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The Comparative Method

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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“Mixed Voices”
A Study on Book of Mormon Criticism

by Hugh Nibley

The Comparative Method

as such is neither good nor bad. It can be abused (as what tool can not?), but to condemn it outright because of its imperfections would put an end to all scholarship.

The fundamental rule of the comparative method is, that if things resemble each other there must be some connection between them, and the closer the resemblance the closer the connection. For example, if anyone were to argue that the Book of Mormon was obviously stolen from Solomon Spaulding's *Manuscript Story* (the document now at Oberlin College) because the word “and” is found to occur frequently in both texts, we would simply laugh at him. If he brought forth as evidence the fact that kings are mentioned in both books, he might not appear quite so ridiculous. But if the *Manuscript Story* actually referred by name to “cureloms and cumoms” we would be quite sure of a possible borrowing (though even then we would not have proven a direct borrowing). This hypothetical case illustrates the fact that there are degrees of significance in parallels. Recently a Protestant minister pointed to seventy-five resemblances between the Book of Mormon and the *Manuscript Story*: None of them alone is worth anything, but his position is that there are so many that taken altogether they must be significant.⁹⁰ The trouble is that it would be very easy to find seventy-five equally good parallels between the Book of Mormon and any other book you can name. As an actual example, to prove that the Book of Mormon and the *Manuscript Story* are related, this investigator shrewdly notes that in both books “men arise and make addresses,” “both [books] pronounce woe unto the wicked mortals,” “both mention milk,” in both “adultery was a crime,” “both had counsellors,” etc. What kind of “parallels”

are these? Seventy-five or seven hundred fifty, it is all the same—such stuff adds up to nothing.⁹⁰

But the most publicized list of parallels of the Book of Mormon and another work is B. H. Roberts' comparison of that book with Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*.⁹¹ Commenting on this, Mrs. Brodie wrote: “The scholarly Mormon historian, B. H. Roberts once made a careful and impressive list of parallels between the *Views of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon, but for obvious reasons it was never published.”⁹² The most obvious reason for not publishing it would be to any textual critic as it was to Elder Roberts, that the “careful and impressive list of parallels” is quite worthless either to prove or disprove the Book of Mormon.

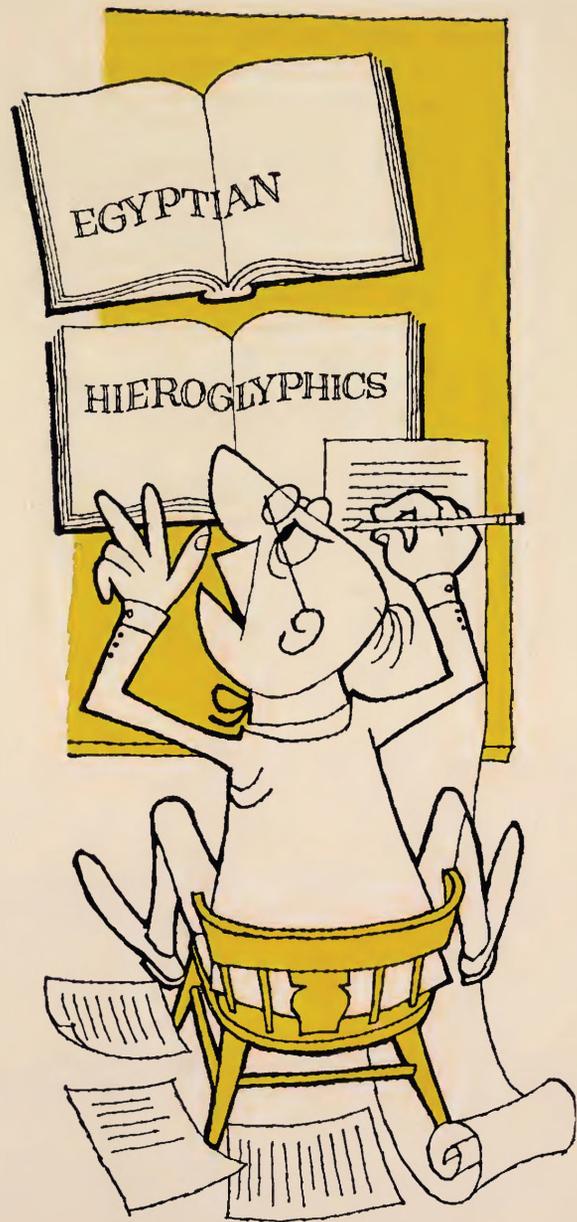
In the first place, only eighteen parallels are listed, and neither Mrs. Brodie nor Mr. Hogan adds anything to the list. This, then is the best we can do for Ethan Smith's parallels. If there were only eighteen ideas in all the Book of Mormon and about the same number in Ethan Smith's book, then the eighteen parallels would be indeed suspicious. But there are not only eighteen ideas in the Book of Mormon—there are hundreds! So if we are going to use such a tiny handful as evidence they had better be good. But when we consider the Roberts' parallels, we find that they are not only very few, but without exception all perfectly ordinary. In fact, Mr. Hogan in his recent treatment of the subject has unwittingly robbed the eighteen parallels of any significance by going to considerable pains to point out in his introduction that the ideas shared by Ethan and Joseph Smith were not original to either of them, but were as common in the world they lived in as the name Smith itself. He would agree with Mr. Cross that “neither Solomon Spaulding, for whom some have claimed authorship of a manuscript which became the Book of Mormon, nor Joseph Smith required any originality to speculate in this direction. . . .”⁹³ No originality was required in these matters because these things were public

