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“Something to Move Mountains”: Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon

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Hugh and Sidney Sperry (left) examine copies of ancient manuscripts, ca. 1950.

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No one in the history of Mormon scholarship has done more to establish rational grounds for belief in the Book of Mormon than Hugh Nibley. . . . Nibley's legendary erudition, fluency across a spectrum of languages, and prodigious output . . . have lent his work a weight that is unprecedented in Mormon studies. . . . Nibley has done more than any Mormon of his era to further the intellectual credibility of the Book of Mormon.

--Terry L. Givens ¹

¹Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 118, 124.

Chapter 16

“Something to Move Mountains”: Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon

Hugh Nibley has had a revolutionary influence on the way we read the Book of Mormon. In *Lehi in the Desert, An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, and *Since Cumorah*, as well as in his many related articles, Hugh Nibley has set the Book of Mormon in an ancient Middle Eastern context and helped three generations of readers realize the book's relevance and importance to our day. The effect of Hugh's writings has been fundamental and far-reaching; our understanding of the Book of Mormon has deepened and our appreciation of the book has grown. As John W. Welch, BYU law professor and Book of Mormon scholar, puts it, “We are warned but reassured” by Hugh's work.²

Hugh finds the Book of Mormon compelling in three fundamental ways: First, the uncanny parallels to other writings from the ancient Middle East have called forth Hugh's respect for the Book of Mormon's ability to fit comfortably within that historical and cultural milieu. Second, this, in turn, has caused him to see the book as a significant witness for the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith; these connections confirm the Prophet's story about the coming forth of the Book of Mormon and witness to his divine calling as a translator. Most importantly, Hugh Nibley venerates the book for its relevance to our day and its prophetic nature, for its accuracy in depicting the sins and

²Welch, “Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon,” *Ensign*, April 1985, 56. I read a version of this chapter, titled “Something to Move Mountains”: Hugh Nibley's Devotion to the Book of Mormon,” at the Literature and Belief Symposium, 28 March 1997 at Brigham Young University. It appeared in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6, no. 2 (1997) 1-25, and *Colloquium: Essays in Literature and Belief*, edited by Richard H. Cracroft, Jane D. Brady, and Linda Hunter Adams (Provo, UT: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, 2001), 489-513.

trials of our generation and its reassuring guidance on how to survive these last days. In short, Hugh Nibley really believes that the Book of Mormon is the word of God.

Hugh Nibley's Life with the Book of Mormon

Hugh Nibley has been interested in the Book of Mormon from a very early age. In our modern Church, this really does not seem so strange, but at the time of Hugh's youth, the Book of Mormon was largely ignored. Significantly this change is somewhat his doing. In his essay "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," Noel Reynolds, BYU political science professor, demonstrates that our present concern with the Book of Mormon is a very recent phenomenon. "The early Saints valued the Book of Mormon as evidence of the Restoration, but by the Nauvoo period, focus on the book had already decreased."³ And in the twentieth century, Reynolds documents that in general conference addresses, Church manuals, books published for the LDS audience, courses of study both at BYU and throughout the Church Educational System, and even the lessons given by our missionaries, focus on the Book of Mormon has been cursory and sporadic until very recent times. "Not long ago you would find stake presidents who had never read the Book of Mormon," states Hugh Nibley.⁴ The reason for the previous generations' neglect of the book may be understandable. Hugh Nibley commented to one correspondent: "Our ancestors for example, spent little time reading the Book of Mormon—even for the youthful President Grant it was nothing but a bore. People tried to get interested in it from a romantic point of view; its strangeness exercised a kind of fascination. It was a happy generation to which the abominations of the Nephites and Jaredites seemed utterly unreal."⁵

Reynolds documents the dramatic shift in perspective: "The last few decades have produced a significant revolution in the LDS community in terms of the increased understanding and competent appreciation for the Book of Mormon as an inspired work of ancient scripture."⁶ Both scholars and the general populace of the Church, Reynolds demonstrates, "strive to understand the Book of Mormon as an ancient document and to give diligent heed to Christ's gospel that it contains."⁷ Hugh Nibley has certainly inspired much of this change in focus. Elder Neal A. Maxwell has stated that Hugh's influence on the new generation of Book of Mormon scholars—his "intellectual reconnaissance," as Elder Maxwell has called it—is among Hugh's greatest contributions to the Church. Elder Maxwell compares Hugh to "an early explorer" who has staked claims on various mine shafts, sampled the ore, and signaled to his students where the ore lies. Maxwell continues, "What's now happening is that his . . . students are coming on and they go all the way into the mine and come out and say, 'Yes, it

³Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 7.

⁴Hugh Nibley, interviewed by Allison Clark, June 1996; photocopy of transcript in my possession.

⁵Hugh Nibley, Letter to Parley H. Merrill, 18 June 1957. Unless otherwise noted, photocopies of all correspondence are in my possession.

⁶Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon," 39-40.

⁷*Ibid.*, 40.

really was a rich vein to be explored."⁸ But Hugh has also inspired the rest of us to take the Book of Mormon more seriously—to look at the text more closely, to reevaluate our assumptions, and to pay closer heed to its teachings.

