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## New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study, Part I: Some Standard Tests

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**Abstract:** This series vividly displays internal and external evidences to test whether the Book of Mormon is or is not a forgery, using the standard scholarly criteria for detecting forged writings. The author offers insightful comments on methodology for studying the Book of Mormon, evaluating evidence, using newly discovered documents, metal plates, literary criticism, poetry, lower criticism, and history. Nibley also comments on animals, weights and measures, and the use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon. The first part covers some tests of the Book of Mormon's authenticity.

# NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

by Hugh Nibley

PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION, BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

## PART I SOME STANDARD TESTS

IN THE short time since the appearance of two series of articles in the ERA under the titles *Lehi in the Desert* (1950) and *The World of the Jaredites* (1951-2),<sup>1\*</sup> a number of important discoveries and significant studies have come forth, bringing new and surprising light to the study of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. By a fortunate coincidence, the new materials are particularly pertinent to answering the objections of those critics of the Book of Mormon who have found the above-named studies hard to accept. But before we take the cover off, we must remind the doubters of certain responsibilities.

It would seem that those who would attack the Book of Mormon are now forsaking the dangerous ground of tangible and objective evidence to set up their artillery on the eminence of moral and philosophical superiority. Their arguments are of a sweeping and general kind and suffer from the fatal weakness of overlooking entirely the well-established rules of textual criticism. Since these rules seem to be virtually unknown to many, yet have a vital bearing on the problem of the Book of Mormon, a few words illustrating their application are not only in order but also long overdue. So the discoveries must wait until we have settled some preliminary points.

One of the best-established disciplines in the world is the critical examination of written texts to detect what in them is spurious and what is genuine. The revival of learning came with the discovery of quantities of ancient documents resurrecting the glories of classical antiquity, but not one of these manuscripts was an

\*Numbers refer to bibliography at end of instalment.



Oliver Cowdery

David Whitmer

Martin Harris

### THE THREE WITNESSES TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

original; all without exception were copies of copies. For four hundred years the main business of "scholarship" has been to produce from the materials at hand texts which would most closely correspond to the lost originals, sifting the true from the false by a strenuous and exacting discipline.<sup>2</sup> With the accumulated wisdom and technical experience of centuries it should be possible in our day—as it should have been in Joseph Smith's—to give the Book of Mormon the full treatment. It seems strange that such a controversial book should never have been subjected to a systematic application of the rules of textual criticism. That may be because textual critics are very few and have always thought they have had more important work at hand, but whatever the reason, the fact is that all criticism of the Book of Mormon in the past has been suspiciously superficial.

To illustrate this claim and not to undertake a thorough investigation at this time, let us briefly apply to the Book of Mormon the main rules

put forth by Friedrich Blass in his classic work on hermeneutics and criticism, which remains the "standard work" on the subject.<sup>3</sup> The rules given by Blass are all obvious enough to experience and reflection, but every one of them is a stumbling block to the superficial critic, and they have all been scrupulously avoided by those attacking the Book of Mormon.

To begin with, says Blass, "We have the document, and the name of its author; we must begin our examination by assuming that the author indicated really wrote it." You always begin by assuming that a text is genuine.<sup>4</sup> What critic of the Book of Mormon has ever done that? One can hear the screams of protest: "How unscientific! How naive! How hopelessly biased!" Yet to the experience of the centuries Blass adds perfectly convincing reasons for his shocking rule. It is equally biased to accept or reject a text at first glance, but still one must assume at the outset that it is either spurious or genuine if one is to make any progress.

As Jacoby, the foremost authority

on Greek historical writing, observes, "No great historical writing was ever produced *sine ira et studio*"—in other words, without partiality—one must take a stand on something if one is to lift or move anything. An open mind is not a mind devoid of opinions, but one that is willing to change opinions in the face of new evidence. If we must assume something about the authenticity of the Book of Mormon at the outset, why not assume that it is false, as its

a lucky coincidence, devoid of any real significance. But if I assume that it is true, then any suspicious passage is highly significant and casts suspicion on the whole thing, no matter how much of it is right.

