Type: Manual Lesson

Lesson 1 - Introduction

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Source: *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*
Published: Salt Lake City; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1957
Pages: 1-12

Abstract: This is a general introduction to the lessons. It declares the purpose of the course as being to illustrate and explain the Book of Mormon, rather than to prove it. In many ways the Book of Mormon remains an unknown book, and the justification for these lessons lies in their use of neglected written materials, including ancient sources, which heretofore have not been consulted in the study of the Book of Mormon. In spite of the nature of the evidence to be presented, the average reader is qualified to pursue this course of study, though he is warned to avoid the practice common among the more sophisticated critics of the Book of Mormon of judging that book not in the light of the ancient times in which it purports to have been written, but in that of whatever period the critic himself arbitrarily chooses as the time of its production. The Book of Mormon must be read as an ancient, not as a modern book. Its mission, as described by the book itself, depends in great measure for its efficacy on its genuine antiquity. After stating this purpose, the present lesson ends with discussion of the "Great Retreat" from the Bible which is in full swing in our day and can only be checked in the end by the Book of Mormon.

AN APPROACH TO THE BOOK OF MORMON

Lesson 1

INTRODUCTION

Prospectus of Lesson 1: This is a general introduction to the lessons. It declares the purpose of the course as being to illustrate and explain the Book of Mormon, rather than to prove it. In many ways the Book of Mormon remains an unknown book, and the justification for these lessons lies in their use of neglected written materials, including ancient sources, which heretofore have not been consulted in the study of the Book of Mormon. In spite of the nature of the evidence to be presented, the average reader is qualified to pursue this course of study, though he is warned to avoid the practice common among the more sophisticated critics of the Book of Mormon of judging that book not in the light of the ancient times in which it purports to have been written, but in that of whatever period the critic himself arbitrarily chooses as the time of its production. The Book of Mormon must be read as an ancient, not as a modern book. Its mission, as described by the book itself, depends in great measure for its efficacy on its genuine antiquity. After stating this purpose, the present lesson ends with discussion of the "Great Retreat" from the Bible which is in full swing in our day and can only be checked in the end by the Book of Mormon.

Purpose of the Lessons: These lessons are dedicated to the proposition that no one can know too much about the Book of Mormon. To believe in a holy writing is just the beginning of wisdom and the first step to understanding. In these lessons on the Book of Mormon we intend to get a closer view of the mighty structure through the mists of time, and to size it up from new positions and angles. Our purpose is to illustrate, explain, suggest and investigate. We are going to consider the Book of Mormon as a possible product not of Ancient America (for that is totally beyond our competence) but of the Ancient East (which is only slightly less so). The book itself claims its origin in both these worlds, and the logical starting point for an investigation is in the older of the two.

"Proving" the Book of Mormon is another matter.

You cannot prove the genuineness of *any* document to one who has decided not to accept it. The scribes and Pharisees of old constantly asked Jesus for *proof*, and when it was set before them in overwhelming abundance they continued to disbelieve: ". . . O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" (Matt. 16:3.) When a man asks for proof we can be pretty sure that proof is the last thing in the world he really wants. His request is thrown out as a challenge, and the chances are that he has no intention of being shown up. After all these years the Bible itself is still not proven to those who do not choose to believe it, and the eminent Harry Torczyner now declares that the main problem of Bible study today is to determine whether or not "the Biblical speeches, songs and laws are forgeries."[1] So the Book of Mormon as an "unproven" book finds itself in good company.

The Forgotten Evidence: The Book of Mormon can be approached and examined by specialists in many fields. In exploring the past, a leading archaeologist reminds us, "no tool may be ignored," and the findings in one field of research even when they seem perfectly clear and unequivocal, may not override contradictory findings in other fields. For example, when the experts went about dating the recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls, the specialists in each field, the textile experts, literary historians, linguists, paleographers, theologians, pottery experts, chemists, and numismatologists all came up with different answers, sometimes many centuries apart. Only by comparing notes could they come to an agreement, and those who refused to compare, in the conviction that as authorities in their fields honestly pursuing rational methods they *could* not be wrong, still maintain that their dating is the only correct one and all the other equally competent people are wrong![2] The moral of this is that the Book of Mormon must be examined by experts in many fields, but may not be judged by the verdict of any one of them.

