

New Approaches to BOOK OF MORMON Study

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PART 5

THE great argument of those who have steadfastly refused, in the face of a rising flood of evidence, to accept the antiquity and authenticity of the new Scrolls, has been that the language they contain is totally out of keeping with the language that should have been used by Jews of such an early period. Here we have pre-Christian Jews talking like the New Testament: "Echoes of New Testament thought and phraseology are clear in the Scrolls; especially those having apocalyptic associations . . ." says J. H. Roberts.³¹ But "New Testament thought and phraseology" have always been supposed at divinity schools to be the product of a gradual and rather late evolution of the Christian community, and have no business at all appearing in pre-Christian Jewish texts! Christian language is familiar enough in old Jewish apocalypses and other texts, but "hitherto perplexed exegetes faced with such texts have usually found in them the interpolations of Christian copyists. But now . . . thanks to the *Habakkuk Commentary* (one of the scrolls), such excisions which could formerly be understood are now no longer to be tolerated; these 'Christological' passages, taken as a whole, henceforth seem to be of the greatest worth, and to continue to reject them without examination as being of Christian origin would appear to be contrary to all sound method."³² The author of these words notes that "it is now certain—and this is one of the most important revelations of the Dead Sea discoveries—that Judaism in the first century B.C. saw a whole theology of the suffering Messiah, of a Messiah who should be the redeemer of the world." We even find

in the scrolls clear indication of three persons in the Godhead.³³

Years ago Hermann Gunkel pointed out that a full-blown gospel of redemption and atonement was in existence among the pre-exilic Jews, but this claim, so jarring to the prevailing schools of theology which would only accept an evolutionary pattern of slow and gradual development, was strenuously resisted by the experts.³⁴ The discovery of the Scrolls has changed all that: "Now that the warning has been given," writes Dupont-Sommer, "many passages of the Old Testament itself must be examined with a fresh eye. Everywhere there is a more or less explicit question of an Anointed One or of a prophet carried off by a violent death. . . ." ³⁵ It is that scholar's

theory that a certain Master of Justice, mentioned in the scrolls as the head of a sect of the Essenes in the first century B. C., was the original pre-Christian inspiration for the Messiah idea. Yet the numerous and ubiquitous references to the Messiah in the Old Testament as in the Apocrypha claim to go back not only to pre-Christian times, but far beyond the first century B. C. as well. So if Dupont-Sommer will not tolerate the business of glibly attributing whatever in those writings betrays a Christological tone to "the interpolations of Christian copyists," neither may he attribute the same passages to interpolations of men living after the Master of Justice. The Messianic theme belongs to the oldest traditions in the world.³⁶

The bearing of this on the Book of Mormon should be at once apparent. The words of an Alma, a Nephi, or a Helaman are replete with "echoes of New Testament thought and phraseology," just as the scrolls are; yet those prophets are all supposed to have lived long before Christ. The New Testament flavor of so much of the Book of Mormon has been until now the strongest single argument against its authenticity. Men trained in sectarian seminaries have leaned back in their armchairs and pointed to Book of Mormon phrases that according to them could have come only from a Christian—and a late Christian—environment: *ergo*, Joseph Smith had simply worked his own



Port Said, one of the gateways to the Middle East.

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The River Jordan, in Palestine. It was in caves in country such as this that the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.



religious conceptions into the book, grossly ignorant as he was of the crass anachronisms they represented. An excellent example of this type of criticism appeared quite recently in the leading Jewish newspaper, *Vorwaerts*. Speaking of the Book of Mormon, a critic writes:

It is full of citations from the Old and New Testaments. . . . The small number of people who have tried to read the book declare that it is dreadfully dull; in it are found quotations from Shakespeare and other English poets. That is one of the very comical things about the book. According to the book itself, it is written in the Egyptian language of some thousands of years ago; yet in it are cited excerpts from the New Testament, a much later document, or from wholly modern poets.³⁷

We shall deal with Shakespeare presently. As for the "other English poets," their identity remains a secret locked in the bosom of the editors of *Vorwaerts*. Since "reformed Egyptian" was being written long after New Testament times, the charges of anachronism on linguistic grounds are worthless. But the basic issue is one which is being fought out furiously today, and the apple of discord is not the Book of Mormon but the Scrolls.

