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Kangaroo Court, Part II

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Abstract: This brief series is a witty exposé of anti-Mormon methods of Book of Mormon criticism. The second and final part concludes the series.

Kangaroo Court

Part Two

by Hugh Nibley, Contributing Editor

One of the few critics ever to do a serious piece of work on the Book of Mormon was H. C. Sheldon. In coming to grips with the problem, he tells us exactly what his position is. "The primary question is, Are those claims credible, or do they bear unmistakably the stamp of falsehood and imposture?" A leading question, indeed, but at last we have someone who at least recognized the possibility of an alternative—Linn reads the book avowedly to prove it false, Taylder gives us our choice of whether Smith was one kind of liar or another, but Mr. Sheldon is actually willing to recognize an "either/or" situation. Only in the next sentence he takes it all back: "Many conditions, some of which are of compelling force, *shut up the critical investigator to the second alternative.*"³⁰ What chicanery! Our guide tells us that the "primary question" for consideration is whether the Book of Mormon is true or false, and then calmly informs us that the first alternative is under no circumstances to be examined. The jury is instructed to choose between A and B, with the specification that A has been disqualified before the contest; with that understandable limitation the jury may favor whomever they will.

As early as 1835 one editor announced a policy that was to become standard procedure in dealing with the Book of Mormon, "an artifice so vile, shallow and contemptible, that it can never deceive one intelligent person; therefore we think it unworthy of so much as a contradiction!"³¹ This is exactly the position taken in what has been hailed as recently as 1950 as the most thorough and devastating attack ever made on the Book of Mormon, a study by W. F. Prince, published in the *America Journal of Psychology* in 1917.³² We shall deal with this study later, but first let Dr. Prince tell us how matters stand with science and the Book of Mormon:

"Since the odd contents of the volume lamentably or ludicrously fall before every canon of historical criticism, scholars have not thought it worth while to

discuss the notion of its ancient authorship, unless briefly for pragmatic and missionary purposes."³³

Here we have it again: the only reason any scholar consults the Book of Mormon is to debunk it for polemical purposes—pragmatic and missionary. The historical question raised by the book is purely and simply that of its ancient authorship—a problem that scholars have never discussed, according to Prince. Why not? we ask. Because it cannot stand up to critical investigation—it falls before every canon of historical criticism. Has it been tested by *any* of those canons? Of course not, it isn't worth the trouble!

This absurd position, that the Book of Mormon has failed to pass a test which has never been given it because of its failure to pass, etc., is neatly confirmed by the learned LaRue in 1919. "What of the book itself?" he asks, "*No serious consideration has ever been given it by men of science.* It is considered a fabrication. . . ."³⁴ Since it is a fabrication, why should any man of science waste his time with it? The answer is, that only by spending a lot of time with it can any man of science prove that it is a fabrication in the first place. But such reasoning does not count: "How could three rational men address 'all nations, kindreds, tongues and people,'" LaRue asks, "and say that God had told them that these plates had been translated by the gift and power of God. . . .?" Another rhetorical question, and quite pointless besides, since the problem of how they *could* do so is overriden by the admitted fact that they *did*.

Writing in the following year, C. S. Jones, after an almost unbelievably confused and inaccurate account of the contents of the Book of Mormon makes his point: "It would be easy, pitably easy, if it were not supererogatory, to pulverize this claim . . . but *cui bono?*"³⁵ *Cui bono* being Latin for "what's the use?" We now have the comforting assurance that if the scholars and scientists have neglected the Book of Mormon it has not been because they were too busy

with more important things—for anything as “pitiably easy” as the debunking of the book, a crying need in our society, should not require more than a few easy hours of a good man’s time. Why don’t they get at it? “What’s the use?” asks Mr. Jones, a strange question from one who feels that the world is in desperate need of a book by him entitled *The Truth about the Mormons*.

