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Preface

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Preface

The purpose of this book¹ is to call attention to some points on which the main hypothesis of the Book of Mormon may be tested. The hypothesis is that the Book of Mormon contains genuine history, and with it goes the corollary that the work was divinely inspired. Because of that corollary no serious attempt has been made to test the main hypothesis; for to test a theory means to take it seriously only for a little while, to assume for the sake of argument that it may conceivably, however absurdly, be true after all. That is a concession no critic of the Book of Mormon has been willing to make.

Instead of the vigorous onslaught that the Book of Mormon hypothesis invites and deserves, it has elicited only a long, monotonous drizzle of authoritarian denunciation, the off-hand opinions of impatient scholars whose intelligence and whose official standing will not allow them to waste a moment more than is necessary to write off an imposture so obviously deserving of contempt.

But today it is being pointed out in many quarters that authoritarianism is the very antithesis of true science, and that the best scientific theory is not the sane, cautious, noncommittal one but the daring and revolutionary one. "A theory which asserts more," says Karl Popper, "and thus takes greater risks, is better testable than a theory which asserts very little."² And he further notes that preference should always be given to the theory that makes more precise assertions than others, explains more facts in greater detail, invites more tests, suggests more new

experiments, and unifies more hitherto unrelated problems. On all these points the Book of Mormon scores high. It is the very extravagance of its claims that makes it so deserving of the respect which is denied it. The outrageous daring of its title page is the very thing that should whet the appetite of a real scholar: here is a book that is asking for a fight, so to speak, and if it is as flimsy as it looks at first glance any competent schoolman should have little trouble polishing it off in an hour or so.

But, strangely, through the years the challenge has had no takers. The learned have been willing enough to wave their credentials and state their opinions, but they have been adroit and determined in avoiding any serious discussion. To illustrate, Bernard de Voto once hailed an ambitious critic of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon as "a detached, modern intelligence, grounded in naturalism, rejecting the supernatural."³ This is good news indeed for the Book of Mormon, for a confirmed naturalist who has made a study of the life of Joseph Smith is the very person best qualified to put Smith's supernaturalist claims to a severe test. "Observations or experiments can be accepted as supporting a theory," writes Popper, "only if these observations or experiments may be described as severe tests of the theory, . . . serious attempts to refute it."⁴ Today we read more and more in the journals about the importance of having a falsifiable rather than a verifiable theory. Anything can be verified, we are told, but a good scientific theory is one that can readily be falsified, that is, easily refuted if and where it is in error. And so it is fortunate that we have critics ready, willing, and able to attack the historical claims of the Book of Mormon, for that book is delightfully falsifiable.

But their attack, to be effective, must be met with the strongest possible resistance: if it meets a half-hearted defense it can never boast a real victory: "Since the method of science is that of critical discussion [Popper again], it is

of great importance that the theories criticized should be tenaciously defended."⁵ That is, there must be a discussion, with the purpose of discovering by all possible means every weakness in both positions. But that is not the way Mr. de Voto and his friends see it at all. For a reliable defense they trust implicitly in the impartiality and intelligence of the prosecution. They give the prize to their champion not for bringing new life into the discussion but for effectively silencing all further discussion. The last thing in the world they want is for the debate to continue. In the impressive footnotes and credentials of accepted authorities they see their own release from endless years of drudgery and research and from the risks and uncertainties of an indefinitely prolonged debate with its constant danger of new and disturbing revelations and its frequent and humiliating disclosures of great gaps and defects in the knowledge even of the foremost investigators. How much better to put the whole thing to bed with the announcement that sound scholarship has at last settled the issue once for all.

That this is the position that the experts take is perfectly apparent in their quick and angry reaction to any word of criticism directed at the established oracles. Any attempt to continue or renew the discussion by pointing to the flaws and contradictions that swarm in their pages meets with almost hysterical protests of prejudice, disrespect, and impertinence. By denying prejudice in their own ranks, they deprive themselves of the one thing that makes their work valuable. How could anyone "grounded in naturalism, rejecting the supernatural" be anything but prejudiced in favor of naturalism and against the supernatural? And why not? How could anyone put up a halfway decent defense of the Book of Mormon without being prejudiced in its favor? There is nothing wrong with having and admitting two sides in a controversy. By definition every theory is controversial, and the better the theory the more highly controversial. There can be no more constructive approach

to a controversial issue like this one than to have each side present the evidence which it finds most convincing, always bearing in mind that authority is not evidence and that name-dropping is as futile as name-calling. Sweeping statements and general impressions are sometimes useful in the process of getting one's bearings and taking up a position, but they cannot serve as evidence because they are expressions of personal impressions which are nontransferrable.

Which brings up an important point: we are not going to *prove* anything in this book. The evidence that will prove or disprove the Book of Mormon does not exist. When, indeed, is a thing proven? Only when an individual has accumulated in his own conscience enough observations, impressions, reasonings, and feelings to satisfy him personally that it is so. The same evidence which convinces one expert may leave another completely unsatisfied; the impressions that build up to definite proof are themselves nontransferrable. All we can do is to talk about the material at hand, hoping that in the course of the discussion every participant will privately and inwardly form, reform, change, or abandon his opinions about it and thereby move in the direction of greater light and knowledge. Some of the things in the pages that follow we think are quite impressive, but there is no guarantee at all that anybody else will think so. The whole thing may well impress some as disappointingly inconclusive, for we must insist that we have reached no final conclusions, even privately, and that all we can see ahead is more and ever more problems.⁶ But they are problems with a meaning, and it is our personal conviction that if the Book of Mormon were not a solid and genuine article we would long since have run out of such meaningful material, i.e., that there is much more behind all this than mere literary invention.

Some, impressed by the sheer mass and charge of the Book of Mormon, are now asking why it can't be seriously and respectfully treated as a myth. Lots of myths are today

coming in for the most reverential treatment. But the book disdains such subterfuge, and never tires of reminding us that it is not myth but history and must stand or fall as such: "I would that ye should remember that these sayings are true, and also that these records are true" (Mosiah 1:6). "We know our record to be true, for behold, it is a just man who did keep the record" (3 Nephi 8:1). There may be mistakes in the record (3 Nephi 8:2), but there is no fraud or fiction: "And whoso receiveth this record, and shall not condemn it because of the imperfections which are in it, the same shall know of greater things" (Mormon 8:12). For "if there be faults they be the faults of man. But behold we know no fault, . . . therefore, he that condemneth, let him be aware" (Mormon 8:17). To call this record a myth is to condemn it as effectively as by calling it a fraud. We are going to approach the Book of Mormon as real history, in hopes that some reader may pick up a useful impression here or there.

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