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“Something to Move Mountains”: The Book of Mormon in Hugh Nibley’s Correspondence

Boyd J. Petersen


1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Hugh Nibley’s correspondence reveals a lifelong fascination with the Book of Mormon. This is significant for two reasons: First, Nibley has taken the book seriously longer than we have as a church, and second, the private Hugh Nibley is as devoted to the Book of Mormon as is the public man. Nibley’s interest in the book is threefold: he recognizes the striking similarities it shares with other ancient Near Eastern texts; acknowledges its witness to Joseph Smith’s divine calling; and, most importantly, perceives the relevance and accuracy of the book’s prophetic warnings. In his letters, Nibley also addresses criticism raised against his methodology. “The potential power” of the Book of Mormon, writes Nibley, “is something to move mountains; it will only take effect when everything is pretty far gone, but then it will be dynamite. That leaves room for optimism.” Hugh Nibley’s words make that optimism contagious.
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Abstract: Hugh Nibley’s correspondence reveals a lifelong fascination with the Book of Mormon. This is significant for two reasons: First, Nibley has taken the book seriously longer than we have as a church, and second, the private Hugh Nibley is as devoted to the Book of Mormon as is the public man. Nibley’s interest in the book is threefold: he recognizes the striking similarities it shares with other ancient Near Eastern texts; acknowledges its witness to Joseph Smith’s divine calling; and, most importantly, perceives the relevance and accuracy of the book’s prophetic warnings. In his letters, Nibley also addresses criticism raised against his methodology. “The potential power” of the Book of Mormon, writes Nibley, “is something to move mountains; it will only take effect when everything is pretty far gone, but then it will be dynamite. That leaves room for optimism.”¹ Hugh Nibley’s words make that optimism contagious.

Hugh Nibley has had a revolutionary influence on the way we read the Book of Mormon. In his books Lehi in the Desert, An Approach to the Book of Mormon, and Since Cumorah, as well as in his many related articles, Hugh Nibley has set the Book of Mormon in an ancient Near Eastern context, and helped us realize the book’s relevance and importance to our day. The effect of

¹ Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 26 July 1944.
Nibley’s writings has been fundamental and far-reaching; our understanding of the Book of Mormon has deepened and our appreciation of the book has grown. As John W. Welch puts it, “We are warned but reassured” by Nibley’s work.2

For the past seven years, I have been researching and collecting the correspondence of Hugh Nibley for a biography I hope to produce. From reading the hundreds of letters Nibley has written, I have discovered that Nibley’s love and respect for the Book of Mormon are as evident in his private writings as in his public writings—the public Nibley does not differ from the private Nibley. Even more significantly, I have learned that Nibley has been a devoted reader and student of the Book of Mormon longer than we have as a church.

Nibley finds the Book of Mormon compelling in three fundamental ways: First, the uncanny parallels to other writings from the ancient Near East have caused Nibley to respect the Book of Mormon for its ability to fit comfortably within that historical and cultural milieu. Second, this, in turn, has caused him to see the book as a significant witness for the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith—these connections confirm the Prophet’s story about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and testify to his divine calling as a translator. Third, and most importantly, Nibley venerates the book for its relevance to our day and its prophetic nature—for its accuracy in depicting the sins and trials of our generation and its reassuring guidance on how to survive these last days. In short, Hugh Nibley really believes that the Book of Mormon is the word of God.

Hugh Nibley’s Life with the Book of Mormon

Hugh Nibley has been interested in the Book of Mormon from a very early age. In our modern church this really does not seem so strange, but when Nibley was a youth, the Book of Mormon was largely ignored. In a forthcoming study, Noel Reynolds demonstrates that our present concern with the Book of Mormon is very recent. In early church history and writings, “The Book of Mormon was valued as evidence of the Restoration, but the text

itself was not generally studied as carefully as the Bible.\textsuperscript{3} And in the twentieth century, Reynolds documents that in general conference addresses, church manuals, books published for the LDS audience, courses of study both at BYU and throughout the church educational system, and even the lessons given by our missionaries, focus on the Book of Mormon has been cursory and sporadic until very recent times. “Not long ago you would find stake presidents who had never read the Book of Mormon,” confirms Nibley.\textsuperscript{4} The reason for the previous generations’ neglect of the book may be understandable. As Nibley explained in one letter:

Our ancestors for example, spent little time reading the Book of Mormon—even for the youthful President Grant it was nothing but a bore. People tried to get interested in it from a romantic point of view; its strangeness exercised a kind of fascination. It was a happy generation to which the abominations of the Nephites and Jaredites seemed utterly unreal.\textsuperscript{5}

Because our ancestors found the sins depicted in the Book of Mormon so foreign, they can hardly be blamed for not understanding the book’s message.

