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Title Worthy of Another Look: Classics from the Past: The Book of Mormon: A Minimal Statement

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Abstract This short article was originally published in the journal *Concilium: An International Review of Theology* and as such is addressed to a non-LDS audience. Nibley begins by giving a brief historical and theological background to the Book of Mormon. He then makes the point that the Book of Mormon includes topics that leave it open to scholars in many different disciplines to study and to put on trial. Finally, he comments on the remarkable coherence with which the prophetic editors were able to compile the Book of Mormon.



Worthy of Another Look:

CLASSICS FROM THE PAST

The Book of Mormon: A Minimal Statement

Hugh Nibley

This article was published as “The Mormon View of the Book of Mormon” in Concilium: An International Review of Theology 10 (December 1967): 82–83; in Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal 30 (1968): 170–73; and in French, Portuguese, and German editions of this journal. It was reprinted in Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978), 149–53, under the title “The Book of Mormon: A Minimal Statement,” with the note that appears here as a postscript. In honor of the centennial of Hugh Nibley’s birth, we present this concise view of the Book of Mormon.



THE FIRST STEP in what the Mormons consider the restoration of the gospel in the dispensation of the fulness of times was the coming forth of the Book of Mormon. More than anything else this fixed the unique status of the new religion, of which Eduard Meyer wrote: “Mormonism . . . is not just another of those innumerable new sects, but a new religion of revelation (*Offenbarungsreligion*).”¹ The Latter-day Saints “believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God” in exactly the same sense as the Bible (Article of Faith 8)—a proposition that has caused great offense to many Christians and led to long and severe persecutions, the Book of Mormon being the principal object of attack.

The book does not, however, take the place of the Bible in Mormonism. But just as the New Testa-

ment clarified the long-misunderstood message of the Old, so the Book of Mormon is held to reiterate the messages of both Testaments in a way that restores their full meaning. Its professed mission, as announced on its title page, is “to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations.” Until recently, most Mormons have not been zealous in the study of the book, considering it on the whole a strange and alien document with little relationship to modern life. Its peculiar effectiveness has indeed been as a messenger (it was brought by an angel) to the world at large.

The Book of Mormon professes to present in highly abridged form the history of a peculiar civilization, transplanted from the Old World to the New around 600 BC. Of complex cultural background and mixed racial stock, the society endured only a thousand years, of which period the Book of Mormon contains an unbroken account, taken supposedly from records kept almost entirely by the leaders of a minority religious group. The first of the line was Lehi, who with his family and some others fled from Jerusalem to the desert to live the law in its purity and prepare for the coming Messiah. Commanded by God after much wandering to cross the seas, the community reached the New World and there broke up, only a minority choosing to continue the ways of the pious sectaries of the desert. Lehi's descendants in time met and mingled with yet other migrants from the Old World, and indeed for almost five hundred years they had, unawares, as their northern neighbors, warlike hunting tribes which, according to the Book of Mormon, had come from Asia thousands of years before. The racial and cultural picture of the Book of Mormon is anything but the oversimplified thing its critics have made it out to be. For the Mormons, the Book of Mormon contains "the fulness of the gospel." Six hundred years of its history transpire before the coming of Christ, and four hundred after that. In the earlier period the faithful minority formed a church of anticipation, their charismatic leaders "teaching the law of Moses, and the intent for which it was given; persuading them to look forward unto the Messiah, and believe in him to come as though he already was" (Jarom 1:11). There are extensive quotations from the Old Testament prophets, especially Isaiah, with remarkable variant readings, and much that is reminiscent in language and imagery of early Jewish apocryphal writings. The boldest part of the Book of Mormon is the detailed account of the visit of Jesus Christ to his "other sheep" (John 10:16; 3 Nephi 15:21) in the New World after the resurrection, including his instructions and commandments to the new church. This episode closely parallels certain of early Christian apocrypha dealing with postresurrectional teachings of the Lord to his disciples in Galilee and on the Mount of Olives, although none of these sources was available in Joseph Smith's day.