Hugh's earliest written reference to the Book of Mormon appears in a letter to his mother from the Swiss-German Mission when he was eighteen. He quoted Ether 12:4, then commented jubilantly: "Great stuff, the Book of Ether."⁹ Eight months later, he would comment at greater length on what he called the "marvelous paradox" of 1 Nephi: "I started to pick it to pieces this evening, pruning with colored pencils. As a result I am, at the moment, beside myself with enthusiasm. What boundless hope!—True, true, rings thru the whole thing. Everything ignored that would stand between the reader and the Idea. That is a library of history & philosophy in the little account of Nephi's vision."¹⁰ Shortly afterward, he confided to his journal, "The Book of Mormon is giving me greater joy than anything ever did" (25 March 1929).

His fellow-missionaries, however, typically traded only on the book's novelty, approaching people with the query: "This is about the American Indians. Don't you want to know where the American Indians come from?"¹¹ This approach had little appeal in the Swiss-German Mission. In contrast, when Hugh served a short-term mission to the Northwestern States, President William Sloan, Hugh's uncle, made the Book of Mormon the central message of the mission. Hugh recalls: "We really hit it hard and had great success."¹²

It wasn't until World War II, however, that Hugh became preoccupied with the Book of Mormon. He has told how the potency of the Book of Mormon struck him with full force as he drove one of the first jeeps onto Utah Beach during the invasion of Normandy.¹³ His correspondence from that period confirms that he was indeed consumed by the Book of Mormon at that time. In a letter to his mother as preparations for D-Day accelerated, Hugh commented, "Of course, there is little time to relax in the Airborne at a time like this, but when I can snatch a moment or two off it is devoted to a single engrossing item: at this late date I have discovered the Book of Mormon, and live in a state of perpetual excitement—that marvelous production throws everything done in our age completely into the shadows."¹⁴

Five months later, after witnessing the battles of Normandy and Holland from the front lines, Hugh lamented that he had lost his triple combination: "I would give anything to get one. I can't tell you how badly I miss not having those three books, though I do have plenty of others."¹⁵

⁸Neal A. Maxwell, interviewed by Boyd Petersen, 29 December 1989.

⁹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 16 July 1928, Charles W. Nibley Collection, Mss 1523, Box 1, fd. 4, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

¹⁰Hugh Nibley, Journal, 17 March 1929. In Nephi's vision, which replicated his father's vision, he saw the tree of life that was "exceeding all beauty" and "precious above all." When Nephi asked the significance of the tree, he was shown Christ's birth, baptism, ministry, and death. Nephi also witnessed the persecution of the early church as well as the history of his people in the New World (1 Ne. 11-14).

¹¹Hugh Nibley, Interviewed by Allison Clark, June 1996.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Welch, "Hugh Nibley and the Book of Mormon," 50-56.

¹⁴Hugh Nibley, Letter to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 8 April 1944.

¹⁵Hugh Nibley, Letter to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 5 November 1944.

An important step in Hugh's development as a defender of the Book of Mormon came in his monograph-length rebuttal of Fawn McKay Brodie's dismissal of Joseph Smith as translator of an authentic ancient record. She explained the Book of Mormon as a result of Joseph Smith's creative mind working on biblical motifs and nineteenth-century American concerns.¹⁶ Hugh countered Brodie's argument that the Book of Mormon contained nineteenth-century parallels with an argument about parallels of his own: "Oriental literature bristles with parallels to the Book of Mormon that are far more full and striking than anything that can be found in the West."¹⁷

As a faculty member at BYU, Hugh pursued these parallels from Arabic and Egyptian literature, breaking new ground in Book of Mormon thought. His first article about the Book of Mormon appeared in the *Improvement Era* in April 1948. "The Book of Mormon: A Mirror of the East" cited the episode of the Nephites' change of political systems from a monarchy to judges and compares it to a similar historical change in Egypt around 1085 B.C. Hugh notes that "the eagerness and ease with which the [Book of Mormon] people adopted the system imply that they were familiar with it." It was also in this article that Hugh first noted similarities between Book of Mormon names and those from the ancient Middle East.¹⁸ Two years later, Hugh evaluated this approach in a letter to Paul Springer:

I am enclosing herewith a few excerpts from a Book of Mormon speculation in which I indulged a couple of years back. It is very premature, but subsequent researches have shown me that I was on the right track almost without knowing it. . . . You can ignore most of my nonsense about the proper names: at the time I had not gone through Lieblein or Ranke, and so failed to realize that the case for the Book of Mormon was really ten times as strong as I supposed.¹⁹

Hugh extended this new approach into a series of articles called "Lehi in the Desert," which appeared in the *Improvement Era* between January and October of 1950. In the series, Hugh compared the culture, social customs, and language in the first forty pages of the Book of Mormon with Middle East documents from the same milieu. He notes, for example, that 1 Nephi 1-3 is a "typical colophon," a common Egyptian literary device. He also expanded material on politics and personal names he had originally used in "The Book of Mormon: A Mirror of the East." He provided a plausible character study on Lehi (a "model sheikh of the desert") and challenged Book of Mormon critics to write a history of eleventh-century Tibet without doing any research, without making any absurd or contradictory statements, and without making any changes to the text. "The ablest orientologists" must have full access to examine the text. He concluded: "It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned

¹⁶As she stated in a later interview, "I think there is no question that the Book of Mormon was fraudulently conceived." Shirley E. Stephenson, "Fawn McKay Brodie: An Oral History Interview," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 99-116.

