



Type: Magazine Article

---

## New Approaches to the Book of Mormon Study, Conclusion

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 57, No. 7 (July 1954)

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

Page(s): 506–507, 521

---

**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 ninth part concludes the series.

# New Approaches BOOK OF

by Dr. Hugh

PROFESSOR, HISTORY AND RELIGION.



The Prophet Joseph Smith

## (CONCLUSION)

INCIDENTALLY, the problem of the elephant in the Old World is no less puzzling than in the New, to judge by a philological study by Kretschmer, appearing in 1951.<sup>130</sup> According to that renowned philologist, the ancient Germans and Slavs actually confused the camel with the elephant, while the people of India, the classic land of the elephant, seem not to have been acquainted with the animal at first hand, since they had no word of their own for it! R. Walz, reviewing the whole problem of the domestication of the camel, has come to the conclusion that, at least up to 1951, the problem remains unsolved, in spite of all the work that has been done on it.<sup>131</sup>

As to glass and metal, it is now certain that their origin is to be sought neither in Egypt nor in Babylonia, but in the mountains to the north of the latter region, the area that we loosely describe as "Jaredite country."<sup>132</sup>

The names of weights and measures are among the most conservative properties of human society, as our

own "foot," "yard," "mile," "ounce," attest. But along with their conservatism such terms give evidence at a glance of much borrowing and exchange between cultures. Thus common designations of weight and measure establish prehistoric ties between Egypt and Babylonia.<sup>133</sup> Now the fourteen odd names of measure given in the Book of Mormon are neither Semitic nor Egyptian; unlike the Nephite proper names, these terms have no parallels in the Old World. The explanation for this is obvious: they are Jaredite names. Clear evidence of borrowing by the Nephites can be seen in the words *shiblon*, *shiblum*, and *shublon*, for not only is the obvious confusion of mimation and nunnation indicative of a transition, but the proper names *Shiblon* and *Shiblum*, in both mimated and nunnated form, are found among both Jaredites and Nephites. From this we may gain an idea of the really significant influence of the Jaredite upon the Nephite culture, for weights and measures are at the foundation of all material civilization. There is a remarkable and natural consistency

in the picture which the most cunning calculations of a forger could not hope to achieve: the pains of the Nephite writer to explain the peculiar system, the names which, unlike other Book of Mormon names, have no known parallels in the Old World, the obvious overlapping of Nephite and Jaredite elements (*seon*, *senine*, *senum*), the well-known tendency of established systems of metrology to hold their own, no matter how quaint and antiquated, so that the older system would necessarily have priority over the newer, the equally well-known tendency to combine various foreign elements in a single system, the material superiority and materialistic orientation of Jaredite culture, betrayed by the incurable worldliness of men with Jaredite names. All this is found in the Nephite account, in which the sinister Jaredite influence constantly lurks in the background.

This brings us to a final reflection on the Book of Mormon as a fraudulent production.

There is wisdom in the rule laid down by Blass, that whoever presumes to doubt the purported source and authorship of a document cannot possibly escape the obligation of supplying a more plausible account in its stead. The critic has made the accusation; therefore he must have his reasons—let us hear them. No intolerable burden is put upon him by the demand, for the more obviously fraudulent an account of origin is, the easier it should be to think up a better explanation. The critic is not required to tell exactly what the true origin of the text was, but merely to supply a more likely story than the one given. The world which rejects the official account of the Book of Mormon is not under obligation to tell us exactly when, where, and how the book was produced, but it is most emphatically under obligation to furnish a clear and convincing account of how it *could have* been created in view of all the positively known cir-

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA



to

# MORMON

## Study

Nibley

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

cumstances of its actual appearance. Clever people have not shirked from this duty, but until now not a single explanation has been offered that is not in glaring conflict with itself or with certain facts upon which all, Mormons and non-Mormons, are in agreement. Above all, it will not do to say that the book is a fraud because angels do not bring books to people, for that is the very point at issue.

Joseph Smith may have been very shrewd and very lucky, but there are impassable bounds set to the reach of human wit and fortune. Consider the cases of Scaliger and Bentley, the two greatest scholars of modern, if not of all, times. The former, a mental marvel without compare, whose prodigious achievements in the field of scholarship make all others appear as novices,<sup>134</sup> could not, for all his immense perspicacity and learning, avoid the normal lapses of human knowledge or the pitfalls of vanity. With a record for accurate observation and penetrating discovery that no other can approach, he none the less "corrupts his own magnificent work by an anxious and morose over-diligence, and by his insane desire to display his erudition."<sup>135</sup> "In particular," says Housman, "he will often propound interpretations which have no bearing either on his own text . . . or on any other, but pertain to things which he has read elsewhere, and which hang like mists in his memory and veil from his eyes the verses which he thinks he is explaining. Furthermore it must be said that Scaliger's conjectures . . . are often uncouth and sometimes monstrous." Housman then quotes Haupt: "Without doing injury to his fame, one may say that no great scholar ever set beside sure discoveries of the most brilliant penetration so much that is grammatically preposterous." "And," says Housman, "the worse the conjecture the louder does Scaliger applaud himself."<sup>136</sup>