Nibley was somehow different from the church of his generation. In his correspondence, the earliest reference to the book appears in a letter he wrote to his mother at age 18 from the Swiss-German mission. After quoting Ether 12:4, Nibley writes, “Great stuff, the Book of Ether.”\textsuperscript{6} Eight months later, he would reveal both his enthusiasm for the Book of Mormon and a particular love for its first book. Commenting on what he calls the “marvelous paradox” of 1 Nephi, Nibley writes:

\textsuperscript{4} Hugh Nibley, interview by Allison Clark, transcript, June 1996.
\textsuperscript{5} Hugh Nibley to Parley H. Merrill, 18 June 1957. Copies of all correspondence in my possession. Spelling and punctuation have been standardized, and abbreviations have been spelled out in the quotations from Nibley’s letters.
\textsuperscript{6} Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 16 July 1928. BYU Archives, Charles W. Nibley collection, box 1, folder 4.
I started to pick it to pieces this evening, pruning with colored pencils. As a result I am, at the moment, beside myself with enthusiasm. What boundless hope!—True, true, rings thru the whole thing. Everything ignored that would stand between the reader and the Idea. That is a library of history & philosophy in the little account of Nephi's vision.7

Days later, he would disclose in his journal, "The Book of Mormon is giving me greater joy than anything ever did."8

His fellow missionaries, however, really didn't understand the book's importance. Their approach would typically be, "This is about the American Indians, don't you want to know where the American Indians come from?"9 Such an opening had little appeal in the Swiss-German mission. Later, when Nibley served a short-term mission to the Northwestern States, the mission president, Nibley's uncle William Sloan, made the Book of Mormon the central message of the mission—"there was a whole emphasis on the Book of Mormon, we really hit it hard and had great success."10

It wasn't until World War II, however, that Nibley became pre-occupied with the Book of Mormon. He has told elsewhere of how the potency of the Book of Mormon hit him with full force as he drove the first jeep onto Utah Beach during the invasion of Normandy.11 His correspondence from that period confirms that he was indeed consumed by the Book of Mormon at that time. In a letter written as preparations for D-Day were underway, Nibley records:

Of course, there is little time to relax in the Airborne at a time like this, but when I can snatch a moment or two off it is devoted to a single engrossing item: at this late date I have discovered the Book of Mormon, and live in a state of perpetual excitement—that marvelous

7 Journal entry for 17 March 1929.
8 Journal entry for 25 March 1929.
9 Hugh Nibley, interview by Allison Clark, transcript, June 1996.
10 Ibid.
production throws everything done in our age completely into the shadows.\textsuperscript{12}

Five months later, after having witnessed the battles of Normandy and Holland from the front lines, Nibley wrote to his mother about a real tragedy: he lost his triple combination. “I would give anything to get one. I can’t tell you how badly I miss not having those three books, though I do have plenty of others.”\textsuperscript{13}

Following the war, Nibley worked for a short time as an editor for the Improvement Era. It was at this time that Fawn Brodie, President David O. McKay’s niece, published her psychological biography of Joseph Smith, \textit{No Man Knows My History}. Brodie dismissed the gold plates and the angel Moroni in favor of a naturalistic origin of the Book of Mormon. To argue that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself, Brodie called attention to biblical motifs in the Book of Mormon and cited parallels between the Book of Mormon and frontier American concerns.\textsuperscript{14} Nibley took upon himself the task of responding to Brodie’s arguments in a pamphlet he titled “No, Ma’am, That’s Not History,” in which he declared that “Oriental literature bristles with parallels to the Book of Mormon that are far more full and striking than anything that can be found in the West.”\textsuperscript{15} His rebuttal was well received in the church; President McKay himself told Nibley in a letter that, “Your comments disclose clearly not only [Brodie’s] immature, prejudiced thinking, but also the superficiality of the critics who have referred to her book as ‘scholarly.’” President McKay concludes, “you do yourself credit, and the Church honor!”\textsuperscript{16} But Nibley was not content to stop with his rebuttal of Brodie; the parallels from “Oriental literature” beckoned.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 8 April 1944.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 5 November 1944.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} As she asserted in a later interview, “I think there is no question that the Book of Mormon was fraudulently conceived.” See Shirley E. Stephenson, “Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral History Interview,” \textit{Dialogue} 14/2 (1981): 106.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Hugh W. Nibley, “No Ma’am, That’s Not History,” in \textit{Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass} (Salt Lake: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} David O. McKay to Hugh Nibley, 16 May 1946.
\end{itemize}
Soon thereafter, Nibley came to Brigham Young University where he began teaching everything from Russian and Greek to early Christian history. But it was his background in Arabic and Egyptian language and culture that drove him to pursue parallels with the Book of Mormon. The first article Nibley published on the Book of Mormon appeared in the Improvement Era in April 1948. “The Book of Mormon: A Mirror of the East” represented his first attempt to apply his “new approaches”—to take note of the parallels with Ancient Near Eastern literature and culture—to the Book of Mormon.¹⁷ Two years after “A Mirror of the East” appeared, Nibley evaluated his work in a letter to his friend Paul Springer:

I am enclosing herewith a few excerpts from a Book of Mormon speculation in which I indulged a couple of years back. It is very premature, but subsequent researches have shown me that I was on the right track almost without knowing it... You can ignore most of my nonsense about the proper names: at the time I had not gone through Lieblein or Ranke, and so failed to realize that the case for the Book of Mormon was really ten times as strong as I supposed.¹⁸

Nibley stretched his approach into a series of articles entitled “Lehi in the Desert,” which appeared in the Improvement Era between January and October 1950. He describes his method: “For an experiment I decided a year ago to confine all my attention to a couple of chapters and simply tear them to pieces. This has entailed an enormous lot of looking up... but has been very rewarding.”¹⁹

Nibley followed “Lehi in the Desert” with the series “The World of the Jaredites” between September 1951 and July 1952, and the two series were published in book form later that year.