property. This being the case why would Joseph Smith need to steal them from Ethan Smith?

Take Parallels Number 2 and 4 in Roberts' list for example: *Both claim a Hebraic origin for the Indian.* But so did everybody else. In 1833 Josiah Priest wrote, ". . . the opinion that the American Indians are descendants of the lost Ten Tribes, is now a popular one, and generally believed. . . ."94 In that case Joseph Smith must have known as much about it as Ethan Smith—no need for pilfering.

No. 5 *The idea of a lost or buried book* is found in both documents. Again what could be commoner? This is Mr. Hogan's prize exhibit and parting shot: Ethan Smith had suggested that the best evidence for a connection between the Indians and the ancient Hebrews would be the finding of an actual inscription "on some durable substance in evident Hebrew language and character." Of course it would; inscriptions in ancient languages on durable material (they could hardly be in modern languages on perishable materials) have been throughout history the best-known link between ancient and living civilizations. Yet Ethan Smith's idea that a Hebrew inscription would be the best tie-up between the Jews and the Indians is presented here as a brilliant and novel idea, the provocation that set Joseph Smith on the high-road to forgery, according to Mr. Hogan, who concludes his study with the weighty words: "If an enterprising and imaginative writer needed any final provocation, this would seem to be it." As if "an energetic and imaginative writer," of all people, needed to be told that it is ancient writings that tell about ancient people.

No. 14. In Ethan Smith's book is reported that an Indian chief once said that "he knew it to be wrong, if a poor man came to his door hungry and naked, to turn him away empty. For he believed God loved the poorest of men better than he did proud rich men." Again, would Joseph Smith or any Christian have to go to Ethan Smith's book to learn this? If



. . . but if you put the two together, what do you get? Another parallel, Egyptian hieroglyphics!

the Indian's words were quoted in the Book of Mormon it would be a different thing: but what compassionate human being, Christian or not, has not held this philosophy? Here is another version of the same thing:

No. 16. An early traveler quoted by Ethan Smith tells of some Indians who were "loving, and affectionate to their wives and children. . . ." The Book of Mormon reports indirectly that the Nephites also loved *their* children. And this, believe it or not, is taken as strong proof that the Book of Mormon was stolen from the *View of the Hebrews*.

No. 15. It is the same with polygamy: in Ethan Smith's book a Delaware chief deplores the recently adopted practice in his tribe of picking up a number of wives and casting them off as soon as one grew tired of them. The fact that the Indian recognizes such a practice as immoral can only indicate according to Ethan Smith the influence of "Israelitish tradition . . . as taught by the Old Testament as if mankind had no other source of morality. Yet here his naive reasoning is sounder than the proposition that the prohibition of more than one wife to the Nephites must have come from this particular source. Actually, this is no parallel at all since there is no resemblance between the practices described.

