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New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study, Part IV

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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 fourth part covers some circumstantial evidence of the Book of Mormon.

NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

by *Hugh Nibley*

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PART 4

Circumstantial Evidence: Entirely apart from the contents of the Book of Mormon and the external evidences that might support it, there are certain circumstances attending its production which cannot be explained on grounds other than those given by Joseph Smith. These may be listed briefly:

(1) There is the testimony of the witnesses. (2) The youth and inexperience of Joseph Smith at the time when he took full responsibility for the publication of the book—proof (a) that he could not have produced it himself and (b) that he was not acting for someone else, for his behavior at all times displayed astounding independence. (3) The absence of notes and sources. (4) The short time of production. (5) The fact that there was only one version of the book ever published. This is most significant. It is now known that the Koran, the only book claiming an equal amount of divine inspiration and accuracy, was completely re-edited at least three times during the lifetime of Mohammed. This brings up (6) the unhesitating and unchanging position of Joseph Smith regarding his revelations, a position that amazed Eduard Meyer more than anything else. From the day the Book of Mormon came from the press, Joseph Smith never ceased to spread it abroad, and he never changed his attitude towards it. What creative writer would not blush for the production of such youth and inexperience twenty years after? What imposter would not lie awake nights worrying about the slips and errors of this massive and pretentious product of his youthful indiscretion and roguery? Yet, since the Prophet was having revelations all along, nothing would have been easier, had he the slightest shadow of a misgiving, than to issue a new, revised, and improved edition, or to recall the book altogether, limit its circulation, claim it

consisted of mysteries to be grasped by the uninitiated alone, say it was to be interpreted only in a "religious" sense, or supersede it by something else. The Saints who believed the Prophet were the only ones who took the book seriously anyway. (7) There has never been any air of mystery about the Book of Mormon; there is no secrecy connected with it at the time of its publication or today; there is a complete lack of sophistry or policy in discussions of the Book of Mormon; it plays absolutely no role in the history of the Church as a pawn; there is never dispute about its nature or contents among the leaders of the Church; there is never any manipulating, explaining, or compromise. The book has enjoyed unlimited sale at all times. (8) Finally, though the success of the book is not proof of its divinity, the type of people it has appealed to, sincere, simple, direct, highly unhysterical and non-mystical, is circumstantial evidence for its honesty. It has very solid supporters.

The reader, using Franklin S.

Harris, Jr.'s²¹ excellent new collection of materials, might add to these lists at his leisure. When one considers that any one of the above arguments makes it very hard to explain the Book of Mormon as a fraud, one wonders if a corresponding list of arguments against the book might not be produced. For such a list one waits with interest but in vain. At present the higher critics are scolding the Book of Mormon for not talking like the dean of a divinity school. We might as well admit it, the Victorian platitudes are simply not there, but what a fatal blow to the Book of Mormon it would be if they were!

NEW DISCOVERIES

Until the year 1947 all ancient texts in the possession of our schools and libraries were such documents as had survived by accident. Ancient writers knew and hoped their words would be copied, as we learn from the Roman poets, but no one expected that the very paper or leather on which he was writing would survive the ages. Perhaps the most remarkable type of accidental preservation in modern times has been that of the *genizas*. *Genizas* were windowless rooms or bins connected with ancient synagogues; into these bins were thrown all old worn-out books of scripture to await a time when they could be burned with proper reverence, for since such texts contained the name of God they could not be thrown into common trash heaps or burnt with ordinary junk. Being windowless—and having little or no ventilation, the *genizas* were occa-



The photograph above shows the monotonous terrain west of Aqaba. It was through such country as this that Lehi and his people probably passed on their journey through the wilderness.

sionally walled up and forgotten, and so their precious contents—Hebrew biblical texts of many centuries ago—were preserved in safe obscurity while the Bible texts in continued use were altered again and again by various learned committees through the centuries.²² The rediscovery of some of these *genizas* has shown to just what extent our Hebrew Bible has been corrupted through the years; the scholar, Paul Kahle, who has made the study of the old *geniza* texts his lifework, has been at particular pains to emphasize certain points of textual criticism which other scholars habitually overlook. One of these is the principle, which should be apparent enough, that there is only one way in which the purity of a text can possibly be preserved through long periods of time, and that is to conceal the text completely from the eyes of men. For years the experts have thought their rules could resur-

Apocrypha as described in Section 91 of the Doctrine and Covenants (1833): “. . . There are many things contained therein that are true, and it is mostly translated correctly;

“There are many things contained therein that are not true, which are interpolations by the hands of men.

