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"Forever Tentative . . ."

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“Forever Tentative . . .”

Science in a Vacuum

From the first, both Mormons and their opponents recognized the possibility of testing the Book of Mormon in a scientific way. The book described certain aspects of civilizations purported to have existed in the New World in ancient times. Very well, where were the remains? A vast amount of time, energy, and patience has been expended in arguing about the interpretations of the scanty evidence that is available, but very little has been devoted to the systematic search for more. Of course, almost any object could conceivably have some connection with the Book of Mormon, but nothing short of an inscription which could be read and roughly dated could bridge the gap between what might be called a preactualistic archaeology and contact with the realities of Nephite civilization.

The possibility that a great nation or empire that once dominated vast areas of land and flourished for centuries could actually get lost and stay lost, in spite of every effort of men to discover its traces, has been demonstrated many times since Schliemann found the real world of the Mycenaeans. In our own generation the first scraps of physical evidence for the existence of certain great civilizations have come to light, though scholars have studied the literary and historical records of those same civilizations for centuries without possessing so much as a button or bead that could be definitely assigned to them.¹ Indeed, until actual remains were found, it was quite possible and respectable to regard

some of those civilizations as the invention of poetic fancy or legend.

So it is with the Nephites. All that we have to go on to date is a written history. That does not mean that our Nephites are necessarily mythical, since the case of those Old World civilizations has taught us by now that the existence of written records which no one claims the credit of having invented is in itself good if not the very best evidence that a people really did exist. But as things stand we are still in the *pre-archaeological* and *pre-anthropological* stages of Book of Mormon study. Which means that there is nothing whatever that an anthropologist or archaeologist as such can say about the Book of Mormon. Nephite civilization was urban in nature, like the civilization of Athens or Babylon, and was far more confined in space and time than either of them. It could just as easily and completely vanish from sight as did the worlds of Ugarit, Ur, or Cnossos; and until some physical remnant of it, no matter how trivial, has been identified beyond question, what can any student of physical remains possibly have to say about it? Everything written so far by anthropologists or archaeologists – even real archaeologists – about the Book of Mormon must be discounted, for the same reason that we must discount studies of the lost Atlantis: not because it did not exist, but because it has not yet been found.

The Bering Strait Theory

The normal way of dealing with the Book of Mormon “scientifically” has been first to attribute to the Book of Mormon something it did not say, and then to refute the claim by scientific statements that have not been proven. A good example of this is the constant attempt to blast the Book of Mormon by assuming that it allows only one possible origin for the blood of the Indians (a perfectly false assumption), and then pointing out that the *real* origin is a migration via the Alaskan land-bridge or Bering Straits –

a still unproven hypothesis. This is presented as the confrontation of crude 19th-century superstition with the latest fruits of modern science. And that, too, is misleading. For the theory of settlement by the Alaska land bridge, which has been accepted by North American anthropologists to this day, even though their colleagues in Europe and South America may shake their heads in wonder at such naive and single-minded devotion to a one-shot explanation of everything, has not been proven. Yes, there has been testing, but few people realize what dismally meager results have rewarded the vast expenditure of time and cash that has gone into the project. "Thus far," wrote Carleton Beals, summing up the situation in 1961, "nothing has been discovered to indicate human presence on or near the Bering Straits prior to 5000 years ago."² It is still a problem, and very much alive, but the solution rests exactly where it has for many years: on a common-sense interpretation of the map.

The Race Question

To clinch the Bering Straits argument, it is usual to point out that the Indians are Mongoloid and therefore cannot possibly be of the racial stock of Lehi. Again an unproven hypothesis is set against a false interpretation of the Book of Mormon. As to the hypothesis, it is fairly well known by now that the predominant blood-type among the Mongols is B, a type which is extremely rare among the Indians, whose dominant blood-type is O, that being found among 91.3 percent of the pure-blooded North American Indians. "Here is a mystery," writes Beals commenting on the disturbing phenomenon, "that requires much pondering and investigation."³

But if we are to take the Book of Mormon to task for its ethnological teachings, it might be well at first to learn what those teachings are. They turn out on investigation to be surprisingly complicated. There is no mention in the