¹⁷Nibley, "No, Ma'am, That's Not History": A Brief Review of Mrs. Brodie's Reluctant Vindication of a Prophet She Seeks to Expose, in *Tinkling Cymbals and Sounding Brass*, edited by David J. Whittaker, Vol. 11 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/FARMS, 1991), 8.

¹⁸Hugh Nibley, "The Book of Mormon as a Mirror of the East," *Improvement Era*, April 1948, 202-4, 249-51. The quotation is on p. 202.

¹⁹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, n.d., 1950.

man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for Joseph Smith." Such tests, he affirmed, proved that the Book of Mormon was an authentic ancient document.²⁰

In his letter to Paul Springer, Hugh described his method: "For an experiment I decided a year ago to confine all my attention to a couple of chapters and simply tear them to pieces. This has entailed an enormous lot of looking up . . . but has been very rewarding."²¹

Hugh followed "Lehi in the Desert" with a second series, "The World of the Jaredites," issued serially between September 1951 and July 1952, in which he examined the book of Ether in light of the cultural/historical milieu of early Asiatic civilization. Both series were combined and published as a book later that year. Then, in 1956-57, the *Improvement Era* ran Hugh's series, "There Were Jaredites," comparing the book of Ether to other ancient epics.²²

President McKay was so impressed by Hugh's approach in these essays that he suggested a similar series of lessons for the 1957 Melchizedek Priesthood manual. Hugh was then absorbed by the twin themes of the apostasy and the early Christian church. He countered by proposing a manual "more abstruse and unfamiliar than that treated by Brother Barker" in his manual *Apostasy from the Divine Church*.²³ However, President McKay's wishes won out and Hugh began working on a Book of Mormon study manual. Once he accepted the job, Hugh's commitment was wholehearted. In a letter to his mother, he stated: "It has been a steady diet of Book of Mormon and no other food is so invigorating. It is the bread of life in the most digestible form."²⁴

Making a virtue of necessity, he made a strong case to Henry D. Moyle, chair of the committee, that he would need to complete his research in a number of specialized libraries outside Utah:

²⁰Hugh Nibley, "Lehi in the Desert" in *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites*, edited by John W. Welch, Darrell L. Matthews, and Stephen R. Callister (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/FARMS, 1988), 43, 119, 123.

²¹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, n.d., 1950.

²²Hugh received very little financial recompense for these articles; usually Church magazines did not pay contributors. If he received anything at all, it was very little, and he received so little from his published books that one goal of the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) in printing Hugh's collected works, beginning in the 1980s, was to compensate him more fairly for his intellectual labor.

²³Henry D. Moyle, Letter to Hugh Nibley, 6 May 1955. Moyle quotes from Nibley's earlier letter to him. At this time, Nibley had completed a series "The World and the Prophets," which on KSL Radio aired between March and October 1954 and was published that year in book form. "The Way of the Church," another series, ran in the *Improvement Era* between January and December 1955, when the *Era* canceled it. Nibley used material from the remaining articles in other articles; all are compiled in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, edited by Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks, Vol. 4 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books/FARMS, 1987). James L. Barker, chair of BYU's Language Department and professor of German, French, Spanish, and Italian, wrote three Melchizedek Priesthood quorum manuals. The three manuals were titled: *The Divine Church: Down Through Change, Apostasy Therefrom, and Restoration* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Council of the Twelve Apostles, 1952, 1953, 1954). They were later combined and published as *Apostasy from the Divine Church* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1960).

²⁴Quoted by LeGrand Richards, "Be Ready Always to Give a Reason of the Hope that Is in You," address to BYU student body, 10 February 1960, *BYU Speeches of the Year, 1960*, 7, on *LDS Collectors Library*, CD-ROM (Orem, UT: Infobase, 1995). Elder Richards says that Sloanie Nibley provided him with a copy of the letter.

I can fill up paper as well as the next man, but you can readily see that a half-baked treatment of this great subject would be far worse than none at all. When attempted proof falls short it but adds to the burden of suspicion already held against the Book of Mormon. Since the rate of discovery has been breaking all records since the War and is now moving at an accelerating pace, it is extremely important to be up to date on everything. I am sure you would be as reluctant to accept as I would be to write a sloppy defense of the most important book in the world. So what can we do about it? There is no point to postponing the business, since the complete returns are never in, and today's evidence is as up-to-date as it ever will be.²⁵

Hugh explained his *modus operandi* to a correspondent while the manual was being prepared:

It was Brother McKay's express and repeated request that the Melchizedek manual for 1957 be based on *Lehi in the Desert*. From what I was told at various committee meetings, it was to be the old opus with almost no changes. As I am constitutionally incapable of redoing anything without completely rewriting it, the eight lessons we have turned out so far resemble the original about as closely as the Book of Mormon resembles the Spalding manuscript—it is a completely new thing.²⁶

