



Type: Magazine Article

Just Another Book?, Part III

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley

Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 62, No. 7 (July 1959)

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

Page(s): 530–531, 565

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 third and final part covers Book of Mormon criticism in the 20th century.

"Mixed Voices"
A Study in Book of
Mormon Criticism

Part Two

Just Another Book

Concluding last month's chapter
by Hugh Nibley

1900's

The verdict of a much-reprinted book appearing first in 1900 is that "For *climacteric comicality* Mormonism should be awarded the palm. Its romancing is refreshing in its very audaciousness. Jules Verne dreaming is here eclipsed; Baron Munchausen marvels seem commonplace. Of absurdities Pelions are piled upon Ossas, but the pile rises ever higher.



Untruth was never more picturesque. From first to last the history of this cult is dramatic and spectacular. One feels that he has stumbled upon a scene in the Arabian Nights, rather than upon a sober chapter of real religion."⁴⁶

An investigator in 1906 found that all the peculiarities of the Mormons "center in and are an outgrowth of their strange religious beliefs," beliefs which he can only describe as "grotesque and monstrous," yet which "at the same time have won a following unsurpassed in devotion."⁴⁷ If the Mormons could only cure themselves of their bizarre taste for the grotesque and monstrous, and purge their religion "of its gross errors of doctrine," all would be well.⁴⁸ "It seems almost beyond belief," one scholar wrote in 1919, "that such a hybrid of fraud and superstition as Mormonism could be brought forth by the most enlightened age of the world . . . a terrible canker has attacked the heart of Christianity at home. . . ."⁴⁹ Mormonism "may hope to survive," writes a typical representative of the new "liberal" school, "only if it is brave enough to jettison its out-of-date creed and face the future boldly,

shorn of its absurdities and blasphemies. . . . That the Mormon Church will become the force predicted for it by its leaders, early and present-day, is impossible. That its doctrine could attract intellectual men is an insult to intellect. That it can continue to exist as a religious force is to expect too much."⁵⁰

"We talk much about 'respecting' this or that person's religion," wrote G. K. Chesterton in an essay on the Mormons, "but the way to respect a religion is to treat it as a religion: to ask what are its tenets and what are their consequences." For Chesterton: "The basic Mormon belief is one that comes out of the morning of the earth, from the most primitive and even infantile attitude," namely the idea regarding God, "not that He was materialized once, as all Christians believe . . . but that He was materially embodied from all time; that he has a local habitation as well as a name." This he calls a "barbaric but violently vivid conception," and bids us view the Mormons as "a number of dull, earnest, ignorant, black-coated men with chimney-pot hats, chin beards or mutton-chop whiskers, [who] managed to reproduce in their own souls

The Grab Bag

by Hugh Nibley

How does the Book of Mormon critic of today go about his work? His point of departure is an article of faith: "Painstaking research can uncover the source of all his [Joseph Smith's] ideas."¹ Actually this statement of Mrs. Brodie's is nonsense, since no research can ever uncover the indisputable source of any man's ideas, let alone those of a man whose world, with all the myriad sights and sounds that *might* conceivably have given him those ideas, has passed away over a century ago. Armed with this naive credo and a determination to "uncover" something, the critic looks about him for something he has read or heard that reminds him of something in the Book of Mormon, and as soon as he has found it announces to the

world that he has at last discovered the indubitable source of the Book of Mormon.

Silly as it sounds, this is exactly how the experts operate.² They begin by declaring the book a typical product of its times; but if it is typical, it must be of a type—there must be other books like it. Where were they? Search as they would, the scholars could find nothing closer to the Book of Mormon than, of all things, the Koran, a writing about as far from Smith's time, place, and culture as it is possible to get.³ The most casual reading will show, moreover, that it would be hard to name two writings less alike than those two. Many Moslems, for example, have rejected the popular nineteenth *sura* (chapter) of the

the richness and peril of an ancient Oriental experience."⁵¹

It is a gaudy picture, and a phony one, but it leaves us in no doubt as to how a top-flight intellectual of the 1920's classified the Mormons: the only parallel Chesterton can think of is not that of the ancient Hebrews but of his own weird idea of them.⁵² It was at least an improvement on the psychic deductions of Theodore Schroeder who a few years before had found the whole key to Mormonism in the doctrine of a heaven "whose greatest and only advertised bliss will be intensified animalism, prolonged through eternity."⁵³

In all this it would be hard to tell who rates the Mormons lower, the Liberals or the Fundamentalists. The cry of the latter is that "from first to last there is not one teaching peculiar to Mormonism which is not contrary to the Bible and to evangelical Christianity." Its "ghastly ideas" of a God who has a body, the necessity of good works for salvation, etc., "cannot but be viewed with abhorrence by all true Christians. . . . We ought to care greatly that such evil beliefs are even held by the Mormons themselves. . . ."⁵⁴ There

should be a limit to freedom of religion, and Mormonism is it. A very recent "study" deplores the fact that "Mormons are generally considered by many to be 'Fundamentalists,' since nothing could be greater than the gap between the two: "Mormons deny the Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity and the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Mormonism denies the authority of the Bible. . . . Mormon theology denies the virgin birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . ."⁵⁵ Such conclusions may be absurd, but they make it clear enough that the "Fundamentalists" are as determined as anyone else to have no part of the Mormons.

Anyone familiar enough with the febrile literature from which we have been quoting to attempt writing his own book on the Mormons should recognize that nothing is more characteristic than the insistence of the critics on every side, that the Mormons are not like any other Christians or like any other people in the Western world. They may be compared with primitive Christians by freethinkers, or with primitive Hebrews or Moslems by people who have only the vaguest homemade conception of what the latter might

have been like, but all are agreed that their presence in our western civilization is completely and incredibly incongruous.

