



Type: Magazine Article

New Approaches to Book of Mormon Study, Part 3

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Source: *Improvement Era*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (January 1954), pp. 30–32, 41

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

NEW APPROACHES TO BOOK OF MORMON STUDY

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PART 3

EVIDENCE for the authenticity of documents falls into three categories, internal, external, and circumstantial.

To summarize, let us list some of the most tangible evidences for the Book of Mormon.

I. *Internal Evidence*: Imagine that a Book of Mormon has been dropped from a helicopter to a man stranded on a desert island, with instructions to decide on its reliability. On the first page the man would find a clear statement of what the book claims to be, on the following pages a story of how it came into existence, and finally the testimonies of certain witnesses. Here are three astonishing claims—all supernatural. Has the man on the island enough evidence in the contents of the book alone—no other books or materials being available to him—to reach a satisfactory decision? By all means. Internal evidence is almost the only type ever used in testing questioned documents; it is rarely necessary to go any farther than the document itself to find enough clues to condemn it, and if the text is a long one, and an historical document in the bargain, the absolute certainty of inner contradictions is enough to assure adequate testing.^{19*} This makes the Book of Mormon preeminently testable, and we may list the following points on which certainty is obtainable.

1. The mere existence of the book, to follow Blass, is a powerful argument in favor of its authenticity. Without knowing a thing about LDS Church history, our stranded islander can immediately see that someone has gone to an enormous amount of trouble to make this book. Why? If the author wishes to deceive, he has chosen a strange and difficult way to do it. He has made the first move; he has magnanimously put into our hands a large and laborious text; in the introductory pages of that text, he

gives us a clear and circumstantial account of what it is supposed to be and invites us to put it to any possible test. This is not the method of a man out to deceive. We must credit him with being honest until he is proved otherwise.

2. Before he has read a word, our islander notes that the book in his hand is a big one. This is another strong argument in its favor. A forger knows that he runs a risk with every word he writes, for him brevity is the soul of success and, as we have seen, the author of such a long book could not have failed to discover what he was up against before he proceeded very far. In giving us a long book, the author forces us to concede that he is not playing tricks.

3. Almost immediately the castaway discovers that the Book of Mor-

mon is both a religious book and a history. This is another point in its favor, for the author could have produced a religious book claiming divine revelation without the slightest risk had he produced a *Summa Theologia* or a *Key to the Scriptures*. If one searches through the entire religious literature of the Christian ages from the time of the Apostles to the time of Joseph Smith, not one of these productions can be found to profess divine revelation aside from that derived through the reading of the scriptures. This is equally true whether one inspects the writings of the apostolic fathers, of the doctors of the Middle Ages, even the greatest of whom claim only to be making commentaries on the scriptures, or more modern religious leaders who, though they claimed enlightenment, spoke



Much study and care went into the preparation of this "ancient Hebrew inscription" near Los Lunas, New Mexico, yet a cursory glance was enough to reveal the crisp freshness of the newly-cut letters. Numerous other flaws appeared upon closer inspection. To anyone not determined to accept this inscription as genuine, it furnishes an interesting illustration of the pains to which people will go to produce a convincing-looking antique, and the impossibility of doing so without immense and laborious preparation. Yet such a forgery as this would be infinitely easier to get away with than one of Book of Mormon proportions.