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¹⁷ Nibley did publish a book review of Sidney Sperry’s Our Book of Mormon in the Improvement Era just before “Mirror of the East” in January 1948; however, “Mirror” represented his first full article specifically on the Book of Mormon.

¹⁸ Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, no date, 1950.

¹⁹ Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, no date, 1950.
Then, between 1956 and 1957, the Improvement Era ran Nibley's series "There Were Jaredites."

President McKay was so impressed by Nibley's approach in these essays that he suggested a similar series of lessons for the Melchizedek Priesthood manual of 1957. Nibley writes:

It was Brother McKay's express and repeated request that the Melchizedek manual for 1957 be based on Lehi in the Desert. From what I was told at various committee meetings, it was to be the old opus with almost no changes. As I am constitutionally incapable of redoing anything without completely rewriting it, the eight lessons we have turned out so far resemble the original about as closely as the Book of Mormon resembles the Spalding manuscript—it is a completely new thing.20

At the time he was approached to do the manual, Nibley's focus had turned to the apostasy and the early Christian church, and he proposed an approach "more abstruse and unfamiliar than that treated by Brother Barker" for his manual Apostasy from the Divine Church.21 However, President McKay's wishes won out and Nibley began working on a Book of Mormon study manual.

After being commissioned to do the manual, Nibley wrote to Henry D. Moyle, the chair of the committee, informing him that this would need to be a special job, requiring trips to libraries outside of Utah to complete the research.

I can fill up paper as well as the next man, but you can readily see that a half-baked treatment of this great subject would be far worse than none at all. When

20 Hugh Nibley to M. W. Wellin, 6 July 1956.
21 Henry D. Moyle to Hugh Nibley, 6 May 1955. In the letter, Moyle quotes from a previous letter from Nibley. At this time, Nibley had completed the KSL radio series "The World and the Prophets," which aired between March and October 1954 and was published that year in book form. Also at the time of this letter, a monthly series for the 1955 Improvement Era was running entitled "The Way of the Church"; after December 1955 the Improvement Era canceled it. The remaining materials from the Improvement Era series were used in articles published elsewhere and are all compiled in the FARMS volume Mormonism and Early Christianity (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1987).
attempted proof falls short it but adds to the burden of suspicion already held against the Book of Mormon. Since the rate of discovery has been breaking all records since the War and is now moving at an accelerating pace, it is extremely important to be up-to-date on everything. I am sure you would be as reluctant to accept as I would be to write a sloppy defense of the most important book in the world.

So what can we do about it? There is no point to postponing the business, since the complete returns are never in, and today’s evidence is as up-to-date as it ever will be.22

Nibley sent off a sample lesson to the committee charged with approving the manual on 2 March 1956, at which time he remarked:

You will notice that this lesson is too long and swarms with the vices of the pedant. It is clear that the author can no more keep from lapsing into moral tirades and personal reflections than he can voluntarily stop breathing. It is for you to decide whether you want that sort of thing or not; unfortunately it is not for me to decide whether I will write that way or not—I can do no other. I have always been impressed by the intelligence of the average priesthood member, and to ask me to write for his benefit a textbook for backward ten-year-olds is to ask the impossible.... The evidences for the Book of Mormon are simply overwhelming; they leave me breathless, but I have learned only too well in my few years in Utah that they excite great anger and resentment in certain quarters, and I should be most reluctant to write a whole priesthood manual for the wastebasket. To write a typical priesthood manual is totally beyond my powers: the question is, can the Lord’s work be helped by a new approach? If so,

22 Hugh Nibley to Henry D. Moyle, 3 February 1956.
we’ve got a million of them—and a couple may be pretty good.23

At the time Nibley was working on the manual, Elder Richard L. Evans, who was not on the committee overseeing production of the manual, recommended that Nibley write for an uneducated and uninformed audience. “Always think of yourself as addressing the tiredest farmer in Koosharem,”24 was Evans’s counsel. Of course, Nibley rejected such advice. And the reviewing committee ended up rejecting his lessons. Nibley was furious: “When the massive work was done the two stooges appointed by the Committee to read it took one look and decided to save themselves the time and eyestrain by turning thumbs down. I was understandably peeved.”25 Responding to an unrelated letter from Elder LeGrand Richards, Nibley wrote:

My own belief is that they are by far the best thing I have ever written and the only really compelling stuff ever brought forward on the Book of Mormon. But Brother Moyle informs me that the committee is sure I would not be willing to let such writings appear under my signature. The committee knows best, but this is certainly the last thing I will ever write for the church.

