



Type: Magazine Article

Just Another Book?, Part I

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 62, No. 5 (May 1959)

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

Page(s): 345–347, 388–391

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.

*Third of the Series
"Mixed Voices"*

A Study in Book of Mormon Criticism



Just another book?

Part One

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.¹ 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 relief² 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."³

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!⁴

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."⁵ 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.⁶

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 evidence 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 example, 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."⁷ Even his claims to revelation were but a "legitimate product of the intensified experience of the region."⁸ 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."⁹ 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."¹⁰

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 necessarily quite at home in that environment. Our modern critics accept these corollaries, but the contemporaries 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 conviction that he could not possibly have written the book. And even more clear and emphatic is the unanimous verdict that nothing could be more completely 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 convict to the Simsbury Mines for daring to proclaim its message in "the principal cities of the Union."¹¹ 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)

more completely out of place in 19th century than Joseph Smith and his book.

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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 deluded 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 Rydland . . . 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-

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?"

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 eloquently 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 goodly 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 CHRIS-
TIAN sun,
's a crying shame—a grievous one;
And into jail
The imps should tarred and feath-
ered run,
Or ride a RAIL."¹⁸

Here it will be seen that the objections 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."¹⁹ To Mr. Kidder Mormonism was "threatening to unsettle the grounds of all rational belief. . . ."²⁰ Wherever the Mormons went, "their fanatical religious zeal and some of their tenets and practices . . . were inconsistent or incompatible with the civilization surrounding them."²¹ 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. . . ."²² "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."²³

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 1850.²⁴ Charles Dickens was bemused at the idea of people "seeing visions in an age of railways"; it was just too incongruous for words.²⁵ "It is most humiliating to our country and our age!" cries a devout American commenting on the same anomaly in 1853, "Who

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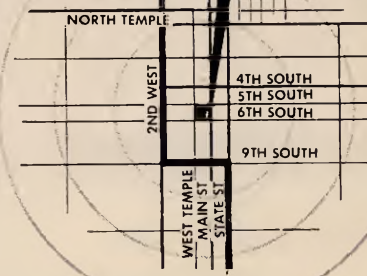
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would opine that, in our happy land, in a nation of voters, freemen, newspapers, periodical literature, and general reading, such a gross and detestable imposture as Mormonism could find disciples and devotees?"²⁶ Speaking of the death of the Prophet, 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."²⁷ 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 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 had a Rabelais or a Swift told the story of the Mormons under the veil of allegory, mankind would probably have entered a protest against the extravagance of the satirist."²⁸

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.²⁹ 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."³⁰ 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 religionists could arise on *delusion* and *imposture*."³¹

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 *moral* 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."³²

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, 1950), as an authentic explanation of the Book of Mormon.

²Campbell "unequivocally and triumphantly sets the question of the divine authenticity of the 'Book' forever at rest, to every rational mind." Thus the *Painesville Telegraph*, May 17, 1881, cited by F. Kirkham, *New Witness for Christ in America*, II, 99.

³*The American Whig Review*, Vol. 7, June 1851, p. 140.

⁴The subject of the affidavits will be treated below in a separate section.

⁵D. Griffiths, Jr., *New Settlements of Ohio* (London: Westley & Davis, 1835), p. 140.

⁶The works of Linn, Arbaugh, 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 Last! 'Positive Proof' that Mormonism Is a Fraud and the Book of Mormon a Fable* (Augusta, Georgia: Chronicle Job Office, 1902).

⁷T. F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 27.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁹Cross, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹¹*Palmyra Reflector*, June 1, 1830, in Kirkham, *op. cit.*, II, 50.

¹²*Missouri Intelligencer and Boone's Lick Advertiser*, Aug. 10, 1833. Also reported in the *Jeffersonian Republican* (Missouri), for Aug. 17, 1833.

¹³*Missouri Intelligencer and Boone's Lick Advertiser*, June 21, 1834.

¹⁴Letter from Governor Daniel Dunklin June 6, 1834, printed *idem*, for July 5, 1834.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, for June 28, 1834.

¹⁶J. Bobb, in *The Western Expositor* for Dec. 10, 1835.