But if all types of research are important for understanding this book, all are not *equally* important, and the reason for writing these lessons is the author's conviction that some of the most important evidence of all has heretofore been completely ignored. A competent biologist has considered the problem of bees in the Book of Mormon, a mathematician has studied the ingenious Nephite monetary system, a great many people have dug among the ruins or taken due note of native American customs and traditions. All that is essential, but in the zeal to conduct scientific research the investigators have entirely overlooked the most telling evidence of all — that of the written documents.

For centuries it was maintained that all knowledge, scientific or otherwise, was contained in the writings of the Ancients. Oddly enough, when that claim was made, it was very nearly true, for ancient science was actually far ahead of Medieval. But with the rise of modern science it was no longer true, and the reaction against the documents was carried to the opposite extreme, which taught that science alone could teach us all there is to know about the world. That was a mistake. If the documents do not tell us everything, it does not follow that they tell us nothing. They are in fact the diary of the human race, that alone can tell us what men have been doing and thinking all these years. Running into millions of pages and going back thousands of years, they are the lab-notes and field-notes from which the ways of mankind may best be studied. There is no substitute for these documents. There are no natural laws by which the social scientist can tell whether events and situations described in the Book of Mormon were real or not; all we have is a huge heap of ancient records which will indicate more or less whether such things were possible or plausible.

The total neglect of these documents, the most powerful and effective instrument for testing and examining our revealed scriptures, has cost a heavy price in misdirected effort and useless wrangling. The only

realm in which every page of the Book of Mormon may be examined has become a lost and deserted world, for our modern education regards the reading of ancient texts as pre-eminently impractical, and those areas of basic research which used to make up the subject and object of university education have yielded to the more ingratiating disciplines of "education for success."

Who is Qualified? The real cause of the neglect of those studies which alone make possible a critical investigation of the Book of Mormon is the tremendous language barrier they present. As we have fully demonstrated elsewhere, no document can be studied critically in translation.[3] The ancients communicated with each other by language, as we do. They also communicate with *us* by language—but it is their language, not ours. Who, then, is qualified to receive their message? Neither the writer of these lessons nor, in all probability, the reader.

The one is merely a filing-clerk, who has been told to look something up and does it—the other is a person of normal intelligence who in the light of what he knows about the Book of Mormon (the only ancient text in a modern language) can decide for himself when anything significant is being conveyed.

By far the most important area in which the Book of Mormon is to be tested is in the reader's own heart. The challenge of Moroni 10:4 is by no means unscientific; every man must build his own structure of the universe but in so doing must forego the prerogative, reserved by God alone, of calling his own work good.

Anyone who attempts to read a historical source with an eye to being critical will naturally refer everything in it to his own experience. In so doing he will quickly discover in the document the most obvious parallels to the world in which he lives. This stuff, he decides, could have been written yesterday, and therefore must have been. If the document is an ancient one, however, he will also run into absurd and unfamiliar things so

foreign to his experience or that of his fellows as to prove beyond a doubt that the document is a wild fabrication. This is the normal method and result of Book of Mormon criticism, which always finds proof for fraud in two kinds of matter: (1) that which is obvious and commonplace and therefore shows that Joseph Smith was simply writing from his own experience, and (2) that which is NOT obvious and commonplace and therefore shows that Joseph Smith was making it up. The critics, putting their trust in the easy generalizations of our shallow modern education, are apparently unaware that *any* authentic history of human beings is bound to contain much that is common and familiar, while on the other hand any genuine ancient record of any length is bound to contain much that is strange and unfamiliar to modern readers.