Whoever refuses to accept the original claim of a document's origin, "is under obligation" says Blass, "to supply in its place a credible explanation" of its origin. In doing so, he warns us, we must be on our guard against "assuming the existence of forgers

hypothesis is to be put aside without hesitation in favor of the simple appeal to the actual remains of the writer."<sup>6</sup>

Even in explaining mistakes and blunders in a document, we are told, fraud is always the last theory to turn to, for forgery "must always be based on the assumption that we are dealing with vicious jugglers and coiners, to whom the critic, whenever it suits his interest, imputes a degree of cunning equal to his own. In reality such a breed of forger is simply a product of fantasy, a race of spooks with which the critic peoples his world, and which are at his disposal when and as he wants them, taking every form, like Proteus, which occasion demands, appearing now as stupid idiots and now as incredibly sly deceivers. Before the sober eye these ghosts vanish."<sup>7</sup>

Now is not this sly but ignorant forger who never existed the very image of the "Joseph Smith" who is now being put forward as the only possible explanation for the Book of Mormon?

The critics who think they have at last found a plausible explanation for the book have simply fallen into the oldest booby trap of all, the one which the critic, according to Blass, must avoid before all others as the easiest but silliest solution of the problem.

But how can we be certain about anything in criticising the Book of Mormon? To this Blass gives us the answer: the nearest we can get to certainty, he says, is when we have before us a *long, historical* document, for it is "improbable in the highest degree, and therefore to be regarded at all times as inadmissible . . . that any forger coming later (than the pretended date of authorship) can have the knowledge and diligence necessary to present any *quantity* of *historical* data without running into contradictions." In this, the one sure way of detecting a falsifier, according to our guide, "is by those things which he cannot well have succeeded in imitating because they were too trifling, too inconspicuous, and too troublesome to reproduce."<sup>8</sup>

In *Lehi in the Desert* we said: "The test of an historical document lies, as we have so often insisted, not in the story it tells, but in the casual details that only an eyewitness can have seen." It is in such incidental and inconspicuous details that the

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Sheet gold ornament over ten inches long from Vasca, Peru.

critics regularly do? Because, says Friedrich Blass, once you assume that a document is a fake no arguments and no evidence to the end of time can ever vindicate it, even if it is absolutely genuine. Why is that? Because "There can be no such thing as an absolutely positive proof."<sup>5</sup> The only certainty lies in the negative; for example, if we know for sure that a crime has been committed by a woman, the negative fact that he is *not* a woman completely exonerates any suspect; but on the other hand the fact that one *is* a woman proves neither guilt nor innocence. The reader cannot produce absolute proof that the dollar bill in his pocket is genuine; it may look all right even to the trained eye and still contain minute evidence of counterfeiting which escape the expert; but if there is anything obviously wrong with it, we then have absolute proof that it is counterfeit. We can never prove absolutely that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be; but any serious proven fault in the work would at once condemn it. If I assume the Book of Mormon to be fraudulent, then whatever is correct in it is merely

who are at one moment so clever and adroit as to imitate the writing of Plato or Demosthenes with deceptive skill, and in the next moment are so idiotic and stupid as to let themselves get caught red-handed in the most colossal blunders. Nor is the existence of forgers of genius believable, nor of highly gifted writers who are at the same time completely uninformed, such as those to whom the *Phaedo* and the gospel of John have been attributed. All this sort of thing represents no true cause, and any explanation that requires such an



Thin sheet gold mummy mask from Peru.

Some insight can be gained through a cursory look at the two departments already discussed as well as that of the summer camp movement. It is difficult to give a true picture of the development of any organization. Who was the one responsible for each facet of the association is likewise difficult to ascertain. In Church work the chief beauty is the united effort that brings about the desired results. The YWMIA is part of the Church. Wards, stakes, and general boards have worked unceasingly to fulfil President Young's urgent request when the association was formed: "I wish our girls to obtain a knowledge of the gospel for themselves." Each worker has added her bit to the perfecting of the plans. Where to draw the line and give credit is almost impossible. The united thinking of many may have impelled one person to a sudden flash of inspiration, but the preliminary thinking and the constant prayers of the entire membership insured the correctness of the planning.

