



Type: Magazine Article

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

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 56, No. 12 (December 1953)

Published by: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Page(s): 919, 1003

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 second part continues the discussion of 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

II

SOME STANDARD TESTS

THERE has been some disagreement as to who the guilty parties were, but none as to their methods. Haller has argued that it was Pope Nichols I who, finding the new document useful to his purposes, insisted that it had reposed in the Roman archives since early Christian times.^{12*} The celebrated Hincmar accepted the document as genuine, and "When we remember how often clever specialists have let themselves be fooled, it is not surprising that Hincmar was one of the first to accept the Isidorian fraud in spite of its sudden appearance out of nowhere." The point to notice, however, is that Hincmar, sympathetic though he was with the document, could not be fooled for long: He soon began to doubt, and as he studied the text, his doubts increased until finally within a few years he had proved to himself and others that it was beyond a doubt a forged document.¹³ Yet though the Decretals were held in suspicion all over France, the pope was able to check criticism by a shrewd appeal to self-interest, showing the irreverent clergy that they had made full use of the forgery when it suited their interests.¹⁴ In the 17th century the Jesuits were still defending the pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, but their only argument was that it was a sin of supreme presumption to question or lay irreverent hands on a holy document, that it is sacrilegious to question what the Church has accepted—a claim to immunity which has become fundamental to the modern Catholic defense. Forgers cannot afford to risk examination. But Joseph Smith to the day of his death placed the Book of Mormon in the hands of all who could do him

the most harm if anything about it could be in any way suspected.

It might be objected that there may be any number of forgeries so clever that they have entirely escaped detection and so are ignorantly accepted by us as genuine. This may be so—and we will never know the answer, but the fact that all known forgeries have turned out to be clumsy ones that only succeeded because their public wanted them to succeed, makes the super-forgery hypothesis exceedingly improbable. The Book of Mormon cannot be attacked on that ground, since it was never, to say the least, a popular book, and thousands of cunning people would have given a great deal to be able to discredit it with unanswerable proofs; considering the circumstances of its production and publication it must be, if a fraud, one of the clumsiest and most obvious of frauds ever produced.

But is *forgery* the proper word to use at all? Might not the author of the Book of Mormon have been weak and foolish rather than vicious; might he not have written a long book simply because he was too naive to know how dangerous that sort of thing was? Geniuses are often quite naive and combine immense ability with hopeless irresponsibility. After all, no one would accuse Chatterton of being depraved—yet he did fool people. To which the answer is that Chatterton's forgeries were very obvious and only fooled romantic critics who were very ignorant of early English or determined to accept the wonderful new finds. The author of the Book of Mormon was not naive: He could not have written such a long book without having given it much thought, and that he dares then to put it into our hands shows that he is very sure of himself. To follow Blass, a forger can be sure of himself for two reasons only: either because he is too utterly silly to know

what he is up against or because he is immensely clever. As to the Prophet, the man who was clever enough to overcome the difficulties presented in writing the Book of Mormon, was certainly capable of recognizing that those difficulties existed. He cannot have overcome them unconsciously without a slip in book after book, no matter how foolishly confident he may have been; there are some things which even irresponsible geniuses cannot do. The author of the Book of Mormon was neither shallow nor naive. But an intelligent forger is not going to risk a long forgery at all when a short one will do just as well, nor is he going to publish and circulate permanent evidence of his crime among the general public who would be far more willing to accept him without it! A silly man *could* not have composed the Book of Mormon, and a clever man absolutely *would* not have!

Are there then no skilful but innocent forgeries? Must we take a hard, uncompromising stand? Cannot Joseph Smith have been a religiously sincere quack? Willrich, noting that it has been popular practice to designate forgeries as "inventions" or "free compositions" to avoid the ugly word, assures us that if the *purpose* of any writing is to deceive, it is a forgery. Thus for all their pious purpose, the letters attributed to Hellenistic rulers in Josephus are forgeries, dishonest documents invented to furnish proof that the Jews had formerly been honored by the great ones of the earth.¹⁵ "We must designate as a forgery any document that claims, without justification, to be genuine, even though the claim may be a comparatively harmless one."¹⁶ In discussing the forgeries of the famous Lanfranc of Canterbury, Bohmer writes: "Is it possible and permissible to consider such a high official and

(Concluded on page 1003)

*Numerals refer to bibliography on page 1003.

New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

(Concluded from page 919)

such a devoted priest as a sly forger?" The answer is, Yes! "It can be proven that the Archbishop when it suited his purpose had not the slightest scruple against taking crooked paths when it appeared that he could not reach his goal by straight ones."

"Whoever knows and understands the men of the Middle Ages, how many of them, though excellent bishops, abbots, clerics, and monks by the standards of the time, practised falsification of documents—Hincmar of Rheims, Adalag of Marburg-Bremen, Frederick of Salzburg, Pilgrim of Passau, Thietmar of Meresburg, Pope Calixtus II, Wilibald of Stablo, Abbot Giselber of Laach—will answer with an unqualified affirmative" the question, "could Lanfranc have been a common forger?"¹⁷

Joseph Smith was either telling the truth or he was a criminal—not just a fool—and no sentimental compromises will settle anything. It is base subterfuge to refuse to apply the fair tests which the Prophet himself freely invited and which will just as surely condemn him if he is lying as they will vindicate him if he is telling the truth.¹⁸

(To be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹⁷Joh. Haller, *Niklaus I. und Pseudoisidor* (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1936), pp. 158 f.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 181 f.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 182 ff.

²⁰H. Willrich, *Urkundenfälschung in der hellenistisch-jüdischen Literatur*, Heft No. 21, N.F., in *Forschungen zur Religion u. Literatur des Alten u. des Neuen Testaments* (1924), pp. 3f.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

²²Heinr. Böhmer, *Die Fälschungen Ezbischofs Lanfrancs von Canterbury* (Leipzig, 1902), being VIII, i, of *Studien zur Gesch. d. Theologie u. Kirche*, p. 126.

²³This is the usual classification. Frd. Leist, *Urkundenlehre* (Leipzig, 1893) divides his whole book into external, internal characteristics of documents; this differs slightly from external vs. internal evidence, the former being information coming from outside, the latter information contained entirely in the document itself.

Samson

Folding Chairs

America's
Number One
PUBLIC
SEATING
Buy!



Save 3 Ways

1. Low Cost!
2. Low Maintenance Cost!
3. Long Life!

Most economical of all public seating buys—Samson Folding Chairs!

Finest welded tubular-steel construction. Bonderized and finished in deluxe chip-resistant baked enamel to conform to U. S. Bureau of Standards specifications.

First choice of schools, churches, hotels, institutions and business concerns everywhere.

ZCMI
SCHOOL and OFFICE
SUPPLY

29 E. 1st South Salt Lake City
Phone 3-1575 — Ext. 291

Fritos RECIPE OF THE MONTH

FRITOS MACAROONS

24-30

2	tblsps.	Shortening
½	cup	Sugar
¾	cup	Coconut
½	tsp.	Baking Powder
¼	tsp.	Salt or less
¾	cup	Rolled or Quick Oatmeal
2	cups	FRITOS Corn Chips crushed slightly
2		Eggs

Directions:

Beat eggs well and mix with oatmeal. Let stand while creaming the sugar and shortening. Combine the two mixtures and add coconut, FRITOS corn chips, baking powder and salt. Drop by spoonfuls, or shape into walnut size balls, and spread on baking sheets. Bake 15 minutes in moderate oven at 350 degrees F.

FRITOS is the registered trade-mark of the Frito Co.



A MEALTIME TREAT THAT'S HARD TO BEAT!