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The Book of Mormon: True or False?

Author(s): Hugh W. Nibley
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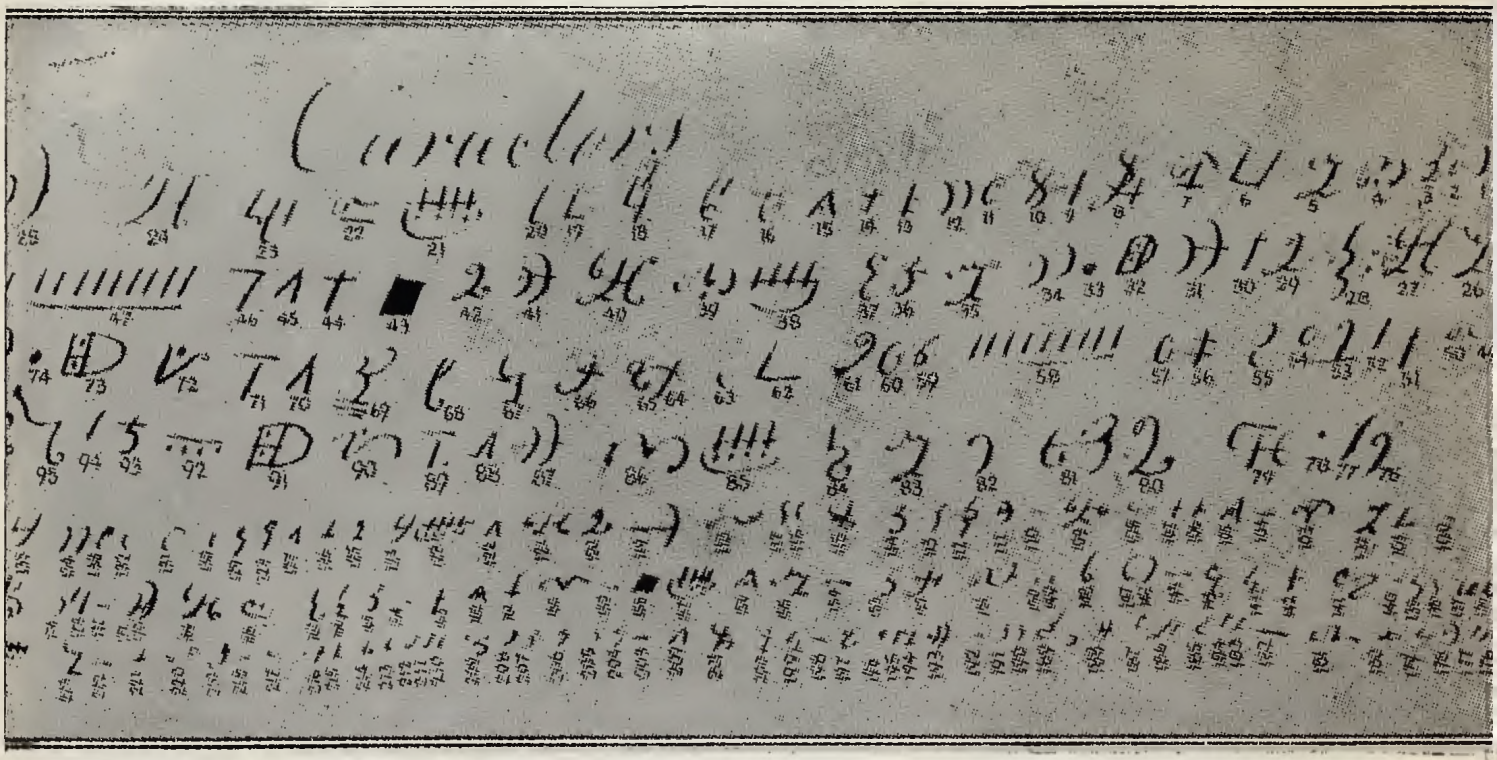
Abstract: Argues that if Joseph Smith was not telling the truth when he provided the world with the Book of Mormon, then he recklessly exposed his forgery and fraud to public discovery. The Book of Mormon is authentic history, not a forgery, and not a product of the tendencies of Joseph Smith's day.

THE BOOK OF MORMON: TRUE OR FALSE?

by Dr. Hugh Nibley

IT is impossible to read the *Book of Mormon* with an "open mind". Confronted on every page with the steady assurance that what he is reading is both holy scripture and true history, the reader is soon forced to acknowledge a prevailing mood of assent or resentment.

