Just Another Book?, Part I

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Abstract: This series shows ways in which the Book of Mormon was out-of-sorts with the nineteenth century and thus not just another book of that time. The first part covers early Book of Mormon criticism.
Just another book?

by Hugh Nibley

*Here We Are Again:*—The logical point of departure for a study of Book of Mormon criticism happens to be, at present, the present; for today’s researches have just achieved the completion of a full circle in the mystic discipline. At the moment the critics are right back where they started from 130 years ago. Such is the progress of scholarship. Today we are being told that the Book of Mormon can be explained fully as a faithful reflection of the mind of Joseph Smith and the world he grew up in. Which is exactly what Alexander Campbell said in the beginning. Indeed, the latest criticisms of the book can do no better than to quote Campbell’s thesis word for word:

“This prophet Smith, through his stone spectacles, wrote on the plates of Nephi, in his Book of Mormon, every error and almost every truth discussed in New York in the last ten years. . . .”

Furthermore, Campbell observes, “there never was a book more evidently written by one set of fingers. . . .” I cannot doubt for a single moment but that he is the sole author and proprietor of it.” That pretty well covers it: Smith was the author of the book, and its substance is a distorted image of his own times.

Now if all this was so perfectly obvious, then as now, why on earth did the critics forsake such a neat and comfortable explanation to wander for a hundred years in a wilderness of speculation and contradiction? It was because the theory of the local origin collapsed at a touch. No sooner had Mr. Campbell’s explanation been received with cries of joy and relief than it was seen that the picture had not been clarified by it at all, but made much messier. An article in the *American Whig Review* explains the new embarrassment:

“Those who were acquainted with the early life of the founder of Mormonism, with his ignorance and character for stupidity, wondered much at the publication of so invention-displaying and elaborate a work, of which he claimed to be the sole author and proprietor, and as the prophet daily lived down his
... today we are being told that the Book of Mormon reflection of the mind of Joseph Smith

own boasts of superior value and wisdom, the wonder grew into a suspicion of the genuineness of his claims to exclusive authorship. A short time served to give this suspicion basis and confirmation, and a number of affidavits filed almost simultaneously in different parts of New York and Pennsylvania, and by witnesses between whom there was no opportunity of collusion, showed clearly the sources of the pretended inspiration."

This statement deserves close examination. Note first of all that it was quickly realized, not only by the Mormons, but by the anti-Mormons as well, that Joseph Smith by his own wits could not possibly have written the Book of Mormon—and so farewell to Mr. Campbell's sublime certitudes: "... I cannot doubt for a single moment but that he is the sole author and proprietor of it!" Note in the second place the admission that this obvious fact left the critics in a quandary—they "wondered much." And since quandaries are intolerable to critics, who are never at a loss to invent explanations, it is not the least surprising that "the wonder grew into a suspicion." From embarrassment to wonder and from wonder to suspicion: is there any doubt what the next step will be? Is suspicion ever at a loss to discover villainy? All at once, and last of all, comes the evidence: "almost simultaneously" people everywhere start remembering a certain unpublished and unregretted novel, a dull, befuddled composition that no one had the patience to read but the names of whose characters were remembered with crystal clarity by people who had forgotten all about the book until then. Then another "double-take" made it necessary to explain how Smith could have got hold of the book, and, presto! another brain-wave hit the public, and here and there people suddenly remembered a "mysterious stranger" who used to visit the Smiths by night, some three to ten and more years before! There is your answer, and no funny business, either: "there was no opportunity of collusion" between the "witnesses."

Only in such a case one does not look for collusion but for control. We do not have to look far for the controlling and co-ordinating agencies in the case of the affidavits against Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon, for they were all systematically sought out and collected by two or three individuals, going from door to door and from town to town, telling people what they wanted and finding certain parties only too glad to oblige. No collusion, indeed!

So Campbell's solution was short-lived, as the Whig Review has told us, and another had to be found. Accordingly we find a learned historian in 1835 voicing his and his fellows' relief at the new solution: "It has come out at last, that the Golden Bible was originally composed for a Novel, and being turned into a Bible by the ingenuity of two or three leading men among the Mormons, was printed and published as the basis of their religion. This development we trust will speedily extinguish the new lights." The "at last" is typical; through the years the experts have continued to attack from every angle, and periodically we hear the joyful cry that at last they have struck pay dirt.