Excuse the emotion, but I am sick of committees that pass the buck to other committees that pass the buck to others, and so on, while nobody really pays attention to what is going on. I would recommend a careful reading of these invaluable lessons in their final form.... But as things stand, it is doubtful whether there will be a final form.26

Nibley’s priesthood manual almost certainly would have been shelved had not President McKay intervened. As Nibley tells it,

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23 Hugh Nibley to Henry D. Moyle, 2 March 1956.
24 Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994), 394.
26 Hugh Nibley to LeGrand Richards, 1 September 1956, emphasis in original.
Then one night a Very Important Person could not
sleep and decided in sheer desperation to look at the
mountain of type that had been so long and so gin­
erly bandied about. After an hour he was having fits,
calling me up long distance from the end of the world
at an unearthly time to shout hosannah over the wire.27

Nibley summed up President McKay’s reasoning: “Well, if
you think it’s over their heads, let them reach for it; we have to
give them something more than pat answers.”28 When the final
version of the lessons were completed, Nibley wrote that, “unless
it is completely emasculated by those members of the Commit­
tee who are afraid of offending the Gentiles it should (but won’t)
cause quite a stir.”29

Nibley’s work on the Book of Mormon has been praised by
many. Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote to Nibley in 1952, “We have
looked upon the Book of Mormon too much as something apart
from flesh and blood. You have opened a new course of thinking
about the book and the characters it contains.”30 President
Spencer W. Kimball wrote that Nibley’s Book of Mormon vol­
umes represent “real contributions to our literature, and open up
a new field untouched by anyone else that I know of.”31 Presi­
dent Ezra Taft Benson called the priesthood manual “a practical,
 scholarly and timely work.”32

But Nibley has never felt that he is the final word on the Book
of Mormon. As he wrote in a letter to President Spencer W.
Kimball:

The main purpose of the Manual is to show what any­
body is up against who undertakes a serious question­
ing of the Book of Mormon: especially we wish to
demonstrate how easy it is to be wrong about the
Book—and to do that we don’t have to be right much
of the time! Moreover, we have merely scratched the

28 Hugh Nibley, interview by Allison Clark, transcript, June 1996.
30 John A. Widtsoe to Hugh Nibley, 1 July 1952.
31 Spencer W. Kimball to Hugh Nibley, 16 September 1959.
surface, and anyone who wants to is welcome to dig further. Our business is to raise questions, not to answer them. After a vast expenditure of time and money, our Book of Mormon archaeologists have failed to produce a single clinching argument for the book in the last thirty years: it is time to try a fresh approach. . . . This is the very beginning of Book of Mormon research, not the end: it would be a paralyzing and a foolish thing to start making pontifical pronouncements at this early date. On to the fray!33

And on to the fray Nibley went, churning out article after article about the Book of Mormon. His book, Since Cumorah, appeared in 1967 and most of the other articles and talks he has produced over the years have been compiled in the FARMS volume The Prophetic Book of Mormon. The predominant focus of all these studies has been to establish the ancient Near Eastern setting of the Book of Mormon.

Setting The Book of Mormon in a Near Eastern Milieu

Nibley began his career studying patterns between cultures—how the writings and rituals of one culture compare with those of another. The focus of his Ph.D. work was year-rites and coronation assemblies throughout the ancient world, and later he noticed patterns in religious ceremony and myth that preceded the efforts of Mircea Eliade.34 Nibley’s attention soon focused on common patterns in the Book of Mormon and the ancient Near East. He described the inspiration for his first article, long after the fact, in a letter to his friend and Egyptian teacher Klaus Baer:

It was certain Egyptian undertones which seemed to me to be more than accidental that first got me interested in the Book of Mormon years ago. I refer to the episode of the judges, in which it is reported how the

33 Hugh Nibley to Spencer W. Kimball, 1 November 1957, emphasis in original.
34 See Nibley’s The Ancient State (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991).
people in the New World set up a system of courts after the Old World pattern; how one Korihor challenged the system as introducing dangerous "ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority" (Alma 30:21–24); how the new chief judge charged one Nehor with being "first to introduce priestcraft among this people" and warned that such a thing "would prove their entire destruction" (Alma 1:12); how Korihor was seized as an agitator by a particularly pious community known as "the people of Ammon"; how finally the rivalry among three brothers called Pahoran, Paanchi, and Pacumeni finally wrecked the system, etc. Well, it seemed to me that the names, the situations, and the conscious harping back to unhappy experiences in the Old World were something beyond the ingenuity of a young yokel writing in upper New York State in 1829. Just now what intrigues me is the old Israelite apocryphal stories that turn up in the Book of Mormon as popular tales.35

More of these parallels could be found in sources that came to light in 1947 when bedouin shepherds discovered scrolls in the caves on the shores of the Dead Sea.