No anti-Mormon book has been pushed more diligently in high places than Arbaugh’s University of Chicago thesis on *Revelation in Mormonism*. Arbaugh informs us that “apart from specialized treatises, there is only one scientific book on Mormonism,” and that is Linn’s work, “. . . quite incomplete, out of date, and defective, presenting a maze of indigested facts.”³⁶ In view of such a state of sorry neglect, one might expect Arbaugh himself to do some real digging on the Book of Mormon, especially since revelation in his story. But no: he disarmingly informs us that where the book is concerned he is going to take his information from a single collection of third-and fourth-hand reports made by the Reverend Charles A. Shook in 1912.³⁷ For Mr. Arbaugh, “The fact that Mormonism is fantastic, interesting, and available for study as no other religion is, makes its study a pleasant task.” It presents no real problem because it is simply “fantastic”—you don’t have to worry about proving or disproving fantastic things, do you?

As recently as 1957 the same Arbaugh has got out a pamphlet which he modestly describes as “an authoritative handbook on Mormonism—concise . . . scholarly . . . objective.” “This is not an exposure of Mormonism,” he cries with liberal magnanimity. “One complaint which can be urged against exposures is that they sometimes confuse hearsay with fact.”³⁸ But not Arbaugh; no prejudice for him! He will write no scandalized exposure, but give his little book the neutral and unemotional title of *Gods, Sex, and Saints: The Mormon Story*, and promises to tell us, without a spark of ill feeling, how “the integrative



Failed to pass a test which was never given because of failure to pass it.

principle of sex" operates in this "polytheistic mystery cult." Thus with a preliminary barrage of loaded words Mr. Arbaugh prepares us for his exercise in semantics—for he admits that he has shifted his ground from the historical to the semantic approach—no need to bother about facts here!³⁸

One of the "exposures" which Dr. Arbaugh condemns for confusing hearsay with fact is Mrs. Brodie's much-heralded novel, recently hailed by a reviewer as *the* work of "primary scholarship" on the Mormons.³⁹ "Scholars of American literary history have remained persistently uninterested in the Book of Mormon," Mrs. Brodie writes in this book. "No sociologist has troubled to draw parallels between the Book of Mormon and other sacred books, like the Koran and Science and Health, though all are . . . an obscure compound of folklore, moral platitude, mysticism, and millennialism."⁴⁰ That should be enough to show how deep Mrs. Brodie herself has gone in her "primary scholarship." She is quite unaware of Eduard Meyer's work though she could not possibly have avoided him in any serious study of the Book of Mormon or the Koran, and she apparently thinks that people who study and compare ancient and modern religious texts are known as sociologists.⁴⁰ But she is right about one thing—the Book of Mormon has been persistently neglected. A search in the latest encyclopedias, American and foreign, will disclose long articles on the Dead Sea Scrolls but never an article on the Book of Mormon.⁴¹

Mr. C. S. Braden in a book devoted to the subject of modern scriptures refuses to touch the Book of Mormon except to note: "Naturally it [the story of the Book of Mormon] has been doubted by those outside the faith, and every effort has been made to find a more plausible explanation of the sources of these scriptures. . . . In an age such as ours," he writes, "critical of all claims that run counter to what may be scientifically proven, the Mormon has a heavy burden of proof upon him. . . ."⁴² Here, surely is a convenient concept of the function of a textual critic. Mr. Braden it is who challenges the book, and then Mr. Braden denies any responsibility for proving his case. He dares the Mormons to convince him, and refuses to study their book.

A Catholic priest prefaces a recent discussion of the Book of Mormon with a helpful statement of policy: "I, of course, hold that Mormon beliefs, differing as they do from the beliefs of Christians during two thousand years, are irreconcilable with the Christian faith."⁴³ In view of that "of course," one wonders why Father Rumble bothers even to pretend to be investigating the thing, but a reading of the pamphlet will readily show that he is innocent of any dangerous researches.