Since the organization of the Young Women's Mutual Improvement Association in November 1869, the constant purpose behind each activity, each lesson, each organization has been to help "the young daughters of Israel to get a living testimony of the truth." Classes have been organized, activities introduced—all to the end that the young women of the Church may find increased happiness here and hereafter by building their lives securely on the foundation of the gospel.

## New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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Book of Mormon shines. Blass, then, notes that when these details occur in considerable numbers (as they certainly do in the Book of Mormon) we can confidently assume a genuine text, and, above all, when the large numbers of details fit together and prove each other, we have the strongest proof of all, for difficulties increase not mathematically with the length of a document, but geometrically.

Speaking of the Jaredites, the author has said: "Incidentally, I find the parallels between the Jaredites and the early Asiatics very impressive, but taken together their value increases as the cube of their number. In the Book of Ether they are woven

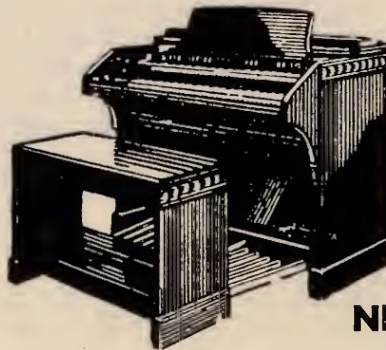
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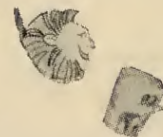
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(Continued from preceding page)

into a perfect organic whole, a consistent picture of a type of society the very existence of which has come to be known only in recent years."<sup>9</sup> For Blass this is the final test.

A principle on which Blass lays great emphasis is that "whatever lies outside the usual and familiar" is to be regarded as "incredible."<sup>10</sup> Hence the sly, stupid forger must go out the window. But what about Joseph Smith's story? Does that lie in the province of the usual and familiar?

If it is totally "outside the usual and familiar" course of events for an ignorant rustic to produce a huge and elaborate book, that proves that he didn't write it; but then we are "under obligation to supply a credible explanation" of who did. Recently clergymen have been making much of the claim that Sidney Rigdon was the man. The claim is ridiculous—Rigdon himself would have shouted it from the housetops were it true—but even if that were so where does it get us? The fabulous forger has

## On Harvesting too Soon...

Richard L. Evans

IN DAYS of restlessness and of uncertainty, sometimes people (all people, including young people) are disposed under pressure to make shortsighted decisions—decisions that seem attractive at the moment, but which may imperil future prospects; decisions that may seem to come closer to what is wanted right now, but at the risk of placing a permanent penalty upon the future. In the lives of many young men and women this is a season of decision: whether to return to school or stay with what seems at the moment to be temptingly profitable employment; whether to abandon preparation and seize a short-term gain or to forego some things now and lay the foundations for a more solid future. There are figures that could be placed before us which show that it is unquestionably costly to sell the future short. There are figures to show that an adequate period of preparation pays in material terms as well as in service and satisfaction. No doubt there are individual circumstances which justify postponing preparation, which justify a quick harvest for a specific purpose. But too short a growing season, harvesting too soon, cuts short the total long-time return. There is some feed in the field as soon as the first green shoots show themselves, but there is greater yield when one cultivates, and waters, and waits. This nation, this generation needs prepared people, and every young person needs to be solidly prepared for the future. It sometimes means self-denial; it means some waiting; it almost always entails some sacrifice, some resourcefulness, some postponing of desired things to complete a period of preparation. But the years pass quickly, and the sacrifices, hard though they seem, are soon over; and for those who have made them, there is the promise of reward and of greater service and satisfaction. With a long look at life, the temptations to take a quick return should be placed in proper perspective. And to those who may be hesitating to complete their preparation, let this be said: Don't let the season for plowing and planting pass without plowing and planting—lest there should be a short harvest.

*"The Spoken Word"*

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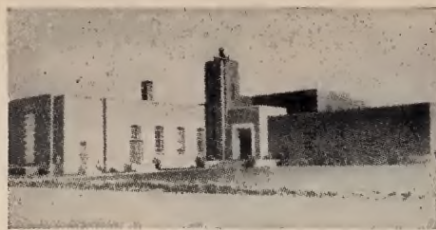
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merely changed his name. As if one were to say, "They claim that a man named Jones dug the Grand Canyon. Preposterous! It was a man named Brown!" In a word, *who* in 1830 could have written the Book of Mormon?