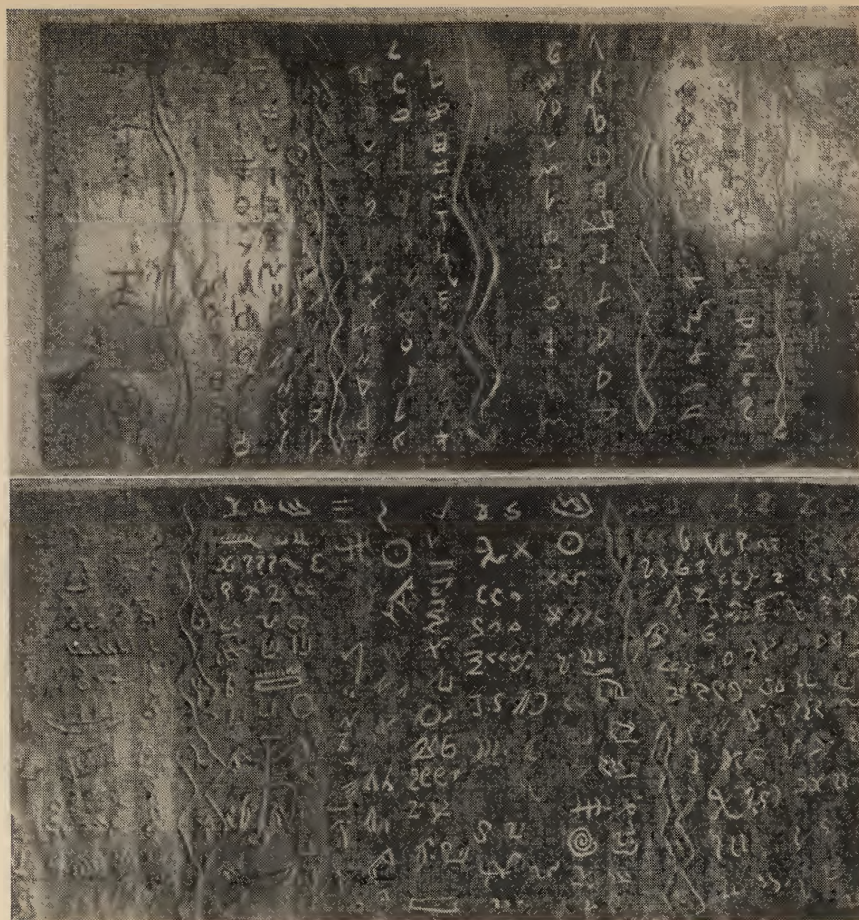
*Numbers refer to bibliography at end of each instalment.

only as the scribes and Pharisees of old who, though they could quote and comment on scripture on every occasion, never dared to speak as one having authority. This writer never falls back on the accepted immunities of double meaning and religious interpretations in the manner of the Swedenborgians or the schoolmen. This refusal to claim any special privileges is an evidence of good faith.

4. Examining the book more closely, the islander is next struck by its great complexity. Doesn't the author know how risky this sort of thing is? If anyone should know, he certainly does, for he handles the intricate stuff with great understanding. Shysters may be diligent enough in their way, but the object of their trickery is to avoid hard work, and this is not the sort of laborious task they give themselves.

5. In its complexity and length lies the key to the problem of the book, for our islander, having once read Blass, remembers that *no* man on earth can falsify a history of any length without contradicting himself continually. Upon close examination all the many apparent contradictions in the Book of Mormon disappear. It passes the sure test of authenticity with flying colors.

6. Since the author must in view of all this be something of a genius, the lonely critic begins to study his work as creative writing. Here it breaks down dismally. The style is *not* that of anyone trying to write well. There is skill of a sort, but even the unscholarly would know that the frequent use of "it came to pass" does not delight the reader, and it is not biblical. Never was writing less "creative" as judged by present day standards: there is no central episode, no artistic development of a plot; one event follows another with equal emphasis in the even flow of a chronicle; the author does not "milk" dramatic situations, as every creative writer must; he takes no advantage of any of his artistic opportunities; he has no favorite characters; there is no gain in confidence or skill as the work progresses, nor on the other hand does he show any sign of getting tired or of becoming bored, as every creative writer does in a long composition: the first and last books of the Book of Mormon are among the best, and the author is going just as strong at the end as at the beginning. The



According to Blass, there has never been a clever forgery. Much energy and ingenuity went into the production of these copper rolls, purportedly found in a cave near Luntun, Arizona, yet it was instantly apparent upon examination that they are modern fabrications. The rolls were strips of modern roofing copper of standard composition and width. There was no sign of aging or patination, though clumsy attempts had been made to achieve the effect with acid. By introducing a confusion of symbols from a number of ancient alphabets, the forger only made his trickery more apparent. Every slip required a dozen tricks to cover it up, and every one of those tricks produced a dozen more slips.

claim of the "translator" is that this book is no literary creation, and the internal evidence bears out the claim. Our critic looks at the date of the book again—1830. Where are the rich sentimentality, the incurable romanticism, and the lush but mealy rhetoric of "fine writing" in the early 1800's? Where are the fantastic imagery, the romantic descriptions, and the unflinching exaggerations that everyone expected in the literature of the time? Here is a book with all the elements of an intensely romantic adventure tale of faraway and long-ago, and the author turns down innumerable chances to please his public!

