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## Momentary Conclusion

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If the ultimate test of the Book of Mormon's validity is whether or not it really has something to say, then the closing chapters alone should be enough to silence all criticism. Those chapters are addressed explicitly to our own age (Mormon 8:33–41), and we can be the best judges of how well or ill they apply to it.

Mormon and Moroni supply the epilogue to the Book of Mormon, the son drawing freely on his father's notes and letters. The picture that these two paint of their world, which in their minds has a significant resemblance to our own, is one of unrelieved gloom. The situation is unbelievably bad and, in view of the way things are going, quite without hope. The scenes of horror and violence, culminating in the sickening escalation of atrocities by Lamanites and Nephites in the 9th chapter of Mormon, need no news-photographs to make their message convincing to the modern world. The Nephites, like the great heroes of tragedy – Oedipus, Macbeth, Achilles – as they approach their end, are hopelessly trapped by a desperate mentality in which the suppressed awareness of their own sins finds paranoid expression in a mad, ungovernable hatred of others: "They have lost their love, one towards another; and they thirst after blood and revenge continually" (Moroni 9:5). Their awful guilt leaps out in their instant resentment of any criticism of themselves: "When I speak the word of God with sharpness they tremble and anger against me"

(Moroni 9:4). They have reached that point of suicidal defiance which the Greeks called *Atē*, the point of no return, when the sinner with a sort of fatal fascination does everything that is most calculated to hasten his own removal from the scene—he is finished, and now all that remains is to get him out of the way: “O my beloved son, how can a people like this, that are without civilization . . . expect that God will stay his hand?” (Moroni 9:11, 14).

Nephite civilization was thus not extinguished at Cumorah. It had already ceased to exist for some time before the final house-cleaning. War had become the order of the day, “and every heart was hardened” (Mormon 4:11), with the military requisitioning the necessities of life and leaving the noncombatants “to faint by the way and die” (Moroni 9:16). “O the depravity of my people!” cries Mormon, and he tells us in what this depravity consists: “They are without order and without mercy, . . . they have become strong in their perversion; and they are alike brutal, sparing none, neither young nor old, . . . and the suffering of our women and our children upon all the face of this land doth exceed everything. . . . Thou knowest that they are without principle and past feeling. . . . I cannot recommend them unto God lest he should smite me” (Moroni 9:18–21). Here then is the real calamity that befell the Nephites in all its tragic horror—and there is no mention whatever of enemy action or of anyone belonging to the wrong party: the ultimate catastrophe is not that people are struck down, but that they should be found in any circumstances whatever “without order and without mercy, . . . without principle and past feeling.”

In this crucible of wickedness the true greatness of Mormon shines like a star as he calls his son to action, telling him that no matter how bad things are, we must never stop trying to do what we can to improve matters, “for if we should cease to labor, we should be brought under condemnation; for we have a labor to perform whilst in this

tabernacle of clay" (Moroni 9:6). In this spirit Mormon took over command of the army even when he knew that all was lost, "for they looked upon me as though I could deliver them from their afflictions. But behold, I was without hope" (Mormon 5:1–2). His is the predicament of the true tragic hero: "I had led them, notwithstanding their wickedness, . . . and had loved them . . . with all my heart; and my soul had been poured out in prayer unto my God all the day long for them; nevertheless, it was without faith, because of the hardness of their hearts" (Mormon 3:12). However it might appeal to our own age of violence, Mormon found little consolation in the fact that his people were wonderfully tough and proud of it—"for so exceedingly do they anger that it seemeth to me that they have no fear of death" (Moroni 9:5). "They repented not of their iniquities, but did struggle for their lives without calling upon that Being who created them" (Mormon 5:2). They could take care of themselves, thank you—and they did.

It is not surprising that their personal experience of things led both Mormon and his son to embrace a completely pessimistic view of the world. As far as the human race taken by itself in a splendid isolation is concerned, both men talk like existentialists. For them the tragic isolation of man is a fact: men *have* cut themselves off from God and their state *is* hopeless. If the father can report that "a continual scene of wickedness and abominations has been before mine eyes ever since I have been sufficient to behold the ways of man" (Mormon 2:18), the son could only have seen the latter and worst part of the picture. When Mormon says that "a man being evil cannot do that which is good; neither will he give a good gift" (Moroni 7:6, 8, 10), he really means it. True, "awful is the state of man" only *if* "faith has ceased"—but faith *has* ceased! If men insist that there is no redemption, then, sure enough, "they are as though there had been no redemption made" (Moroni 7:38–39). "If these things have ceased," says