The alternative theory having collapsed, and since it is much too late in the day to think up another one, the critics have no choice today but to go back to the old original theory of Campbell. But if that theory was so readily discredited (please note: it was not supplanted by the Spaulding theory, but broke down of its own accord, and the Spaulding substitute was only found after a desperate interval of frantic searching), if it could not stand up for a year on its own merits, why should it work now? For the good reason that lots of things are forgotten in 125 years! The theory that Joseph Smith composed the Book of Mormon raises questions and involves corollaries which a hundred years ago were readily seen to present an insuperable obstacle to its acceptance. But the modern world can very easily overlook those questions and corollaries, and present-day critics are trying hard to do so.

but ... nothing could be America
can be explained as a faithful
and the world he grew up in

One of the latest and most conscientious critics of
the Book of Mormon, Dr. O'Dea, finds the answer
to the whole thing just as simple and obvious as it
was to Alexander Campbell:

"There is a simple common-sense explanation which
states that Joseph Smith was a normal person living
in an atmosphere of religious excitement that . . . led
him from necromancy into revelation, from revelation
to prophecy, and from prophecy to leadership. . . .
To the non-Mormon . . . such an explanation on the
basis of the evidence at hand seems far the most likely
and safest."7

The trouble with this position is that all "the evi-
dence at hand" refutes it. To be consistent with his
own position Dr. O'Dea must accept without question
a number of perfectly untenable corollaries; for exam-
ple, he accepts emphatically the proposition that as
"a normal person" Smith reacted to the common
stimulus of his environment just the way other people
did, so that his Book of Mormon is in fact "a primary
source for the intellectual history of the common
man."8 Even his claims to revelation were but a
"legitimate product of the intensified experience of
the region."9 Dr. Cross goes even further; for him
all of the prophet's revelations, including the Book
of Mormon, are "nothing more than what happens to
any man who enjoys great responsibility. . . . It
might have happened to almost any one of Joseph's
fellow Yankee migrants."10 Even the alleged treasure-
digging and the finding of the plates "was by no means
peculiar and quite naturally seemed authentic to
ordinary folks," according to this authority, who
notes that such a composition as the Book of Mormon
"would scarcely seem fanciful, possibly not even novel,
to their contemporaries."11

The modern school has dug in so deeply on this
ground that it will be necessary for us to labor the
obvious by way of calling their reluctant attention
to it. Two fundamental corollaries of the theorem
that Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon are
1) that it was not beyond his ability to write such
a book, and 2) that the book itself, as the product of
a normal mind under the influences of everyday
stimuli supplied by a given environment, was neces-
sarily quite at home in that environment. Our
modern critics accept these corollaries, but the con-
temporaries of Joseph Smith could not, however eager
they were to explain the Book of Mormon. For they
knew too much and they saw too much. Dr. Francis
Kirkham has devoted the better part of a large book
to quotations in which contemporaries of Joseph
Smith, hostile or friendly, all express complete con-
viction that he could not possibly have written the
book. And even more clear and emphatic is the
unanimous verdict that nothing could be more com-
pletely out of place in nineteenth century America
than Joseph Smith and his book.

We are apt to forget this unless we look at the record.
Today, the experts find it not only convenient but
also essential to their argument to forget how the
world has reacted to Joseph Smith and the Book of
Mormon. Let us refresh their memories by listing
in chronological order some thoroughly representative
remarks by leading critics.

1830's

A month after the appearance of the Book of
Mormon, the liberal Palmyra Reflector warned Oliver
Cowdery that he might end up being sent as a con-
vict to the Simsbury Mines for daring to proclaim its
message in "the principal cities of the Union."12 Could
this be the doctrine "that naturally seemed quite
authentic to ordinary folks?" In August 1833 a widely-
heralded mass-meeting in Jackson County, Missouri,
unanimously voted that all Mormons should leave
"the country," that no more should be allowed to enter
"the country," that the Mormon printing press
should be destroyed (this was immediately done)
and all publication by Mormons forthwith and forever
cease. The reason for this perfectly illegal action
was clearly stated and clearly understood:

"The community especially fears that . . . the life
and property of other . . . (Continued on page 388)
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so much to be learned. There are other cheaper, faster ways of getting the attention of the boys, but they don't bring happiness. They don't even bring popularity except for a little while. But if you settle for a cheap substitute, you'll have plenty of time to be worried when it's too late. While you're preparing yourself for dating you'll spend a few lonely evenings, but the time won't be wasted. Just remember it takes time to 'practise your personality,' and when you 'arrive' it will be a sure thing.