Hugh sent off a sample lesson to the reading committee on 2 March 1956, with a letter that combined both an aggressive defense of his scholarly method and humble trepidation about how it would be received:

You will notice that this lesson is too long and swarms with the vices of the pedant. It is clear that the author can no more keep from lapsing into moral tirades and personal reflections than he can voluntarily stop breathing. It is for you to decide whether you want that sort of thing or not; unfortunately it is not for me to decide whether I will write that way or not—I can do no other. I have always been impressed by the intelligence of the average priesthood member, and to ask me to write for his benefit a text-book for backward ten-year-olds is to ask the impossible. . . . The evidences for the Book of Mormon are simply overwhelming; they leave me breathless, but I have learned only too well in my few years in Utah that they excite great anger and resentment in certain quarters, and I should be most reluctant to write a whole priesthood manual for the waste-basket. To write a typical priesthood manual is totally beyond my powers: the question is, can the Lord's work be helped by a new approach? If so, we've got a million of them—and a couple may be pretty good.²⁷

Hugh's misgivings were prescient. Elder Richard L. Evans of the Quorum of the Twelve, even though he was not on the committee overseeing production of the manual, recommended that Hugh write for an uneducated and uninformed audience. "Always think of yourself as addressing the tiredest farmer in Koosharem," was Evans's counsel, as Hugh recalled it.²⁸ Predictably, Hugh rejected such advice. When the review-

²⁵Hugh Nibley, Letter to Henry D. Moyle, 3 February 1956.

²⁶Hugh Nibley, Letter to M. W. Wellin, 6 July 1956.

²⁷Hugh Nibley, Letter to Henry D. Moyle, 2 March 1956.

²⁸Nibley, "Mediocre Meditations on the Media," in *Brother Brigham Challenges the Saints*, 394.

ing committee turned down Hugh's lessons, he unburdened himself to Paul Springer: "When the massive work was done, the two stooges appointed by the Committee to read it took one look and decided to save themselves the time and eyestrain by turning thumbs down. I was understandably peeved."²⁹

Responding to an unrelated letter from Elder LeGrand Richards, Hugh took the opportunity to defend his lessons:

My own belief is that they are by far the best thing I have ever written and the only really compelling stuff ever brought forward on the Book of Mormon. But Brother Moyle informs me that the committee is sure I would not be willing to let such writings appear under my signature. The committee knows best, but THIS IS CERTAINLY THE LAST THING I WILL EVER WRITE FOR THE CHURCH. Excuse the emotion, but I am sick of committees that pass the buck to other committees that pass the buck to others, and so on, while nobody really pays attention to what is going on. I would recommend a careful reading of these invaluable lessons in their final form. . . . But as things stand, it is doubtful whether there will ever be a final form.³⁰

Hugh's priesthood manual almost certainly would have been shelved had not President McKay intervened personally. There is no evidence that Hugh approached him on this issue, although Hugh's letter to Richards may have prompted Richards to take up the matter with McKay. As Hugh tells it: "Then one night a Very Important Person could not sleep and decided in sheer desperation to look at the mountain of type that had been so long and so gingerly bandied about. After an hour he was having fits, calling me up long distance from the end of the world at an unearthly time to shout hosannah over the wire."³¹ Hugh rejoiced in the excited President McKay's reasoning, based on his career as an educator: "Well, if you think it's over their heads, let them reach for it. We have to give them something more than pat answers."³² When the final version of the lessons was completed, Hugh wrote, relieved but realistic: "Unless it is completely emasculated by those members of the Committee who are afraid of offending the Gentiles it should (but won't) cause quite a stir."³³ The orange, paperbound *Approach to the Book of Mormon* was published by the Council of the Twelve for use as the 1957 course of study for all Melchizedek Priesthood holders. The unnamed editor wrote in the foreword that the course "needs diligent and prayerful study" (vii); and in the preface, Joseph Fielding Smith invited readers to "show their gratitude to Dr. Nibley by taking a deep interest in these lessons" (x). A second, clothbound edition appeared in 1964.

To a correspondent in 1982, Hugh told what may be a hyperbolic version of this same experience:

²⁹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 17 September 1956.

³⁰Hugh Nibley, Letter to LeGrand Richards, 1 September 1956.

³¹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 17 September 1956.

³²Hugh Nibley, interviewed by Allison Clark, June 1996.

³³Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 20 December 1956.

