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A Time for Reexamination

Author(s): Hugh Nibley

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A Time for Reexamination

The Book of Mormon can and should be tested. It invites criticism, and the best possible test for its authenticity is provided by its own oft-proclaimed provenance in the Old World. Since the Nephites are really a branch broken off from the main cultural, racial, and religious stock, that provenance can be readily examined.

In case one thinks the Book of Mormon has been adequately examined in the past, it is well to know that today all ancient records are being read anew in the light of new discoveries. In this lesson we discuss some of the overthrows of the last decades that make it necessary to undertake the thoroughgoing reevaluation of ancient records, including the Bible. The old evolutionary interpretation is being reexamined, while in its place is coming the realization that all ancient records can best be understood if they are read as a single book.

Claims of the Book of Mormon Can Be Tested

A century and a quarter ago a young man shocked the world by bringing out a large book which he had set up right beside the Bible not as a commentary or key to the scriptures, but as original scripture—the revealed word of God to man: “And the Book of Mormon and the holy scriptures are given of me for your instruction,” says the Lord (D&C 33:16). Likewise the book was given out as genuine history: “Which contains a record of a fallen people, and the fulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also” (D&C 20:9).

How can one “control” such a claim? In the primitive church it was taught that no one had a right to question a prophet on “intellectual” grounds. History, however, is another thing. If the Book of Mormon is to convert the honest in heart it must provide convincing tests for them.

For the righteous, Moroni 10:4 offers adequate conviction; for the others, who must either convict the Book of Mormon of fraud or be convicted by it, the best and most immediate of many checks upon it are to be found in its Old World background. The "fallen people" that it tells us about are described by one of their prophets as a "branch of the tree of Israel, and has been lost from its body in a strange land" (Alma 26:36). Another says they are a "lonesome and a solemn people, wanderers, cast out from Jerusalem" (Jacob 7:26). These two statements, written purportedly 410 years apart, show that our Book of Mormon people never think of themselves as an indigenous or autochthonous culture in the New World, but always and only as the heirs of Old World civilization. The very metal plates on which the book was preserved from generation to generation were made in imitation of older records brought from Palestine (1 Nephi 19:1-6): Its language and style from the first were consciously modeled after the literary and linguistic usage of the Old World (1 Nephi 1:1-2). The Book of Mormon in many ways declares itself to be an authentic product of the Near East; it gives a full and circumstantial account of its own production, declaring that it is but one of many such books to have been produced in the course of history and placing itself in about the middle of a long list of sacred writings, beginning with the first patriarchs and continuing down to the end of human history; it cites lost prophetic writings of prime importance, giving the names of their authors; it traces its own cultural roots in all directions, emphasizing the immense breadth and complexity of such connections in the world; it belongs to the same class of literature as the Bible, but along with a sharper and clearer statement of biblical teachings contains a formidable mass of historical material unknown to biblical writers but well within the range of modern comparative study, since it insists on deriving its whole cultural tradition, even in de-

tails, directly from a specific time and place in the Old World.

The Rediscovery of the Ancients

In the light of these claims recent developments in the study of scriptures take on an intense interest for students of the Book of Mormon.

We are living in a time of the reexamination and re-evaluation of all ancient records. It is not only in the field of religion but in all ancient studies that preconceived ideas are being uprooted on all sides. New discoveries should be received with joy, for though they bring into question the *forms* in which the labors of scholarship have molded the past, they bring a new *substance* and reality to things which the learned of another age had never thought possible. The same discoveries which, it appears, may alter the theories of the doctors, are at the same time vindicating that Bible world which they had consigned to the realm of myth.¹ Years ago the celebrated Neibuhr observed that ancient history is always treated "as if it had never really happened" — it is a thesis, a demonstration, an intellectual exercise, but not a real account of real people.² "Ingrained in our subconscious," says a recent study of ancient Egypt, "is a disbelief in the actual existence of those times and persons, which haunts us through the schools and in the theaters and libraries and dominates the whole concept of 'Antiquity.'" ³

From this mood of academic complacency the learned ones are now aroused to face another world entirely. Among other things that must be viewed in the new cold light of day is the Book of Mormon. If this seems a late date to be asking, "What is the Book of Mormon?" it should seem far stranger to ask, "What is the Iliad?", "What is the Apocrypha?", "What is the Book of the Dead?" or "What is the Bible?" Yet these questions are being more seriously considered today than at any other time. Up until the pres-

ent, scholars have thought they had a pretty good idea of what the historical, literary, philosophical or religious writings of the past were all about. Not so today! The whole question of ancient records is now undergoing a thorough reinvestigation.