"I'll finish your new dress tonight. You could wash your hair and do your nails. I have a new book that tells all about how to improve your conversation. You know, by morning you'll have quite a bit done." She winked at her daughter, "It's going to be fun, isn't it, getting ready for your very first date?"

Just Another Book

(Continued) citizens would be insecure, under the administration of men who are so ignorant and superstitious as to believe that they have been the subjects of miraculous and supernatural cures; hold converse with God and his angels, and possess and exercise the gifts of divination, and of unknown tongues."12

In vain the newspapers around the country pointed out that you could not throw the Constitution out of the window simply because people had crazy religious ideas: "We regard the Mormons as a sect of de- luded and deceived fanatics, yet they have their rights and privileges. . . ."13 In vain the governor of the state asked why the Mormons alone of all fanatics should be so treated: "It is not long," he wrote, "since an impostor assumed the character of Jesus Christ, and attempted to minister as such; but I never heard of any combination to deprive him of his rights."14 At the same time a learned judge in the same state, acting in his official capacity, urged the Mormons to give up the cause of all their troubles, and warned them of what would happen, rights or no rights, if they did not: "The Honorable Judge Ryd- land . . . addressed the Mormons warning them against the danger of suffering themselves to be led by pretenders to the high prerogatives of the Prophets of God."15 Such is the specific crime with which he charges them. A year later a western editor compared the Mormons with the early Christians; he also called the Book of Mormon "an artifice so vile, shallow, and contemptible that it can never deceive one intelligent individual; therefore we think it unworthy to so much notice as a contradiction!" But the remarkable thing about this perfect-

ly orthodox statement is that the author, who was a freethinker, went right on to speak of Moses and Christ and of the Old and New Testaments in the very same terms, sagely observing that the world's opinion of the Book of Mormon was also "unquestionably the opinion of the learned ancients, concerning the former revelations."16 It was a direct hit which went unnoticed in the general cry, voiced by the Missouri Argus in 1838, that though the Mormons may be Christians, still they were "a sect with a peculiar creed, distinct from that professed by the rest of Christians."17 The general impression of the Mormons on American society at the time is elo-

quently expressed in the verses of Josiah Canning, the New England "poet":

"Now MORMON, with his golden plates,
Says he has opened heaven's gates,
And hangs out many tempting baits
To prove the fact;
And old JOE SMITH, his agent, prates

With school-boy tact.

"Here in our own, our godly land,
Some zealot has enrolled a band,
Whose object is to take command
From HEAVEN, I think!
The last accounts they seem to stand
Upon the brink.

"That heathenism should be done
Beneath New England's CHRISTIAN sun,
's a crying shame—a grievous one;
And into jail
The imps should tarred and feathered run,

Or ride a RAIL."18

Here it will be seen that the ob-
jections are raised to the Mormons in staid New England as in wild
Missouri (and they are purely religious objections), and the same rough treatment is recommended for them. But today we are being told that such doctrines "would scarcely seem fanciful, possibly not even novel" in those early times. Who is kidding whom?

It was the oddness of Mormonism that arrested the attention of the Fabulous Forties, when the critics looked for the peculiar and found it everywhere. Everything about Mormonism was fantastic. Josiah Quincy said of the stately Nauvoo Temple, "It certainly cannot be compared to any ecclesiastical building which may be discerned by the natural sight." To Mr. Kidder Mormonism was "threatening to unsettle the grounds of all rational belief. . ." Wherever the Mormons went, "their fanatical religious zeal and some of their tenets and practices . . . were inconsistent or incompatible with the civilization surrounding them." We are accustomed to boast of the intelligence of the nineteenth century," wrote the scandalized editor of the eminent Dublin University Magazine in 1843, "to laud ourselves on the march of mind in these modern days, and to speak of the popular delusions by which past generations were misled, as the spectral shadows of 'the long night now gone down the sky.' Mormonism is a bitter reply to our self-laudation. . ." How in the name of common sense," an English minister wrote to his nephew who had become a Mormon elder, "could you be so simple, as to let such a poor, weak deluded creature, commit such blasphemy, as to put his hands on your head, and tell you that you should have the Holy Ghost descend upon you?—I would much rather have a pig's foot on my head, if it was well boiled."

