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# SINCE CUMORAH

## NEW VOICES FROM THE DUST

BY HUGH NIBLEY, PH.D.

PROFESSOR OF HISTORY AND RELIGION  
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*Continuing his discussion on findings that relate to the Book of Mormon, the author challenges men of thought—both in the Church and out—to put the Book of Mormon to the test by applying the new attitudes and methods of contemporary philosophers of science.*

● In the last issue we discussed the Alaskan land bridge theory, geological time tables, and K. R. Popper's challenge of the authoritarianism of science in which he noted that "observation and experiment cannot establish anything finally . . ." but only help us eliminate the weaker theories.

Popper's final word is a warning against taking refuge in status and prestige; we must, says he, "avoid like the plague the appearance of possessing knowledge which is too deep to be clearly and simply expressed." Or, in the words of David Starr Jordan, "Authority? There is no authority!"

Such an approach would alleviate a good deal of the tension, rivalry, and misunderstanding that have always accompanied research into the scriptures. Since there are no true authorities, there are no false ones; there are no igno-

ramuses, charlatans, or pseudo scholars, but only theories which may be more or less easily refuted. One does not have to be an expert to enter into the discussion, but the discussion itself will readily enough make clear who is equipped and how well and in what fields—degrees, honors, titles, credentials, and emoluments have nothing to do with the case; they are but the forlorn trappings of an authoritarianism that we have often been told has no place in true research. The only pseudo scholarship is that which claims authority and finality and so refuses to enter into the discussion. The new approach does away with such exquisite snobbery as the classic phrase, "the right to an opinion." Anybody has a right to an opinion, with the understanding, of course, that his opinion will be subjected to unsparing criticism.

We can illustrate how the method of "problems—theories—criticism" works by taking the case of Hermonthis in the Book of Mormon. It is admittedly remarkably close in form and meaning to the Egyptian Hermonthis. But therewith the problem is not solved but only introduced. The resemblance between the two words has to be explained, and so we invent a

theory, namely, that Joseph Smith must have had access to authentic ancient sources. That settles nothing, however, since (to quote Popper again) "the number of competing theories is always infinite," and we can think offhand of a dozen different theories to explain the Hermonths phenomenon. And so we come to the discussion, which will never settle the question but which may lead to the discovery of much new and relevant information.

Where, then, does certitude lie? That is another issue that has come in for a good deal of discussion recently, and the growing consensus is a surprising one: Certitude lies only in inspiration, in that insight which in the last analysis defies analysis.<sup>126</sup> Even so, routine investigation is not a waste of time, for in the process of dealing with materials, certain convictions build up in the individual that, like a testimony of the gospel, are nontransferable but that comprise the most tangible and gratifying fruits of study.

The Book of Mormon has always been a puzzle to the world. It is a problem and a challenge, but instead of being treated as such, it has always been taken as a final proof on the one hand that Joseph Smith was an imposter and on the other that he was an inspired prophet. With that deadlock we would leave it were it not that the book itself irresistibly invites testing. "Testability has degrees," according to Popper, and "a theory which asserts more, and thus takes greater risks, is better testable than a theory which asserts very little." Where can one find a bolder assertion than Joseph Smith's claims for the Book of Mormon, or a greater willingness than he displayed to be tested by all the tests the ingenuity of man can devise?

*(To be continued)*

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>126</sup>For an interesting discussion of this, P. B. Medawar, "Is the Scientific Paper Fraudulent?" in *Journal of Human Relations*, 13 (1965), pp. 1-6; reprinted from *Saturday Review*, Aug. 1, 1964.



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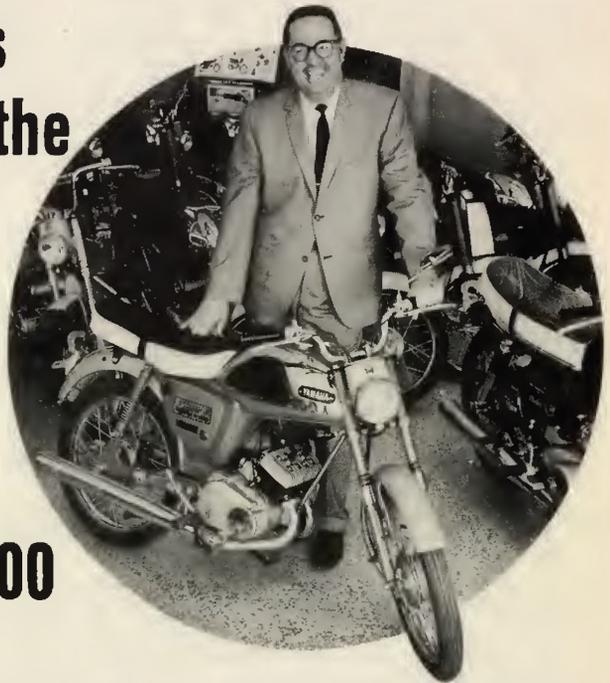
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