The historical parts of the Book of Mormon bear witness to its good faith, which never claims

for itself any sort of immunity, religious or otherwise, from the most searching scientific and scholarly criticism. Lack of comparative historical documents is offset by an abundance of cultural data: over two hundred nonbiblical Hebrew and Egyptian names offer ample material to the philologist, and a wealth of technical detail invites critical examination, thanks to precise descriptions of such things as the life of a family wandering in the Arabian desert, a great earthquake, the ancient craft of olive culture, a major war in all its phases, the ways of the early desert sectaries, and the state of the world during a protohistoric *Völkerwanderung*, and so on.

The Book of Mormon is the history of a polarized world in which two irreconcilable ideologies confronted each other and is addressed explicitly to our own age, faced by the same predicament and the same impending threat of destruction. It is a call to faith and repentance couched in the language of history and prophecy, but above all it is a witness of God's concern for all his children, and to the intimate proximity of Jesus Christ to all who will receive him.

Along with cultural-historical particulars, the religious message of the book is richly interspersed with peculiar expressions, legends, traditions, and customs supposedly derived from the Old World, which may today be checked against ancient

sources. Thus it describes certain practices of arrow divination, an odd custom of treading on garments, a coronation ceremony (in great detail), the evils of the archaic matriarchy, peculiar ways of keeping and transmitting sacred records, the intricacies of an ingenious monetary system, and the like.

Of particular interest to Latter-day Saints are the prophetic parts of the Book of Mormon, which seem to depict the present state of the world most convincingly. The past 140 years have borne out exactly what the book foretold would be its own reception and influence in the world; and its predictions for the Mormons, the Jews, and the other remnants of scattered Israel (among which are included the American Indians) seem to be on the way to fulfillment. The Book of Mormon allows an ample timescale for the realization of its prophecies, according to which the deepening perplexities of the nations, when “the Lord God shall cause a great division among the people” (2 Nephi 30:10), shall lead to worldwide destructions by fire, for “blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke must come; and it must needs be upon the face of this earth.” After this, the survivors (for this is not to be the end of the world) shall have learned enough to coexist peaceably “for the space of many years,” when “all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people shall dwell safely in the Holy One of Israel if it so be that they will repent” (1 Nephi 22:26, 28).

The Book of Mormon is the history of a polarized world in which two irreconcilable ideologies confronted each other and is addressed explicitly to our own age, faced by the same predicament and the same impending threat of destruction. It is a call to faith and repentance couched in the language of history and prophecy, but above all it is a witness of God’s concern for all his children, and to the intimate proximity of Jesus Christ to all who will receive him.

Postscript: The preceding statement was written on request for a journal that is published in eight languages and therefore insists on conciseness and brevity. Teaching a Book of Mormon Sunday School class ten years later, I am impressed more than anything by something I completely overlooked until now—namely, the immense skill with which the editors of that book put the thing together. The long book of Alma, for example, is followed through with a smooth and logical sequence in which an incredible amount of detailed and widely varying material

is handled in the most lucid and apparently effortless manner. Whether Alma is addressing a king and his court, a throng of ragged paupers sitting on the ground, or his own three sons, each a distinctly different character, his eloquence is always suited to his audience, and he goes unfailingly to the peculiar problems of each hearer.

Throughout this big and complex volume, we are aware of much shuffling and winnowing of documents and are informed from time to time of the method used by an editor distilling the contents of a large library into edifying lessons for the dedicated and pious minority among the people. The overall picture reflects before all a limited geographical and cultural point of view—small localized operations, with only occasional flights and expeditions into the wilderness; one might almost be moving in the cultural circuit of the Hopi villages. The focusing of the whole account on religious themes as well as the limited cultural scope leaves all the rest of the stage clear for any other activities that might have been going on in the vast reaches of the New World, including the hypothetical Norsemen, Celts, Phoenicians, Libyans, or prehistoric infiltrations via the Bering Straits. Indeed, the more varied the ancient American scene becomes, as newly discovered artifacts and even inscriptions hint at local populations of Near Eastern, Far Eastern, and European origin, the more hospitable it is to the activities of one tragically short-lived religious civilization that once flourished in Mesoamerica and then vanished toward the northeast in the course of a series of confused tribal wars that was one long, drawn-out retreat into oblivion. Such considerations would now have to be included in any “minimal statement” this reader would make about the Book of Mormon.

Note

1. Eduard Meyer, *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1912), 1; published also as *The Origin and History of the Mormons*, trans. Heinz F. Rahde and Eugene Seach (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1961), 1.