7. For the professional religionist, what John Chrysostom called "the wise economy of a useful deception," i.e. religious double talk, has been ever since his day a condition of survival and success. But there is none of this in the Book of Mormon. There are no plays on words, no rhetorical

subtleties or tricks, no reveling in abstract terms, no esoteric language or doctrine to require the trained interpreter. This is not a "mystic" text, though mysticism is the surest refuge for any religious quack who thinks he might be running a risk. The lone investigator feels the direct impact of the concrete terms; he is never in doubt as to what they mean. This is not the language of one trying to fool others or who has ever had any experience in fooling others.

8. Our examiner is struck by the limited vocabulary of the Book of Mormon. Taken in connection with the size and nature of the book, this is very significant. Whoever wrote the book must have been a very intelligent and experienced person; yet such people in 1830 did not produce books with rudimentary vocabularies. This cannot be the work of any simple clown, but neither can it be that of an able and educated contemporary.

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9. The extremely limited vocabulary suggests another piece of internal evidence to the reader. The Book of Mormon never makes any attempt to be clever. This, says Blass, is a test no forger can pass. The Achilles' heel of the smart impostor is vanity. The man who practises fraud to gain an ascendancy and assert his superiority over others cannot forego the pleasure of enjoying that superiority. The islander does not know it, but recent attempts to account for Joseph Smith claim to discover the key to his character in an overpowering ambition to outsmart people. Why then doesn't he ever try to show how clever he is? Where are the big words and the deep mysteries? There is no cleverness in the Book of Mormon. It was not written by a deceiver.

10. Since it claims to be translated by divine power, the Book of Mormon also claims all the authority—and responsibility—of the original text. The author leaves himself no philological loopholes, though the book, stemming from a number of nations and languages, offers opportunity for many of them. It is a humble document of intensely moral tone, but it does not flinch at reporting unsavory incidents not calculated to please people who think that any mention of horror or bloodshed should be deleted from religious writing.

II. *External Evidence*:—Our islander has been rescued by a British tramp steamer. Burning with curiosity, he jumps ship in London, rushes to Great Russell Street, and bounds up the steps of the British Museum three at a time. He is now after *external* proofs for the Book of Mormon. He may spend the next forty years in the great library, but whatever external evidence he finds must fulfil three conditions:

1. The Book of Mormon must make clear and specific statements about certain concrete, objective things.

2. Other sources, ancient and modern, must make equally clear and objective statements about the same things, agreeing substantially with what the Book of Mormon says about them.

3. There must be clear proof that there has been no collusion between the two reports, i.e., that Joseph Smith could not possibly have knowledge of the source by which his account is

being "controlled" or of any other source that could give him the information contained in the Book of Mormon.

The purpose of our studies on Lehi and the Jaredites was to supply information that fulfilled these three conditions, and the purpose of the present articles is to supply yet more evidence of the same type. In criticizing such information one might classify the various items as (1) positive, (2) possible, and (3) doubtful evidence of authenticity. As positive proof, we might accept the evidence

of such authentically Egyptian names as Paanchi, Manti, and Hem, or such freakish Jaredite customs as keeping kings in comfortable imprisonment all their days, for these things are clearly described in the Book of Mormon, well established in the secular world, yet known to no one at the time the Book of Mormon came forth. As possible but not positive proof we have a good deal of evidence from the New World; the hesitation to accept this proof as final comes from the inability or reluctance of our secular experts

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Altering Attitudes

Richard L. Evans

THERE is a profound thought in these words of William James: "The greatest discovery of my generation is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind." This is one of the great discoveries of any generation—or of any individual—and in one sense it is simply a restatement of the principle of repentance. There are times when most of us have need to alter our attitudes. There are times when the stubborn set of a mind or of a heart will drive people apart when they should come closer—and when without some honest change of attitude, there would be little possibility of improvement. Sometimes misunderstandings settle into stalemated situations because neither party will change the set of his jaw, the set of his heart, the set of his thoughts—because neither will alter his attitude. Granted that there may be grievances (and remembering also that no one is perfect), there still must be some honest altering of attitudes, some giving by someone in some degree if resentments are ever to be resolved, if personal relationships between estranged people are ever to be improved. A person may sincerely feel that it is not his place to make the first move. He may feel that it is not his place to go halfway—or any part of the way. He may sincerely feel that the fault lies wholly somewhere outside himself. But someone has to move. Someone, sometime, has to break the heartbreaking deadlocks of opposing personalities if they are ever again to be compatible. Someone has to do something if what shouldn't be is ever to be as it should be. Someone must make some move if misunderstandings are not forever to remain. To repeat the words of William James: ". . . human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes. . . ." Where something should be done, let false pride be pushed aside; let people who should not be apart move toward one another; let repentance enter the picture; let men make the most of life by honestly altering false attitudes.

