all research, there are certain small errors in the book. Here are some examples:

- Nibley states that Helaman and his 2,000 stripling warriors fought on the "eastern front" (p. 318); the Book of Mormon makes it clear that Helaman's campaign was by the western seashore (Alma 53:22).

- Though Nibley gives passing credit to Mormon for the abridgment of the story of the Nephite war in the days of the first Moroni (p. 293; cf. p. 291), he nevertheless generally errs in crediting the "younger Moroni" with this work (pages 298, 302-3, 306, 311). It was, in fact, Mormon who made the abridgement down to Mormon 7:10, where he bids his future readers farewell.

- Nibley suggests a comparison between the Zenos of the Book of Mormon and the biblical Kenaz, known as Zenez in a pseudepigraphical text (pp. 286-90). Kenaz, the brother of

Caleb and father of Othniel, was of the tribe of Judah (Joshua 15:13-17). Zenos, on the other hand, appears to have been an ancestor of Lehi (3 Nephi 10:16), who was of the tribe of Manasseh (Alma 10:3).

Revision of the text could also have updated all statements like "more than a decade ago" (p. 54) to "a quarter of a century ago," and the like.

Nibley's off-hand remark about Ammon's "karate" swordplay (p. 183) may not be as far-fetched as it seems. In 1969, a Latter-day Saint karate expert, Maurice W. Connell, wrote an article on "Karate in Ancient Egypt," in which he listed evidences of karate techniques used by the sons of Jacob in the book of Jasher.¹ Connell cited Nibley on another matter, but did not mention the story of Ammon or the Book of Mormon. Others have noted that some of the ritual stances depicted in Egyptian documents and in tomb and wall reliefs are similar or identical to karate stances.

Nibley devotes at least ten pages to discussions of the accounts of Lehi's dream of the tree of life (1 Nephi 8, 11, 15) and Zenos's parable of the olive tree (Jacob 5). In a very real sense, the tree is the same in both stories. Joseph Smith identified the tree of life with the olive tree, when he designated D&C 88 (see preface) as an "olive leaf . . . plucked from the *Tree of Paradise*, the Lord's message of peace to us." In Jewish lore, the tree of life is sometimes considered to be an olive tree, around which is entwined the vine, often believed to be the tree of knowledge. In the Dura-Europos synagogue, as Nibley points out (pp. 189-91), the tree of life is both a tree and a vine. So the olive tree is not out-of-place in the vineyard.

In the Book of Mormon, the tree represents not only the love of God, which was manifest in the giving of his Only Begotten Son (1 Nephi 11:25), but also the people of Israel, who are God's means of blessing the whole earth.² Lehi,

¹ Maurice W. Connell, "Karate in Ancient Egypt," *Action Karate* 2 (1969): 20-23. The same issue carried an article by another Latter-day Saint, Di Mau, "Did the Maoris Know Karate?" The author notes that there is evidence that the Maoris are Israelites.

² Likening people and nations to trees, branches, and vines is not new. We find such allegories throughout the Bible, e.g., Psalm 1:3-5; 52:8; 128:3; Jeremiah 11:19; 17:6, 8; Isaiah 24:13; Ezekiel 31; Zechariah 4; Revelation 11:3-4. Typically, the righteous are likened to trees planted beside water, while the wicked are unfruitful trees cut down and burned.

evidently following Zenos's lead, compared Israel with an olive tree, whose branches would be scattered on the face of the earth, stating that "after the house of Israel should be scattered they should be *gathered together again*; or, in fine, after the Gentiles had received the fulness of the Gospel, the natural branches of the olive-tree, or the remnants of the house of Israel, should be *grafted in, or come to the knowledge of the true Messiah*, their Lord and their Redeemer" (1 Nephi 10:12-14).

When Laman and Lemuel complained to Nephi that they could not understand Lehi's words "concerning the natural branches of the olive-tree, and also concerning the Gentiles" (1 Nephi 15:7), he explained "that the house of Israel was compared unto an olive-tree . . . and behold are we not broken off from the house of Israel, and are we not a branch of the house of Israel?" (1 Nephi 15:12). He further explained that "the grafting in of the natural branches" referred to the people's acceptance "of the gospel of the Messiah" in the last days (1 Nephi 15:13), knowing "that they are of the house of Israel," and knowing "the gospel of their Redeemer" (1 Nephi 15:14). Then they will "receive the strength and nourishment from the true vine (1 Nephi 15:15) and, having been "remembered again among the house of Israel, they shall be grafted in, being a natural branch of the olive-tree, into the true olive-tree" (1 Nephi 15:16).

While Nephi spoke of his people being grafted into "the true olive tree," Alma compared the believing Nephites to "a branch . . . grafted into the true vine" (Alma 16:17), which is

Similar ideas are expressed in pseudepigraphical works. Here are some examples:

The Illuminator of knowledge will pass by in great glory in order to leave a remnant of the seed of Noah and the sons of Ham and Japheth so that he might leave behind for himself fruit-bearing trees. (*Apocalypse of Adam* 6:1, in James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2 vols. [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983], 1:715)

The Lord's paradise, the trees of life, are his devout ones. Their planting is firmly rooted forever; they shall not be uprooted as long as the heavens shall last, for Israel is the portion and inheritance of God. (*Psalms of Solomon* 14:2-5, in Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:663)

Jesus Christ. Other allusions to the scattered branch are found in 1 Nephi 19:24; 2 Nephi 3:5; 9:53; 10:1; and Jacob 2:25. Ammon, speaking of the Lamanites, said, "God . . . has been mindful of this people, who are a branch of the tree of Israel, and has been lost from its body in a strange land" (Alma 26:36).