Significant Changes

How this state of things has come about may best be illustrated by considering the case of the famous Eduard Meyer. In 1884 the first volume of his great *History of the Ancient World (Geschichte des Altertums)* appeared, presenting to the world "for the first time a history of the Ancient East in a scientifically satisfying form, a work which at the time produced a veritable sensation."⁴ Hardly was the first edition completed, however, when the author was hard at work revising the whole thing, for the history of the Ancient World must be constantly rewritten. By considering a few of the things that happened between Meyer's two editions, one may gain some idea of the tempo of discovery in our times. As Walter Otto summarizes the developments:

The History of the Ancient East had taken on a totally different aspect. . . . Times and areas which formerly had been almost or completely unknown were brought to light; we have become acquainted with completely new languages and learned to use them as sources; people known formerly only by name now stand before us as concrete realities; the Indo-Germanic element, which serious scholarship had long concluded was of no significance for the Ancient East . . . now shows more clearly every day as an important historical element even in the more ancient periods; empires, such as the Mitanni and especially the Hittite, of whose history and structure not long ago only a few scattered details were known, have recently emerged as worthy rivals of the great traditional empires of the East, who actually recognized the Hittites as their equal.⁵

In the two decades since those words were written,

things have gone faster than ever. To mention only a few of the developments, there is afoot today a general re-evaluation of the oldest Egyptian texts and a far-reaching reinterpretation of the very essentials of Egyptian religion; the origin and background of Sumero-Babylonian civilization is being reconsidered completely in the light of excavations made along the periphery of that area and of epic texts whose real significance has just begun to dawn on the experts; the unearthing of the oldest known villages gives us a new and unexpected picture of a civilization that "seems to have come into being with relative (even revolutionary) suddenness," instead of with that evolutionary gradualness with which all such things were once supposed to have happened.⁶ The involvement of the Hebrew patriarchs, especially Abraham, with our own Indo-European relatives has called for a wholly new picture of Old Testament times and peoples. The application of new methods of dating has cut down the conventional time scale, especially for the earlier periods (e.g., as at Jericho) abruptly and drastically. The discovery of a new date for Hammurabi has called for a thoroughgoing revamping of ancient chronology. "The Hurrians have emerged from total obscurity and have come to occupy a stellar role. . . . A new planet has appeared on the historical horizon, and an area that was formerly dark has been flooded with a new and strange light."⁷

Within the last five years, with the discovery of a single inscription, a whole world of Greek myth and legend has been transmuted into the category of flesh and blood reality. Within the same short period the decipherment of the Minoan Script B has with a single sweep rubbed out two hundred years of the Homeric problem and shown us the Greeks writing good Greek a thousand years before anyone had credited them with literacy. At the same time the mystery of Etruscan has been solved, and the true nature of the mysterious Runic writing of our Norse ancestors ex-

plained. Today nearly all scholars accept the original identity of the Hamitic, Semitic, and Indo-European languages—a thing that the less informed and more opinionated gentlemen of a few years ago laughed at as a Fundamentalist dream.

The Discovery of the Israelites

In all this fever and ferment of discovery and reevaluation no documents have been more conspicuously involved than those relating to Israel's past and that of the earliest Christian church. Since World War II the greatest discoveries ever made in these fields have come to light. In the great days of "scientific" scholarship, the only safe and respectable position for any man of stature to take was to say "no" to any suggestion that the Bible might contain real history, not the least sensational of Eduard Meyer's many ingenious pronouncements was the startling declaration that the Old Testament was not only history but very good history—by far the most accurate, reliable, and complete history ever produced by an ancient people, with the possible exception of the Greeks, who came much, much later.⁸ Time and research have strikingly vindicated this claim.⁹ It is hard now to realize that as recently as 1908 Eduard Meyer could announce to the Berlin Academy: "Twenty-five years ago there existed *not a single historical document*" to confirm the early history of Israel as given in the Bible.¹⁰ It was, however, quite suddenly in the 1880s that such documents began to appear, and then like the coming of spring floods, great collections of material began pouring out year after year in a breathtaking sequence that appears not yet to have reached its crest.