The Only Valid Approach: According to Blass, the first thing to do in examining any ancient text is to consider it in the light of the origin and background that is claimed for it. If it fits into that background there is no need to look farther, since historical forgery is virtually impossible.[4] Five hundred years of textual criticism have shown the futility of trying to judge ancient writings by the standards of modern taste, or of assuming that any ancient document is a forgery before it has been tested. Yet today the literary condemn the Book of Mormon as not being up to the standards of English literature that appeal to them, social scientists condemn it because it fails to display an evolutionary pattern of history, and the exponents of Pure Thought are disgusted with it because it entirely ignores the heritage of Medieval Scholaticism and fails to display the Victorian meliorism which should be the mark of any 19th century history of humanity.

Today some critics are fond of pointing out that the Book of Mormon is written in the very language of Joseph Smith's own society. That is as if a professor of French literature were to prove Champollion a fraud by

showing after patient years of study that his translation of the Rosetta Stone was not in Egyptian at all but in the very type of French that Champollion and his friends were wont to use! The discovery is totally without significance, of course, because Champollion never claimed to be writing Egyptian, but to be rendering it into his own language. To test his *Egyptian* claims we would have to go back not to Grenoble but to Egypt; and for the same reason to test the claims of the Book of Mormon to antiquity we do not go back to the town of Manchester but to the world from which it purports to come. There is only one direction from which any ancient writing may be profitably approached. *It must be considered in its original ancient setting and in no other.* Only there, if it is a forgery, will its weakness be revealed, and only there, if it is true, can its claims be vindicated.

Yet this is the one test to which the Book of Mormon has never been subjected. The usual thing today is to regard the problem of the origin of the Book of Mormon as solved if one can only show, as Alexander Campbell did a century and a quarter ago, that the Book deals with matters of doctrine commonly discussed in the world of Joseph Smith. One of the latest studies of the subject finds decisive proof for the origin of the Book of Mormon in the fact that it treats "the very doctrines which thirty years of revivalism had made most intensely interesting to the folk of western New York."[5] But it can be shown that those very same doctrines have been a subject of intense interest to the folk of every land and every century in which the Bible has been seriously read, and one might argue most convincingly that the Book of Mormon had its real origin in any one of those times and places,—but it would be a waste of time. This obvious point has been completely missed in the case of the Book of Mormon.

Why the Book of Mormon? The 27th and 29th chapters of the Book of II Nephi explain the conditions

under which the Lord has brought forth the Book of Mormon in modern times and his purpose in doing so:

To show the human race the vanity of their wisdom and to show them ". . . that I know all their works." (2 Ne. 27:26-27.)

To teach the meek and correct ancient misunderstandings. (2 Ne. 27:25, 30.)

To serve as a great central rallying point for the work of the last days: ". . . a standard unto my people," recalling them to their covenants. (2 Ne. 29:1-2.)

To stand beside the Bible as ". . . the testimony of two nations . . . a witness unto you that I am God, that I remember one nation like unto another." (2 Ne. 29:8.)

". . . that I may prove unto many that I am the same yesterday, today, and forever . . . for my work is not yet finished. . . ." (2 Ne. 29:9.)

It is ". . . written to the Lamanites . . . and also to Jew and Gentile . . . Which is to show unto the remnant of the House of Israel what great things the Lord hath done for their fathers; and that they may know the covenants of the Lord, that they are not cast off forever—And also to the convincing of the Jew and Gentile that Jesus is the Christ, the Eternal God, manifesting himself unto all nations." (Preface to the Book of Mormon)

At a time when men ". . . cast many things away which are written and esteem them as things of naught" (2 Ne. 33:2), the Book of Mormon, containing ". . . the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles and to the Jews also; . . . was given by inspiration, and is confirmed to others by the ministering of angels, and is declared unto the world by them—Proving to the world that the holy scriptures are true, and that God does inspire men and call them to his holy work in this age and generation, as well as in generations of old; Thereby showing that he is the same God yesterday, today, and forever. Amen." (D & C 20:9-12.)