Critics of the Book of Mormon typically trace the olive tree parable in Jacob 5 to Romans 11:16-25 and accuse Joseph Smith of plagiarism. That the two passages are related cannot be doubted. But is Romans 11 the source of Jacob 5, or did Jacob and Paul draw upon an earlier, common source?

A partial answer to this question lies in the fact that even in the Bible Paul's grafted branches have their precedents. Jesus, for example, likened himself to "the true vine" of which God is "the husbandman" and of which those obedient to Christ are "the branches," bringing forth "much fruit," while the disobedient are withered branches which are burned in the fire (John 15:1-6).

The Psalmist spoke of Israel as a vine taken out of Egypt and planted in its own land which, because of disobedience, was cut and burned (Psalm 80:8-16). Similarly, prophets such as Balaam (Numbers 24:6), Isaiah (Isaiah 60:21), and Jeremiah (Jeremiah 11:16-17) compared Israel with trees or branches planted by the Lord. Similar ideas were expressed by the prophet Hosea (Hosea 9:10; 14:5-8).

In Revelation 22:2, the tree of life is said to have twelve branches with "twelve manner of fruits," evidently representing the twelve tribes of Israel.³ Its leaves are "for the healing of the nations," reminding us of God's promise that the nations of the world would be blessed through Abraham's seed (Genesis 12:3; 22:18).⁴

Nibley likens Zenos's olive tree allegory to the *Thanksgiving Hymns* from Qumran (pp. 283-85), wherein well-watered trees in the desert are the righteous in the world, while the wicked are cut down and burned. He further notes that in the Zenez/Kenaz story in Pseudo-Philo, the vineyard (symbolizing people) had corrupted the fruit, just as in Jacob 5 (p. 289).

Nibley notes that the language in the Zenez story is close to *4 Esdras* and closer to Ezekiel (p. 287). Significantly, Ezekiel,

³ Cf. the parable of the twelve olive trees in D&C 101:44-45.

⁴ At the end of his explanation of Lehi's comments regarding the grafted branches, referred to above, Nephi told his brothers that the parable referred to the scattering of Israel and the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham that all kindreds would be blessed through his seed (1 Nephi 15:17-18).

speaking of the exile of the Jews, compared Jerusalem to a useless vine which would be burned (Ezekiel 15:1-6). He further compared Israel to a vine planted by the water, with fruitful branches, which is plucked up and the rods (rulers) burned, after which the tree is planted "in a dry and thirsty ground" (Ezekiel 19:10-14).

Even more important is the fact that Ezekiel 17 is, along with Romans 11, the closest biblical parallel to the Zenos parable in Jacob 5. Ezekiel compared the house of Israel to a tree from which an eagle "took the highest branch of the cedar: He cropped off the top of his young twigs, and carried it. . . . He took also of the seed of the land, and planted it in a fruitful field; he placed it by great waters, and set it as a willow tree. And it grew, and became a spreading vine" (Ezekiel 17:3-6). Another eagle took the vine and "it was planted in a good soil by great waters, that it might bring forth branches, and that it might bear fruit, that it might be a goodly vine" (Ezekiel 17:8). But the vine withered in the wind (Ezekiel 17:9-10). Ezekiel explained that the parable referred to the scattering of Judah (Ezekiel 17:11-21).

The simplest explanation for this recurrent scriptural theme is that prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and Paul drew upon the parable of Zenos in the same way Jacob did. The Zenos story also seems to have influenced at least one pseudepigraphical work, the eleventh chapter of the *Odes of Solomon*.⁵ In this passage, the king reputedly says, "My heart was proved and its flower appeared, then grace sprang upon it, and it produced fruits for the Lord." Planted on the rock of truth, he drinks living waters (*Odes of Solomon* 11:5-8); and becomes "like the land which blossoms and rejoices in its fruits" (*Odes of Solomon* 11:12). He is taken to paradise, where "I contemplated blooming and fruit-bearing trees. . . . Their branches were flourishing and their fruits were shining; their roots [were] from an immortal land" (*Odes of Solomon* 11:16). "And I said, blessed, O Lord, are they who are planted in your land, and who have a place in your paradise" (*Odes of Solomon* 11:8). "Behold, all your laborers are fair, they who work good works. . . . For they turned away from themselves the bitterness of the trees, when they were planted in your own land" (*Odes of Solomon* 11:20-21).

⁵ In Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:744-46.

Thoughts such as those I have expressed here are but an extension of ideas originally conceived by Hugh Nibley. A generation of scholars has grown up on his works and, as Nibley himself hoped, has begun building a superstructure of additional knowledge atop the foundation he laid. With the republication of *Since Cumorah*, a third generation will climb even higher.

But scholars are not the only ones who can profit from a study of Nibley's writings. In *Since Cumorah*, Dr. Nibley has left us an important spiritual message as well. Noting that it was written for our day, delivered by an angel of God, and translated with divine assistance, he concludes that the ultimate test of the Book of Mormon is whether it has any meaning for us. With this in mind, he concludes his work by listing the major messages of the Book of Mormon:

- Righteousness brings peace.
- Wealth is a fringe benefit, not a goal; it becomes evil when inequality results, bringing pride to the rich and misery to the poor.
- Ambitious people are a serious social problem; they bring about inequality because they seek wealth.
- Secret combinations are another serious problem; they bring about inequality because they seek gain and believe that the end justifies the means.
- The false philosophies encountered in the Book of Mormon are still with us today, challenging divine truths.
- One of the most oft-quoted statements in the Book of Mormon is the Lord's admonition to Lehi that the people will prosper if they keep the commandments, but will suffer if they commit sin.

These principles are not only important for us in today's complex and troublesome world; they are the very basis of the gospel, which teaches us to serve one another and to obey God. Along with faith in the atonement of Christ, they are the Lord's blueprint for temporal and spiritual salvation.