The objection to an “over-intellectual” approach to the Gospel runs entirely counter to the long tradition of learning in the Church. When I wrote the Melchizedek Priesthood Manual for 1957, the “Reading Committee” rejected each and every lesson as it was submitted week by week; and in each and every case without exception President McKay overruled the Committee, saying, “If it is over their heads, let them reach for it—that is what we need!” Every lesson was printed without any alteration; the Manual was reprinted many times and with all its “mistakes of men” is still in print. So much for study that is “too advanced” for our people.³⁴

Hugh’s work on the Book of Mormon has been praised by many. Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote to Hugh in 1952, “We have looked upon the Book of Mormon too much as something apart from flesh and blood. You have opened a new course of thinking about the book and the characters it contains.”³⁵ Spencer W. Kimball, then an apostle, wrote that Hugh’s Book of Mormon volumes represent “real contributions to our literature, and open up a new field untouched by anyone else that I know of.”³⁶ Ezra Taft Benson, also an apostle at the time, called the priesthood manual “a practical, scholarly and timely work.”³⁷

But Hugh downplayed his own contribution. Writing the next year to Spencer W. Kimball, then an apostle, he demurred:

The main purpose of the Manual is to show what anybody is up against who undertakes a serious questioning of the Book of Mormon: especially we wish to demonstrate how easy it is to be wrong about the Book—and to do that we don’t have to be right much of the time! Moreover, we have merely scratched the surface, and anyone who wants to is welcome to dig further. Our business is to raise questions, not to answer them. After a vast expenditure of time and money, our Book of Mormon archaeologists have failed to produce a single clinching argument for the book in the last thirty years: it is time to try a fresh approach. . . . This is the very beginning of Book of Mormon research, not the end: it would be a paralyzing and a foolish thing to start making pontifical pronouncements at this early date. On to the fray!³⁸

And on to the fray Hugh went, tapping out article after article about the Book of Mormon on his typewriter, without secretarial assistance until at least the 1970s. Since *Cumorah* appeared in 1967, and most of the twenty-three articles and talks he has produced on the Book of Mormon over the years have been compiled in *The Prophetic Book of Mormon*. Throughout, his focus has steadfastly remained fixed on establishing the ancient Middle Eastern setting for the Book of Mormon.

³⁴Hugh Nibley, “To Whom It May Concern” (letter of recommendation for Avraham Gileadi), 16 February 1982.

³⁵John A. Widtsoe, Letter to Hugh Nibley, 1 July 1952.

³⁶Spencer W. Kimball, Letter to Hugh Nibley, 16 September 1959.

³⁷Ezra Taft Benson, Letter to Hugh Nibley, 2 January 1958.

³⁸Hugh Nibley, Letter to Spencer W. Kimball, 1 November 1957.

The Book of Mormon as a Middle Eastern Book

Hugh began his career studying patterns between cultures—how the writings and rituals of one culture compare with those of another. The focus of his Ph.D. work was year-rites and coronation assemblies throughout the ancient world, and later he noticed patterns in religious ceremony and myth, preceding the efforts of Mircea Eliade.³⁹ Hugh described the inspiration for his first article fourteen years after the fact in a letter to his friend and Egyptian teacher Klaus Baer:

It was certain Egyptian undertones which seemed to me to be more than accidental that first got me interested in the Book of Mormon years ago. I refer to the episode of the judges, in which it is reported how the people in the New World set up a system of courts after the Old World pattern; how one Korihor challenged the system as introducing dangerous "ordinances and performances which are laid down by ancient priests, to usurp power and authority" (Alma 30:21-24); how the new chief judge charged one Nehor with being "first to introduce priestcraft among this people" and warned that such a thing "would prove their entire destruction" (Alma 1:12); how Korihor was seized as an agitator by a particularly pious community known as "the people of Ammon"; how finally the rivalry among three brothers called Pahoran, Paanchi, and Pacumeni finally wrecked the system, etc. Well, it seemed to me that the names, the situations, and the conscious harping back to unhappy experiences in the Old World were something beyond the ingenuity of a young yokel writing in upper New York State in 1829. Just now what intrigues me is the old Israelite apocryphal stories that turn up in the Book of Mormon as popular tales.⁴⁰

More of these parallels could be found in sources that came to light in 1947 when Bedouin shepherds discovered scrolls in the caves on the shores of the Dead Sea. Although these scrolls would not be translated for decades, their existence was immensely provocative. In 1967 Ernest L. Wilkinson, BYU president, asked Hugh to review an article on the Dead Sea Scrolls that he had received from a syndicated columnist in 1967. Hugh responded:

Away back in 1957 I included in the Melchizedek Priesthood Manual a chapter entitled UNWELCOME VOICES FROM THE DUST. The idea was that the Dead Sea Scrolls are unwelcome both to Jews and Christians for the same reason that the Book of Mormon is, namely because they give a picture of ancient Judaism AND Christianity which is totally at variance with that of conventional Christianity and Judaism alike. The picture they give, however, is identical with that of the Book of Mormon, and that should make them doubly welcome to the Latter-day Saints.⁴¹

³⁹Hugh Nibley, *The Ancient State*, edited by Donald W. Parry and Stephen D. Ricks, Vol. 10 of *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books/FARMS, 1991).

⁴⁰Hugh Nibley, Letter to Klaus Baer, 2 August 1962, Klaus Baer Collection, Archives of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago.

⁴¹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Ernest L. Wilkinson, 10 January 1967, Ernest L. Wilkinson Collection, Box 403, fd. 13, Perry Special Collections.

As the parallels Hugh discovered became apparent, he marveled at how numerous and how conspicuous they were. He wrote Paul Springer in 1964:

I have been sort of overseeing the translating of the Book of Mormon into Greek (it is now finished), while at the same time working on my Moslems⁴² and consorting with the Hasidic Jews, meantime faithfully plodding through the Coffin Texts and preparing an article on the new Christian Coptic texts for a very serious journal.⁴³ Doing all this at once has addled the old brains more than ever, but forced me to recognize the common pattern behind things. I say recognize, not invent, because other people are beginning to recognize it too. This whole apocryphal world is brought together in the Book of Mormon, a veritable handbook of motifs and traditions. As a work of fiction, as a mere intellectual tour-de-force, nothing can touch it—but along with that it is full of old Jewish lore that very few Jews have ever heard of, handles the desert situation in a way that delights my Meccans, and gives a picture of primitive Christianity that is right out of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi texts.⁴⁴

As Hugh mentions, the enthusiastic response of Moslem students in his Book of Mormon class was living “proof” that his parallels were justified. Proudly he claimed that they often related to the book better than Westerners:

I always get at least a dozen Iranians in my Book of Mormon class for Moslems—had eight students from Mecca this year!—and since they have all seen the golden plates and the stone box in Ispahan they are properly impressed. In teaching several hundred Arabs—well, maybe ONE hundred real Bedouins—over the past several years I have found that they universally approve of *Lehi in the Desert* and have only one criticism to make, viz., WHY did Nephi wait so long to cut off Laban’s head? For them that is the one false note.⁴⁵

When he began teaching at BYU, Hugh also came in contact with further “living proof” of the ancient authenticity of the Book of Mormon in his associations with the Hopi of northeastern Arizona. (See chap. 18.) He visited their mesas many times throughout his career. Hugh’s respect for the Hopi derives from their having managed to preserve ancient lore and customs that he had previously only read about in books. And like Hugh’s Arab students, the Hopi developed an appreciation for the Book of Mormon which caused, as Hugh delightedly reported, Protestant missionaries and clergy on the reservation to evolve some complicated explanations for the parallels the Hopi found between the Book of Mormon and their oral lore. Writing to Paul Springer, he confided:

⁴²For several years during the 1960s, Hugh taught a special Book of Mormon class to Moslem students.

⁴³Hugh lectured on “The Early Christian Church in Light of Some Newly Discovered Papyri from Egypt” on 3 March 1964. It probably reflected the work he was doing at this time. The essay was published by the BYU Extension Publications and most of it was later incorporated into *Since Cumorah*, edited by John W. Welch (1967; reprinted Salt Lake City: Deseret/FARMS, 1988).

⁴⁴Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 2 February 1964.

⁴⁵Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 5 July 1963.

As far as I was able to find out, every Hopi we talked with was quite frank in stating that he knew the Book of Mormon was perfectly true and told the very same stories that have always been told in the tribe. The other missions, justly alarmed, have now spread abroad the interesting fiction that old Chief Tuba (after whom Tuba City was named) when he became a Mormon and went to Salt Lake with Jacob Hamblin cir. 1870 was buttoned-holed by Joseph Smith, wheedled into telling the tribal secrets which were then written down & published as the Book of Mormon. That is how the Protestant missionaries now explain to the Hopis how their sacred & secret legends all got into the Mormons' book. There is a slight matter of chronology to be adjusted, but at least it is a frank admission by the opposition that the Book of Mormon does contain the real stuff.⁴⁶

In 1958, Ezra Taft Benson sent Hugh a letter of "gratitude and congratulations" for the priesthood manual, and Hugh responded: "Wishing to be fair in the matter, I have just compiled what I believe to be a complete list of all important arguments AGAINST the Book of Mormon. Not one new argument has been added since 1840! This shrinking list makes a significant contrast to the growing list of arguments in the book's favor."⁴⁷

In the four decades since Hugh launched his impressive reconstruction of the Book of Mormon's ancient world, the evidence in its favor, documented both by Hugh and by other Mormon scholars, has grown exponentially. Hugh has influenced a whole new generation of Book of Mormon scholars. John Welch has examined literary evidence, in particular the use of the ancient poetic form of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon and has published a book exploring the temple rituals preserved in the book. Stephen Ricks, professor of Hebrew, has followed Hugh's lead in examining kingship in the Book of Mormon. William Hamblin, a history professor, has further considered warfare in the Book of Mormon, while Paul Hoskisson, professor of ancient studies, has looked more attentively at proper names in the Book of Mormon. Donald Parry, a professor of Hebrew, has focused on Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon.

Perhaps the most significant change occurred in 1980 when the Foundation of Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) was founded as a clearing-house of scholarly materials on the Book of Mormon. This organization, which became part of BYU in 1998, fulfilled a desire that Hugh had expressed to Wilkinson in 1952 that "the BYU should be the Information Center for the Church," compiling files and "information-sheets" to answer questions for "members who passionately desire" such information. He continued, "The dissemination of well-documented, scholarly, pertinent information throughout the Church would contribute substantially to its strength."⁴⁸

⁴⁶Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 29 April 1957.

⁴⁷Hugh Nibley, Letter to Ezra Taft Benson, 9 January 1958. He did not include this list in his letter.

⁴⁸Hugh Nibley, Letter to Ernest L. Wilkinson, 13 April 1952, Wilkinson Presidential Papers, Perry Special Collections, Lee Library; emphasis Hugh's.