But does the world really need more than the Bible to do these things? Nephi predicted what the reaction of the world would be to the claims of the Book of Mormon: ". . . many of the Gentiles shall say: A Bible! A Bible! We have got a Bible, and there cannot be any more Bible." (2 Ne. 29:3.) The moment the book was presented for sale this prophecy began to be fulfilled, when the most eminent newspaper of the region, "The Rochester Daily Advertiser of Rochester," New York . . . published . . . the following opinion:

BLASPHEMY

Book of Mormon—Alias the 'Golden Bible'

The Book of Mormon has been placed in our hands. A viler imposition was never practiced. It is an evidence of fraud, blasphemy, and credulity, shocking to both Christians and moralists . . .[6]

The Great Retreat: For a century the Book of Mormon continued to be regarded as an unspeakable affront to the claims and the very existence of the Bible. But in our own day a strange thing has happened: A large influential number of diligent Bible students have declared that the Bible itself is nothing but mythology, and that in order to mean anything to modern man it must be "demythologized" or "deeschatologized," that is, everything of a miraculous, prophetic, or supernatural nature must be removed from it! That is tantamount to putting the Book of Mormon and the Bible on the same footing, not by accepting the one, but by rejecting the other—and the men who do this are clergymen.

When the rest of the clergy have risen in indignation and charged these "existentialists" with taking out of the Bible all that gives it power and removing from Christianity all that is uniquely Christian, the others have rightly retorted that the clergy itself have always taken the lead in discrediting supernatural demonstrations of God's power.[7] When Bultmann says that no one who makes use of electric light, radio, or modern medical science can possibly believe in the miracles of the New Testament, even the liberal clergy protest that he is going too far; yet for a whole century *their* strongest charge against the Mormons has been that they have been guilty of "seeing visions in an age of railways."[8]

So now the Christian world has reached a point of decision; it must either believe what the Bible says or reject it—it is no longer possible to have it both ways by the clever use of scholarly jargon and sanctimonious double-talk. The show-down has been forced by what one scholar calls "the breakthrough of the eschatologi-

cal interpretation," which he compares to a strategic military breakthrough that throws a whole army into panic and disorder.[9] Conventional and long-established views of the nature of the Christian religion, whether liberal or fundamentalist, are so completely out of line with new discoveries that the "existentialist" school now proposes to ignore history altogether. This decision is, we are told,

> witness to the increasing embarrassment felt by Christian thinkers about the assumed historicity of their faith. Such a suggestion of embarrassment in this connection may possibly cause surprise and provoke an instant denial that such a situation exists in any significant academic circle. However . . . the historical character of Christianity, which was once proclaimed apologetically as the greatest argument for the validity of that faith, has gradually been found to be a source of great perplexity if not of weakness.

Until now, according to this authority, Christian scholars have willingly accepted

> the claim that . . . Christianity . . . must be investigated by the most austere standards of historical judgment. For many decades, under the aegis of the liberal tradition of scholarship, this task was undertaken with fervent conviction, and great was the knowledge amassed by such methods of research about Primitive Christianity. But in time this process of investigation into Christian origins has gradually revealed itself to be a journey ever deeper into a morass of conjecture about the imponderables which lie behind or beyond the extant literary documents.[10]

In all this what is found wanting is not the Bible but men's interpretations of it, the root of the trouble being that they simply don't have enough evidence to go on one way or the other. The noisy protests brought against the Book of Mormon, that the Bible contains a fulness of knowledge to add to which is only blasphemy, are now seen to have been unjustified and premature. And now the learned hold the Bible responsible for their own shortcomings and denounce it as a fraud, whose historical claims Bultmann and his school, like the Jew Torczyner attack with "truly vehement repudiation."[11]