That New Testament language and thought cannot possibly have been familiar to the ancient Jews is a fiercely defended axiom in some schools. Less than a year ago Solomon Zeitlin declared of the Scrolls, "The entire story of the discovery may be a *hoax*," and even if it were not, still the Scrolls "have no value for the history of the Jewish people, of the development of their ideas, or literature, or language. The so-called Manual of Discipline is a conglomeration of words. The Hebrew text makes no sense . . . it undoubtedly

was written by an uneducated Jew of the Middle Ages."³⁸ How strangely like the conventional criticism of the Book of Mormon this reads! Yet here we have to do with texts which the ablest scholars of our time have declared to be not only genuine, but also the most important discovery ever made in Biblical archaeology! How is such disagreement possible among the doctors in the face of so much evidence? Paul Kahle has discoursed at length on the incredible stubbornness and self-will of the best religious scholars when they make up their minds on a subject. One expert now decides that the Scrolls are a Kurdish production of the twelfth century A.D.³⁹ On what does he base this remarkable deduction? On certain details of literary style! But what of the other evidence, such as the fact that "not a single medieval manuscript exhibits the same script as the Scrolls"?⁴⁰ That is simply ignored. The scholars who maintain that the Scrolls are medieval "accord preferential treatment to the evidence supplied by the . . . literary and linguistic relations between the Scrolls" and other medieval documents, according to Teicher, while on the other hand "the archaeologists and palaeographers . . . set *their* feet on what they consider to be the firm ground of their palaeographic and archaeological evidence and reject airily the literary and linguistic evidence."⁴¹ As an illustration, "to maintain, as Dr. Weis does, that 'the examination of the Habakkuk Scroll suggests that it was written about the year 1096 by an Isawite or a Judganite,' is, in view of the archaeological and palaeological evidence alone, simply impossible."⁴²

It is because it has been judged in the light of certain fundamental preconceptions about the nature of Jewish and Christian history that the Book of Mormon has been held to be a mass of crude anachronisms. Today the finding of the Scrolls shows these fundamental preconceptions to have been quite false: "Everything is now changed," writes Dupont-Sommer, "and all the problems relative to primitive Christianity—problems earnestly examined for so many centuries—all these problems henceforth find themselves placed in a new light, which forces us to reconsider them completely. . . . It is not a *single* revolution in the study of biblical exegesis which the Dead Sea documents have brought about; it is, one already feels, a whole cascade of revolutions."⁴³ Recently a leading English liberal clergyman has declared that in order to support the accepted viewpoints he and his fellows have been under constant strain "of having to contort his (Christ's) message, ignoring a considerable portion of it and making unwarranted deductions from other parts, to suit our preconceptions"; the confession of this folly and the acceptance of literal interpretations in place of what he calls the "liberal, ameliorist, social-gospel" view, "gives a sense of relief, of illumination, of enlargement."⁴⁴

Such changing points of view, largely the result of the new discoveries, are very significant for Book of Mormon study. Their immediate result is to show for the first time on what extremely flimsy groundwork criticism of the Book of Mormon has rested in the past. Recently the

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writer has been taken to task for dealing somewhat roughly with the conventional commentators on Ezekiel. It is therefore with considerable complacency that he can now point to W. A. Irwin's very recent study on Ezekiel research between 1943 and 1953, in which that scholar after a thorough investigation can announce that in spite of the diligence and number of the researchers, "not a single scholar has succeeded in convincing his colleagues of the finality of his analysis of so much as one passage!"⁴⁵ Though the experts propound wildly varying views—some having Ezekiel flourishing in Palestine in 400 B.C., while Messel dates his call, with great exactness at 593 B.C.—none of them bothers to submit the evidence for his claims: "It is unfortunate," says Irwin, after a careful survey of the whole field, "that none of these scholars argued his position. We concede readily that they had weighty reasons for their views, but as matters stand, they have given only opinions, when the situation cries aloud for assembling of evidence and for close-knit argument."⁴⁶ Every Ezekiel scholar, according to Irwin, follows "the method that is far too frequent in Old Testament criticism, that of presenting a plausible story as final evidence in a case, when in reality it is not evidence at all."⁴⁷ The result of this is that "as soon as one pushes beyond the general admission of spurious matter in the book, and seeks to identify it, he is at once plunged into confusion and chaos not one whit relieved through these years. Still worse, there is no clearly emerging recognition of a sound method by which to assault this prime problem. Every scholar goes his own way, and according to his private predilection chooses what is genuine and what is secondary in the book; and the figure and work of Ezekiel still dwell in thick darkness."⁴⁸ Can we expect the Book of Mormon to enjoy unprejudiced and objective criticism when such treatment is accorded the Bible?

Any "Christological" elements in the Book of Mormon must have taken their rise not merely in pre-Christian times but in that world to which the Nephites must ultimately trace all their Israelitish traditions, the Jeru-

salem of 600 B.C. Now there is much to indicate that that period was one of those times when great emphasis was being laid on the Messianic doctrine.⁴⁹ One leaving Jerusalem at that time would take with him a powerfully prophetic religion, undamaged by the centuries of learned exposition and rationalization which were to make the Jewish religion a product of schools and committees.⁵⁰ The whole treatment of the Messianic tradition and the mission of Israel in the Book of Mormon is of a piece not with the demonstrations and *sententiae* of the doctors nor with the flights of the mystics, but with the systematic and traditional exposition which we find in the Scrolls and Apocrypha. Both in the Old World and the New we are led into a pool of common ideas and terms centering about the Messianic concept.