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SYSTEM, OCTOBER 25, 1953

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Priesthood

authorized. They are to make full preparations for stake quarterly conferences in their respective stakes, and, under the direction of the visiting General Authority, conduct the conference sessions. And at all times they are to be subject to directions from the First Presidency and the other General Authorities.

STAKE MELCHIZEDEK PRIESTHOOD MEETINGS AND PRIESTHOOD LEADERSHIP MEETINGS

It is the policy of the Church for the stake presidencies to direct a two-hour combined monthly stake Melchizedek Priesthood meeting and priesthood leadership meeting in each stake. Exceptions to this rule are made only with the consent of the General Authorities in cases where scattered conditions in stakes make it advisable to hold these meetings no oftener than once each quarter. This monthly meeting affords the stake presidency an opportunity to meet with the priesthood quorums and transact such business as is necessary in the best interest of the priesthood program and activity of the stake; however, it should be kept in mind that this meeting does not replace the monthly quorum meetings. (See *Ibid.*, pp. 37-41.)

STAKE AND FOREIGN MISSIONARY WORK

One of the important responsibilities of stake presidencies is to organize and direct stake missionary work and push forward vigorously that program. Stake presidents select and recommend to the First Presidency stake mission presidents who are set apart by one of the General Authorities. However, the counselors to the stake mission presidents are set apart by stake presidencies. Stake missionaries, recommended by bishoprics, are called into the service by stake presidencies, and they are to see that the missionaries are released from all other Church duties so that they may devote their full church-service time to the missionary cause. It is also

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the responsibility of stake presidencies to further the missionary program in foreign fields.

SELECTING PERSONNEL FOR STAKE WORK

Since bishops of wards and their counselors, as well as all other stake and ward officers, are accountable to the stake presidency, the stake presidency has the right to select any person in the stake and assign him or her to do stake missionary work or to any other job. It is desirable that the stake presidency consult with the bishopric of the ward concerned when selections of persons to do stake work are made; however, bishoprics should recognize the fact that they are accountable to the stake presidency and should readily submit to the desires of their superior officers. By so doing unity will prevail throughout the stakes of Zion among the priesthood holders and officers. This will result in progression and strength in the cause of building the kingdom of God.

USE OF HIGH COUNCILS BY STAKE PRESIDENCIES

Stake presidents are advised to make extensive use of their high

councils in supervising the various organizations and activities of their stakes. By so doing marked progress and efficiency in all the organizations of the stake will be attained; and this will result in the Saints' adhering more closely to the commandments. It is a known fact that people will readily respond to good leadership that knows in which direction it is going; and the First Presidency and its associates look to the stake presidencies to supply that leadership.

APPRECIATION EXPRESSED TO STAKE PRESIDENCIES

The General Authorities express deep appreciation to all the stake presidencies throughout the Church for your diligent and faithful services to the cause of righteousness, and we encourage you to continue to perform your duties and to magnify your callings to the best of your abilities, endeavoring to have every organization within your stake bounds function as near to perfection as possible. If these things are done, the Saints will live more closely to the requirements of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church will continue to grow in strength, power, and righteousness. Thus, a great and marvelous work will be accomplished.

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to come to an agreement regarding just what they have found. Until they reach a consensus our condition number two above remains unsatisfied and the issue unsettled. Finally there are doubtful bits of evidence put forth as proof, but which were better left alone. Thus while the Book of Mormon says that mountains rose and fell during the great earthquake, the presence of the Rocky Mountains does not prove a thing, since the Book of Mormon does not pretend for a moment that mountains were never formed at any other time or in

any other way. Such "evidence" only does harm.

(To be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

¹⁹Thus Housman, *op. cit.*, I, lxy: "Now where all mss give nonsense and are therefore corrupt, those mss are to be preferred which give the worst nonsense, because they are likely to be the least interpolated." Cf. *ibid.* V, xxxiiiff.

²⁰This aspect of the Book of Mormon is the subject of a thesis written by Mr. Robert K. Thomas at Reed College in 1947.

²¹Franklin S. Harris, Jr., *The Book of Mormon Message and Evidences* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1953).