It was the same uncompromising "yea or nay" in the teaching of Jesus that infuriated the scribes and Pharisees against Him; the claims of the Christ allowed no one the comfortable neutrality of a middle ground. Critics of the *Book of Mormon* have from the beginning attempted to escape the responsibility of reading it by a simple appeal to the story of its miraculous origin; that is enough to discredit it without further investigation.



A copy of some of the characters inscribed on the gold plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon.

Thanks to its title page, the *Book of Mormon* "has not been universally considered by its critics," as one of them recently wrote, "as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it." Even Eduard Meyer, who wrote an ambitious study of Mormon origins, confessed that he had never read the *Book of Mormon* through.

So it was something of an event when not long since an eminent German historian read enough of the strange volume to be thoroughly disturbed by it. He found in it "the expression of a mighty awakening historical consciousness," and declared that "the problem of America and Europe has in fact never again been so clearly perceived and pregnantly treated as here."

Clear perception? Skilful treatment? In *that* book? Of course the whole thing is a monstrous hoax, Professor Meinhold will not even deign to consider any alternative: in spite of the witnesses and all that, the story of its origin needs and deserves no examination; it is simply *unerhört*, and we don't discuss things that are *unerhört*.

Worst of all, the *Book of Mormon* bears such alarming resemblance to Scripture that for Meinhold it not only undermines but threatens in a spirit of "nihilistic scepticism" to discredit the Bible altogether. Since one can reject the *Book of Mormon* without in any way jeopardising one's faith in the Bible, and since no one ever can accept or ever has accepted the *Book of Mormon* without complete and unreserved belief in the Bible, the theory that the *Book of Mormon* is a fiendish attempt to undermine faith in the Bible is an argument of sheer desperation. Recently Professor Albright has noted that the Bible is first and last a historical document, and that of all the religions of the world only Judaeo-Christianity "can be said to have a completely historical orientation."

Modern scholarship has up to recent years steadily undermined that historical orientation and with it the authority of the Bible; but today the process is being reversed and the glory of our Judaeo-Christian tradition vindicated. "Characteristic of the compelling force of this orientation," according to Albright are the "marked historical tendencies" of Islam and Mormonism, the most complete expression of

which is Mormonism's " alleged historical authentication in the form of the *Book of Mormon* . . . "

What shocks Professor Meinhold in the *Book of Mormon* is the very thing that shocked the past generations of German professors in the Bible: its claims to be a genuine history. When the whole Christian world had forgotten that " historical orientation " which was its one unique distinction, the *Book of Mormon* alone preserved it completely intact.

It is said that John Stuart Mill, the man with the fabulous I.Q. (and little else), read the New Testament with relish until he got to the Gospel of John, when he tossed the book aside before reaching the sixth chapter with the crushing and final verdict, " This is poor stuff! " Any book is a fraud if we choose to regard it as such, but Professor Meinhold cannot nearly so experienced or well-educated (*sic*) as any of logic and savage language serve notice that this book is no laughing matter.

But why should anybody be upset by what a Harvard pedant of our own day calls " the gibberish of a crazy boy? " Because the *Book of Mormon* is anything but gibberish to one who takes the trouble to read it. Here is an assignment which we like to give to classes of Oriental (mostly Moslem) students studying the *Book of Mormon* (it is required) at the Brigham Young University:

> " Since Joseph Smith was younger than most of you and not nearly so experienced or well-educated (sic) as any of you at the time he copyrighted the *Book of Mormon,* it should not be too much to ask you to hand in by the end of the Semester (which will give you more time than he had) a paper of, say, from five- to six-hundred pages in length. Call it a sacred book if you will, and give it the form of a history. Tell of a community of wandering Jews in ancient times; have all sorts of characters in your story, and involve them in all sorts of public and private vicissitudes; give them names—hundreds of them—pretending that they are real Hebrew and Egyptian names of cir. B.C. 600; be lavish with cultural and technical details—manners and customs, arts and industries, political and religious institutions, rites, and traditions; include long and complicated military and economic histories; have your narrative cover a thousand years without any large gaps; keep a number of interrelated local histories going at once; feel free to introduce religious controversy and philosophical discussion, but always in a plausible setting; observe the appropriate literary conventions and explain the derivation and transmission of your varied historical materials. Above all, do not ever contradict yourself! For now we come to the really hard part of this little assignment. You and I know that you are making this all up—we have our little joke—but just the same you are going to be required to have your paper published when you finish it, not as fiction or romance, but as a true history! After you have handed it in you may make no changes in it (in this class we always use the *first* edition of the *Book of Mormon*); what is more, you are to invite any and all scholars to read and criticise your work freely, explaining to them that it is a sacred book on a par with the Bible. If they seem over-sceptical you might tell them that you translated the book from original records by the aid of the Urim and Thummim—they will love that! Further to allay their misgivings, you might tell them that the original manuscript was on golden plates, and that you got the plates from an angel. Now go to work and good luck! "