Book of Mormon of red skins versus white; indeed, there is no mention of red skin at all. What we find is a more or less steady process over long periods of time of mixing and separating of many closely related but not identical ethnic groups. The Book of Mormon is careful to specify that the terms Lamanite and Nephite are used in a loose and general sense to designate not racial but political (e.g., Mormon 1:9), military (Alma 43:4), religious (4 Nephi 1:38), and cultural (Alma 53:10, 15; 3:10–11) divisions and groupings of people. The Lamanite and Nephite division was tribal rather than racial, each of the main groups representing an amalgamation of tribes that retained their identity (Alma 43:13; 4 Nephi 1:36–37). Our text frequently goes out of its way to specify that such and such a group is only *called* Nephite or Lamanite (2 Nephi 5:14; Jacob 1:2; Mosiah 25:12; Alma 3:10; 30:59; Helaman 3:16; 3 Nephi 3:24; 10:18; 4 Nephi 1:36–38, 43; Mormon 1:9). For the situation was often very mobile, with large numbers of Nephites going over to the Lamanites (Words of Mormon 1:16; 4 Nephi 1:20; Mormon 6:15; Alma 47:35–36), or Lamanites to the Nephites (Alma 27:27; Mosiah 25:12; Alma 55:4), or members of the mixed Mulekite people, such as their Zoramite offshoot, going over either to the Lamanites (Alma 43:4) or to the Nephites (Alma 35:9—not really to the Nephites, but to the Ammonites who were Lamanites who had earlier become Nephites!); or at times the Lamanites and Nephites would freely intermingle (Helaman 6:7–8), while at other times the Nephite society would be heavily infiltrated by Lamanites and by robbers of dubious background (Mormon 2:8). Such robbers were fond of kidnapping Nephite women and children (Helaman 11:33).

The dark skin is mentioned as the mark of a general way of life; it is a Gypsy or Bedouin type of darkness, “black” and “white” being used in their Oriental sense (as in Egyptian), black and loathsome being contrasted to white and delightful (2 Nephi 5:21–22). We are told that when

"their scales of darkness shall begin to fall from their eyes" they shall become "a white and delightsome people" (2 Nephi 30:6; "a pure and delightsome people," 1979 edition), and at the same time the Jews "shall also become a delightsome people" (2 Nephi 30:7). Darkness and filthiness go together as part of a way of life (Jacob 3:5,9); we never hear of the Lamanites becoming whiter, no matter how righteous they were, except when they adopted the Nephite way of life (3 Nephi 2:14–15), while the Lamanites could, by becoming more savage in their ways than their brother Lamanites, actually become darker, "a dark, filthy, and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been . . . among the Lamanites" (Mormon 5:15). The dark skin is but one of the marks that God places upon the Lamanites, and these marks go together; people who joined the Lamanites were marked like them (Alma 3:10); they were naked and their skins were dark (Alma 3:5–6); when "they set the mark upon *themselves*; . . . the Amlicites knew not that they were fulfilling the words of God," when he said, "I will set a mark on them. . . . I will set a mark upon him that mingleth his seed with thy brethren. . . . I will set a mark upon him that fighteth against thee [Nephi] and thy seed" (Alma 3:13–18). "Even so," says Alma, "doth every man that is cursed bring upon himself his own condemnation" (Alma 3:19). By their own deliberate act they both marked their foreheads and turned their bodies dark. Though ever alert to miraculous manifestations, the authors of the Book of Mormon never refer to the transformation of Lamanites into "white and delightsome" Nephites or Nephites into "dark and loathsome" Lamanites as in any way miraculous or marvelous. When they became savage "because of their cursing" (2 Nephi 5:24), their skins became dark and they also became "loathsome" to the Nephites (2 Nephi 5:21–22). But there is nothing loathsome about dark skin, which most people consider very attractive: the darkness, like the loathsomeness, was part of the general picture

(Jacob 3:9); Mormon prays “that they may once again be a delightful people” (Words of Mormon 1:8; Mormon 5:17), but then the Jews are also to become “a delightful people” (2 Nephi 30:7) – are they black?

