

Nibley's Commentary On The Book of Mormon

Sharman Bookwalter Hummel, Editor

Selections from all Four Volumes
Teachings of the Book of Mormon
by Hugh W. Nibley

Volume 1
(Edited from Semester 1, 2)

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Dedication

To the Ancient Prophet Moroni, the last Editor of
The Book of Mormon, who knew through prophecy
the problems of our day, and who as an Angel was
assigned to restore the Gospel at the hands of a
Modern Prophet Joseph Smith.

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Preface

The Purpose of this Book is to make easily available selections from the four volume lectures transcribed and published as ***Teachings of the Book of Mormon*** by Hugh W. Nibley, Professor at Brigham Young University.

I have made an effort to add ***Scripture References*** to each paragraph, when applicable, including chapter and verse. The original books only had occasional verse references. This effort along with greatly expanded **Lecture Topics** at the beginning of some of the Lessons will be helpful to teachers of the Book of Mormon classes.

The numbers at the beginning of each paragraph refer to the page number of the First Edition of each of the four volumes. These numbers will give the reader a clue as to where I have made extensive omissions. Total omissions approximate 50%.

All document text was scanned from the first editions of the four volumes. Foreign language printed in italics in the original books were converted by me to capital letters to distinguish them. Text scanning to word processing could not retain foreign characters. Refer to the earlier editions for these words using the page references mentioned above.

I have occasionally used brackets to clarify omissions or where necessary for understanding. Most of the brackets were added by other editors. Occasionally I have recast some sentences without changing the meaning.

Omissions are always controversial. It is my hope that this volume will entice the reader to read the original volumes. My objective was to leave only comments by Brother Nibley directly relating to the scriptures.

About Hugh Nibley

Hugh Nibley (1910-2005) was one of the most gifted scholars in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. His linguistic abilities, his concern with detail, and his brilliant mind combined to make his efforts productive and meaningful. He was a prolific writer and a popular lecturer. Dr. Nibley graduated summa cum laude from the University of California at Los Angeles and completed his Ph.D. as a University Fellow at the University of California at Berkeley. He taught at the Claremont Colleges in California before serving in military intelligence in World War II. He joined the faculty of Brigham Young University in 1946, where he spent most of his time in research and writing as a professor of history and religion. Dr. Nibley has been honored as the recipient of many awards, including the David O. McKay Humanities Award in 1971 and Professor of the Year in 1973. He served as a missionary for the Church in Switzerland and Germany and concluded his mission in Greece. He and his wife, the former Phyllis Draper, are the parents of eight children.

Lecture 1 Introduction

**The Book of Mormon—Like Nothing Else
[Greatest Miracle is the Sudden Appearance of the
Written Word]
[Few Ancient Documents Existed at the Time of
Joseph Smith]
[Book of Adam]**

1 Now the shocking thought comes to us: Is it possible that nobody is doing what he should be doing? The answer is yes. It's not only possible; that's the situation. When the Lord Jesus Christ appeared to Joseph Smith in the Grove, according to the oldest and best account of all—that of Frederick G. Williams, written in 1832-33 and dictated by Joseph Smith when he was only 26 years old. It's different from the one we have in the Pearl of Great Price here because the Lord speaks in the first person. In the account we have here, it's an indirect quotation (what the Lord told Joseph), but here the words to the Prophet when he was only fourteen years old are, "The world at this time lieth in sin, and there is none that doeth good—no not one. Mine anger is kindling against the inhabitants of the world to visit them in this ungodliness." There are those who do well and have good intentions, but that is not what it means. It means to do what they should be doing—the best possible thing. If you break an arm, I might with the best of intentions try to mend it, but I could be doing a lot of damage. I'm not doing any good. I'm doing more harm probably, though I mean well and get credit for that. The

fact is we are not in a condition where anybody can do what he should be doing because we are not living by the heavenly order anymore. We are not living by the order for which the earth was designed and created; we are a million miles away from it, completely independent. So the Lord says, “There is none that doeth good, no not one and mine anger is kindling.”

2 The thing is that this is where the Book of Mormon comes in. It’s like nothing else. It’s the only answer you are ever going to get to that question [why read the Book of Mormon] in this dispensation. In reading the Book of Mormon no one is ever doing something he shouldn’t be doing. Most of the time he would be doing probably the best thing he could possibly be doing. If it is not itself the best thing to be doing, it will quickly put you onto the best thing to be doing because it will have a direct effect on you. It will change you; it will work on you. It is a personal, intimate document. It will hit you. You can’t just read the Book of Mormon and nothing else. It immediately puts you on the high road to what you should be doing, like no other book. And it will lead you directly into a course of thought or a course of action of the greatest significance to yourself and to the world you live in. In other words, it will enable you to break loose as nothing else can. Only the Book of Mormon breaks loose because it does break loose. It’s like nothing else. Now we have the direct revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants, etc., but the Book of Mormon was brought by an angel, a tangible thing. He gave it to Joseph. He gives this clinical description of how the angel was. This is something completely different.