The Book of Mormon as Witness of Joseph Smith's Calling

A logical outgrowth for Hugh Nibley of the authenticity of Middle East traces in the Book of Mormon is the conclusion that Joseph Smith really was who he claimed to be—the translator of an ancient document “by the gift and power of God” (Book of Mormon, title page) and a divinely called prophet. Writing at age sixty-eight, Hugh sounded the same note that he had in his thirties about Joseph Smith: “What Joseph Smith gives us bears none of the marks of the careful researcher, and even less of the wild and undisciplined imagination to which Ms. Brodie attributes the Book of Mormon. Research is a way of life, and Joseph Smith lived under a relentless spotlight: he might have gotten away with a little bit—but with research and note-juggling on such a scale?”⁴⁹

For Hugh, the brilliance of Book of Mormon's literary achievement confirms that Joseph Smith could not have written the book—he wasn't capable of writing it. But this does not decrease Joseph's stature; rather it raises it. Joseph is not a “religious genius” with a brilliant “religion-making imagination,” as Harold Bloom has declared him,⁵⁰ but a prophet of God.

“What a theme for a kid of 23 to attempt,” Hugh marveled to Paul Springer.

It makes all the honors papers I have ever read look painfully jejeune and unbecomingly: I have never met or heard of anyone in college or out who could turn out a piece of work of such boldness, sweep, variety, precision, complexity, confidence, simplicity, etc. Put it beside any work in our literature for sheer number of ideas, situations, propositions and insights. . . . It makes me mad the way they act as if this was nothing at all and then turn out a million pages of pompous froth about a literature that has hardly given the world a dozen interesting ideas or characters in 200 years. Open the Book of Mormon every ten or twenty pages and see what it is talking about—a bedazzening [sic] variety of stuff; open any other big work, James Joyce or the 1001 Nights, and you will find largely variations on a theme, a round of safely familiar matter given largely stereotyped treatment. Shakespeare has that kind of variety, but Shakespeare does not have to be telling the truth, does not have to combine his things in a single package, and can take thirty years to tell his story; also he is free to borrow at will without apologies to anyone. When you start listing the problems Joseph Smith had to face just to get his book down on paper you will see that writing about a biblical people does NOT automatically take care of everything, in fact it raises more questions than it solves.

Recognizing his own frenetic tone, Hugh queries, with a charming lapse into domesticity: “You ask why I am going on like this? Because [fourteen-year-old] Christina is making such a damnable racket with the vacuum cleaner around my feet,

⁴⁹Hugh Nibley, Letter to John W. Welch and other *Festschrift* contributors, 20 September 1978. The material from this *Festschrift* was later compiled with other materials in *By Study and Also By Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of his Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, edited by John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, Vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990).

⁵⁰Harold Bloom, *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 96-97.

cleaning up our rumpus-room-salon-library-ante-room-dining-music-conservatory-nursery-playschool-parlor for company, that I can't think as is fiercely apparent."⁵¹

The Book of Mormon, Hugh argues, is truly the keystone of our religion: "Some object that the Book of Mormon does not contain the fullness of the Gospel but I find such elements as the preexistence and the Temple spread all over it—sometimes thinly and by inference, but always lurking nearby."⁵²

In short, even though it is not always evident, Hugh saw the Book of Mormon as containing the full doctrines, ordinances, and covenants of God. For all its marvelous antiquity, he also saw it as an up-to-date handbook containing answers for the problems of our day.

The Book of Mormon as Prophecy for Our Day

It is the Book of Mormon's relevance to our day and prophetic accuracy that makes the book so important in Hugh's life, even though that relevance and accuracy is a source of both comfort and fear. As he commented to Paul Springer in the mid-fifties: "Poverty keeps me off many a sucker list, [but] the nature of my writings has brought me into direct and heated correspondence with every crackpot in the country. . . . What brings me back to earth is the good old Book of Mormon, the book that really tells you what goes on in the world."⁵³ Hugh was always willing to give even a crackpot a hearing, even when he knew that said crackpot probably simply wanted the validation of being able to say that he had had a conversation with Hugh. But his respect for the Book of Mormon's ability to help us understand the absurdity of the contemporary world and provide the stability of anchoring in eternal principles never wavered.

⁵¹Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 2 February 1964. In a letter to his missionary sons, Paul and Tom Nibley, n.d., ca. 1971, Hugh wrote similarly: "Consider once more the Book of Mormon. There are thousands of points at which it can be tested against real historical evidence, but in the world of science nothing is settled until the last reports are in. Meanwhile if one would put the Prophet to a truly rigorous test, let him compare his performance with that of other men who have created fanciful civilizations out of their heads. One thinks at once of Tolkien, then of Homer, Dante, James Joyce, Galsworthy, Dickens, Thomas Mann, etc., men who have conjured societies, mythical nations, whole worlds into existence by the power of their imaginations. How does their performance compare with Joseph Smith's? It is completely different: They all had age and experience, reading and training and all the literary and historical sources they needed at their disposal; they were all free to put down anything they chose, without having to answer for it as fact or history. But Joseph Smith goes far beyond any of them as he blocks out his geography, builds his cities, names and clothes his strange people, arranges his battles and elaborate campaigns, follows his migrations and explorations, evolves his social unrest, his dynastic intrigues, invents ingenious weights and measures, describes plagues and the upheavals of nature, while telling a religious story of great moral impact, with heavenly visitations, inspired prophecies, cosmological discourses and eschatological significance. With it all, his book must have something to tell people that they did not know before, something extremely important for the world to know. And all this done without the aid of scholarship, age, experience, and literary or historical sources or assistance, in a situation tense with hostility and danger, and completed in a matter of weeks. Since there is in the annals of human attainment no performance to equal this, I think it entitles Joseph Smith to a patient and respectful hearing free from the ridiculous nit-picking which has always been fashionable where the Book of Mormon is concerned."