In an ambitious historical study of the Book of Mormon published in 1954, Professor Meinhold of Kiel wrote: "To presume to believe on the existence of the 'golden plates,' is in spite of the witnesses, *unerhört* [unheard of, unthinkable]."⁴⁴ *Unerhört* is no argument and no proof; it is the evasion of a task which the world has a right to expect of an honest scholar, and like Eduard Meyer before him, Meinhold sidesteps the responsibility with a shrug. Speaking of such responsibility, A. E. Housman wrote, years ago, that no scholar, no matter how learned, may be "allowed to fling his opinions in the reader's face without being called to account and asked for his reasons."⁴⁵ One of the best commentaries on this text is one of the latest: Dr. O'Dea has observed, not without a touch of Irish wit, that "the Book of Mormon has not been universally considered by its critics as one of those books that must be read in order to have an opinion of it."⁴⁶ We have seen why.

From the brief survey of critical policy just presented, one fact stands out conspicuously—the fact that from first to last the foremost objection to the book, an objection that far outweighs all others both as to the frequency and feeling with which it is put forward, is that it is hopelessly out of place in our modern, scientific, enlightened society. What amazes the first commentator is that such a thing can exist "at this enlightened age of the world": Campbell "sets the question . . . forever at rest, to every *rational* mind"; E. D. Howe is alarmed that "great numbers of people in our enlightened country" should fall for such a thing; the Reverend Clark is astonished that it should find followers "in enlightened New England"; Gregg finds it "simply astounding that any human being . . . can be found so credulous as to believe it"; and so on. This completely disqualified the comfortable thesis, that while the Book of Mormon may have impressed the rustic America of a century ago, "in an age such as ours" it simply won't hold up. Forty years ago a critic wrote that if Joseph Smith had "lived at a later age, he would have been laughed to scorn at once."⁴⁷ The fact is that he *was* laughed to scorn at once: in 1830 his book was if anything even more obnoxious to enlightened liberalism and modern education than it is today. "We must not forget," one investigator reminds us, "that Mormonism arose almost yesterday, amid universities and libraries," and not in a primitive world.⁴⁸ "The modern mind," writes Beardsley, "will reject the Mormon version of the golden plates and Urim and Thummim, as either delusions or fraud."⁴⁹ But in that respect the mind of 1830 was quite as "modern" as the mind of 1930. When Mrs. Brodie announces that twentieth-century science has finally "disembowelled" the Book of Mormon we wait (Continued on page 300)



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Kangaroo Court

(Continued) for the lurid details — but we wait in vain. Not a single twentieth-century argument does she produce: not one new argument against the Book of Mormon has come forth since the first decade of its appearance!

(To be continued)

FOOTNOTES

³⁰Henry C. Sheldon, *A Fourfold Test of Mormonism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1914), p. 10. (Italics ours.)

³¹J. Bobb, in *The Western Expositor*, Dec. 10, 1835.

³²Prince's study "proved beyond dispute thirty years ago" exactly when and where the Book of Mormon was conceived, according to W. R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1950), p. 144.

³³W. F. Prince, in *Am. Journal of Psychology* 28 (1917), p. 373.

³⁴Wm. Earl LaRue, *The Foundations of Mormonism* (New York: E. H. Revell, Co., 1919), p. 77. (Italics ours.) "A higher critical appraisal of the Book of Mormon, which was the result of this creative effort of Joseph Smith, would be extremely interesting," wrote C. F. Potter, *The Story of Religion as told in the Lives of its Leaders* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1929), p. 531. But such has never been undertaken.

³⁵C. Sheridan Jones, *The Truth about the Mormons* (London: Wm. Rider, 1920), p. 4.

³⁶Geo. B. Arbaugh, *Revelation in Mormonism* (U. of Chicago Thesis, 1932), (reprinted 1950), p. v.

³⁷*Ibid.*, p. vii.

³⁸G. B. Arbaugh, *Gods, Sex, and Saints: The Mormon Story* (Rock Island, Ill.: Augustana Press, 1957), pp. 5-6; "There is need for clarity at the point of semantics rather than for stories about the latest polygamists."