Moroni, speaking of gifts of the Spirit (Moroni 7:37), "wo be unto the children of men, for it is because of unbelief, and all is vain." This is no mere figure of speech; if faith fulfills its own prophecies so does unbelief, and those who insist that all is vain are quite right; if men reject the gospel they will find everywhere powerful confirmation for their unbelief, and undeniable evidence to support their contention that the human predicament is hopeless. Does God cease to do miracles? Indeed he does, "and the reason why he ceaseth to do miracles among the children of men is because that they dwindle in unbelief" (Mormon 9:20). Anyone who says there are no miracles, therefore, can quote Mormon to prove that he is right: "He ceaseth to do miracles." Neither Mormon nor Moroni see the slightest hope of the human race ever pulling itself up by its own bootstraps. And thus far their message is in the bleak idiom of our own day.

But that is not the whole story. What Mormon and Moroni tell us next is that there is something much better than all this, and that we are supposed to be in on it. It is not something that we can get out of ourselves or work out for ourselves, let us hasten to observe. Our prophets spare us the usual cliches about higher spiritual values, the brotherhood of man, and how our problems would be solved if everybody only did this or that. The way out is not to be found in the self-consoling merry-go-round of philosophy, the heroic self-dramatization of literature and art, or the self-reassuring posturings of science and scholarship. Men have tried everything for a long time, and the idea that their condition has improved rests entirely on an imaginary reconstruction of the past devised to prove that very proposition. Not that the theory may not be right, but at present we just don't know; and for a world in as dire a predicament as ours, that can guarantee no long centuries of quiet research ahead and seems to need some quick and definite

assistance if it is to survive at all, it might pay to consider what Mormon and Moroni have to offer.

If mankind is to get any real help it must come from outside, and it does. First of all *angels*, yes angels, must come to explain and establish things (Moroni 7:29–32); they do not come on their own, but are direct representatives from the presence of God, “subject to him, to minister according to the word of his command.” Moreover, these angels do not come to just anybody, but only to those possessing peculiar qualifications, “showing themselves unto them of strong faith and a firm mind in every form of godliness” (Moroni 7:30). These ministrations, then, are not for the foolish, hysterical, over-imaginative, ambitious, or posturing members of the race: to possess along with strong faith a firm mind in *every* form of godliness is to qualify for something definitely beyond the range of the ordinary run of mortals. Those so favored are expected to “prepare the way among the children of men” for passing on the important information they have received by sharing it with and entrusting it “unto the chosen vessels of the Lord,” namely, those who are chosen by God to direct his work in the world. These in turn “bear testimony of him,” and through their efforts “the Lord God prepareth the way that the *residue* of men may have faith in Christ” (Moroni 7:31–32).

This is not a handing down of testimony, for each of these messengers calls upon the others to seek testimony for themselves by faith and prayer; there are no second- or third-hand testimonies: “Whoso believeth in me believeth in the Father also; and unto him will the *Father* bear record of me” (3 Nephi 11:35, cf. Matthew 16:19).

Is there anything to this? You will never find out, say our prophets, if you begin by denying everything: “Deny not his power,” is Moroni’s final word of advice to the world (Moroni 10:33). All that Mormon and Moroni ask of the reader is, don’t fight it, don’t block it, give it a chance!

If it does not work, then you can forget it; but it is not asking too much that men invest a little of their time and effort in an enterprise in which they stand to win everything and lose nothing – especially now, when so many *know* that as things are they stand to win nothing. Let the hesitant consider that the way of faith is the way of science, too: “Ye receive no witness until *after* the trial of your faith,” says Moroni (Ether 12:6). First we “make the experiment” (Alma 32:27, 33, 36; 34:4) in which it is fair game to hope for results, since without hope nobody would go through with the thing at all (Moroni 10:22), and then we get our answers. That is the way it is done in the laboratory; what could be fairer?

What, then, is holding us back? Why are so few willing to let faith and hope lead them? There is a serious obstacle here, for a man “cannot have faith and hope, save he shall be meek, and lowly of heart; . . . and if a man be meek and lowly in heart . . . he must needs have charity; for if he have not charity he is nothing; wherefore he must needs have charity” (Moroni 7:43–44). Both Mormon and Moroni come back unerringly to charity as the key to the whole business; it was for lack of charity that their people were destroyed; charity is “the greatest of all” without which “all things must fail” (Moroni 7:46). No demonstration of its existence is necessary; it “is the pure love of Christ,” the irreducible quantity in the universe, as mysterious and undeniable as consciousness itself; without it we are impatient, unkind, envious, puffed up, self-seeking, touchy, suspicious, irritable, distrustful, skeptical, and intolerant (Moroni 7:47), in a word, incapable of seeking truth in any field.

