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Foreword to the 1967 Edition

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History is the record of the unpredictable. Old orders give way without perceiving their own passing. The religious world of early Christianity was just such an unstable age. Yet the most penetrating Roman historian, Tacitus, considered Christianity at the close of its apostolic ministry nothing but a disreputable superstition. This fact prompted today's leading private Bible translator of the Anglo-American world to ask whether the modern age might not have somewhere an unrecognized counterpart of the ancient ministry of inspired apostles. In his preface to his translation of Acts, J.B. Phillips considered, "It is perfectly possible that the unpublicised and almost unknown activities of the Spirit through His human agents to-day are of more permanent importance than all the news recorded in the whole of the popular Press."¹

The need of modern "activities of the Spirit through His human agents" was hardly felt when Joseph Smith announced revelation to a Christian world firm in confident orthodoxy. Nearly a century and a half later, Christianity itself is in the crisis of a doctrinal revolution of such proportions that serious believers and leaders display the deepest anxiety. The president of Harvard University has recently challenged the lack of conviction of the teachers who train Christian ministers: "Men continue to scorn older formulations of belief; . . . but now belief itself—professedly—is consciously eschewed. We have all become doubting Thomases."² Now it is a question of what doc-

trines may survive when creeds are no longer valid statements of faith.

As never before, the claims of Joseph Smith to modern revelation demand the attention of serious men. The fact that a scholar of the stature of Hugh Nibley has found it productive to spend years on the question of the Book of Mormon shows that no easy dismissal of this work as an obvious imposture is possible. His research has examined Joseph Smith's claims at every point where historical scholarship possesses the tools to do so. Fortunately for this purpose, Joseph Smith "translated" an ancient American record of religious history roughly the size of the historical portions of the Old Testament. Anyone with slight experience with the Book of Mormon knows that its prophetic portions are only reached through chapter after chapter of historical detail—of migrations from the Near East, of religious traditions and practices, of unfamiliar names and strange *mores*, of economic, political, and military affairs. The very existence of a purported history of this length is an open invitation to competent scholars to demolish the claim of its author that it is history. No other product of Joseph Smith's life shows such promise of giving unerring knowledge of whether he is a genuine prophet or a clever fraud.

Yet the main case against the Book of Mormon continues to be argued mainly on the ground that it is the inevitable product of the nineteenth century. In the first place, no one has so far offered this thesis who is in the slightest competent to say whether the Book of Mormon is more like the nineteenth century than the ancient world that it chronicles. A student of the nineteenth century may indeed find parallels in this period and the Book of Mormon, but without a knowledge of the world of antiquity, he simply is not equipped to make a judgment whether the Book of Mormon resembles more Joseph Smith's environment or the ancient culture it claims to represent. Professor Nibley is the only

person now publishing on this question who is equipped to make valid observations. A simple scanning of the table of contents will show him dealing with the writings of the Christian fathers, the writings of the Christian gnostics, Jewish literature and traditions, Near-Eastern history and archeology, not to speak of a half-dozen assorted areas of special competence such as military tactics and social dis-integrations. Professor Nibley has looked into these areas at least enough to ask questions about them, and that is all he does. But he asks odd questions.

The last century in the field of ancient studies is as iconoclastic as the industrial revolution in the world of practical concerns. The fact that the accuracy of the Book of Mormon is more evident after new discoveries makes it impossible now to be honest and simply ridicule this record. These discoveries have done more than vindicate the Book of Mormon. They have shown enough of its truth to put a burden of investigation on anyone who is seriously interested in religious or historical reality. New evidence demands a fresh look at the claim that the Book of Mormon is a record of ancient religious history, sealed up for the instruction and salvation of the modern world. Readers of every level of education have in this book exciting and provocative insights to God's purposes under the competent guidance of a gifted scholar. Lack of answers to his evidence for the Book of Mormon over two decades is rapidly forging the conviction that it is unanswerable.

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