“And whoso is enlightened by the Spirit shall obtain benefit therefrom.” (D. & C. 91:1-2, 5.) The habit of scholars right down to the present has been to accept or reject apocryphal works completely, and only since the momentous discoveries beginning in 1947 has the correctness of the Lord’s evaluation in Section 91 become fully apparent. The new documents have shown, for example, that such Apocrypha as *Jubilees* and the *Testament of the XII Patriarchs* while full of interpolations are nonetheless among the most valuable and authentic sources we have for the understanding of early Christianity.

for the present we are left to speculation.²⁴ In this, however, we may enlist the aid of a document related to the scrolls, the apocryphal Assumption of Moses (as preserved in a Latin copy of the sixth century) in which Moses before being taken up to heaven is instructed by the Lord to “seal up” the covenant: “Receive this writing that thou mayest know how to preserve the books which I shall deliver unto thee: and thou shalt set these in order and anoint them with oil of cedar and put them away in earthen vessels in the place which he made from the beginning of the creation of the world.” The purpose of this hiding, we are told, is to preserve the books through a period of darkness when men shall have fallen away from the true covenant and would pervert the truth.²⁵ In his *Chronicon*, in which Eusebius often displays a really remarkable intimacy with genuine ancient sources (e.g., Berossus and Sanchthoniathon) we learn that Noah was ordered in his day “to inscribe in writing the beginning, middle, and end of everything, and to bury the records in the city of Sippar.”²⁶

Here we see that there was actually an ancient tradition in Israel, according to which one dispensation would hide up records to come forth in another. Now the newly found Dead Sea scrolls not only show marked affinities with the assumption of Moses, but the peculiar manner of their preservation is also exactly that prescribed to Moses: they were found in specially-made earthen jars, wrapped in linen which was “coated with wax or pitch or asphalt which proves that the scrolls were hidden in the cave for safe preservation, to be recovered and used later again.”²⁷ By whom? The peculiar method of storage also indicates very plainly that the documents were meant for a long seclusion, for the purpose of such treatment of documents is explained in the Moses text, and to lay a roll away with the scrupulous care and after the very manner of entombing an Egyptian mummy certainly indicates a long and solemn farewell and no mere temporary storage of convenience.

At any rate, we now have proof both of the tradition and practice in Israel of hiding up holy documents as the only means of conveying them in their purity to the men of another and a distant age. With this, one of

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The above photograph is taken from Aqaba looking east over the plains.

rect ancient texts in their purity, and to this day Westcott and Hort’s *New Testament in the Original Greek* is still widely used, though we now know that we shall probably never get a text of the New Testament “in the original Greek,” and it is being seriously questioned whether the original language of the New Testament was Greek at all! Only within the last few years has the true force of I Nephi 14:26 become apparent: “. . . and they are sealed up to come forth in their purity, according to the truth which is in the Lamb, in the own due time of the Lord, unto the house of Israel.” Unless documents are actually thus “sealed up,” they invariably suffer the fate of the
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To return to our original theme, the texts that have turned up with such dramatic suddenness in the last few years,²³ as if a signal had been given, are the first ancient documents which have survived not by accident but by design. They were hidden away on purpose, to be dug up at a later date. It is naturally assumed that during a time of danger for the sect that produced the texts, certain members in authority stored the scrolls away secretly for safe keeping until they could be used again. The intention of the hidiers may become known when some of the missing scrolls (which are still being held back by people who took them secretly from the caves) are examined, but

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the great stumbling blocks of Joseph Smith's story is removed, and the Book of Mormon appears as an established type of document.

One of the most interesting things about the Book of Mormon, however, was not its hiding but its metallic format. By now the discovery of writings on plates of precious metal, once the hardest thing to swallow in Joseph Smith's story, has become almost a commonplace in the Near East.²⁸ In 1950 was announced the discovery, in a greatly eroded bronze (or "brass") vessel found in the Beritz Valley, of some silver-lead plates, rectangular, 4.5 by 5 centimeters, quite thin, and entirely covered with Semitic characters, 22 lines of them, pressed into the metal with a hard, sharp object. The plates are thought to be from the late Hittite period, i.e., from about Lehi's time.²⁹ At the same time this find was announced, Dupont-Sommer described two newly-discovered sheets of gold and silver, bearing a Hebrew-Aramaic inscription of curious nature and mentioning the God of Israel. The script dates the documents from about 200 A.D. So the fabulous plates that were buried by an ancient prophet are beginning to find themselves in respectable company, and just where they should—in ancient Israel.³⁰

(To be continued)

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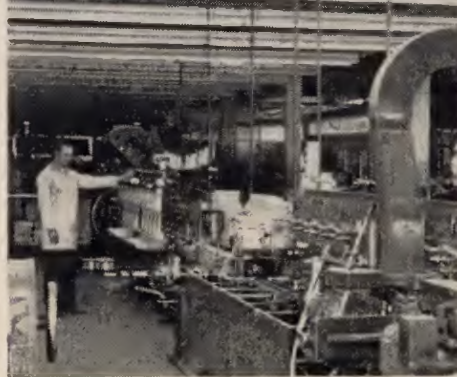
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The Place of Prayer In a Modern World

(Concluded from page 83)

who were sustained by it. If our
prayers, like theirs, are based on faith
in and knowledge of the true God of
heaven, if they are the product of a
constant communion with him, and
if our lives are living expressions of
our righteous desires, then our
prayers will be answered and we will
be sustained by them. The conflicts
between prayer and the wisdom of
the world will disappear, and we shall
receive the testimony of the Spirit that
God lives and that he hears and an-
swers our prayers.



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