"In every age," writes Guerrier, discussing parallels in early Christian papyri, "and especially where religious matter is concerned, there has circulated in a more or less extensive area (of the Near East) a certain fund of ideas and formulas, exact or inexact, which have been employed everywhere, and it is not always easy to discover their origin." As a result, he says, we find parallels everywhere, without being able to trace them to any single doctrine or document as a source; for example, the *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, though pre-Christian and non-Christian, is thoroughly typical of genuine early Christian writing.⁵¹ We need not be surprised if striking but common ideas cannot be run down to their sources, for from the very beginning borrowing has been general and universal in the East: "as soon as a book was completed, its life ended. . . . There was no idea in those times of authorship . . . a book was nobody's property. It belonged to everyone."⁵² Texts far more ancient than the Scrolls, now read with a new understanding, show us how all through the ages the same ideas and even the same expressions have been current with regard to an expected Messiah.⁵³ But in particular there have always been special groups of pious people, separating themselves from the main body of Israel to prepare in a most particular way for the coming

of the Lord, and thereby incurring the mockery, wrath, and persecution of the society as a whole, under the leadership of conservative priests.⁵⁴ This situation is indicated in the Scrolls and also in the Lachish letters, which are contemporaneous with Lehi.⁵⁵ It is tersely and finely described in the Book of Mormon as well: "Our father Lehi was driven out of Jerusalem because he testified of these things. Nephi also testified of these things, and also almost all of our fathers, even down to this time; yea, they have testified of the coming of Christ, and have looked forward, and have rejoiced in his day which is to come." (Helaman 8:22.) Here we are told that the situation in the Old World persisted in the New World, and what the Book of Mormon describes—pious separatist groups living in a religion of expectation, suffering persecution and moving into the "wilderness" from time to time under inspired leaders, who often visit royal courts and cities on dangerous missionary assignments—is precisely the picture that is beginning to emerge in the Old World.

With the finding of the Scrolls it becomes apparent that large sections of the Book of Mormon (e.g., in Jacob, Alma, Helaman, etc.) are actually specimens of a very peculiar literary style that would be exceedingly difficult to forge at any time. It is still too early for a definitive study of the problem, and the whole question of ancient *non-Biblical* literary types in the Book of Mormon has hardly been scratched. But the first step in such an investigation has already been made by capable researchers who have attempted to expose the Book of Mormon as a typical modern American fabrication. Now it takes no great genius to discover that the Book of Mormon first appeared in western New York in the early nineteenth century: that is a given quantity. What the literary savant must show us is that it is a *typical* production of its environment—that there were many, many other writings just like the Book of Mormon being produced in the world of Joseph Smith. If that is asking too much, let the experts furnish but *one* other example of such a book. It will not do merely to point to any text

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using "thee" and "thou," or to any work that mentions the lost tribes or a possible Hebrew origin for the Indians or ancient wars and migrations—what we must have is a book that is something like the Book of Mormon, which resembles it in form and structure, and not merely in casual and far-fetched parallels of detail such as abound in all literature. It is not enough to observe that "Lehi" sounds like "Lehigh" or that a man was murdered on the shores of Lake Erie in Joseph Smith's day—nothing is proved by such silly parallels. The Bible will not do, either, for the Bible was not written in western New York in the early nineteenth century. If we can find a book written in imitation of the Bible, that will do for our point of departure—but even for such a book we search in vain.

The Book of Mormon like the Bible is an organic whole. We are asking the literary experts to produce just one modern work which resembles it as such. There are, we believe, plenty of ancient parallels, but if the Book of Mormon is a fraud, a cheat, a copy, a theft, etc., as people have said it is, we have every right to ask for a sampling of the abundant and obvious sources from which it was taken. Smith's *View of the Indians* is no more like the Book of Mormon than a telephone directory. All attempts to find contemporary works which the Book of Mormon even remotely resembles have been conspicuous failures. So it has been necessary to explain the book as a work of pure and absolute fiction, a non-religious, money-making romance. But one need only read a page of the book at random to see that it is a religious book through and through, and one need only read the title page of the first edition to see that it is given to the world as holy scripture, no less. Here we come to the crux of the whole matter.

The whole force and meaning of the Book of Mormon rests on one proposition: that it is true. It was written and published to be believed.