Golden Plates

The main obstacle to a fair and unbiased testing of the Book of Mormon in the past has been the story of the golden plates. Scholars have found it hard to be impartial or even

serious in the face of such a tale, and as recently as 1954 a learned critic wrote: "To expect anyone to believe in the existence of the 'gold plates' . . . is in spite of the witnesses simply preposterous [*unerhört*]." ¹¹ Critics of the Book of Mormon often remark sarcastically that it is a great pity that the golden plates have disappeared, since they would very conveniently prove Joseph Smith's story. They would do nothing of the sort. The presence of the plates would only prove that there were plates, no more: it would not prove that Nephites wrote them, or that an angel brought them, or that they had been translated by the gift and power of God; and we can be sure that scholars would quarrel about the writing on them for generations without coming to any agreement, exactly as they did about the writings of Homer and parts of the Bible. The possession of the plates would have a very disruptive effect, and it would prove virtually nothing. On the other hand, a far more impressive claim is put forth when the whole work is given to the world in what is claimed to be a divinely inspired translation — in such a text any cause or pretext for disagreement and speculation about the text is reduced to an absolute minimum: it is a text which all the world can read and understand, and is a far more miraculous object than any gold plates would be.

But still the story of the plates deserves more examination than our "learned critic" above was willing to give it. We learn from the Book of Mormon itself that gold plates were indeed a rarity, and that the rule was to keep records on plates of copper ("ore") or bronze ("brass"), and that the practice of keeping records on metal plates was of great antiquity in Palestine, and by no means an invention of the Nephites. We know that the ancient Hebrews, like the Egyptians, wrote on leather,¹² and from the Lachish seals, discovered in 1938, for the first time "we now know for certain that round about 600 B.C. papyrus was being commonly used as writing material in Judah."¹³ A private letter

written in Hebrew on a copper plate has turned up and been dated to the twelfth century B.C.¹⁴ No doubt the highly literate and educated Lehi had all sorts of writing materials.

This is illustrated in the account of how a certain Book of Mormon king, when a royal speech given at the great national assembly could not be heard by all the people, "caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth among those that were not under the sound of his voice" (Mosiah 2:8). The same king's father, Mosiah I, interpreted the engravings on an ancient stone (Omni 20), and at a great public meeting, that king's son, Mosiah II, read to his people from the ancient plates (Mosiah 25:1-7), which, as Alma says, "enlarged the memory of this people" (Alma 37:8). Exactly so "Darius the Median," who was to liberate the Jews of Lehi's own generation, since a public proclamation of his written on stone could not be seen by all the people, had copies of it made and circulated on papyrus throughout the empire, and some of these have actually turned up in the Jewish colony at Elephantine, where the Jews of Lehi's day fled when Jerusalem fell.¹⁵ The same ruler had his royal proclamation put on plates of pure gold and silver and buried in a carefully made stone box, which was discovered in 1938.¹⁶ Thus we find parallel practices between Book of Mormon kings and the kings of the East who ruled in Lehi's time, and all this is of recent discovery.

Another pair of gold and silver plates has been found since the Darius plates, and of these the golden tablet begins: "Palace of Assurnasirpal . . . on tablets of silver and gold I have established my foundations." This has been held to illustrate a general belief in the East that a building should be founded on plates of gold and silver recounting the name and the deeds of the royal builder.¹⁷ The great antiquity of the practice may be seen in the discovery in 1937 of such a gold tablet in Sumerian Umma,¹⁸ and its persistence through the ages is apparent from the report

that the wise Arab King Nu'man of Hira ordered a copy of the poems of the Arabs to be buried in his White Palace.¹⁹ Such foundation tablets are actually histories, and recall Eusebius' report that Noah inscribed a "history of everything" and then buried it in the city of Sippar.²⁰