At the time of the Lord’s visit, there were “neither . . . Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites,” (4 Nephi 1:17; see also 3 Nephi 2:14) so that when the old titles of Lamanite and Nephite were later revived by parties deliberately seeking to stir up old hatreds, they designated religious affiliation rather than race (4 Nephi 1:38–39). From this it would seem that at that time it was impossible to distinguish a person of Nephite blood from one of Lamanite blood by appearance. Moreover, there were no pure-blooded Lamanites or Nephites after the early period, for Nephi, Jacob, Joseph, and Sam were all promised that their seed would survive mingled with that of their elder brethren (2 Nephi 3:2, 23; 9:53; 10:10, 19–20; 29:13; 3 Nephi 26:8; Mormon 7:1). Since the Nephites were always aware of that mingling, which they could nearly always perceive in the steady flow of Nephite dissenters to one side and Lamanite converts to the other, it is understandable why they do *not* think of the terms Nephite and Lamanite as indicating race. The Mulekites, who outnumbered the Nephites better than two to one (Mosiah 25:2–4), were a mixed Near Eastern rabble who had brought no written records with them and had never observed the Law of Moses and did not speak Nephite (Omni 1:18); yet after Mosiah became their king, they “were numbered with the Nephites, and this because the kingdom had been conferred upon none but those who were descendants of Nephi” (Mosiah 25:13). From time to time large numbers of people disappear beyond the Book of Mormon frontiers to vanish in the wilderness or on the sea, taking their traditions and even written records with them (Helaman 3:3–13). What shall we call these people – Nephites or Lamanites?

And just as the Book of Mormon offers no objections

whatever to the free movement of whatever tribes and families choose to depart into regions beyond its ken, so it presents no obstacles to the arrival of whatever other bands may have occupied the hemisphere without its knowledge; for hundreds of years the Nephites shared the continent with the far more numerous Jaredites, of whose existence they were totally unaware.⁴ Strictly speaking, the Book of Mormon is the history of a group of sectaries preoccupied with their own religious affairs, who only notice the presence of other groups when such have reason to mingle with them or collide with them. Just as the desert tribes through whose territories Lehi's people moved in the Old World are mentioned only casually and indirectly, though quite unmistakably (1 Nephi 17:33), so the idea of other migrations to the New World is taken so completely for granted that the story of the Mulekites is dismissed in a few verses (Omni 1:14–17). Indeed, the Lord reminds the Nephites that there are all sorts of migrations of which they know nothing, and that their history is only a small segment of the big picture (2 Nephi 10:21). There is nothing whatever in the Book of Mormon to indicate that everything that is found in the New World before Columbus must be either Nephite or Lamanite. On the contrary, when Mormon boasts, "I am Mormon, and a pure descendant of Lehi" (3 Nephi 5:20), we are given to understand that being a direct descendant of Lehi, as all true Nephites and Lamanites were, was really something special. We think of Zarahemla as a great Nephite capital and its civilization as the Nephite civilization at its peak; yet Zarahemla was not a Nephite city at all: its inhabitants called themselves Nephites, as we have seen, because their ruling family were Nephites who had immigrated from the south.

There were times when the Nephites, like the Jaredites, broke up into small bands, including robber bands and secret combinations, each fending for itself (3 Nephi 7:2–3). And when all semblance of centralized control disap-

peared, "and it was one complete revolution throughout all the face of the land" (Mormon 2:8), who is to say how far how many of these scattered groups went in their wanderings, with whom they fought, and with whom they joined? After the battle of Cumorah, the Lamanites, who had been joined by large numbers of Nephite defectors during the war, were well launched on a career of fierce tribal wars "among themselves" (Moroni 1:2). It would be as impossible to distinguish any one race among them as it would be to distinguish two; there may have been marked "racial" types, as there are now among the Indians (for example, the striking contrast of Navaho and Hopi), but the Book of Mormon makes it clear that those Nephites who went over to live with Lamanites soon came to look like Lamanites. An anthropologist would have been driven wild trying to detect a clear racial pattern among the survivors of Cumorah. So let us not oversimplify and take the Book of Mormon to task for naive conclusions and images that are really our own.