A number of parallels in the list are attributed to Joseph Smith's stealing from the *View of the Hebrews*, when he could more easily have found the same material in the Bible. This reaches the point of absurdity in parallel No. 12 where Joseph Smith gets the idea of quoting Isaiah from Ethan since the latter "quoted copiously and chiefly from Isaiah in relation to the scattering and gathering of Israel." This is the equivalent of accusing one scholar of stealing

from another because they both quote "copiously and chiefly" from Homer in their studies of Troy. Since ancient times Isaiah has been *the* source for information on the scattering and gathering of Israel. Any student writing a term paper on that subject would deserve to be flunked if he failed to quote from that prophet without ever having heard of Ethan Smith!

Parallel No. 11 is a related case: "The view of the Hebrews has many references to both the scattering and the gathering of Israel in the last days. The second chapter is entitled 'The Certain Restoration of Judah and Israel' and in this section are quoted nearly all the references to Isaiah that are referred to and quoted *more fully* in the Book of Mormon." Which would Joseph Smith be more likely to go to in treating this subject, Mr. Ethan Smith or the Bible? Obviously the Bible is the source used since it is here quoted more fully than it is in Ethan's book. But did Joseph need Ethan to tell him to consult the Bible in the first place?

Again, No. 10, the first chapter of the *Views of the Hebrews* is devoted to the destruction of Jerusalem. Since the book claims to be searching out the lost ten tribes, it is hard to conceive how it could begin otherwise. There have been many dispersions from Jerusalem, as the Book of Mormon tells us, and many destructions; the one told of in the Book of Mormon is a *totally different* one from that described by Ethan Smith, which took place hundreds of years before it. It is hardly likely that the Bible-reading Smiths first discovered that Jerusalem was destroyed by perusing the pages of Ethan's book. Neither did Joseph need Ethan Smith to tell him (No. 6) that God's people anciently had inspired prophets and heavenly gifts. This has always been a conspicuous part of Indian

PEACE

by Ruth K. Kent

A storm is threatening the beach today;
The screaming sea gulls swoop in weird delight
While gleeful waves tattoo a roundelay
Against the restless sands, the clouds benight
The sun and playful winds conspire to strum
The branches on the stalwart pines as Thor
Beats thunder drums; all nature must succumb
Whenever tempests frolic near the shore.
There was a time on earth when Jesus said,
To seas that foamed in fury, "Peace, be still."
Then all was quiet as the sacred dead;
The elements are subject to his will.
So why should not the struggling nations cease
Their bickerings, and pray to God for peace?

tradition, but given the popular belief that the ancient Americans were of Israel, Joseph Smith would have no choice but to attribute to them the divine gift possessed by God's people. Among these divine gifts was the Urim and Thummim (No. 7) *described* in the Bible, and only dimly and indirectly hinted at by Ethan Smith in describing an article of clothing worn by medicine men—quite a different article from the Urim and Thummim of either the Book of Mormon or the Bible.

The trouble with this last parallel is that it is not a parallel at all, but only something that is made into one by egregiously taking the part for the whole. The same faulty reasoning characterizes the first of the parallels in the list, No. 1: the *place of origin of the two works*. Ethan Smith's book was written in Vermont, and Joseph Smith was born in Vermont. That would be a very suspicious coincidence were it not that Joseph Smith left Vermont as a child at least eight years before the *View of the Hebrews* was published. The time scale which invalidates the argument of place of origin is actually given as another parallel between the two books. Parallel No. 3: *the time of production*—it is held to be most significant that the publication of Ethan Smith's first edition and the appearance of the Angel Moroni occurred in the same year. We must confess our failure to detect anything in Ethan Smith's book that might have suggested the Angel Moroni. All that is proved by the dates is that the *View of the Hebrews* came out first, so that Joseph Smith *could* have used it. Of course, if *View of the Hebrews* had appeared *after* the Book of Mormon there would be no case—though Mrs. Brodie tries very hard to hint that Joseph Smith stole from Josiah Priest, whose book did not appear until 1833!⁹⁵ Even Mrs. Brodie concedes that "it may never be proven that Joseph ever saw the *View of the Hebrews*," but even if he had seen it, that would prove nothing unless we could discover something in the Book of Mormon that could not possibly come from any other source.