Joseph Smith's own story of the book's authorship certainly lies far "outside the usual and familiar," and we have every right to ask for special proof of it. This he obligingly supplies when he puts the book in our hands and asks us how *we* explain it. Books of Mormon do not occur at all "in the usual course of events." Therefore, we have every right to doubt the book's existence, except for one thing: We have the book. The only alternative to Joseph Smith's explanation is to assume, paraphrasing Blass, the existence of a forger who at one moment is so clever and adroit as to imitate the archaic poetry of the desert to perfection and supply us with genuine Egyptian names, and yet so incredibly stupid as to think that the best way to fool people and get money out of them is to write an exceedingly difficult historical epic of six hundred pages. Endowed with the brains, perseverance, and super-human cunning necessary to produce this monumental forgery, the incredibly sly genius did not have the wit to know, after years of experience in the arts of deception, that there are ten thousand safer and easier ways of fooling people than by undertaking a work of infinite toil and danger which, as he could see from the first, only made him immensely unpopular. This is the forger who never existed.

According to Blass, there has never been a clever forgery. Some forgeries have been very successful, but that always required the willing co-operation of dupes and salutary neglect of critics. A classic illustration of the principle is furnished by an experience of the Arab poet Khalaf al-Ahmar, by whom, according to Nicholson, "the art of forgery was brought to perfection" in the eighth century A.D. After the scholars of Basra and Kufa had accepted his work as genuine for many years, the imposter, grown old and penitent, confessed to them that the verses he had palmed off on them as genuine writings of the ancients were really his own compositions. To this honest but belated admission, the scholars gave the astonishing reply that they preferred to regard the documents as genuine, pompously

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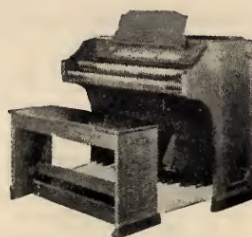


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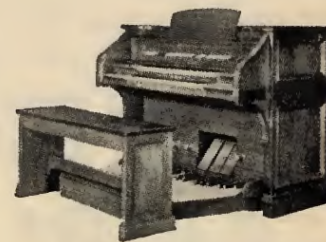
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## New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

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declaring, "What you said then seems to us more trustworthy than your present assertion."<sup>10a</sup> They believed the forgery because they were determined to, and from many other cases it is clear that the numerous forgeries of the Arab poets were successful not because they were cleverly done, but because of the ignorance, gullibility, and above all the eagerness of the schoolmen to accept them. As late as the nineteenth century German scholars were still studying as the genuine work of a Greek poet an adroit imitation composed by the celebrated Joseph Scaliger: and yet the document that fooled them was not even a forgery, for Scaliger had actually signed his name to it! If no forgery can stand without the will to believe it, on the other hand, once that will is present, no forgery is too clumsy to be acceptable to the experts.

This point is further illustrated in recent studies on the false Isidorian Decretals, the most famous and influential of all forgeries. It is agreed among experts that whoever produced this celebrated cornerstone of papal power could only have succeeded in the ruse by being "strong enough to prevent any investigation of its origin and hence the discovery of the fraud."<sup>11</sup>

(To be continued)

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<sup>2</sup>The best available treatment in English of the nature and rules of textual criticism is to be found in the introductions of the five volumes (especially see volumes I and V) of A.E. Housman's *Manilius* (Cambridge Univ., 1937).

<sup>3</sup>Friedr. Blass, *Hermeneutik und Kritik*, Section ii (pp. 149-295) *Einleitende und Hilfs-Disziplinen*, being Vol. I of Iwan von Müller's *Handbuch der kl. Altertumswissenschaft* (Munich, 1892).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 292.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 294.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 293.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>9</sup>*Lehi in the Desert*, etc., p. 257. Blass, *op. cit.*, p. 295.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 294,

<sup>10a</sup>R. A. Nicholson, *A Literary History of The Arabs* (N.Y.: Scribners, 1907), p. 134.

<sup>11</sup>Joh. Haller, *Niklaus I. und Pseudoisidor* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1936), pp. 158 f.

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA