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Vernal Holley, *Book of Mormon Authorship: A Closer Look*

L. Ara Norwood

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Reviewed by L. Ara Norwood

When Mormon scholar Lester Bush wrote his historical survey of the Spaulding Theory eleven years ago, he made a comment at the tail end of his paper which bears repeating: "One therefore can reasonably expect that new variants [of the Spaulding theory] will, like the influenza, reemerge every now and then."¹ Vernal Holley's 1983 booklet, *Book of Mormon Authorship: A Closer Look*, is one of the more recent strains of this particular virus. Even so, the work does have some merit.

The main premise of Holley's study is that, contrary to statements by the likes of Bush, Hugh Nibley, L. L. Rice, President Joseph F. Smith, and James H. Fairchild, president of Oberlin College (where the Spaulding manuscript is now housed), there exist many similarities between the two texts. These similarities are given as evidence that the later work (the Book of Mormon) borrowed from, or was influenced by, the earlier work (the Spaulding manuscript). If that is so, then it is generally concluded that the Book of Mormon is the product of the mind of a nineteenth-century rustic whose clever trickery has duped millions of people into embracing the religion of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.²

Vernal Holley's contribution to the issue is a plethora of parallels. Though interesting, these parallels do little to establish the charge (or in this case, the implication) of piracy on the part of the author of the Book of Mormon.³

Citing parallels involving, among other things, what Mr. Holley sees are "the same ancient American inhabitants,... arts and sciences,... Christian theology,... white God person,... the

² Although this is not openly stated by Mr. Holley, that it is implied is a certainty.
³ Even Sandra Tanner, who is an avowed enemy of the Book of Mormon, found the parallels somewhat padded and generally unimpressive (private 1985 conversation with L. Ara Norwood). See also Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *Did Spaulding Write the Book of Mormon?* (Salt Lake City: Utah Lighthouse Ministry, 1977).
use of seer stones, and ... a war of extermination between two nations whose people were once brothers” (p. 11), Holley wonders aloud whether or not the author of the Book of Mormon borrowed from, or was dependent upon, Solomon Spaulding’s unpublished *Manuscript Story*.

Holley is neither provisional nor conservative in his exhibition of the parallels between the two works; he is, however, provisional and conservative in his interpretation of those parallels. For this he is to be credited.

He presents far more parallels between the *Manuscript Story* and the Book of Mormon than have previously been published. Nevertheless (to paraphrase Nibley) the significance of each parallel must be weighed and evaluated separately. Finding that both records make frequent reference to the word “and” is not as convincing as is the fact that both mention “kings,” which would not be as convincing as finding the words “cureloms and cumoms” in both records (which we do not). The degree of commonality between words or phrases in the two records determines the significance of the parallels.

If the parallels in question are unique to both the *Manuscript Story* and the Book of Mormon, then we have a good case for possible pilfering. If, on the other hand, the parallels are found in other sources as well, then the case for duplicity is diluted. When the investigator makes claims for parallels which do not even exist, then the charge of plagiarism is exploded.

After careful scrutiny of the Spaulding manuscript, I found that some of the parallels mentioned by Mr. Holley do exist while others do not, but never do I find parallels of enough significance to lend credence to the claims of plagiarism. For instance, it is true that both tell of a war of extermination

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4 My count reveals approximately 181 alleged parallels depending on how infinitesimal one wants to be in his analysis. This does not include a list of 53 word combinations, eight of which are identical but insignificant, seven of which are nearly identical and moderately significant. Compare that with Walter Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1978), who claims to have studied the Spaulding manuscript and to have found numerous similarities in the Book of Mormon, yet fails to cite even one due to a lack of time (p. 60).

between two nations whose people were once brothers,⁶ but each record was not "found in exactly the same way,"⁷ as can be demonstrated.⁸

Regarding the parallels, Holley says,

It is important ... to call attention to the fact that the Book of Mormon concepts are [in some instances] ... exactly opposite to those in Spaulding's story.... Many of the parallels between the Book of Mormon and Spaulding's Manuscript Story are typified by a ... reversal of conceptual word order (see p. 13).

It need not be pointed out that if a "parallel" is opposite, it isn't a parallel; what should be remembered about parallels, however, is that it is very easy to find an abundance of parallels of various types between almost any two works of literature provided they are comparable in size. Finding parallels between the Book of Mormon and any other literary work (fiction or nonfiction) is facile if the latter contains any historical nuances.

The thing that would make a study of this kind convincing (or at least intellectually provocative) would be if the parallels found in the two works in question were unique or unusual.

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⁶ Solomon Spaulding, The "Manuscript Found," or "Manuscript Story," (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1886), 22-24; actually, the two peoples were brothers only in the sense that they were all children of one God. The Manuscript Story is explicit on this. Speaking to the two nations, Lobaska says, "You have all derived your existence from the great Father of Spirits, you are his children & belong to his great family. Why, then have you thirsted for each others' blood? for the Blood of Brothers?" (Spaulding, Manuscript Story, p. 56). It should also be noted that a colossal difference exists in the motivation behind the wars in the two stories.

⁷ Ibid., 10.

⁸ In Manuscript Story, the stone which allegedly led to the parchments was "a small distance from the [ancient] fort," had ancient writing on it, rested on other stones, covered an artificial cave, concealed a second stone, was flat, and was found by chance. In the case of the Book of Mormon, there is no mention of a fort, ancient writing on the stone, other stones, an artificial cave, or a second stone. Furthermore, the stone in the Book of Mormon was "thick and rounding in the middle on the upper side," not flat (see JS-H 1:51), and was not found by chance but by divine guidance. Thus, to claim that the two records were found in "exactly" the same way is to overstate the issue.
For instance, if the Tree of Life motif were found in the *Manuscript Story*, or if words like “deseret” and “Irreantum,” “ziff” and “Zenock,” “limnah” and “liahona,” “neas” and “Neum,” “Rameumptom” and “Rabbanah,” or even if “title of liberty,” “secret combination,” or “Gadianton Robber” were found therein, the parallels would carry far more weight and the whole study would take on an entirely new dimension. Yet not one of these terms, nor any term like them, is found within the text of *Manuscript Story*.9

There are a number of other incorrect statements as well. For instance, Mr. Holley claims the Book of Mormon makes the error of teaching “Copernican astronomy” centuries before such principles were advanced (see p. 14). Actually, the Book of Mormon makes no such claim, neither in Alma 30:44 nor in any other place.10 In another instance, Mr. Holley makes several

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9 Not only is there a dearth of significant parallels, but there is an abundance of “unparallels.” After my first reading, I isolated no less than 100 differences between the two works, some of which include the following:

a. The main parchment of *Manuscript Story* discussed the life of its sole author and that portion of America near the Great Lakes and the Mississippi. The Book of Mormon has numerous authors and never mentions either the Great Lakes or the Mississippi.

b. *Manuscript Story* uses terms such as “gentle reader,” “bite the dust” (to describe death), “wigwams,” “Mamoon,” and “Bird Play” (a game). All of these terms are absent from the Book of Mormon.

c. In *Manuscript Story*, a storm arose and blew the vessel off course and away from Brittian [sic], their intended destination. In the Book of Mormon, the vessel eventually arrived at the intended destination.

d. In *Manuscript Story*, one of the fair-skinned mariners requests permission for an interracial marriage and his request is granted. Such a notion is condemned in the Book of Mormon (see 2 Nephi 5:21-23).

In addition to my study, Dale R. Broadhurst has prepared other very detailed unpublished studies.

10 It should be noted that although Book of Mormon writers are never explicit about the prevailing beliefs concerning astronomy, neither are the biblical writers. Indeed, the heliocentrism acceptable among the Greeks only shortly after the time of Lehi was replaced by the geocentrism of Ptolemy until revived in a new form by Copernicus. Also, prophets of God in any age could have independently known the truths concerning the revolutions of the stars and planets.
comments to establish that the traditional LDS opinion regarding Book of Mormon geography being located in Central or South America is not "compatible with the evidence within the text [of the Book of Mormon]" (see pp. 31-33). Actually, John L. Sorenson's work demonstrates that a Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon is very plausible.\(^{11}\) Also, contrary to Mr. Holley's assertions, the two texts do not describe "the same ancient American inhabitants,... the same white God person" (p. 11), and especially not "the same Christian theology." In fact, Mr. Holley claims that the theological principles in chapter 7 of *Manuscript Story* are paralleled in King Benjamin's address, "in each account in exactly the same order" (p. 16). Yet, of the six parallels he cites to support his assertion, only three of them deal directly with theological principles, two of the three come from Jacob, not Benjamin, and one of those is actually a contradiction of what the *Manuscript Story* teaches.\(^{12}\) Thus, his concluding statement that, "The theological similarities noted above are presented in the same place in the story outlines in both works" (p. 16), is utterly false.