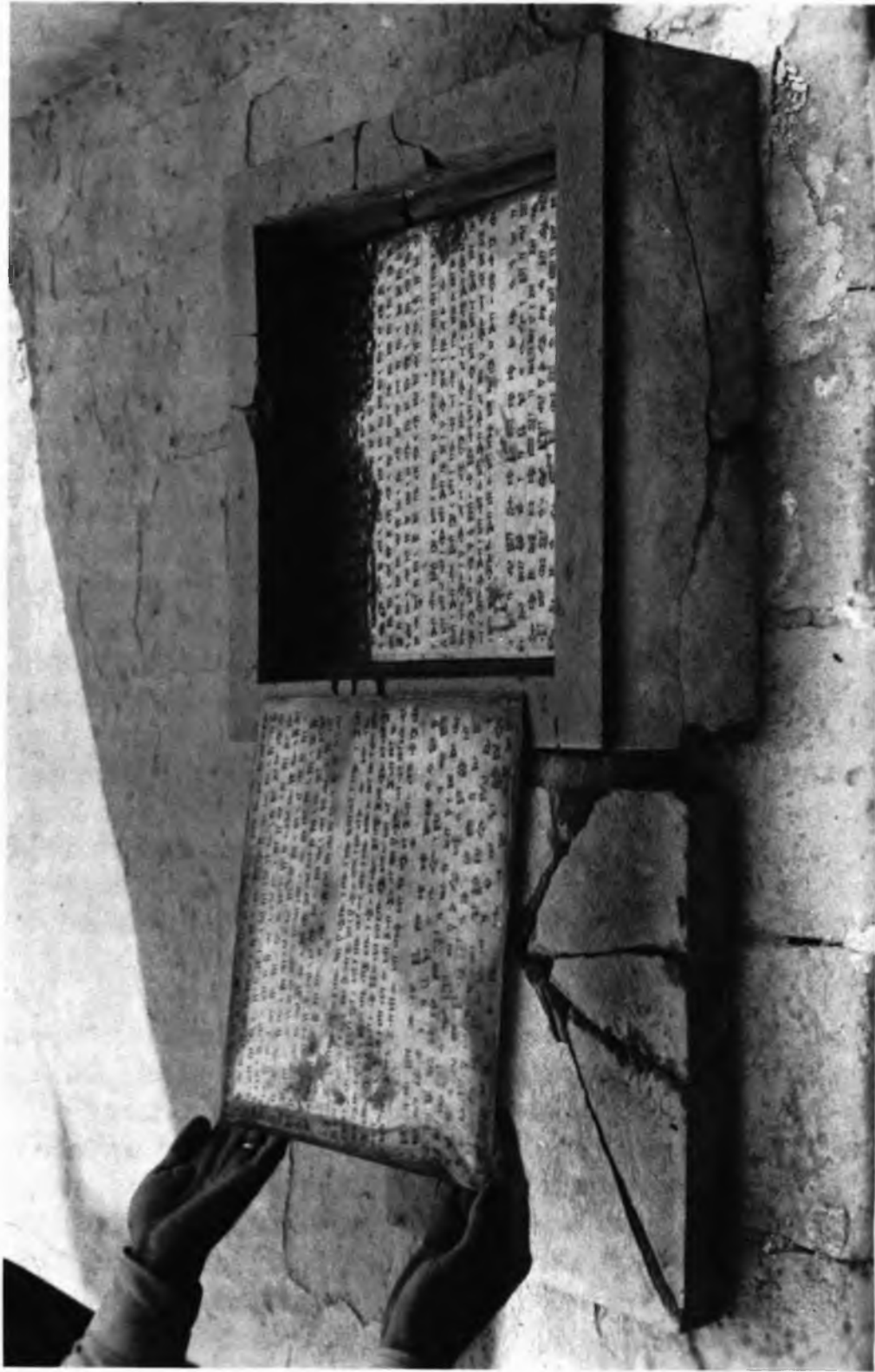
The Plates

It is hard for us to realize today that for many years the idea of writing a sacred record on gold plates was considered just too funny for words and that the mere mention of the "Golden Bible" was enough to shock and scandalize the world. Today at least a hundred examples of ancient writing on metal plates are available, the latest discoveries being three gold plaques found in 1964 near an ancient shrine on the coast of Italy; they are covered with Punic and Etruscan writing and date from about 500 B.C. Punic, it will be recalled, is Phoenician, a language and script that flourished in Lehi's day a few miles from Jerusalem.⁵ It was also in 1964 that the writings on a thin gold plate from Sicily was identified as Hebrew; though the plate has been known since 1876, Hebrew was the last thing anybody expected.⁶ The golden plates of Darius, discovered in 1938, which in

