

Preface to the 1964 Edition

Since *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* appeared as a Melchizedek Priesthood manual seven years ago, a number of very significant discoveries have been made having more or less direct bearing on the study of the Book of Mormon. Also there have been brought to the compiler's attention a number of significant items of which he should have been aware long since. He should have known, for example, that Karl Jaspers has described Lehi's age, the sixth century B.C., as the very heart of "the Axial Period" of world history. "The most extraordinary events are concentrated in this period," writes Jaspers. "In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created. The step into universality was taken in every sense"¹—which is exactly what we pointed out in the introductory chapters of the manual, wherein we noted that 600 B.C. was the most perfectly calculated moment and the Eastern Mediterranean the most suitable point of departure for the launching of a new offshoot civilization in far places. It was that same age also which saw, as we have since discovered, the definitive split between those "Sophic" and "Mantic" ways of thinking which is so vividly set forth in the Book of Mormon accounts of the vast controversies stirred up by such ambitious intellectuals as Nehor and Zoram. The Book of Mormon even tells us how these conflicting schools of thought were transplanted from their Near Eastern home as part of Lehi's family baggage and a source of perpetual trouble in his afflicted household.²

At the time the manual appeared, Professor Cyrus Gordon had not yet published his controversial studies demonstrating the essential identity of the Classic Greek and the Hebrew literary traditions—a thing we pointed out in the fourth chapter of the manual.³ Even if one does not choose to go with Professor Gordon all the way, few will dispute the common elements of Near Eastern civilization which made Lehi "a representative man" of 600 B.C.

When in 1946 this writer composed a little treatise called *Lehi in the Desert* from limited materials then available in Utah, he had never knowingly set eyes on a real Arab. Within the last five years Aneze tribesmen and citizens of Mecca, including even guides to the Holy Places, have been his students, in Provo, of all places, while Utah has suddenly been enriched with a magnificent Arabic library, thanks to the inspired efforts of Professor Aziz Atiya of the University of Utah. As if it were not enough for the mountain to come to Mohammed, those sons of the desert who came to Provo found themselves taking a required class in the Book of Mormon from the compiler of this manual. Naturally he was more than curious to see how these young men would react to the Book of Mormon treatment of desert themes, and invited and even required them to report frankly on their impressions. To date, with only one exception, no fault has been found with Nephi on technical grounds. The one exception deserves the attention of all would-be critics of the Book of Mormon.

It was in the first class ever held in "Book of Mormon for Near Eastern Students," and the semester had barely begun when of course we ran smack into the story of how Nephi found Laban dead drunk in a dark alley and cut off his head—a grisly tale that upsets Nephi himself in telling it. As we rehearsed the somber episode, I could detect visible signs of annoyance among the Arab students—whispered remarks, head-shakings, and frowns of dissent. Finally, toward the end of the hour, a smart young man from Jordan could hold out no longer. "Mr. Nibley," he said, plainly speaking for the others, "there is one thing wrong here. It doesn't sound right. Why did this Nephi wait so long to cut off Laban's head?" Since I had been expecting the routine protests of shock and disgust with which Western critics react to the Laban story, I was stunned by this surprise attack—stunned with a new insight into the Book of Mormon as a message from another age and another culture.

Since the manual appeared, hundreds of books and articles have come forth examining the nature of that strange Church in the Wilderness or “Church of Anticipation” that was first brought to light by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among other things it is now generally accepted by the experts that the Scrolls were not hastily hidden away in an emergency but deliberately laid away, at a time when the authors knew that their society was on the verge of extinction, carefully buried in “a solemn communal interment” to come forth in a later dispensation, as we suggested in chapter 14 of the manual.⁴ Moreover, it was after we had pointed to a writing known as the “Assumption of Moses” as evidence for this, that a fragment of that very writing was found among the Scrolls, and came to be regarded as clear proof of the manner in which the Scrolls had been deposited.⁵ It is now generally accepted, moreover, that the organization and ordinances of the Church in the Wilderness not only resemble those of the later Christian Church very closely, but that there is a definite connection between them. The finding of more and more typically “Christian” institutions among pre-Christian Jews who had fled from Jerusalem because of their faith in the Messiah and their disapproval of the wickedness of that city answers what have been in the past the most powerful arguments against the Book of Mormon. Furthermore, it is now widely recognized that the movement represented by the refugees of Qumran was really a very ancient type of thing, going right back to the centuries before Lehi, so that his own behavior now appears to be following the grooves of a well-established tradition.

John M. Allegro, *The Treasure of the Copper Scroll* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1960), 62. fn The parallel to the burying of Book of Mormon plates needs no commentary.