Away back in 1957 I included in the Melchizedek Priesthood Manual a chapter entitled "Unwelcome Voices from the Dust." The idea was that the Dead Sea Scrolls are unwelcome both to Jews and Christians for the same reason that the Book of Mormon is, namely because they give a picture of ancient Judaism and Christianity which is totally at variance with that of conventional Christianity and Judaism alike. The picture they give, however, is identical with that of the Book of Mormon, and that should make them doubly welcome to Latter-day Saints.36

35 Hugh Nibley to Klaus Baer, 2 August 1962, Klaus Baer collection, Archives of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.
The parallels Nibley discovered often required little effort; they seemed to reveal themselves to him:

I have been sort of overseeing the translating of the Book of Mormon into Greek (it is now finished), while at the same time working on my Moslems\(^{37}\) and consorting with the Hasidic Jews, meantime faithfully plodding through the Coffin Texts and preparing an article on the new Christian Coptic texts for a very serious journal.\(^{38}\) Doing all this at once has addled the old brains more than ever, but forced me to recognize the common pattern behind things. I say recognize, not invent, because other people are beginning to recognize it too. This whole apocryphal world is brought together in the Book of Mormon, a veritable handbook of motifs and traditions. As a work of fiction, as a mere intellectual tour-de-force, nothing can touch it—but along with that it is full of old Jewish lore that very few Jews have ever heard of, handles the desert situation in a way that delights my Meccans, and gives a picture of primitive Christianity that is right out of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts.\(^{39}\)

Nibley also received living “proof” that his parallels were justified when he taught the Book of Mormon to groups of Muslim students from the Near East who were attending BYU. He found that these students often related to the book better than Westerners.

I always get at least a dozen Iranians in my Book of Mormon class for Moslems—had eight students from Mecca this year!—and since they have all seen the golden plates and the stone box in Ispahan they are

\(^{37}\) For several years, Nibley taught a special Book of Mormon class to visiting Muslim students.

\(^{38}\) Nibley gave the lecture “The Early Christian Church in Light of Some Newly Discovered Papyri from Egypt” on 3 March 1964, which probably reflected the work he was doing at the time. The essay was published by the BYU Extension Publications, and most of it was later incorporated into \emph{Since Cumorah}.

\(^{39}\) Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 2 February 1964.
properly impressed. In teaching several hundred Arabs—well, maybe one-hundred real Bedouins—over the past six years I have found that they universally approve of Lehi in the Desert and have only one criticism to make, viz., why did Nephi wait so long to cut off Laban's head? For them that is the one false note.40

When he began teaching at BYU, Nibley also came in contact with further “living proof” of the ancient authenticity of the Book of Mormon in his associations with the Hopi of northeastern Arizona. He visited with them on their mesas many times throughout his career. Nibley’s respect for the Hopi derives from their having managed to preserve ancient lore and customs that he had previously only read about in books. And like Nibley’s Arab students, the Hopi appreciated the Book of Mormon for what it is. In fact, they accepted the book so well that the Protestant missionaries and clergy working among the Indians began to offer some unique explanations for the parallels the Hopi found between the Book of Mormon and their oral lore.

As far as I was able to find out, every Hopi we talked with was quite frank in stating that he knew the Book of Mormon was perfectly true and told the very same stories that have always been told in the tribe. The other missions, justly alarmed, have now spread abroad the interesting fiction that old Chief Tuba (after whom Tuba City was named) when he became a Mormon and went to Salt Lake with Jacob Hamblin cir. 1870 was buttoned-holed by Joseph Smith, wheedled into telling the tribal secrets which were then written down & published as the Book of Mormon. That is how the Protestant missionaries now explain to the Hopis how their sacred & secret legends all got into the Mormons' book. There is a slight matter of chronology to be adjusted, but at least it is a frank admission by the opposition that the Book of Mormon does contain the real stuff.41

40 Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 5 July 1963, emphasis in original.
41 Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 29 April 1957.
Just as these Protestant missionaries noticed, the evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon is strong. In 1958, Nibley wrote in a letter to Ezra Taft Benson:

Wishing to be fair in the matter, I have just compiled what I believe to be a complete list of all important arguments against the Book of Mormon. Not one new argument has been added since 1840! This shrinking list makes a significant contrast to the growing list of arguments in the book’s favor.42

Since that time, the evidence in favor of the Book of Mormon, whether documented by Nibley or other Mormon scholars, has grown exponentially. And, despite the proliferation of books attacking the authenticity of the Book of Mormon, no new arguments have been added since.

On Nibley’s Methodology

Nibley has not been universally praised for his work on the Book of Mormon. Some have argued that his work is nothing more than apologetics (ignoring the long and respected tradition of apologetic literature) and see him as being driven by his conclusions to muster corroborating evidence. Nibley has not been unaware of such criticism. In fact, some of the most scathing criticism he has received has come from his closest friends. In a letter he wrote to his friend, Paul Springer, Nibley gives a preemptive response to such criticism:

I am sending you a copy of the Priesthood Manual, so you can see what goes on. Escapism pure & simple, you will say. Call it what you will, the main point is that I am running to and not from. If the uses of this world are weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable, you & I have never really thought they were anything else.43

A short time later, Paul Springer and another close friend, Lucien Goldschmidt, noticed a “decline” in Nibley’s scholarship

42 Hugh Nibley to Ezra Taft Benson, 9 January 1958.
43 Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 29 April 1957.
between such articles as "The Arrow, the Hunter, and the State," and the book *Lehi in the Desert*, and expressed their concern for Nibley's fate: "We see in you one of the few really first class minds of these muddled times voluntarily consigning itself to oblivion."44 Nibley responded with his characteristic wit and insight:

Of course you are right, but not all right. If I knew what you knew I wouldn't be here, and if you knew what I knew I wouldn't be there and weez woiza, as the Immortal [Krazy] Kat would say . . . I have found that no matter where I go I promptly subside in to a groove of gospel declamation which displeases people everywhere but here and which is by no means viewed with approval by all the local brains . . . . Your comparison of *opera* was amusing: I have got some important communication from some big-shots in the business, but none of them were in response to any of my Gentile exertions (which are merely written to set the stage for the other stuff), but always the big interest was in the Book of Mormon. Some top names both here and abroad are very interested . . . . Where fourteen or fifteen ineffectual *Stubemenschen* read my articles, hundreds of thousands have read Lehi in the form of a priesthood manual, and I get communications all the time telling how one way or another some of the stuff I have ground out has changed the life of this person or that—and they are not all fools. No, my dear fellow, scholarship in America is as dead as the dodo and has been for at least 30 years: go to their conventions if you don't believe they are a bunch of ineffectual zombies; they are simply marking time waiting for nothing to happen. I prefer a more active role. At least I have the illusion of getting somewhere, which is more than my friends do.45

Some of his colleagues at Brigham Young University were also critical of Nibley’s approach. But Nibley saw that as an indication of their own insecurities:

They have assailed me hysterically for daring to criticize Mrs. Brodie or speak of the Book of Mormon in polite company. And yet I cannot feel to chide them for their timidity—mere prudence admonishes them against rocking the boat in waters where they cannot swim.⁴⁶

In fact, Nibley remarked that the response from non-Mormons to his writings was often better than that coming from Mormons: “it has been interesting to note how ‘outsiders’ of considerable standing have been far more impressed by the evidence [for the Book of Mormon] than a lot of insiders have.”⁴⁷ For example, anthropologist Cyrus Gordon, of Brandeis University, writes that “I would say that [Nibley] bridged the gap that used to separate Mormon scholarship from the mainstream of Near Eastern Studies.”⁴⁸ One only need browse the pages of Nibley’s Festschrift By Study and Also by Faith to get an appreciation for the number and caliber of non-Mormon scholars who are impressed by Nibley’s work and scholarship.⁴⁹

Nibley has, however, never denied starting his research with a preconceived notion. In fact, he argues he has no alternative:

At once an agonized cry goes up from the faculty: “How can you be so narrow, so biased, so prejudiced as to begin your researches by assuming that you already have the truth!” While in Berkeley I got a letter from a BYU professor who gave me to know that because I believe the Book of Mormon I am not really qualified to teach history, and who ended his harangue

⁴⁶ Hugh Nibley to “Brother Bergen,” 29 July 1960. This was a private letter that Nibley distributed publicly.
⁴⁷ Hugh Nibley to Ezra Taft Benson, 9 January 1958.
⁴⁸ Cyrus H. Gordon to Boyd Petersen, 8 February 1997.
with the observation that while I claim to know the truth, the gentlemen of the History Department, like true scholars, claim only to be searching for it. A noble sentiment, truly, but a phony one—are they really searching? For one thing, they don’t believe for a moment that the truth of the gospel can be found, and have only loud cries of rage and contempt for any who say they have found it—they are as sure that it doesn’t exist as we are that it does; which is to say, our dedicated searchers for truth are dead sure that they have the answer already! As if to prove that they have no intention of pursuing serious investigations, these people have conspicuously neglected to prepare themselves for any but the most localized research; they are like a man setting out to explore a wonderful cavern without bothering to equip himself with either lights or ropes. We respect our local Gelehrten for that knowledge and proficiency which they have demonstrated to the world, but when they go out of bounds and attack the Church with specious learning they invite legitimate censure. They are like dentists who insist on performing delicate brain surgery, because that is more interesting than filing teeth. Nice for them—but what about their patients?50

As Nibley declared in his famous BYU commencement address, scholarship can only be redeemed when it is clothed in the robes of the gospel. Otherwise it is nothing more than a counterfeit.51

The Book of Mormon as Witness of Joseph Smith’s Calling

Hugh Nibley has also noted that the authentic setting of the Book of Mormon provides a solid witness to the divine calling of Joseph Smith as a translator and prophet.

50 Hugh Nibley to “Brother Bergen,” 29 July 1960, emphasis in original.
What Joseph Smith gives us bears none of the marks of the careful researcher, and even less of the wild and undisciplined imagination to which Ms. Brodie attributes the Book of Mormon. Research is a way of life, and Joseph Smith lived under a relentless spotlight: he might have gotten away with a little bit—but with research and note-juggling on such a scale?\(^{52}\)

The brilliance of the Book of Mormon’s literary achievement confirms that Joseph Smith could not have written the book—he wasn’t capable of writing it. But this does not decrease Joseph’s stature; rather it raises it. He is not a “religious genius” with a brilliant “religion-making imagination,” as Harold Bloom has declared him,\(^{53}\) but a prophet of God.