Of Bentley, Housman writes: "The  
JULY 1954

firm strength and piercing edge and arrowy swiftness of his intellect, his matchless facility and adroitness and resource, were never so triumphant as where defeat seemed sure; and yet it is other virtues that one most admires . . . his lucidity, his sanity, his just and simple and straight-forward fashion of thought."<sup>137</sup> If anyone could produce a flawless reconstruction of a text, this paragon should, but what do we find? "The faults of this edition, which are abundant, are the faults of Bentley's other critical works. He was impatient, he was tyrannical, and he was too sure of himself. Hence he corrupts sound verses which he will not wait to understand, alters what offends his taste. . . . His buoyant mind, elated by the exercise of its powers, too often forgot the nature of its business, and turned from work to play; and many a time when he feigned and half fancied that he was correcting the scribe, he knew in his heart . . . that he was revising the author."<sup>138</sup>



The Angel Moroni atop the Hill Cumorah Monument.

Now "the nature of the business" of these two men was very close to that of the author of the Book of Mormon: it was to produce ancient texts "in their purity" by correcting the corrupt manuscripts which the world has inherited from early copyists. The correction was done on the basis of what the editor, using all the information at his disposal about the writer in question and the world in

which he lived, conjectured that the author would have written in place of the badly copied text before him. Scaliger, Bentley, and the author of the Book of Mormon are all engaged in the proper business of scholarship, that of bringing out of obscurity and darkness ancient texts that present a true and faithful picture of the past. If the former two suffer serious reverses on almost every page, due to inevitable defects of knowledge and judgment, what should we expect of the last, even assuming him to be the most honest of men? To say that he may have made no more frightful mistakes per page than a Scaliger or a Bentley is to pay him the highest tribute. More cleverness and luck than that we simply cannot allow him. If any modern man, however great his genius, composed the Book of Mormon it must of necessity swarm with the uncouth, monstrous, impossible, contradictory, and absurd.<sup>139</sup> But it does not. The few odds and ends we have touched upon in this short study should be enough to show what teeming opportunities the writer of the Book of Mormon had to make a complete fool of himself, and the world will give a handsome reward to anyone who can show it but one clear and unmistakable instance in which he did so. We must grant, therefore, that the current explanation of the Book of Mormon—that the man who wrote it was both smart and unscrupulous—explains nothing.

(The End)

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>130</sup>P. Kretschmer, "Der Name des Elefanten," *Oesterr. Akad. Anzeiger*, 1951, No. 21, 324f.

<sup>131</sup>R. Walz, "Zum Problem der Domestikation der altweltlichen Cameliden," *Ztschr. der dt. Morgenl. Gesellsch.* Vol. 101, N. F. 26 (1951), pp. 29-51.

<sup>132</sup>For the latest philological evidence, P. Kretschmer, "Zu den ältesten Metallnamen," *Glotta* XXXII (1952), 1-16; the oldest of all names for metal is neither Egyptian nor Babylonian, but Indo-European—our own word "ore." For the classic treatment of the home of metalurgy, J. De Morgan, *La Préhistoire Orientale* (Paris, 1925ff), I, 184ff. H. C. Beck, "Glass before 1500," *Ancient Egypt and the East*, 1934 (June, Pt. i), pp. 7-21.

<sup>133</sup>De Morgan, *op. cit.*, II, 315ff.

<sup>134</sup>"Scaliger," wrote the great Niebuhr, "stood on the summit of universal solid philological learning, in a degree that none have reached since; so high in every branch of knowledge, that from the resources of his own mind he could comprehend, apply, and decide on, whatever came his way." (Quoted by Mark Pattison, *Essays* (Oxford, 1889), I, (Concluded on page 521)



## New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study

(Concluded from page 507)

133). Pattison himself (*ibid.*, p. 195) calls Scaliger's "the most richly-stored intellect which ever spent itself in acquiring knowledge." G. W. Robinson writes: "Whether Joseph Scaliger should be reckoned the greatest scholar of all time, or should share that palm with Aristotle, is, perhaps, an open question; of his primacy beyond all rivalry among the scholars of modern times there can be no doubt. . . ." (*Autobiography of Joseph Scaliger* [Cambridge, Mass., 1927], p. 8.) "His only possible rival," writes H. W. Garrod in his *Manilius* (p. lxxxii), "is Bentley—so much inferior in knowledge, in patience, in circumspection, and in the faculty of grasping a whole, that only a native levity of the caprice of reaction could place him on the same height as Scaliger." "He came nearer than any other man before or since his time to reaching the ideal of a universal grasp of antiquity," thus J. Bernays, *Joseph Justus Scaliger* (Berlin: 1885), p. 1. For other references to Scaliger's achievements, H. Nibley, "New Light on Scaliger," *The Classical Journal*, XXXVII (1942), 291-5.