The duplication of the records on a precious metal is as much a sign of their importance as a device for long preservation. Certainly lead would have done as well as silver, and a lead tablet recently found in Egypt bears, with some important exceptions, the same inscription as is found on a royal stele of stone. It is a mysterious writing in a peculiar type of Egyptian that has never been deciphered, and its age is not known.²¹

Within the past decade some silver plates from the time of Lehi have turned up not far from his home. They were found in the "Bertiz" valley, carefully laid away in a bronze vessel. The plates measured 4.5 by 5 centimeters, were quite thin, and were entirely covered with writing, twenty-two lines of Semitic characters "pressed into the metal with a hard sharp object."²² Almost at the same time small plates made of gold and silver foil and covered with Hebrew and Aramaic inscriptions were found: they seem to have been carried about as talismans, and the writing on them included magic words and names of power, along with the name of the God of Israel.²³ In form and function they closely resemble the Golden Tablets of the Orphic mysteries which protected and guided the bearer in his ways and on which devotees might also inscribe an account of their wanderings.²⁴ One of these plates, recently found in Thurii and dated to the fourth century B.C., ends with the words, "Hail, hail to thee, journeying the right-hand road by holy meadows and the groves of Persephone."²⁵ This immediately suggested to scholars Plato's description of Minos sitting in judgment "in the meadow at the dividing of the road, whence are the two ways leading one to the Isles of the Blest, and the other to Tartarus [hell]."²⁶ Now there is no

more prominent doctrine in early Christian or Jewish teaching than this very doctrine of the Two Ways, which we treat below in connection with the Book of Mormon.²⁷ Here it is enough to note that the carrying of scrolls and plates of scriptures for protection and guidance on a journey was a widespread practice in the ancient world. This was especially prominent among the Jews.²⁸ Lehi himself refused to undertake his wanderings without "the record of the Jews . . . engraven upon plates of brass" (1 Nephi 3:3). And these plates were closely associated with the Liahona, "which led our fathers through the wilderness," and together with the sword of Laban comprised the national treasure and symbolized the survival and preservation of the people in their wanderings and their journey through life (Mosiah 1:16-17). The celebrated Demotic Chronicle of Egypt, a document of great importance in the study both of Jewish and Christian beliefs regarding the coming of the Messiah, was copied from a text originally written on thirteen plates.²⁹

In India and the Far East some very interesting plates have turned up. To those mentioned in *Lehi in the Desert*³⁰ may be added the Kalawan copper-plate inscription of the year 134, which records the depositing of relics in a shrine, and is "about contemporary with the Taxila silver scroll inscription of the year 136."³¹ In 1956 the two copper rolls from the Qumran Cave on the Dead Sea were unrolled and found to contain, like the Kalawan copper plate, a record of the depositing of relics.³² If it seems strange that we should find identical practices going on at the same time so far apart, it should be remembered that the Sanskrit writing of India is itself derived from the Aramaic script of Lehi's world and also that an ancient Phoenician alphabet has been found in Sumatra.³³ If it was possible for the Phoenicians, that is, the men of Lehi's Sidon, to cross the Indian Ocean and reach the Pacific, we must admit at least that the same way was open to Lehi!

Such metal rolls as described above actually go back to Lehi's day, for the seven lead rolls from a private house in Assur found in 1905 and engraved in Hittite hieroglyphics are dated "from the end of the seventh century B.C." They were private business letters written apparently by the owner of the house.³⁴ It is most interesting to find writing on metal practiced even in everyday affairs by Lehi's fellow merchants. Of course, other types of writing material were used. "The Hittites also wrote on wooden boards . . . often covered with wax," while the common word for wax-tablet used in Palestine and Syria in Lehi's day was an Old Babylonian loan-word, showing the custom to be very old.³⁵ Very recently, there were discovered in Assyria some waxed writing-boards which "take the history of the 'album' or book back to the 8th century [B.C.]."³⁶ The significant thing about this is that while the folding boards were often made of wood or ivory they could also be of *metal*. It is still "uncertain whether the boards made of precious metals were votive gifts [since they must have been very expensive] or plaques inscribed with a short dedicatory inscription, or whether they were 'writing-boards,' for the same term denotes a wood or *metal plate* used in overlay-work."³⁷ The continued use of metal plates in Assyria (no actual plates have been found from the earlier period) is seen in the recent discovery of a copper plate in Maghreb, beautifully written on both sides with a continuing text in Arabic.³⁸