One of the more notable characteristics of Holley's booklet is the tone. There is a dearth of the hysteria, finger-pointing, or arrogance reminiscent of previous studies in support of the Spaulding Theory.\(^{13}\) One is relieved that a person can state his/her case against the Book of Mormon without claiming to have the last word in pinpointing Book of Mormon origins. Compared with the tone of prior hostile attacks, a rather tentative hue permeates most pages of this booklet and the work is generally void of polemics.

Perhaps the most innovative portion of the study is the section on geography. Several anti-Mormons shouted with glee when they first laid eyes on the map of proposed Book of Mormon lands shown side by side with the map of New

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\(^{11}\) John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985). I acknowledge that Holley's study originally appeared about two years prior to Sorenson's. Still, Sorenson's views were widely circulated long before 1983, and he was not the first to suggest the idea in general.

\(^{12}\) In this instance, *Manuscript Story* approves of plural marriage if granted by a mortal (i.e., the king), whereas the Book of Mormon forbids plural marriage unless God commands it (see Jacob 2:30).

\(^{13}\) See E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unvailed* (Painesville, OH, 1834); John C. Bennett, *Mormonism Exposed* (New York, 1842); Martin, *The Maze of Mormonism*, for examples of this.
England (see figs. 1 and 2), while some LDS scholars looked forward to studying the maps since it seemed that a fresh point of attack worthy of scrutiny had finally reared its head. An exhaustive study of the maps is beyond our purview here. Nonetheless, my general findings are summarized below:

Of the 17 Book of Mormon place names treated by Mr. Holley, nine of them (more than 50%) are mentioned only once or twice in the entire Nephite/Jaredite record. This reveals an effort to try to pinpoint cities which have little or no clue given as to their respective locations from the text of the Book of Mormon itself. Even so, it surprised me to learn that many of the cities on Holley’s maps are placed in incorrect relationship to one another.

For instance, Angola and Jacobugath should be north of Zarahemla (Mormon 2:3b-4 and 3 Nephi 7:12a; 9:9a); Alma should be north of Lehi-Nephi (Mosiah 18:30-34; 23:1-4, 19; 24:20, 24-25); Jerusalem should be in the land of Lehi-Nephi (Alma 21:1; 24:1); and Morianton should be on the eastern borders of the land southward (Alma 50:28-34; 51:26). Mr. Holley has altered these locational relationships in every instance. Furthermore, he displays a glaring inconsistency in his treatment of the river Sidon. On his maps, he sees a parallel between this river and the Genesee River, yet on pages 14-15 he draws a parallel between the river Sidon and the Ohio River.

Other pertinent questions surface when considering just how original the place names are. For instance, several of the Book of Mormon place names appear in the Bible. These include Ephraim (2 Samuel 13:23), Ramah (Joshua 19:36), and, of course, Jerusalem. If the author of the Book of Mormon were given to pilfering, why would he need the Manuscript Story when the Bible would serve just as well?

It is also important to note that some of the New England cities were not even incorporated entities prior to 1830. Angola was incorporated in 1873,15 and in Monroe County, Ohio, Jerusalem’s post office wasn’t established until January 8, 1850. Thus, Mr. Holley’s claim that such places were known in the neighborhood of Joseph Smith is chronologically

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14 My more thorough treatment of the maps is the result of an invitation I received from James R. Spencer to respond to their implications. This unpublished study is in my possession.

Figure 1. Actual Place Names in the Location of the Spaulding Story (Holley, *Book of Mormon Authorship*, p. 36).
Figure 2. Proposed Book of Mormon Lands (Holley, Book of Mormon Authorship, p. 37).
misinformed. Finally, to draw etymological parallels between "Jacobugath" and "Jacobsburg," or "Shurr" and "Sherbrooke" is to strain one's credulity.¹⁶

To his credit, Mr. Holley does not state firm conclusions. Instead, he merely presents his research, asks questions (which any good researcher does), and lets the reader ponder the implications.

Finally, let me say that if I were a law professor and were to assign a student the exercise of making a case on behalf of the Spaulding Theory, I would expect (and be delighted in) the kind of results Mr. Holley has produced. This in no way means that I would find the evidence produced to be significant enough to seriously discredit the Book of Mormon (and I do not in this case). Mr. Holley's evidence, though still far from undermining the Book of Mormon, is as good an effort as has been made by any proponent of the Spaulding Theory to date.

¹⁶ It must also be pointed out that none of the Book of Mormon place names treated in Vernal Holley's maps appears in the Spaulding manuscript, a curiosity since the front cover of his booklet states, "A comprehensive study of the similarities of the Book of Mormon and the writings of Solomon Spaulding."