<sup>132</sup>Huet, quoted in A. E. Housman, *Manilius*, I, xiv.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xiv ff.

<sup>130</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xvii.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. xvii f, with much more to the same effect.

<sup>128</sup>After immense labor and research a moving-picture of Lloyd Douglas's epic, *The Robe*, has been released. Almost the opening scene shows two lovers parting at a dock—Ostia. Their last embraces are curtailed by the voice of an importunate captain or mate of the ship, who keeps crying from the deck that unless our hero hastens they will surely miss the tide. "The tide, sir! The tide!" wails the voice. As any schoolboy knows who has read his Caesar, there are no tides in the Mediterranean. What if the Book of Mormon had made a slip like that? *The Robe* is full of them.

## Antoine R. Ivins

(Concluded from page 499)

fulfilled his every wish. As Father expressed it,

I have always been ambitious, of course, for the welfare of my children. I have worked for them, saved for them, determined that their opportunities should be better than mine were. I wanted them to be accomplished and well equipped for the battle of life. I wanted them to be men and women of character, with faith, loving the right because it was right, with their consciences trained to abhor the habit so common in society which regards self-interest as the dominant thing to be sought after; to be independent thinkers, but at the same time giving honor and respect to the opinions of others, and above all, to have faith that the Lord will care for and direct us if we put our trust in him, and that in the end (and we can't reach a proper judgment until the end comes) we will know that he does all things well.

JULY 1954

## Have your IMPROVEMENT ERAS

handsomely bound  
for just \$3.00

FOB SALT LAKE CITY

FOR BINDING YOUR ENTIRE YEAR'S ISSUE

Retain for permanent use the excellent instructions and outstanding articles of lasting interest that appear monthly in your Improvement Era. You may have editions of the Era handsomely bound now in cloth-covered book form with gold stamping. Cost is just \$3 (prepaid), plus postage, for an entire year's issues.

ADD POSTAGE FOR MAIL ORDERS

Distance from Salt Lake City, Utah	Rate
Up to 150 miles	.43
150 to 300 miles	.49
300 to 600 miles	.59
600 to 1000 miles	.73
1000 to 1400 miles	.88
1400 to 1800 miles	1.06
Over 1800 miles	1.23

Send to or bring your Era Magazines to the

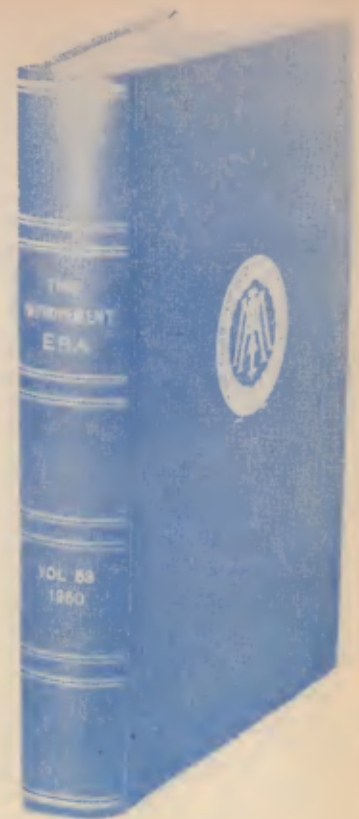
# Deseret News Press

The West's Finest Binders

31 RICHARDS STREET

PHONE 4-2581

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH



It "TALKS" you into good luck  
It "TALKS" you out of trouble

## BERNARDIN

double-feature home canning caps



*Snap*

Lid Snaps down.  
You've got a high vacuum.

*Snap*

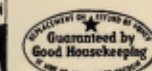
Lid Snaps up.  
Check jar rim and re-can.

. . . Yes, a loud Snap tells you you've got a tight seal . . . those built-in latex rings are solidly gripping the jar rim—and that exclusive third coat of food acid resistant enamel on the inside of that lid—gives you added protection no matter what you can.

But—suppose there's a tiny gully on the jar rim, or a fragment of food adhered to it—or you filled the jar too full. Snap goes the lid—up comes the center . . . you hear—you see—in plenty of time to correct the trouble and re-can.

In every detail, the metal, the threading, the convenient packing, Bernardin is the Quality 2-piece cap of the Home Canning field but is priced competitively.

This season enjoy these extra advantages.



## BERNARDIN

Home Canning  
CAPS AND SNAP LIDS  
...Just ask for snap caps and lids.