What a theme for a kid of 23 to attempt—it makes all the honors papers I have ever read look painfully jejune and \textit{unbeholfen}: I have never met or heard of anyone in college or out who could turn out a piece of work of such boldness, sweep, variety, precision, complexity, confidence, simplicity, etc. Put it beside any work in our literature for sheer number of ideas, situations, propositions and insights; . . . it makes me mad the way they act as if this was nothing at all and then turn out a million pages of pompous froth about a literature that has hardly given the world a dozen interesting ideas or characters in 200 years. Open the Book of Mormon every ten or twenty pages and see what it is talking about—a bedizening variety of stuff; open any other big work—James Joyce or the \textit{1001 Nights}—and you will find largely variations on a theme, a round of safely familiar matter given largely stereotyped treatment. Shakespeare has that kind of variety, but Shakespeare does not have to be telling the truth, does not

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\(^{52}\) Hugh Nibley to John W. Welch and other contributors to a Festschrift in honor of Nibley’s 65th birthday, 20 September 1978, p. 13. (The material from this Festschrift was later compiled with other materials in \textit{By Study and Also by Faith}.)

have to combine his things in a single package, and can take thirty years to tell his story; also he is free to borrow at will without apologies to anyone. When you start listing the problems Joseph Smith had to face just to get his book down on paper you will see that writing about a biblical people does not automatically take care of everything—in fact it raises more questions than it solves. You ask why I am going on like this? Because Christina is making such a damnable racket with the vacuum cleaner around my feet, cleaning up our rumpus-room-salon-library-ante-room-dining-music-conservatory-nursery-playschool-parlor for company, that I can’t think as is fiercely apparent.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{54} Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, 2 February 1964, emphasis in original. In a letter to his missionary sons, Nibley writes in a similar vein: “Consider once more the Book of Mormon. There are thousands of points at which it can be tested against real historical evidence, but in the world of science nothing is settled until the last reports are in. Meanwhile if one would put the Prophet to a truly rigorous test, let him compare his performance with that of other men who have created fanciful civilizations out of their heads. One thinks at once of Tolkien, then of Homer, Dante, James Joyce, Galsworthy, Dickens, Thomas Mann, etc., men who have conjured societies, mythical nations, whole worlds into existence by the power of their imaginations. How does their performance compare with Joseph Smith’s? It is completely different: They all had age and experience, reading and training and all the literary and historical sources they needed at their disposal; they were all free to put down anything they chose, without having to answer for it as fact of history. But Joseph Smith goes far beyond any of them as he blocks out his geography, builds his cities, names and clothes his strange people, arranges his battles and elaborate campaigns, follows his migrations and explorations, evolves his social unrest, his dynastic intrigues, invents ingenious weights and measures, describes plagues and the upheavals of nature, while telling a religious story of great moral impact, with heavenly visitations, inspired prophecies, cosmological discourses and eschatological significance. With it all, his book must have something to tell people that they did not know before, something extremely important for the world to know. And all this done without the aid of scholarship, age, experience, literary or historical sources or assistance, in a situation tense with hostility and danger, and completed in a matter of weeks. Since there is in the annals of human attainment no performance to equal this, I think it entitles Joseph Smith to a patient and respectful hearing free from the ridiculous nit-picking which has always been fashionable where the Book of Mormon is concerned” (Hugh Nibley to Paul Nibley and Tom Nibley, no date, circa 1971).
The Book of Mormon, Nibley argues, is truly the keystone of our religion.

Some object that the Book of Mormon does not contain the fullness of the gospel but I find such elements as the preexistence and the temple spread all over it—sometimes thinly and by inference, but always lurking nearby.55

Even though it is not always evident, the Book of Mormon contains the full doctrines, ordinances, and covenants of God and provides answers for the problems of our day.

The Book of Mormon as Prophecy for Our Day

It is the Book of Mormon’s relevance to our day and prophetic accuracy that makes it so important in Nibley’s life, even though that relevance and accuracy is a source of both comfort and fear. As he writes to Paul Springer:

Poverty keeps me off many a sucker list, the nature of my writings has brought me into direct and heated correspondence with every crackpot in the country.... What brings me back to earth is the good old Book of Mormon, the book that really tells you what goes on in the world.56

Noting that one of the principal themes of the Book of Mormon is the fall of civilizations, Nibley has argued that it is particularly appropriate for our contemporary world: “I cannot imagine a more powerful, prophetic document or one more obviously going into fulfillment at the present time. If you look at the big picture, the Book of Mormon is as up-to-date as tomorrow’s newspaper.”57

As Noel Reynolds documents and Hugh Nibley has affirmed, previous generations in the church did not understand or appreciate the Book of Mormon. “It was a happy generation to which the

55 Hugh Nibley to John W. Welch and other contributors to a Festschrift in his honor, 20 September 1978, p. 12, emphasis in original.
56 Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, June 1956.
57 Hugh Nibley to Jan Taylor, 24 April 1975.
abominations of the Nephites and Jaredites seemed utterly unreal," Nibley wrote. To make his point, Nibley posed a very enigmatic question in his priesthood manual at the end of a chapter on the downfall of Jerusalem: "Explain the saying: 'Wo to the generation that understands the Book of Mormon!'" He received many calls and letters asking him if he had gotten the question backwards; some wondered if it was, in fact, even his question. In a response to one such letter, Nibley writes: "The [question] you asked about is my own and to it I might add another: 'Woe to people who make up enigmatic [questions]!' But Nibley meant the question as it stood.