But what is all this to an unbeliever whose chances of being visited by angels are not exactly brilliant? That is where the Book of Mormon comes into the picture. It asks to be taken as evidence – not proof, but material for study and criticism – for *or* against the proposition that things do

come from outside; it is a standing challenge to those who will maintain that man's little round of work and play is all there is to his existence. The best of hypotheses, we are told, are those that are most testable, and the most testable are those that have the courage to predict. By way of providing tests, and thereby leaving even the most skeptical without excuse, Moroni makes bold promises "unto all, even unto the ends of the earth" that God will give to him who asks in faith, believing in Christ, "whatsoever he shall ask the Father" (Mormon 9:21) and that if anyone will ask God if the things in the Book of Mormon itself "are not true, . . . he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost" (Moroni 10:4). True, the fulfillment of the conditions requires real faith, but so does the carrying out of any great experiment, and it is the special concern of the Book of Mormon to help men build up such faith, directing their feet if only in the first cautious steps in that direction: "If ye will awake and arouse your faculties, even to an experiment upon my words, and exercise a particle of faith, yea, even if ye can no more than desire to believe, let this desire work in you" (Alma 32:27). How could one ask for less?

The Book of Mormon has a way of stirring the faculties of those who read it to wondering about a number of things. It is packed with minor matters that need looking into, striking little coincidences that may be explained as lucky bits or as marks of inspiration or in some other way—for there is no limit to the possible explanations for any phenomenon, and every explanation is as legitimate as any other provided it is made with full intent of exposing it to the full force of critical examination. Such minor matters as we have pointed to are the riddle of the Liahona, the story of Joseph's two garments, the perfect coinage system of the Nephites, Lehi's *qaṣida* or didactic poem for his sons, the genuine nonbiblical Hebrew and Egyptian names, such odd customs as treading on the garments, etc., etc. These all



suggest testable theories as to their origins, for we now possess ancient records that may possibly confirm them. But verification is not proof, and the questions these little items raise must remain forever unsolved, the discussion forever open. Then why do we bother about them? Because one learns to understand a problem only by living with it, and by studying these things one can personally acquire those impressions and bits of information that will make it possible for him to reach his own decisions and direct his own researches. One can never prove the Book of Mormon to another, but one can go far enough to ask for a testimony for one's self, and get it.

Though none of the interesting details and minor coincidences in the Book of Mormon may be sufficient to push one this way or that, their cumulative effect can be pretty disturbing. The major issues, however, are more difficult to evade. They have to do with the way the Book of Mormon describes certain ancient institutions and situations of real dimension, things of which virtually nothing was known in Joseph Smith's day, but on which a good deal of information is available today. Ask a class of college students to describe out of their own imaginations and experience such things as the life of a family wandering in the Arabian desert, an ancient coronation rite (in detail), a major war or battle in ancient times, a first-class earthquake, the general state of the Near East around 600 B.C. Most of them will have little trouble writing at length on these subjects, because they have seen movies and some of them may even have read books, and all of them have had far better training than anyone could have got in early nineteenth-century America. We sometimes give such assignments to classes in ancient history—but it is strictly for fun, for the results would otherwise be most embarrassing; the efforts of even the best students are terribly inept and uninformed. It would be downright cruel to ask anyone for a serious discussion of such real blockbusters as life in the "Heroic Ages"

of the great migrations, the ways of the early desert sectaries, what the activities and teachings of the Lord during his visits to the earth after the resurrection may have been, the techniques of preserving and transmitting sacred writings, or the rise, prosperity, and fall of an ancient civilization (describe in detail).

But in all these matters we hold Joseph Smith to account. His book enjoys no immunity to the severest tests and asks for none. The study of forged documents is by no means in its infancy; it was in fact the principal delight of Renaissance scholarship. It has been known for centuries that the easiest of all forgeries to test and detect are long historical documents, and that it is never necessary to go beyond the inner inconsistencies of such documents to expose their fraudulence. So here is the Book of Mormon: if its title page is not telling the truth, it is a big, shallow, clumsy fraud, and there are hundreds of scholars in the world quite capable of refuting its claims within the hour. But whoever offers to undertake the job must be willing to submit his claims and arguments to the same severe criticism that it is his business to mete out. With this understanding the Book of Mormon may some day enjoy the serious critical examination it deserves.