People who believe the Book of Mormon (and the writer is one of them) think it is the most wonderful document in the world. But if it were not true, the writer could not imagine a more dismal performance.

There is nothing paradoxical in this. As Aristotle noted, the better a thing is, the more depraved is a spurious imitation of it. An imitation nursery rhyme may be almost as good as an original, but a knowingly faked mathematical equation would be the abomination of desolation. Curves and equations derive all their value not from the hard work they represent or the neatness with which they are presented on paper, but from one fact alone—the fact that they speak the truth and communicate valid knowledge. Without that they are less than nothing. To those who understand and believe that $E = mc^2$ * that statement is a revelation of power; to those who do not understand or believe it (and there are many!) it is nothing short of an insolent and blasphemous fraud. So it is with the Book of Mormon, which if believed is a revelation of power, but otherwise is a nonsensical jumble. "Surely," wrote Sir Richard Burton, "there never was a book so thoroughly dull and heavy; it is as monotonous as a sage-prairie."

It will be said that this merely proves that the greatness of the Book of Mormon lies entirely in the mind of the reader. Not entirely! There are people who loathe Bach and can't stand Beethoven; it was once as popular among clever and educated people as barbaric as it is now proper to rhapsodize about them in great books clubs. Different readers react differently to these things—but they must have something valid to work on. We are not laying down rules for taste or saying that the Book of Mormon is good because some people like it or bad because others do not. What we are saying is that the Book of Mormon, whatever one may think of it, is one of the great realities of our time, and that what makes it so is that certain people believe it. Its literary or artistic qualities do not enter into the discussion: It was written to be believed. Its one and only merit is truth. Without that merit, it is all that non-believers say it is: With the merit it is all that believers say it is. And we must insist on this

*Einstein equation:
E = energy in each particle of matter
m = mass, or weight of matter
c = the speed of light
2 = the squaring of the number.

truism because it supplies a valuable clue to the authorship of the book.

(To be continued)

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- ³²Dupont-Sommer, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 95.
- ³³*Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ³⁴Dupont-Sommer, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
- ³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 96.
- ³⁶H. Gunkel, *Zum religionsgeschichtlichen Verständnis des Neuen Testaments* (1903). Though Gunkel became the founder of a "school," the consensus went against him, and in his latest book, *Christian Beginnings*, Burkitt writes (p. 27): "Christians have been too apt in the past to assume that there already existed among the Jews a fairly definite and uniform conception of the Messiah who was expected to come. That indeed is a notion presupposed in many Christian documents . . . but it is not borne out by a study of Jewish literature." If anything, conventional Jewry has been opposed to the idea, but the Scrolls and sects among the Jews show it flourishing among the more pious element all along.
- ³⁷Dupont-Sommer, *loc. cit.*, p. 96.
- ³⁸A good collection of texts has been made by A. von Gall, *Basilea tou Theou* (Heidelberg, 1926).
- ³⁹Hilel Ragaf, "The Origin of the Religious Sect of Mormons," *Forward*, April 26, 1953.
- ⁴⁰Zeitlin, "The Hebrew Pogram and the Hebrew Scrolls," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLII (1952), p. 146f.
- ⁴¹T. Wechsler, "Origin of the So Called Dead Sea Scrolls," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, XLIII (1952), 121-139.
- ⁴²J. L. Teicher, "The Dead Sea Scrolls—Documents of the Jewish Christian Sect of Ebionites," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, II (1951), p. 69.
- ⁴³*Ibid.*, p. 78.
- ⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p. 86.
- ⁴⁵Dupont-Sommer, *op. cit.*, pp. 100, 96.
- ⁴⁶F. A. M. Spencer, in *The Church Quarterly Review*, CXXVI (1938), p. 18.
- ⁴⁷W. A. Irwin, in *Vetus Testamentum*, III (1953), p. 62.
- ⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 54.
- ⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p. 55.
- ⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 61.
- ⁵¹Von Gall, *op. cit.*, pp. 65ff., 164ff.
- ⁵²The process of "intellectualizing" the message of the prophets is well illustrated by the Talmud, see Chap. XIII of M. Mielziner, *Introduction to the Talmud* (Chicago, 1894).
- ⁵³L. Guerrier, in *Patrologia Orientalis* IX.3, p. 148f.
- ⁵⁴E. Chiera, *They Wrote on Clay* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1938), p. 133.
- ⁵⁵*Supra*, n. 36 and following note below.
- ⁵⁶For an extensive study of these groups, Robert Eisler, *Iesus Basileus ou Basileus* (Heidelberg, 1930), II, Sections V-X.
- ⁵⁷Jeremiah seems to have been the leader of the opposition to the government party, to judge by the Lachish Letters; see sources cited in *Lehi in the Desert*, pp. 5-13.