To date no student has carried out this assignment which, of course, was not meant seriously. But why not? If anybody could write the *Book of Mormon,* as we have been so often assured, it is high time that somebody, some devoted and learned minister of the Gospel, let us say, performed the invaluable public service of showing the world that it can be done.

Assuming that it was not Joseph Smith but somebody else who wrote it gets us nowhere. If he did not write it, Joseph Smith ran an even greater risk in claiming authorship than if he had. For the first important man among his followers to turn against him would infallibly give him away. Sidney Rigdon, full of ambition and jealous of the Prophet, never claimed authorship of the *Book of Mormon* (which has often been claimed *for* him) or any part in it, nor in all the years during which he fought Smith from outside the Church did he ever hint the possibility of any other explanation for the *Book of Mormon* than Joseph Smith's own story.

Martin Harris, Oliver Cowdery, David Whitmer all turned against the Prophet at one time or another, but neither they nor any other of the early associates of Smith, no matter how embittered, ever gave the slightest indication that they knew of anybody besides Smith himself who had any part whatever of the composition of the *Book of Mormon.* For years men searched desperately to discover some other possible candidate for authorship, or as one present-day critic puts it, " Every effort has been made to find a more plausible explanation of the sources of these scriptures."

From the first all admitted that Joseph Smith was much too ignorant for the job. We grant that willingly, but who on earth in 1829 was not too ignorant for it? Who is up to it today? If the disproportion between the learning of Smith and the stature of the *Book of Mormon* is simply comical, that between the qualifications of an Anthon or a Lepsius and the production of such a book is hardly less so. We can't get rid of Joseph Smith, but then it would do us no good if we could. Just consider the scope and variety of the work as briefly as possible.

1 Nephi gives us first a clear and vivid look at the world of Lehi, a citizen of Jerusalem but much at home in the general world of the Near East of 600 B.C. Then it takes us to the desert where Lehi and his family wander for eight years, doing all the things that wandering families in the desert should do. The manner of their crossing the ocean is described, as is the first settlement and hard pioneer life in the New World dealt with in the Book of Jacob and a number of short and gloomy other books. The ethnological picture becomes very complicated as we learn that the real foundations of New World civilisation were not laid by Lehi's people at all, but that there were far larger groups coming from the Middle East at about the same time (this was the greatest era of exploration and colonisation in the history of the ancient world), as well as numerous survivors of an archaic hunting culture of Asiatic origin that had thousands of years before crossed the North Pacific and roamed all over the " north country ".

The book of Mosiah describes a coronation rite in all its details, and presents extensive religious and political histories mixed in with a complicated background of exploration and colonisation. The book of Alma is marked by long eschatological discourses and a remarkably full and circumstantial military history. The main theme of the book of Helaman is the undermining of society by moral decay and criminal conspiracy; the powerful essay on crime is carried into the next book where the ultimate dissolution of the Nephite government is described.

Then comes the account of the great storm and earthquakes, in which the writer, ignoring a splendid opportunity for exaggeration, has as accurately depicted the typical behaviour of the elements on such occasions as if he were copying out of a modern textbook on seismology. The damage was not by any means total, and soon after the catastrophe Jesus Christ appeared to the most pious sectaries who had gathered at the Temple.

The account of Christ's visits to the earth after His resurrection are exceedingly fragmentary in the New Testament, and zealous efforts are made in early Christian apocryphal writings to eke them out; his mission to the Nephites is the most remarkable part of the *Book of Mormon*. Can anyone now imagine the terrifying prospect of confronting the Christian world of 1830 with the very words of Christ? Professor Meinhold still shudders with horror at the presumption of it, and well he might, as the work of an impudent imposter who knew a year ahead of time just what mortal peril he was risking the project is indeed *unerhört;* as the work of an honest well-meaning Christian it is equally unthinkable.