1850's

Everyone knows that the Mormons "are a queer, eccentric set; that they have got odd notions into their heads respecting religion and the Bible . . ." a London editor observed in 1850. Charles Dickens was bemused at the idea of people "seeing visions in an age of railways;" it was just too incongruous for words. "It is most humiliating to our country and our age!" cries a devout American commenting on the same anomaly in 1853, "Who
would opine that, in our happy land, in a nation of voters, freemen, newspapers, periodical literature, and general reading, such a gross and detestable imposture as Mormonism could find disciples and devotees?" Speaking of the death of the Prophet, the most noted literary journal of the age says, "we cannot deny that in his punishment, the wrath of lawless men fulfilled the righteousness of God." Actually it was "a death too honorable for his deserts. . . . To call such a man a martyr is an abuse of language." When one considers that this was written in Scotland, far from the political or economic troubles of the American frontier, and by a man who prided himself on his cool intellectual detachment, who had had never had any contact with Joseph Smith, it is hard to argue that Mormonism was simply a normal product of the times. "It has been observed with some reason," an important American journal remarked in 1854, "that a Rabelais or a Swift told the story of the Mormons under the vail of allegory, mankind would probably have entered a protest against the extravagance of the satirist." An editorial in the eminent Putnam's Monthly for March 1855, replies with a resounding "No!" to its own question: "Shall Utah be admitted to the Union?" It is the doctrines of the Church regarding God and man that decide the issue. A later thesis on the same subject in the Forum reached the same conclusions:--the Mormons are as different from the rest of society as the wild redskins, totally devoid of "the virtues upon which alone Christian people can build republican institutions." In the same year, John Reynolds, a shrewd observer, wrote: "In all the great events and revolutions in the various nations of the earth nothing surpasses the extraordinary history of the Mormons. The facts in relation to this singular people are so strange, so opposite to common sense, and so great and important, that they would not obtain our belief if we did not see the events transpire before our eyes. No argument, or mode of reasoning, could induce anyone to believe that in the nineteenth century, in the United States . . . a sect of religiousists could arise on delusion and imposture." Yet our present-day critics do not even raise an eyebrow. They were born yesterday. A hundred years ago the critics agreed that "Mormonism is . . . the product of a bewildered brain, when it has evidence both of a morbid and metaphysical nature, to prove that it cannot by possibility—I may almost say human or divine—be true! Before Mormonism can be true, the nature of man, the nature of truth, and the nature of Deity himself, must be totally subverted. . . . Nothing less than a total abcession in these parts can be tolerated."}

FOOTNOTES, PART II, Part I

1A. Campbell, in The Millennial Harbinger II (Bethany Virginia, 1831), p. 93; The passage is cited at length by W. R. Cross, The Burned-over District. (Ithaca, 1890), as an authentic explanation of the Book of Mormon.
2Campbell "unequivocally and triumphantly sets the question of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon rest, to every rational mind." Thus the Painesville Telegraph, May 17, 1831, cited by F. Kirkham, New Witness for Christ in America, II, 89.
4The subject of the affidavits will be treated below in a separate section.
6The works of Linn, Arbough, Brodie, Morgan, Davis, to name only a few, all promise to produce the true story of the Book of Mormon—at last! In such pathetic hopefulness the Rev. J. E. Mahaffey published his Found at Lost! Positive Proof that Mormonism Is A Fraud and the Book of Mormon A Fable (Augusta, Georgia: Chronicle Job Office, 1902).
8Ibid., p. 13.
9Cross, op. cit., p. 140.
10Ibid., p. 81.
11Palmyra Reflector, June 1, 1830, in Kirkham, op. cit., II, 50.
12Missouri Intelligencer and Boone's Lick Advertiser, Aug. 10, 1833. Also reported in the Jeffersonian Republican (Missouri), for Aug. 17, 1833.
13Missouri Intelligencer and Boone's Lick Advertiser, June 21, 1834.
14Letter from Governor Daniel Dunklin June 6, 1834, printed idem, for July 5, 1834.
15Ibid., for June 28, 1834.
17Missouri Argus for Dec. 20, 1838.
19The poem is dedicated to Daniel Webster.
21D. Kidder, Mormonism and the Mormons (New York, 1843).
22J. S. Morton, The Illustrated History of Nebraska (Lincoln: J. North & Co., 1906) II, 125, speaking of the 1840's. This is
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