³⁹D. L. Morgan, "The 'Peculiar People'" *Sat. Rev. of Literature*, Dec. 28, 1957, p. 9.

⁴⁰Fawn M. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History* (New York: A. Knopf, 1946), p. 67. Meyer's work (see note 1, above) contains not only the classic comparison of Joseph Smith with Mohammed but also a detailed comparison of their revelations and their books. The work is not mentioned by Mrs. Brodie.

⁴¹All that the *Encyclopedia Americana* (1957 ed., s.v. "Mormon") has to say about the Book of Mormon itself is that "many editions have been published, millions of copies have been distributed, and the work has been translated into many different languages." The *Britannica* has not a word to say about the contents of the Book of Mormon.

⁴²C. S. Braden, *The Scriptures of Mankind, An Introduction* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 481-2.

⁴³L. Rumble, *Mormons or Latter-day Saints* (Tract, Paulist Press, 1950), Introduction (Kirkham, *op. cit.*, II, 304-7.)

⁴⁴P. Meinhold, "Die Anfänge des Amerikanischen Geschichtsbewusstseins," *Saeculum V* (1954), pp. 85-86.

⁴⁵In his edition of Manilius, *Astronomicon*, Vol. V, pp. xxxiii.

⁴⁶Thos. F. O'Dea, *The Mormons* (Uni-

versity of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 26.

⁴²Stuart Martin, *The Mystery of Mormonism* (New York: Dutton & Co., 1920), p. 16.

⁴³Geo. Seibell, *The Mormon Saints* (Pittsburgh: Lessing Co., 1919), p. 7.

⁴⁴See above note 27.

Editor's Page

(Continued) which caused the Savior to give his life for the salvation of the human family.

Self-Control.—Great as are the virtues of truth, justice, wisdom, and benevolence, they do not seem so practical and applicable to daily life as the virtue of self-control. Indeed, if these elements of true manhood are not attained by, they are at least manifested through, self-control. Self-control means the government and regulation of all our natural appetites, desires, passions, and affections; and there is nothing which gives man such strength of character as the sense of self-conquest—the realization that he can make his appetites and passions serve him, and that he is not a servant to them.

The comprehensiveness of this virtue may be best understood by naming others included by it. Some of these are: temperance, bravery, fortitude, cheerfulness, hopefulness, sobriety, chastity, independence, tolerance, patience, submission, continence, purity.

In our efforts to develop true manhood, we must accept Christ as the way, the truth, and the life. He not only possessed truth, justice, wisdom, benevolence, and self-control, and taught them, but also practised them. And herein is the secret of manly strength: that is, the doing of that which one knows to be right. A man cannot truly believe in God and Jesus Christ, in their divinity, omnipotence, and power, who daily violated their teachings and commandments.

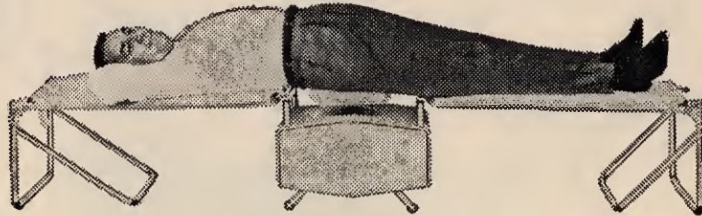
What we need today is the gospel of application—the gospel that is preached by noble acts, that commands the attention and respect of everyone. The life of Christ was the life of true manhood. The gospel of Christ points to the attainment of it; the Church is an ideal means of developing it; but true moral character is attained only by each individual's practising daily the virtues that give not only character but also happiness and eternal life.

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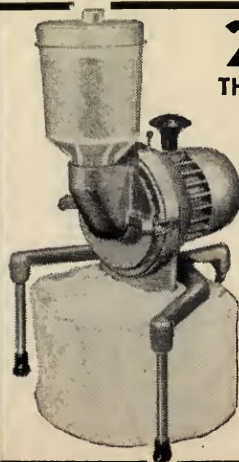
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