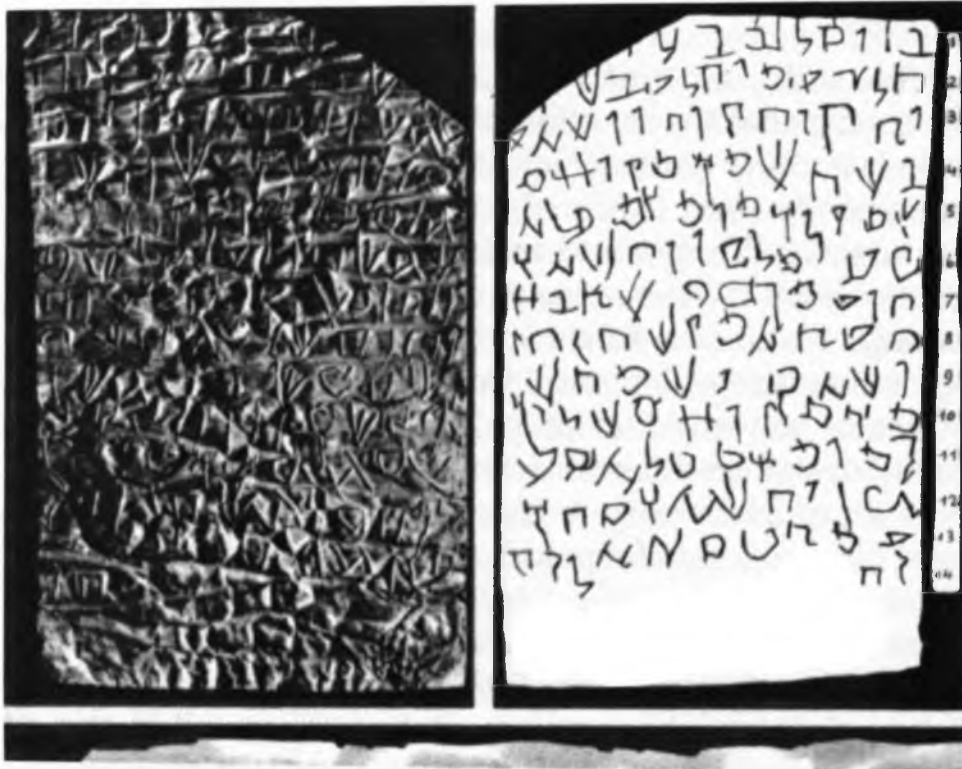
their form and the manner of their preservation so strikingly resemble the plates described by Joseph Smith, were augmented by new findings in the 1950s; the contents of the latter plates, a pious mixture of religious declamation and history, are as suggestive of the Book of Mormon as their outward appearance is of the plates.⁷ We have already spoken of the Copper Scrolls, riveted metal sheets, and noted how the purpose and spirit as well as the method of their production and concealment matches the record-keeping practices of the Nephites in every particular. Especially interesting is the provision that treasures "must be hidden away," that such treasures "would never be desecrated by profane use," since "to use such goods for nonreligious purposes was a heinous sin," and it was "dangerous for any but priests to handle."⁸ For this is a lesson that Samuel the Lamanite drives home: "For I will, saith the Lord, that they shall hide up their treasures unto me; and cursed be they who hide not up their treasures unto me; for none hideth up their treasures unto me save it be the righteous; and he that hideth not up his treasures unto me, cursed is he, and also the treasure, and none shall redeem it because of the curse of the land. . . . [I] will hide up their treasures when they shall flee before their enemies; because they will not hide them up unto me, cursed be they and also their treasure" (Helaman 13:19–20).

Steel and Cement

Through the years critics of the Book of Mormon have constantly called attention to the mention of steel in that book as a gross anachronism. But now we are being reminded that one cannot be dogmatic in dating the appearance of steel, since there is more than one kind of steel with "a whole series of variants in the combination of iron and steel components" in ancient times; and when a particularly fine combination was hit upon, it would be kept secret in "individual workshops" and "passed on from father to son



The Darius plates



Cosimo plates

for many generations."⁹ Hence it is not too surprising to learn that "even in early European times" there is evidence for the production of steel "of very high quality" and extreme hardness.¹⁰ Further east, steel is attested even earlier.

The mention of cement in the Book of Mormon (Helaman 3:7–11) has been considered as great an anachronism as that of steel. But within the last ten years or so much has been made of the surprising extent to which the ancient Americans used cement, concrete, and gypsum in their building operations. It is now suggested that the overlavish detail, the extremely high relief, and the tendency to round off all angles in the heavy and serpentine profusion of line that is so characteristic of some early American architectural adornment are the direct heritage of a time when the builders worked in the yielding and plastic medium of cement.¹¹