For our generation the story [of the Book of Mormon] rings painfully familiar.... The generations that understand the Book of Mormon must needs be in much the same situation that the ancient Americans were in, and people in such a predicament are to be pitied.

During the war, Nibley wrote often with sorrow about events unraveling according to prophecy. At the end of the war, Nibley was able to return to visit the areas where he labored as a missionary in Germany and witnessed to having seen the fulfillment of prophecy:

Having visited all the scenes of my missionary labors by jeep, and beheld the painfully literal justifications of the warning word to these foolish people 17 years ago, I speak with confidence of calamities to come. Everything has turned out exactly as I had imagined, so there is no reason to suppose that it won't continue to do so.  

Nibley saw the fate of the Germans as only a precursor of what is to come for the Americans. In a letter written just after the

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58 An Approach to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 119.
59 Hugh Nibley to Parley H. Merrill, 18 June 1957.
60 Hugh Nibley to Paul Springer, no date. (Letter was written at conclusion of World War II, probably late summer 1946.)
Normandy invasion responding to details about the political climate in the United States, Nibley writes:

Obviously few people are making an effort to win the blessings which the Book of Mormon promises to the promised land; the catch is that the alternative is not an easy decline or gentle corruption but a whacking curse that knocks all the pegs out at once as soon as everything is good and ready.61

Of this moral decay, Nibley writes: “The people of the world for the most part . . . have built up a strong willful indifference to everything: they believe nothing, they hope nothing, they have endured what they had to and hope to be able to get out of enduring anything more.”62

In another letter, Nibley quotes 1 Nephi 22:15–19 about the events to take place in the last days and then writes:

A display of force is going to be necessary, and the world is going to get it in terms described—not fire from heaven, but their own dirty work: “for they shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own heads,” etc. How did I get on this track? Rather how can I get off? It haunts me.63

Yet despite such apocalyptic musings, Nibley remains hopeful. And the message of repentance found in the Book of Mormon is the key. Responding to a letter from a detractor of Nibley’s writings and of the church, Nibley writes:

Anyway it’s lucky you wrote me when you did. It is still not too late; the Lord has extended the day of our probation: you would be insane to waste this priceless reprieve, and you could still be one of the few really happy men on the earth, but you’ll have to stop being a damned fool. I could find as many faults as you do without half trying, but a committee of characters like

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61 Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 24 August 1944.
62 Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 12 September 1944.
us couldn't produce the Book of Mormon in 140 years. Why do you worry so much about what other people think? They don't know anything about it. Ask the Lord for a change!64

Once, Nibley was invited to speak to the “Swearing Elders” — a group of secular Mormon intellectuals — at the University of Utah.65 After he gave his presentation, Nibley says they took him aside and told him, “You're among friends now, you can say what you really feel about the Book of Mormon.” Nibley simply bore them his testimony that the Book of Mormon is, in fact, a true record of an ancient people and that Joseph Smith was a prophet. “Oh, were they mad,” Nibley states. “They were just boiling.” He recalls one member of the group launching into a harangue about the Book of Mormon and how “We have to get rid of it. It's driving the best minds out of the church! You can't see it, but with my training, I can know it.” He continued, “Joseph Smith was a deceiver, but he was a sly deceiver.” Nibley recalls, “They had a real active hatred of the Book of Mormon.”66 These were members of the church who were accepted and in good standing. Today, such thought would put one at the fringes of the church.

As Noel Reynolds informs us: “It seems evident that the last few decades have produced a significant revolution in the LDS community in terms of the increased understanding and appreciation for the Book of Mormon as an inspired work of ancient scripture.” Both scholars and the general populace of the church, Reynolds demonstrates, “are passionately focused on a fantastically productive effort to understand the Book of Mormon on its own terms and to benefit from the pristine accounts of Christ’s

64 Hugh Nibley to LeMar Petersen, 17 July 1961, emphasis in original.
66 Hugh Nibley, interview by Allison Clark, transcript, June 1996.
gospel which it contains." Nibley has certainly inspired much of this change in focus. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has proposed that Nibley’s influence on the new generation of Book of Mormon scholars—Nibley’s “intellectual reconnaissance,” as Elder Maxwell has called it—is among Nibley’s greatest contributions to the church. Elder Maxwell compares Nibley to “an early explorer” who has staked claims on various mine shafts, sampled the ore, and signaled to his students where the ore lies. Elder Maxwell continues, “What’s now happening is that his . . . students are coming on and they go all the way into the mine and come out and say ‘yes, it really was a rich vein to be explored.’” But Nibley has also inspired the rest of us to take the Book of Mormon more seriously: to look at the text more closely, to reevaluate our assumptions, and to pay closer heed to its teachings.

Writing from the war front, Hugh Nibley seemed to prophesy of our day: “The potential power of [the Book of Mormon] is something to move mountains; it will only take effect when everything is pretty far gone, but then it will be dynamite. That leaves room for optimism.”

68 Neal A. Maxwell, interview by Boyd Petersen, audio tape, 29 December 1989.
69 Hugh Nibley to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 26 July 1944.