But the boldness of the thing is matched by the directness and nobility with which the preaching of the Saviour and the organisation of the Church are described. After this comes a happy history and then the usual signs of decline and demoralisation; the death-struggle of the Nephite civilisation is described with due attention to all the complex factors that make up an exceedingly complicated but perfectly consistent picture of Decline and Fall. Only one who attempts to make a full outline of *Book of Mormon* history can begin to appreciate its immense complexity: and never once does the author get lost (as the student repeatedly does, picking his way out of one maze after another only with the greatest effort), and never once does he contradict himself. We should be glad to learn of any other like performance in the history of literature.

The final book takes us back thousands of years before Lehi's time to the dawn of history and the first of the great world migration. A vivid description of a " Voelkerwanderungszeit " concentrates on the migration of a particular party—a large one, moving through the years with their vast flocks and herds across central Asia, (described as at that time a land of swollen inland sees), and then undertaking a terrifying crossing of the North Pacific. Totally unlike the rest of the *Book of Mormon*, this archaic tale conjures up the " heroic " ages, the " Epic Milieu " of the great migrations and the " Saga time " that follows, describing in detail the customs and usages of a cultural complex that Chadwick was first to describe in our own day.

Here in this early epic, far beyond the reach of any checks and controls our foolish farm-boy had unlimited opportunity to let his imagination run wild. What an invitation to the most gorgeously funny extravaganza! And instead we get a sober, factual, but completely strange and unfamiliar tale.

Even this brief and sketchy indication of thematic material should be enough to show that we are not dealing here with a typical product of American or any other modern literature. Lord Raglan has recently observed that the evolution of religions has been not from the simple to the complex but the other way around: " The modern tendency in religion, as in language, is towards simplicity. The youngest world religion, Islam, is simpler both in ritual and dogma than its predecessors, and such modern cults as Quakerism, Baabism, Theosophy, and Christian Science are simpler still."

The work of Joseph Smith completely ignores this basic tendency; whatever he is, he is not a product of the times. The mere mass, charge, and variety of Mormonism has perplexed and offended many: but it is never too much to digest. The big, ponderous, detailed plot of the *Book of Mormon*, for example, is no more impressive than the ease, confidence, and precision with which the material is handled. The prose is terse, condensed and fast-moving; the writer never wanders or speculates; beginning, middle and ending are equally powerful, with no signs of fatigue or boredom;

The Author

This is the first in a series of articles on *The Book of Mormon* by Dr. Hugh Nibley. Dr. Nibley is one of the finest scholars in the Church. He is on the faculty at Brigham Young University, where he is professor in the departments of history and religion.

there is no rhetoric, no purple patches, nothing lurid or melodramatic, everything is kept sober and factual.

The Book of Mormon betrays none of the marks of " fine writing " of its day; it does not view the Gorgeous East with the eyes of any American of 1830, nor does it share in the prevailing ideas of what makes great or moving literature: the grandiose, awesome, terrible and magnificent may be indicated in these pages, but they are never described; there is no attempt to be clever or display learning, the *Book of Mormon* vocabulary is only 3,000 words! There are no favourite characters, no milking of particularly colourful or romantic episodes or situations, no revelling in terror and gore.

The book starts out with a colophon telling us whose hand wrote it, what his sources were, and what it is about; the author boasts of his pious parents and good education, explaining that his background was an equal mixture of Egyptian and Jewish, and then moves into his history establishing time, place and background; the situation at Jerusalem and the reaction of Nephi's father to it, his misgivings, his prayers, a manifestation that came to him in the desert as he travelled on business and sent him back post-haste " to his own house at Jerusalem," where he has a great apocalyptic vision.

All this and more in the *first seven verses* of the *Book of*

Mormon. The writer knows exactly what he is going to say and wastes no time in saying it. Throughout the book we get the impression that it really is what its authors claim it to be, a highly condensed account from much fuller records. We can imagine our young rustic getting off to this flying start, but can we imagine him keeping up the pace for ten pages? For 588 pages the story never drags, the author never hesitates or wanders, he is never at a loss. What is really amazing is that he never contradicts himself.

Long ago Friedrich Blass laid down rules for testing any document for forgery. Let us paraphrase these as Rules to be followed by a Successful Forger, and consider whether Joseph Smith paid any attention to any of them.

(1) Keep out of the range of unsympathetic critics- There is, Blass insists, no such thing as a clever forgery. No forger can escape detection if somebody really wants to expose him; all the great forgeries discovered to date have been crudely executed (e.g. the Piltdown skull), depending for their success on the enthusiastic support of the public or the experts. The *Book of Mormon* has enjoyed no such support; from the day it appeared important persons at the urgent demand of an impatient public did everything they could to show it a forgery. And Joseph Smith, far from keeping it out of the hands of unsympathetic critics, did everything he could to put it into those hands. Surely this is not the way of a deceiver.