What the critics seem to consider the most devastating of all the parallels in the list, the one most often mentioned and on which B. H. Roberts concentrates most of his attention, is No. 9, which deals with the general relations of the ancient Americans to each other. The most obvious and immediate objection to the popular theory that the Indians were the ten tribes was that the ten tribes were civilized and the Indians were not. Since colonial times there were two things that everybody knew about aboriginal America: (1) that it was full of savages, and (2) that it was full of ruins left by people who were *not* savages. If the Indians were from the ten tribes, then they must have fallen from a higher estate, and that estate was mutely

witnessed by the ruins. Using these general speculations as his starting point, Ethan Smith, like any intelligent man, goes on with his own surmises: When the civilized ten tribes arrived in the New World, they found themselves in a wilderness teeming with game, (1) "*inviting them to the chase*, most of them (2) *fell into a wandering and idle hunting life*," while "the more sensible parts of this people" continued in their civilized ways and left behind them the ruins that fill the land. "It is highly probable," Ethan Smith continues to speculate, "that the more civilized part of the Ten Tribes of Israel after they settled in America, became (3) *wholly separated* from the hunting and savage tribes of their brethren; that the latter (4) *lost the knowledge* of their having descended from the same family with themselves; that the civilized part continued many centuries; that (5) *tremendous wars were frequent* between them and their savage brethren." Then gradually (6) "*in process of time* their savage jealousies and rage annihilated their more civilized brethren." No other explanation is possible, he thinks: "What account can be given of this, but that the savages exterminated them, after (7) *long and dismal wars*." As to the state of the savages, "We cannot so well account for their evident degeneracy in any way" except the Bible way: "as that it took place under the vindictive Providence, as has been noted, to accomplish (8) *divine judgments denounced against the idolatrous Ten Tribes of Israel*." (Italics ours.)

Now consider the eight points from the viewpoint of the Book of Mormon. (1) It was *not* the joy of the chase that led the Lamanites into the wilderness—the greatest hunters in the Book of Mormon are Nephites; (2) the less civilized group did *not* upon arriving in America "fall into a wandering . . . life," they were wanderers when they got here, and so were their brethren. (3) In the Book of Mormon "the more civilized part" of the people *never* becomes "wholly separated . . . from their brethren," the two remaining always in contact. (4) The more savage element never "lost the knowledge" of their descent: The Lamanites always claimed in fact that the Nephites had stolen their birthright. (5) The wars were neither tremendous nor frequent—they are almost all in the nature of sudden raids; they involved small numbers of people, and, except for the last great war, they are brief. (6) It was *not* the savage jealousy and rage of an inferior civilization that destroyed the higher civilization—that higher civilization had broken up completely before the last war by its own corruption, and at the time of their destruction the Nephites were as debased as their rivals. (7) It was *not* a process of gradual extermination (Continued on page 759)

Thomas A. Edison. Young Tom was expelled from school because of his ambitions. Before he could read he wanted to study high school subjects. He was labeled incorrigible by his exasperated teacher and sent home to his worried parents. Even at home his ambitions soon created a neighborhood panic. Finally his mother decided to guide all these big ideas into more constructive channels. By the time young Tom was 9 he and his mother had carefully read Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Hume's *History of England*, Sears' *History of the World*, Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and *The Dictionary of Sciences*. Such was the early guidance of a boy's career whose inventions later created industries worth more than twenty-five billion dollars.

Ninth, we certainly will not want to close this list of achievements without mentioning just one more—Junior's sense of humor. Most 21-year-olds have a fathomless capacity for humor, but like other human qualities it should have matured.

In his childhood days Junior responded to the "humor of absurdity." He loved the absurdity of slapstick comedy, pie-throwing contests, or seeing an elderly woman slip on the ice and crash to the sidewalk.

In later years Junior tastes enough of life to feel sympathy for people in unfortunate situations. He seldom laughs at people slipping or falling. He identifies his own feelings with those of the victim. His sense of humor now requires more subtle things. He graduates to the level of "hidden meaning humor."