Critics may be permitted at this late date to try their hand at winning friends and influencing people by telling the Mormons of today that they are just ordinary folk with an ordinary church. But to say that such was also the case in the days of Joseph Smith and Brigham Young is neither honest nor sporting. The genial and forced camaraderie of some of the present-day critics of Mormonism is that of the man who finds it easier to pick your pocket by affectionately locking arms with you than by hitting you over the head. The new humane approach is simply an obvious maneuver to rob the Church of a glorious history and to play down every remarkable circumstance of its origin. When it reaches the point of being told that while the Book of Mormon may seem very strange to us, to the contemporaries of Joseph Smith it "would scarcely seem fanciful, possibly not even novel," it is high time to protest. For even the most superficial acquaintance with the literature will show (Continued on page 565)

Koran because it contains in the story of Joseph and his brethren an episode of human history: ". . . it is entirely worldly history [they protest], and it is unthinkable that this physical history should ever be part of the holy Book revealed by God."⁴ The reader can soon convince himself that the Koran really is remarkably innocent of "physical history," while the Book of Mormon purports to contain whole books of it. That alone should indicate how much the two books have in common.

But while some saw in Smith "another Mohammed preparing another Koran,"⁵ others found in his work typical "Swedenborgian illusions,"⁶ a writer in Hastings' *Encyclopedia* even discovering in the Book of

Mormon "references to Swedenborgianism with its three heavens." The fact that there is no such doctrine mentioned in the book does not deter this investigator, who finds in the same source traces of "the Washingtonian movement for total abstinence."⁷ Though religious men in every age have abstained from strong waters, yet the Mormons can only have got the Word of Wisdom (*not* mentioned in the Book of Mormon!) from the Washingtonians, because they happened to be active at the time. These two instances illustrate how the critics operate.

"The theological ideas of the Book of Mormon," according to J. H. Snowden, "are also easily traced to their sources . . . the Nephites were *Old School*

Just Another Book

(Continued) that the Book of Mormon was as baffling, scandalizing, and hated a book in the first week of its appearance as it has ever been since. The idea that the Book of Mormon was simply a product of its time may be a necessary fiction to explain it but it is a fiction none the less. If they may be trusted in nothing else, the voluminous writings of the anti-Mormons stand as monumental evidence for one fact: that Mormonism and the Book of Mormon were in no way a product of the society in which they arose.

FOOTNOTES

⁴⁰Edgar E. Volk, *The Mormon Monster* (Chicago: F. H. Revell Co., 1900), quoting G. H. Combs. This is the "standard" Baptist work on Mormonism.

⁴¹G. A. Irving, "The Ways of the Mormons," *Outlook*, Dec. 26, 1906, p. 1064.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p. 1068.

⁴³Geo. Scibel, *The Mormon Saints* (Pittsburgh: Lessing Co., 1919), pp. 3-4, protesting that in this study "nought is set down in malice."

⁴⁴Stuart Martin, *The Mystery of Mormonism* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1920), pp. 307ff.

⁴⁵G. K. Chesterton, *The Uses of Adversity* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1921), pp. 184, 188, 189.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 189; "In other words, this strange sect, by soaking itself solely in the Hebrew Scriptures, had really managed to reproduce the atmosphere of those Scriptures as they are felt by Hebrews rather than by Christians." How does G. K. know how an "atmosphere" feels to another person?

⁴⁷Theodore Schroeder, "The Sex-Determinant in Mormon Theology," in *The Alienist and Neurologist*, May 1908, p. 12.

⁴⁸Rev. J. D. Nutting, *Why Care about Mormonism?* (Cleveland: Utah Gospel Mission, 1926), pp. 1-2 (Tract).

⁴⁹W. R. Martin, *The Rise of the Cults* (An Introduction to Non-Christian Cults), (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House, 1955), pp. 51-52.

Denmark Celebrates the American Independence Day

(Continued) have an atmosphere all their own—a unique and deep feeling due to the rare combination of emigrant loyalty to the new nation mingled with rejoicing in never quite forgotten memories of an earlier home. Thus do strong and good husbands and wives celebrate their new festival together with

a STAUFFER FIGURE and a happier summer **33¢ a day**

Yes, Stauffer—America's No. 1 home reducing plan of effortless exercise and calorie reduction—is now yours for far less than you would expect to pay for imitations and "look-alikes."



Stauffer's "Magic Couch" (Posture-Rest®) in the beautiful Princess Model is now yours for only \$149.50 ...gives controlled rhythmic motion for the thorough deep-down effortless exercise you need to help reduce.



Get Complete Details Today Write or Call

Stauffer Home Plan

520 East 4th South
Davis 8-0531
Salt Lake City 1, Utah

I would like more information about the Stauffer Home Plan without obligation.

Name Phone.....
Address
City State.....

MORMON WAGON TRAIN MAP

Shows the route taken by the Mormon pioneers in 1847, to the West. Accurate data on the historical facts of this wagon train. Biography and portrait of Brigham Young pictured on map. Beautifully illustrated in color, 17"x22". A valuable teaching aid.

Send Today, \$1.00, postpaid.

BUTLER ART SERVICE, P.O. Box 88-T, Orange, Calif.

FOR COMPLETE DETAILS OF **VIRCO**

FOLDING CHAIRS & FOLDING TABLES
SEE PAGE 557

NOW is the time to plan that European Trip to: Olympic Games—Rome, 1960 Passion Play—Oberammergau

We can help you!



MURDOCK TRAVEL

51 North State Street
Salt Lake City, Utah Dial DAVIS 2-1129
(A word to the wise is sufficient)