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The Comparative Method, Part II

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Abstract: This series rejects the idea that the Book of Mormon copies Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews*. The second and final part concludes the series.

The Comparative Method

by Hugh Nibley

To establish any connection at all between the books of the two Smiths it is absolutely imperative to find something perfectly unique and peculiar in both of them. Yet there is not *one single thing* in common between *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon that is not also found in the Bible. Parallel No. 9 promises to be the exception to this containing as it does significant details that are not found in the Bible: yet it is in these very details that the two books are in complete disagreement! Another false parallel is No. 10, the destruction of Jerusalem: Ethan Smith speaks of one destruction, the Book of Mormon of another, but the Bible speaks of both. Here the parallel is not between the two Smiths at all—they are talking of wholly different events—but between them and the Bible only. Again, there is an indirect reference to American hieroglyphics in Ethan Smith which leads to parallel No. 8 with the query: “Was this sufficient to suggest the strange manner of writing in the Book of Mormon in the ‘learning of the Jews and language of the Egyptians’ but in altered Egyptian?” In other words, the two sources have the mention of *Egyptian hieroglyphics* in common:—only the word *Egyptian* does *not* appear in Ethan Smith; and the word *hieroglyphics* does *not* appear in the Book of Mormon; but if you put the two together, what do you get? Egyptian hieroglyphics! In the same way, Ethan Smith contains a brief mention of Quetzalcoatl, though nothing could be farther from his mind than to suggest that Quetzalcoatl might be Christ, while the Book of Mormon contains mention of Christ without the slightest hint that he might be Quetzalcoatl: put *them* together, and you have parallel No. 18: The common teaching of both books that Christ was Quetzalcoatl! Again, because Joseph Smith (*not* the Book of Mormon) and Ethan Smith both mention Ezekiel 37, our critics are convinced that the former is stealing from the latter, though their interpretations of the celebrated passage are *entirely different*: it is suspicious for Joseph Smith even to mention a uni-

versally discussed chapter of the Bible if Ethan Smith has already mentioned it.

Finally parallel No. 12: Granted that the Indians are the descendants of the lost ten tribes, as everyone believed in 1830, what Christian would not feel an obligation towards them? Ethan Smith’s view that “the American Gentile nation [the United States]” should “become the Savior of Israel in America,” is a perfectly natural one, and is assumed to offer another parallel to the teaching of the Book of Mormon. Nothing could be farther from the mark: the Book of Mormon never looks to the United States government, the American people, or Christian civilization to save the Indians—it tells a very different story of what is to happen.

So after all Ethan Smith turns in a perfect score; not a single blemish mars the target. In every case where the Book of Mormon *might* have borrowed from him, it might much more easily have borrowed from the Bible or prevailing popular beliefs. In the few cases where he deals in common with the Book of Mormon with matters not treated in those other sources, the two books are completely at variance.

Grab-bag Research:—Any conscientious student likes to find support for his own theories and ideas in the writings of others, and when he comes upon a particularly helpful or enlightening passage joyfully quotes it. Yet if Joseph Smith says there was once a great civilization in Central America, and quotes Josiah Stout to back him up, it is plain that Smith is stealing from Stout—even though Stout’s book came out three years later than his! Plagiarists conceal the sources of their information; they do not shout them from the housetops; but if a Mormon leader is so careless as to quote a non-Mormon writer by way of illustrating or supporting a Mormon teaching, he has given everything away; he has openly declared the true source of Mormon revelation. Sidney Rigdon “openly quoted from a book by Thomas Dick on one occasion. This proves to Mrs. (Continued on page 854)



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great commandments to guide our accomplishment. One of these is "Thou shalt not covet." God has given each one of us sufficient for all of our needs. We must learn to trust and be true to those gifts.

One of the greatest leadership lessons we may learn is "Thou shalt not covet." For "Lo, your own house is the house with the golden windows."

The Comparative Method

(Continued from page 848)

Brodie that he had read the book—therefore Joseph Smith had read it or heard of it—therefore Smith got his cosmology from it—therefore Mr. Davis⁹⁶ now tells us that Mormon leaders "drew in ideas at random from local preachers, pseudo-scientific books, and 'philosophers' like Thomas Dick." And this statement is bred of nothing more than an airy word from Mrs. Brodie.⁹⁷

If we were to ask an IBM machine, a super-electronic memorizer, associator, and classifier of data, to tell us which cultural, historical, and intellectual influences are most prominent in the Book of Mormon, we would consider the machine's response utterly worthless unless we had first stocked it with ten thousand times more facts than any human mind contains. Yet every Book of Mormon critic thinks he can answer the question by referring to whatever tiny patch of knowledge he happens to sit on. What do we trust in the critics? Certainly it cannot be their knowledge—it must be instinct. Today we are asked to accept mystic explanations of the Book of Mormon which, lacking any solid foundation, rest their case on Joseph Smith's reactions to "latent facets" of Puritanism (O'Dea) or to "historic responses" of the Reformation (Davis). All the prevailing environmental theories of Mormonism and the Book of Mormon insist that both were the product of an intensely local setting, suited to the extremely limited intellectual horizon of Smith and his followers, yet Mr. Cross and Dr. O'Dea tells us that it was not Mr. Davis' old New Englanders to whose thoughts Joseph Smith gave such welcome expression but a very different stock, the "Yorkers." Mr. Armytage, however, shows us that Mormonism was exactly and peculiarly what the sturdy North country farmers and artisans



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of England wanted to hear,⁹⁸ while the same holds true for Welsh miners, Scandinavian fishermen, prosperous Swiss burghers, and South Pacific Islanders. Davis's "fourteen-year-old ragamuffin" certainly had a knack: "Why should the gibberish of a crazy boy," he asks, "send thousands of people trekking off to establish a theocracy beyond the Rocky Mountains?"⁹⁹ The question is admirably put, and he can find but one possible answer for it: It was because the crazy boy told all those people exactly what they wanted to hear, giving them a doctrine so perfectly suited to their taste that they would undergo any toil or danger for it. One hundred years ago Monsieur Remy accounted for the success of Joseph Smith by observing that he had simply combined all that was most enticing in all religions into one religion. Look what our crazy boy Joseph is doing! What we want to know is *how* he does it. After all, what the latest explanations of Smith and his book amount to is the profound discovery that he succeeded where others failed because he always happened to do just the right thing.

The vast depth and breadth of the grab-bag guarantee that our Book of Mormon investigators will never run out of parallels and analogies which they may hail as significant or not as they choose. But it also guarantees that none of them will ever have the last word. To the end their ideas about the Book of Mormon remain strictly their own, and they are welcome to them. But any pretense to scientific or scholarly finality under the circumstances is but an illusion. Our poorly trained scholars, satisfied that modern science has emancipated them from old methods and chores, are quite unaware that the critics of an earlier day were just as well-educated and emancipated as they, and that they are only repeating in their shallow researches what has already been done by men of greater diligence and authority—and duly marked off as wasted effort.

(The end)

⁹⁸D. D. Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 167.

⁹⁹Brodie, *op. cit.*, p. 69 "... the book can best be explained ... by his responsiveness to the provincial opinions of the time."

¹⁰⁰W. H. G. Armytage, "Liverpool, Gateway to Zion," *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 48 (1957), pp. 39-40. For sheer misinformation Mr. Armytage's article sets a record even among anti-Mormon writers.

¹⁰¹Davis, *ibid.*