To the hopeless inadequacy of man's knowledge

may be attributed what now goes by the name of "the Modern Predicament," which is, "that man seems to be faced with an unbridgeable gulf between . . . knowledge and faith. . . . Religion was born in a world different from ours—a tiny, comfortable world. . . . That ancient world has been nibbled away by science and the question arises whether against a new and scientific background religion in any form will find it possible to survive."[12] It was just that "tiny, comfortable world" of conventional Christianity that was so mortally offended by the coming forth of latter-day prophecy; the mighty revelations of the Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenants, and Pearl of Great Price were an unpardonable affront to the established Christian framework of time, place, and custom. The Christian world is now for the first time learning how wrong it was, and the experience is not a pleasant one. In countless journals, Catholic and Protestant alike, a cry of distress goes up "What is left to us," they ask, "if the things we have always been taught are not so?"[13] If they only knew it, the Book of Mormon is the one way out of their dilemma. And how does it fare?

The Unwelcome Deliverance: "In such an age as ours," a modern churchman writes, "critical of all claims that run counter to what may be scientifically proven, the Mormon has a heavy burden of proof upon him."[14] He is speaking of the Book of Mormon, and fulfilling the prophecy of Mormon 8:26: "And it shall come in a day when it shall be said that miracles are done away." The same scepticism that has systematically dismantled the Bible would reject the Book of Mormon out of hand. But that is not so easy. Dr. Braden may not directly declare that the Book of Mormon "runs counter to what may be scientifically proven" and then skip lightly out leaving the "heavy burden of proof" on those that believe it. He should know that in textual criticism or law or even by that scientific reasoning to which he is so devoted anyone who challenges the authenticity of a

document put forth in good faith has taken upon himself the *whole* burden of proving it false. I am not obliged to prove to you that the dollar bill I offer you in good faith is genuine; you may believe it is counterfeit and refuse to accept it, but if you do, it is entirely up to you to prove your case or perhaps face a libel suit.

We offer the Book of Mormon to the world in good faith, convinced that it is the truest of books. To those who may say it is counterfeit, actually "running counter to what may be scientifically proven," its defects should be at once apparent, and would be. But what do we find? "Naturally," says Braden, speaking of the Prophet's story of the coming forth of the book, "it has been doubted by those outside the faith and *every effort has been made* to find a more plausible explanation of the sources of this scripture."[15] (Italics ours) In view of this it is strange that this writer cannot present a single telling argument against Joseph Smith's story, but not strange that he avoids responsibility by seeking to drop the whole problem in the laps of the Mormons.[16]

In the following lessons we have attempted to give full consideration to the principal arguments against the Book of Mormon as well as those for it. But it must be admitted that we do not look upon both sides with equal favor. No fruitful work of science or scholarship was ever written that did not attempt to prove one thing and in so doing disprove another. It is impossible to impart new information or explore new areas without treading on controversial ground, since by that very act one is passing beyond accepted bounds. Anyone defending the Copernican system may be legitimately charged with bias against the Ptolemaic system, and if, as some have noted with disapproval, there is little in our writing to *dis*prove the Book of Mormon, it is because we honestly believe that the arguments against it are few and feeble —the case of Dr. Braden shows that. We leave it to others to show that we are wrong.

Questions

1. How is it possible for specialists in different fields to reach conflicting conclusions regarding the same object of study?

2. When two such investigators disagree, which is to be believed?

3. Why must the Book of Mormon be tested first of all in the light of its purported background?

4. Friedrich Blass says every ancient text must be assumed to be genuine until it is proven otherwise. Is that a prejudiced approach?

5. Can the Book of Mormon be judged in the light of common sense and everyday experience alone?

6. What is the principal threat to the authority of the Bible today?

7. Why can it no longer be claimed that the Bible itself contains all that it is necessary to know about it?

8. Why do the "existentialists" reject historical evidence as a support of the Christian faith?

9. What is the "Modern Predicament"? Is it strictly modern?

10. Why have the written documents been neglected as a source of information on the Book of Mormon?

11. Why does the Christian world need the Book of Mormon today?

12. Why is a completely unbiased study of the Book of Mormon impossible?