Money

We still get lots of letters, especially from churchmen, protesting that the mention of money in the Book of Mormon is another crude anachronism. They all point out that coinage was first invented by the Lydians in the eighth century B.C. That would make coinage available to Lehi, but the Book of Mormon says nothing about coins, but only money, which is a different thing. The Egyptians and Babylonians had real money from a very early time—metal pieces of conventional shape and size whose exact value could always be determined by weighing and which often bore an official stamp or inscription.¹² This old-fashioned kind of money was favored by the Jews in Egypt even after the new modern coinage had been introduced. The “money,” writes Prof. E.G. Kraeling, “. . . involved pieces of metal of certain weight which had an officially recognized value. . . . In many areas, even after the establishment of coinage, people continued to weigh out pieces of metal.”¹³ Now when Alma compares the value of *different* metals, he uses the expression “equal to”: thus “a senum of silver was equal to a senine of gold” and they both equaled a measure of barley, though of course they did not weigh the same (Alma 11:7), and “an antion of gold is equal to three shiblons” (Alma 11:19), shiblons being a silver measure (Alma 11:15). But when he compares the value of the silver pieces among themselves, he uses a different expression: “And an amnor of silver was as great as two senums. And an ezrom of silver was as great as four senums. And an onti was as great as them all” (Alma 11:11–13). Here he is referring not to value, but “greatness,” i.e., weight. Naturally a senum of silver, a senine of gold, and a measure of barley would not all weigh the same, but are equal in value; whereas the comparative values of pieces of the same metal would be exactly proportional to their greatness or weight. From which it would appear that the Nephites used the old-fashioned type of money.

But what is most remarkable about the system described by Alma is its mathematical sophistication. Alma explains that the Nephite monetary system was not based on any conventional Old World scale, "for they did not reckon after the manner of the Jews; . . . but they altered their reckoning and their measure, according to the minds and the circumstances of the people, in every generation (Alma 11:4). Thus their system had been worked over and improved through the years until they thought they had the most efficient system possible. And it was just that. Professor Richard Smith has shown that "the Nephite system was a peculiarly efficient one. The selection of 1, 2, 4, 7 for the values of the larger coins seems particularly wise." Comparing it with other possible combinations, Prof. Smith finds that "in every case it turns out that the '1-2-4-7' system has an edge over the other systems from the standpoint of number of coins required for a purchase."¹⁴ This is thus another of those cases where Joseph Smith promises much—and delivers. It is one thing for a simple rustic to say that his Nephites possessed the best monetary system their ingenuity could devise; but it is a very different thing to produce on demand an actual system that answers such a description.

The Animal Kingdom

The mention in the Book of Mormon of certain domesticated animals not found in the New World at the time of Columbus has always been taken as irrefutable proof of Smith's folly. Elephants head the list. What happened to the elephants? The Jaredites used them, we are told, but there is no mention of the Nephites having them. They disappear in between the two cultures. When? The Book of Mormon does not say, and the guesses of scientists range all the way from hundreds of thousands to mere hundreds of years ago. Elephants have strange ways of disappearing. If it were not for the written accounts of unquestionable

authenticity, no one would ever have guessed that the Pharaohs of the XVIII Dynasty hunted elephants in Syria—where are their remains? Prof. Mallowan says that the wonderful Birs Nimrud ivories which he discovered were made from the tusks of a now-extinct breed of elephant that was being hunted in Mesopotamia as recently as the eighth century B.C. Who would have guessed that ten years ago?

Extensive studies on the domestication of the horse (and the presence of a pre-Columbian horse in America is still being argued pro and con) have established that the horse was not domesticated at just one time and place but independently in various times and places. It would appear that horses were used to pull wagons in some places long before anybody thought of riding upon their backs, though to us the reverse would be the natural course of evolution. "Multiple origins of New World domesticates," both plant and animal, would seem to be the rule today.¹⁵ The denizens of the barnyard come and go, and change their breed and their appearance in sometimes extreme and surprising ways. The Book of Mormon wisely leaves the names of certain animals untranslated, since there is probably no word in the language today that would accurately designate them. It is for scientists and specialists, however, to deal with such matters.

In trespassing on scientific grounds, or rather in timidly peeping over the fence, we are only seeking enlightenment. We have heard so often that "science" has disproved, nay "disemboweled," the Book of Mormon, that we are naturally curious to have a look at some of the more spectacular havoc. Where is it? We have tiptoed into the archaeology museum and there found nothing that could not be interpreted many ways. We have entered the house of the anthropologists, and there found all in confusion—and the confusion is growing. We have consulted with the more exact or authentic scientists and found them surprisingly hesitant to commit themselves on the Book of Mormon. A

definitive refutation must rest on definitive conclusions, and of such conclusions scientists are becoming increasingly wary. "Observation and experiment cannot establish anything finally," writes Karl Popper. "Essentially, they help us to eliminate the weaker theories," and thus they "lend support, though only for the time being, to the surviving theory." Hence "the method of critical discussion does not establish anything. Its verdict is always 'not proven.'"¹⁶ And the most hopeless task of all is to prove a negative.