In the same year in which the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, an equally valuable find was made in Egypt—that of the early Christian library of Nag Hammadi. The publication of the latter has been slow, however, and the first texts have become available only since the appearance of the manual. What is important here is the emphasis on the teachings of the Lord to his disciples *after* the resurrection. In the manual we paid almost no attention at all to the two books which, in view of the Nag Hammadi discoveries, we now consider by far the most significant parts of the Book of Mormon, both intrinsically and as evidence, namely the books of Third and Fourth Nephi. That is how much things have changed.

A year after the manual appeared, those Cambridge scholars who first brought “patternism” to light issued an important volume summarizing the work of the past two decades and bringing their conclusions up to date. Suffice it to say that their work confirms all the basic features of “patternism” and fully supports our chapter on the subject—chapter 23 in the manual.⁶ In the following year (1959) an Arab scholar published a study on prehistoric Semitic arrow-divination which has allowed us to bestow a certificate of plausibility on the mysterious Liahona.⁷ A number of anthropological studies appearing in the past few years have been remarkably free of the old doctrinaire cocksureness that once characterized discussions of Indian origins. Here it will be enough to quote a remark of Carleton Beals, summarizing findings of the experts in the field of blood typing: “Few Indians of South America [and even fewer of North America, according to Beals] have even 1 per cent of B blood, and most have none at all—though this is the most important and characteristic non-O ingredient of Asia. . . . Here is a mystery that requires much pondering and investigation.”⁸ The Indians, that is, who are supposed, as we all know, to have come from eastern Asia, according to this report do not appear to have the Asiatic blood type.

With characteristic lack of caution we included among topics for discussion in the manual one which kept the phone ringing for weeks, to wit, the proposition, “Woe to the generation that understands the Book of Mormon.” Drove of perplexed quorum teachers wanted to know if we didn’t mean “Woe to the generation that does *not* understand it?” We did not. Take the nightmarish last chapters of Ether or Moroni, for example. Not long ago they

had the faraway and fantastic ring of science fiction—but today we understand them only too well; intelligent people everywhere are now all but obsessed with the dreadful image of total extermination which in the Book of Mormon was assailed as monstrous and preposterous. The basic theme of the wise commentaries of Mormon and Moroni, the problem of survival, has suddenly become an issue of the day. Repeatedly the Book of Mormon speaks of the great overburn, not the final destruction of the earth by fire, but a great man-made holocaust from which some shall be saved to make a better world. Nobody laughs at that sort of thing today. Take the fallout-shelter psychology of the Jaredites in their last desperate years: “Wherefore every man did cleave unto that which was his own, with his hands, and would not borrow neither would he lend; and every man kept the hilt of his sword in his right hand, in the defence of his property and his own life and of his wives and children” (Ether 14:2). A forlorn and terrifying picture: Who would have thought that we should ever come to understand its meaning so well? What other book goes so frankly and directly to the fundamental issues of our day, the problem of power, and the futility of seeking it? Where can one find a comparable commentary on the infatuations of mass suicide and the point of no return? The last seven years have seen the appearance of a number of notable books discussing those national vices which, according to the Book of Mormon, encompassed the destruction of the Nephites *and* threaten our own age with the same fate. These are the passion and the struggle for wealth, status, and success which, we are now being warned, have become something like a national obsession with a people who are displaying the twin Nephite weaknesses of attributing their own success to their own superiority (“according to the management of the creature,” Alma 30:17), and their setbacks and defeats to the evil machinations of other people with another ideology—after all, the Lamanites *were* wicked.

The appendix on archaeology in the manual has proved to be no idle gesture. The Book of Mormon has continued to be the subject of archaeological proofs and disproofs, fantastic philological speculation, and outright forgery, which if taken seriously could only lead to total confusion or worse.

Hugh Nibley

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1. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), 1–2.
 2. For the study of “Sophic and Mantic” the patient reader must await publication of the delinquent writer. It is quite a subject. [Publication of this article is forthcoming in *CWHN*—ed.]
 3. A summary of Gordon’s views may be found in Cyrus H. Gordon, *Before the Bible* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
 4. Matthew Black, *The Scrolls and Christian Origins* (New York: Scribner, 1961), 11–12.
 5. See pages 173–75 below, with notes.
 6. Samuel H. Hooke, ed., *Myth, Ritual, and Kingship* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958).
 7. See Hugh W. Nibley, “The Liahona’s Cousins,” *IE* 64 (1961): 87–89, 104, 106, 108–11.
 8. Carleton Beals, *Nomads and Empire Builders* (Philadelphia: Chilton, 1961), 78. For an excellent survey of the whole field of pre-Columbian North American civilization, see Harold E. Driver and William C. Massey,

Comparative Studies of North American Indians, vol. 47, pt. 2, of *American Philosophical Society Transactions*
(Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1957).