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The Sobering Lesson of the Grolier Codex

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THE SOBERING LESSON OF THE GROLIER CODEX

"Therefore, having so great witnesses, by them shall the world be judged. . . . those who harden their hearts in unbelief, and reject [the Book of Mormon], it shall turn to their own condemnation." (D&C 20:13, 15)

The story of the authenticating of the Grolier Codex twenty-five years ago still teaches some valuable lessons about the dangers of jumping to conclusions and the problems of name calling, even though the scholars involved no longer hold to their original positions. As discussed recently by John L. Sorenson, the discovery of ancient manuscripts is a touchy issue that, for some people, can be unsettling.¹

In 1971 what seemed to be an ancient Mesoamerican codex was discovered in southern Mexico. It was claimed to stem from "unauthorized archaeology" (most archaeologists would call it looting). Mesoamerican scholars judged it a fake without giving it much, if any, scrutiny. Michael D. Coe was a principal protagonist in arguing for the authenticity of the document, eventually labeled the "Grolier Codex."² The famed Mayanist scholar Sir J. E. S. Thompson played the role of key antagonist.³

In 1992 Coe said of Thompson that he had "ignor[ed] the main argument [about the Grolier] while concentrating on some detail where he thought the chances of a quick kill were best."⁴ Thompson had also criticized Yuri

Knorosov, the Soviet linguist to whom much of the credit eventually has gone for launching the successful decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphics. Thompson had considered the Knorosov position completely mistaken and labeled the Russian's work "a Marxist hoax."

The Grolier Codex is now generally acknowledged to be authentic, based on the characteristics of the document itself rather than on its unorthodox discovery. Coe believes that had the Grolier Codex had a less-prejudiced origin, "it would [have been] accepted by even the most rock-ribbed scholar as the genuine article."⁵

Those who judged the Grolier Codex a hoax made at least five mistakes, also commonly made by people critical of the Book of Mormon:

(1) They allowed the unconventional origins of the codex to prejudice the case. Just as Thompson was dogmatically dubious from the outset, many have peremptorily ruled the Book of Mormon out of scientific court.

(2) Moreover, the antagonists ruled out the Grolier Codex without giving it a close examination. Similarly, as Thomas O'Dea once reported, "the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."⁶

(3) Those who misjudged the Grolier Codex were served poorly by their closed-mindedness. They responded by reflex on the basis of opinions they had long since fixed in intellectual concrete of their own mix.

(4) When the opponents took time to examine the Grolier Codex, they chose to pick on little details that seemed easier targets than the main characteristics of that complex document. One is reminded of the pedantry of Alexander Campbell who took endless delight in pointing out minor infelicities of grammar in the first edition of the Book of Mormon.⁷

(5) Finally, if all else fails, a critic may turn to name calling. The lesson is especially poignant here, because even Coe himself once regrettably spoke of the Book of Mormon using derogatory labels.⁸ That was just as unwise and irrelevant in judging the Book of Mormon as was Thompson's use of the "Marxist" brush to smear Knorosov's scholarship. Using such epithets allows the critic to avoid the drudgery of doing the serious investigation that ought to precede a judgment about the authenticity of any potentially ancient text.

The truth will some day become clearer as to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Until then, derogatory remarks and sloppy research do no one any good.

Research by John L. Sorenson and John W. Welch, originally published as a FARMS Update in Insights (October 1997): 2.

NOTES

1. See John L. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 484–86.

2. See Michael D. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 227–29.

3. See J. Eric S. Thompson, review of *The Maya Scribe and His World*, by Michael D. Coe, *The Book Collector* 26 (1976): 64–75.

4. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 229.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Thomas F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 26.

7. See Alexander Campbell, "Delusions," *Millennial Harbinger* (10 February 1831): 85–97.

8. See Michael Coe, "Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue* 8/2 (1973): 40–45.