¹⁷*Missouri Argus* for Dec. 20, 1838.

¹⁸Josiah D. Canning, "The Review," in *Poems* (Greenfield, Massachusetts: Phelps & Ingersoll, 1838), pp. 107-8. The poem is dedicated to Daniel Webster.

¹⁹Josiah Quincy, *Figures of the Past* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1901), p. 389.

²⁰D. Kidder, *Mormonism and the Mormons* (New York, 1842).

²¹J. S. Morton, *Illustrated History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: J. North & Co., 1906) II, 125, speaking of the 1840's. This is

clearly illustrated in Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail*.

²²Editorial, "Mormonism; or, New Mohammedanism in England and America," *Dublin University Magazine*, March 1843, p. 283.

²³Rev. P. Alcock, *Latter-day Saints, A Letter to His Nephew, E. H. Webb, Elder in the Church of the Latter-day Saints* (Bristol: Wm. Taylor, 1842), p. 3.

²⁴Editorial, "What Is Mormonism?" in *Sharpe's London Magazine*, N.S. 5 (1850), p. 55.

²⁵Charles Dickens, *Household Words*, July 19, 1851.

²⁶S. H. Cox, *Interviews: Memorable and Useful* (New York: Harpers, 1853), p. 293.

²⁷W. J. Conybeare, in *The Edinburgh Review*, 1854, pp. 169-170.

²⁸Editorial in *The National Magazine*, IV, No. 6, June 1854, pp. 481-2.

²⁹Editorial in *Putnam's Monthly* V, xxvii (March 1855), p. 226. The Mormons can only be compared with "a body of savages." *Ibid.*, pp. 225, 236.

³⁰H. L. Dawes, "The Admission of Utah," *Forum* (no date), p. 482.

³¹John Reynolds, *My Own Times* (Illinois, 1855), p. 562.

³²J. T. Peck, D. D., *The History of the Great Republic* (New York: Broughton & Wyman, 1868), p. 504.

³³H. Caswall, in W. S. Parrott, *The Vail Uplifted* (London: 1865), p. 19: "I should be showing great want of charity to my countrymen, if I willingly allowed them to think well of the 'Latter-day' doctrine."

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 33, 39, quoting Rev. O. C. Duke of Omaha.

³⁵C. H. Brigham, "The Mormon Problem," in *Old and New*, May 1870, pp. 638f, 629.

³⁶Editorial, "The Mormon Theocracy," in *Scribner's*, July, 1877, pp. 391-2.

³⁷T. deWitt Talmage, *The Brooklyn Tabernacle, A Collection of 104 Sermons* (N.Y.: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884), pp. 55-56. In an earlier sermon, pp. 36-37, Talmage labors to implicate the Mormons in the assassination of President Garfield.

³⁸F. A. Noble, D. D., *The Mormon Iniquity* (Chicago: Jameson & Morse, 1884), p. 3.

³⁹R. W. Beers, *The Mormon Puzzle and How to Solve It* (New York, Chicago: Funk & Wagnalls, 1887) p. 17, reluctantly adding: "But thus far it has successfully withstood even the fiercest opposition."

⁴⁰J. P. Newman, D. D., "The Mormon Question," in the Rt. Rev. S. Fallows, *Hot Shot fired at Fashions Follies and Society's Abominations* (Chicago: Standard Publishing Co., 1889), pp. 99-100, 108.

⁴¹It was drawn up "by order of the Presbytery of Utah, April 8, 1897. Endorsed by the Congregational Association of Utah, October 14, 1897. Endorsed by the Baptist Association of Utah, Sept. 7, 1898." League for Social Service (New York City), *Ten Reasons Why Christians Cannot Fellowship the Mormon Church* (New York: 105 E. 22 St., 1898).

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 3. Italics ours.

⁴³*Ibid.*, pp. 3-8.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 14. The expression "God-Man" would shock a Moslem or Jew quite as much as any Mormon teaching about God shocked these liberal Protestants!

⁴⁵S. Laing, *Modern Science and Modern Thought* (London: Chapman & Hall Ltd., 1898), p. 231.



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