We told in *Lehi in the Desert* of a Karen inscription plate which cannot be read but which to judge by practices found in the neighboring regions probably contained the account of the founding of the nation and/or its ruler's claim to the throne. We also noted that visitors to the Karens have often been struck by what seem to be unusually close affinities to the Jews.³⁹ Now as late as the nineteenth century the people were "accustomed to assemble once a year from all parts of the nation, to propitiate it [the plate] with offerings. The gathering of the people takes place in the month of

March, and is with them the great feast-day."⁴⁰ One cannot help thinking of how King Mosiah called all his people together in a great national assembly in order to read to them out of holy plates and to discourse to them on the history of the nation and his own claim to the throne (Mosiah 25:1-14).⁴¹

The general concern and anxious attention to the keeping of records in ancient Israel was entirely unknown to scholars until the work of Eduard Meyer and the discovery of the Ugaritic library in 1929. The eminent Orientalist A. H. Sayce describes the surprising result of that find:

There is no longer any difficulty in believing that there were abundant literary documents for compiling the earlier books of the Old Testament. . . . Consequently there is no longer any need of our believing as I formerly did that cuneiform tablets lie behind the text of the earlier Biblical books. . . . In the Mosaic period the Oriental world was as well stocked with books and what we should call public libraries as it was in the Greek epoch. . . . The royal library of David and Solomon would have been preceded by temple libraries in the age of the Judges. . . . Samuel as lawgiver or *mehoqeq* would have been accompanied by his scribe (Jud. 5:14; Gen. 49:10), and at Shiloh there would have been a temple library. . . . It is significant that as late as the reign of Solomon the 'prophecies' of Ahijah the Shilonite were still being committed in writing.⁴²

All this, brought forth since 1930, is a remarkable vindication not only of the great concern of the Book of Mormon people with the keeping of books and records, but of the peculiar manner in which those records were kept and the ways in which they were disseminated. The Book of Mormon writers leave us in no doubt that the engraving of plates was a hard and laborious business which they did not relish. They would much have preferred writing in ink, as we can surmise from the state of the Kasia plate:

An interesting fact revealed by this plate is the way in which copperplates were inscribed. The matter was first written out in ink on the plate, and when the ink dried the engraver cut the written letters into the metal. . . . Here the engraver was manifestly incapable, for only the first line has been carved and most of the letters in it are bungled. There can be little doubt that, as his work was so unsatisfactory the incision of the rest was given up and the plate was accepted as it was, written only in ink.⁴³

So we can sympathize with Jacob when he says, "I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates" (Jacob 4:1).

The Book of Mormon bids us look at the larger background before we judge it. As soon as we attempt to do so we meet everywhere with striking hints and suggestions, odd coincidences, and astonishing parallels. If it is too early to work these into a single consistent picture, it is not too early to show that they are actually there. If heavenly books brought by angels and writings on gold plates seem fantastic to modern man, they were perfectly familiar to the ancients. A realization of that is the beginning of wisdom in any examination of the Book of Mormon. Plainly we are dealing not with a modern book but with an ancient one. That must be the point of departure for any fruitful criticism.

Questions

1. Why must the Book of Mormon be subject to testing by objective methods? Is it not enough that the honest in heart believe it?
2. How does the Book of Mormon provoke questions and investigation? Is that intentional?
3. What has brought about the reevaluation of ancient documents at the present time?
4. How does the newly established "oneness of all ancient literature" affect Bible study?

5. Why has Joseph Smith's story of the gold plates always excited derision?

6. Are inscriptions on metal plates a rarity in history? Why should metal be used as a writing material at all?

7. Dougherty has shown that papyrus rolls are mentioned in Cappadocian texts which are dated at 2300 B.C.⁴⁴ What does this imply as to the "development" of writing materials through the centuries? Did the ancients use only one kind of writing material at any one time?

8. Why did scholars once think that writing on stone and clay was the only type of writing employed? What made them change their minds?