Finally, however, Junior should attain the rich, warm glow of grown-up humor. Adult humor is hearty but not boisterous. It is not laughter to be heard but laughter to be felt. It grows out of the deep, golden depths of the human personality which reflect the vast richness of life. It is the laughter of a father who is smothered under an avalanche of welcoming arms as a bevy of little people shout, "Daddy's home!" It is the laughter of the happy hunter as he brings home the game at the end of the day. Adult humor is the music of the heart—tuned in on the universe.

Reflections of a Parent

But whether our son has attained all of these desirable things or

only part of them, the important thing is that suddenly he is 21! It seems almost impossible to realize it. He grew up so fast. Now we are sorry we didn't take time to enjoy him more. Perhaps in the twilight of a quiet summer evening we thumb through the pages of the family album. It sparks some happy memories for a mom and dad. As a baby he was the cutest little fellow in the town. At four he was a monkey on wheels—all over the place. At six the camera caught him proudly grinning without his two front teeth. Age 10 was truly his golden year. And wasn't he sprouting out of his Sunday suit at 13! Then there are all those wonderful high school pictures. You can almost see yourself in every scene and remember how it used to be in your day, at your school. The college pictures are great, too, but not quite so sentimental. And there is his picture in uniform. He made a handsome serviceman! No wonder the girls fell for him. Funny how he seemed sort of oblivious to it. Except, of course, for Jo Anne. How lovely she looks in her wedding dress. They make a marvelous couple. . . .

As a mom and dad look back over the past fifth of a century, they seem caught between the sentimental flood of happy memories and the relief they feel for a mission ac-

complished. They know they made some mistakes, but they marvel how well it turned out after all. One thing they can't help mentioning—how some of Junior's childhood vices turned out to be his grownup virtues. They remember how they worried over his destructive proclivities—how he took the family clock apart, unstrung the bedroom radio, wrecked the first family TV. Now he earns his living mending such things! Or they remember worrying about his reading so much but now they are proud as punch that he made the national honor fraternity. They think of Nancy Hanks Lincoln gently scolding her boy for being a dreamer and not splitting the rails for the farm fence. And all the time she was raising one of America's greatest presidents! Mother Nature surely has a way of fooling parents.

Perhaps this is why raising a boy so often seems like a chore. Only when the job is practically completed does it suddenly seem like the greatest happiness of a lifetime. And how great the reward of parents who were blessed with a boy who really tried. It makes a mom and dad know that it was all worth while, and they cannot help saying with the wisdom of the ages:

Raising boys is a partnership between parents and God; how much better to build men than mend them!

The Comparative Method

(Continued from page 747)

but of a quick and violent end.

(8) Finally the downgrading of the Lamanites is *not* the fulfilment of prophecies about the ten tribes after the pattern of the destruction of God's people (that would be the *Nephites*), their degeneracy is given a unique explanation that cannot be found either in Ethan Smith or the Bible. (*To be continued*)

FOOTNOTES

¹⁰Jas. D. Bales, *The Book of Mormon*, (1958).

Even to work out the small number of seventy-five parallels Bales had to pad heavily. Thus, both the Book of Mormon and the Spaulding Manuscript talk about great civilizations, as what history does

not? This parallel is broken down into such inevitable points of resemblance as "both [books] refer to great cities," "both . . . represented as having some scientific knowledge," "Both knew something of mechanical arts," "both used iron," "both used coins" (the words "coin" and "coins" are *not* mentioned in the Book of Mormon), "both constructed fortifications," "both exceeded the present Indians in works of art and ingenuity," etc. Now all these things are inevitable accompaniments of any civilization: They are not separate and distinct points of resemblance at all. One might as well argue that since both books mention people, both imply that people have hands, hands have fingers, etc., and thus accumulate "parallels" by the score.

¹¹M. B. Hogan, "'A Parallel,' a matter of chance versus coincidence," in the *Rocky Mountain Mason*, Jan. 1956, pp. 17-36. Elder Roberts' manuscript is still in manuscript form.

¹²Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 47, n. 2.

¹³Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

¹⁴Josiah Priest, pp. 75-76.

¹⁵Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 47 cf. 49, 45, 101.