(2) Keep your document as *short* as possible. The longer a forgery is the more easily it may be exposed, the danger increasing geometrically with the length of the writing. By the time he had gone ten pages the author of the *Book of Mormon* knew only too well what a dangerous game he was playing *if* it was a hoax; yet he carries on undismayed for six hundred pages.

(3) Above all, *don't* write a *historical* document! They are by far the easiest of all to expose being full of "things too trifling, too inconspicuous, and too troublesome" for the forger to check up on.[11]

(4) After you have perpetrated your forgery, go into retirement or disappear completely. For vanity, according to Blass, is the Achilles heel of *every* forger. A forger is not only a cheat but also a show-off, attempting to put one over on society; he cannot resist the temptation to enjoy his triumph and if he remains in circulation inevitably gives himself away. Joseph Smith ignored any opportunity of taking credit for the *Book of Mormoon*—he took only the responsibility for it.

(5) Always leave an escape door open. Be vague and general, philosophise and moralise. Religious immunity has been the refuge of most eminent forgers in the past, beautiful thoughts and pious allegories, deep interpretations of Scripture, mystic communication to the initiated few, these are safe grounds for the *pia fraus*. But the *Book of Mormon* never uses them. It does not even exploit the convenient philological loophole of being a translation: as an inspired translation it claims all the authority and responsibility of the original.

Granted that any explanation is preferable to Joseph Smith's, where is any explanation? The chances against such a book ever coming into existence are astronomical: Who would write it? Why? Trouble, danger, and unpopularity are promised its defenders in the book itself. Did someone else write it so that Joseph Smith could take all the credit? Did Smith, knowing it was somebody's else's fraud, claim authorship so that he could take all the blame?

The work involved in producing the thing was staggering, the danger terrifying, long before publication time the newspapers and clergy were howling for blood. Who would want to go on with such a suicidal project? All that trouble and danger just to fool people; but the author of this book is not trying to fool anybody: he claims no religious immunity, makes no effort to mystify, employs to rhetorical or allegorical license.

There are other things to consider too, such as the youth and inexperience of Smith when (regardless of who the author might be) he took sole responsibility for the *Book of Mormon*. Faced with a point-blank challenge by the learned world any imposter would have collapsed in an instant, but Joseph Smith never weakened though the opposition quickly mounted to a roar of national indignation. Then there were the Witnesses; real men, who though leaving the Church for various real or imagined offences never altered or retracted their testimonies of what they had seen and heard.

The fact that only one version of the *Book of Mormon* was ever published and that Joseph Smith's attitude towards it never changed is also significant. After copyrighting it in the Spring of 1829 he had a year to think it over before publication and yield sensibly to social pressure; after that he had the rest of his life to correct his youthful indiscretion; years later, an important public figure and a skilful writer, knowing that his book was a fraud, knowing the horrible risk he ran on every page of it, and knowing how hopelessly naïve he had been when he wrote it, he should at least have soft-pedalled the *Book of Mormon* theme. Instead he insisted to the end of his life that it was the truest book on earth, and that a man could get nearer to God by observing its precepts than in any other way.

Parallelomania has recently been defined as the double process which "first overdoes the supposed similarity in passages and then proceeds to describe source and derivation as if implying literary connections flowing in an inevitable or predetermined direction." It isn't merely that one sees parallels everywhere, but especially that one instantly concludes that there can be only one possible explanation for such. From the beginning the *Book of Mormon* has enjoyed the full treatment from Parallelomaniacs. Its origin has been found in the Koran, in Swedenborg, in the teachings of Old School Presbyterians, French Mystics, Methodists, Unitarians, Millerites, Baptists, Cambellites, and Quakers, in Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Gnosticism, Transcendentalism, Atheism, Deism, Owenism, Socialism, and Platoism; in the writing of Rabelias, Milton, St. Anselm, Joachim of Flores, Eethan Smith, the Early Church, in Old Iranian doctrines, Brahmin mysticism and Freemasonry, etc.

Now a person who has only read Milton, or Defoe, or Rabelais would have an easy time discovering parallels all through the *Book of Mormon*, or any other book he might read thereafter, and it is not surprising that people who have studied only English literature are the most eager to condemn the *Book of Mormon*.