⁵²Hugh Nibley, Letter to John W. Welch and other Festschrift contributors, 20 September 1978.

⁵³Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, June 1956.

Noting that one of the principal themes of the Book of Mormon is the fall of civilizations, Hugh finds its note of doom inescapably appropriate for our contemporary world: "I cannot imagine a more powerful, prophetic document or one more obviously going into fulfillment at the present time," he told a correspondent in the mid-seventies. "If you look at the big picture, the Book of Mormon is as up-to-date as tomorrow's newspaper."⁵⁴

As already noted, previous generations of Mormons had not understood or appreciated the Book of Mormon because genocide was simply unthinkable, emotionally unfathomable, until the lessons of World War II's holocaust and the possibility of a nuclear winter sank into the consciousness of the nation. "It was a happy generation to which the abominations of the Nephites and Jaredites seemed utterly unreal," Hugh wrote trenchantly. To make his point, Hugh posed an enigmatic question in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* at the end of a chapter on the downfall of Jerusalem: "Explain the saying: 'Wo to the generation that understands the Book of Mormon!'"⁵⁵ He received many calls and letters asking him if he had gotten the question backwards; some wondered if it was, in fact, even his question. In a response to one such letter, Hugh writes: "The [question] you asked about is my own and to it I might add another: 'Woe to people who make up enigmatic [questions]!' But although Hugh turned the question aside with a jest, he was in deadly earnest and continued: "For our generation the story [of the Book of Mormon] rings painfully familiar. . . . The generations that understand the Book of Mormon must needs be in much the same situation that the ancient Americans were in, and people in such a predicament are to be pitied."⁵⁶

In another letter, Hugh quotes 1 Nephi 22:15-19 about the events to take place in the last days—how the time will soon come when "the fulness of the wrath of God shall be poured out upon the children of men" and "blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke must come," but "the righteous shall not perish; for the time surely must come that all they who fight against Zion shall be cut off." He then writes: "A display of force is going to be necessary, and the world is going to get it in terms described—NOT fire from heaven, but their own dirty work: 'for they shall war among themselves, and the sword of their own hands shall fall upon their own heads,' etc. How did I get on this track? Rather how can I get off? It haunts me."⁵⁷

The pervasiveness of the Book of Mormon's cataclysmic and catastrophic worldview shows up in details. For example, the eruption of Mount St. Helens in Oregon in May 1980 proved to Hugh that the calamities described by the Book of Mormon are not that far fetched. "I have read the Book of Mormon twice this week—a revelation; infinitely cheering and reassuring, this saddest of stories that is coming closer to home every day," he wrote hastily to his son Alex, then serving a mission to Japan. "The cheering thing is that we were right all along in believing its extravagant story—mountains do blow up and great nations do destroy each other."⁵⁸

⁵⁴Hugh Nibley, Letter to Jan Taylor, 24 April 1975.

⁵⁵Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, edited by John W. Welch, Vol. 6 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* (1957; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book/FARMS, 1988), 119.

⁵⁶Hugh Nibley, Letter to Parley H. Merrill, 18 June 1957.

⁵⁷Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, 20 May 1961.

⁵⁸Hugh Nibley, Letter to Charles Alexander Nibley, n.d., ca. May 1980.

Yet despite such apocalyptic musings, Hugh remains hopeful because the Book of Mormon's dire warnings are always accompanied by an open door showing the way to escape—repentance. Responding to a letter from a detractor, Hugh wrote cheerfully:

Anyway, it's lucky you wrote me when you did, it is still not too late; the Lord has extended the day of our probation: you would be insane to waste this priceless reprieve, and you could still be one of the few really happy men on the earth, but you'll have to stop being a damned fool. I could find as many faults as you do without half trying, but a committee of characters like us couldn't produce the Book of Mormon in 140 years. Why do you worry so much about what other people think? They don't know anything about it. Ask the Lord for a change!⁵⁹

Writing from the war front, Hugh Nibley seemed to prophesy of our day: "The potential power of [the Book of Mormon] is something to move mountains; it will only take effect when everything is pretty far gone, but then it will be dynamite. That leaves room for optimism."⁶⁰

⁵⁹Hugh Nibley, Letter to LeMar Petersen, 17 July 1961.

⁶⁰Hugh Nibley, Letter to Agnes Sloan Nibley, 26 July 1944.