2,3 The Book of Mormon is like nothing else. It is totally different from the Bible by virtue of its genesis. Look at the Bible. It took hundreds of years to give us the Bible—thousands, actually, if you include the Old Testament, of course. The documents had to trickle in from different times, different places, and different writers. The Tanakh, the Torah; Nebiim, the prophets; and the Kethubim, the literary writings. These are the three things that make up the Bible—all from different authors. Some parts are poetry,

some parts are prophecy, and some parts are history. There are lots of chronicles, etc. Some parts are the law from different times and different places—hundreds of different manuscripts.

3 Until the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the oldest manuscript we had of the books of Moses (the first five books) was from the ninth century A.D., the Ben Asher Codex. There are eight thousand different old manuscripts of the New Testament, no two alike. So there is a lot of collating, comparing, and arguing about which passages are which and what order they come in. Then when you have translation, there is no agreement about that. Year after year there are new revised translations coming forth. Well, if the last translation is reliable, why the new revised, improved Cambridge, or Anchor, or whatever it is, edition of the Bible? It's processing all the time. The Bible is a very human document, of course it is. So is the Book of Mormon. It covers thousands of years. It has many authors; it was edited, etc. But it was handed to us in a single passage. Bang, just like that, the whole thing—all edited, all in order, all translated. We don't have to argue about any of that stuff. If it is true, it comes to us whole, and there is nothing to slow us down on it—nothing to hold us up until we have decided what this passage means, or what that is. It was translated directly by the gift and power of God. There is no need to argue about it. It is in words of exceeding plainness, in a very small vocabulary. We may treat that later. But here it comes to us in this package all at once. It is not only like no other book, of course; it's like nothing else. It's like no other thing. It was either brought by an angel, or it came out of nowhere, this single shot— instant scripture and instant history of a thousand years, just like that.

4 We are talking about the Book of Mormon in an unbelieving world. Eduard Meyer was by far the greatest critic of Joseph Smith, the one to judge him. He was a great German historian who died in 1927. He was fascinated by the Book of Mormon. So Eduard Meyer says, "Well, obviously it's easy to explain." It's not easy to explain, but

you have to explain it this way: that the angel and the plates were a hallucination. But the Book of Mormon is not a hallucination; that's the trouble. And he wouldn't read the Book of Mormon. That's very interesting because he was criticizing it. He said things like, "I've explained it now; don't bother. The English is too primitive, too crude. It can't possibly be anything but just made up by a hick." But he never found out what was in it because he never bothered to read it; imagine that, the great Eduard Meyer.

5 So it is in an unbelieving world, you see. How do you account for the Book of Mormon in a world that can't believe in another world, or other possibilities? If you don't believe in it, what's your alternative? There are no alternatives, absolutely none. Joseph couldn't have got it anywhere is the point. That's why no one will take it up. They ask some very searching questions and they should, but they never wait for the answers, you notice. They always leave the room as soon as you start showing that it is possible that this happened.

5 This is a fact of enormous significance that the book can't be explained. It is what you would call a singularity, so we will write "singularity" on the board. (Boy, this is education! Tell me if I spell it right; it would be singular if I spelled it right.) A singularity is a thing that does exist but should not exist, as you know. It cannot be described or comprehended, like the universe before it started expanding, or like quasars or black holes. Astronomers and physicists are absolutely sure they exist, no doubt whatever. Yet they cannot describe them, they cannot conceive of them, they cannot imagine what they would be like. Yet they exist. Now that's a singularity. The Book of Mormon is such a thing if you won't accept Joseph Smith's story. Like black holes and quasars, its presence forces us to reassess all our ideas of reality. We are not just talking about philosophy or esthetics, or even theology or ethics, here—the usual matter of religion. Nor are we talking about happiness, the good life, success, and that sort of thing that TV preachers, Norman Vincent Peale, and others talk about. That has nothing to do with it; we are talking about real things here,

no Christian allegory. This stuff is to be taken literally, and therefore we are supposed to take it very seriously. It has been given to us because it concerns us, and it comes to us full of instructions on how to use it. As a book, of course, it will turn most of us off because people don't read books anymore. We have other ways of learning things (we think they are good). But it comes to us as a written text.

6,7 The book is the most remarkable invention ever made, as Galileo says. It is the miracle of miracles. "If anything is to be hailed as the greatest of all miracles, it would certainly be writing," he said. In 26 simple symbols you can convey not only what happened and what people's names were, but what they did (you can do that with TV), but their innermost thoughts and most sensitive feelings can be conveyed by these 22, 24, or 26 letters of an alphabet. That's all it takes. Nothing else can do or ever has done that. So writing comes to us as a special message and special emissary. That's where you get this emphasis all the time in the Book of Mormon. They talk about the importance of the record, how it's transmitted, how it's handed down, the characters it's written in, the trouble they have writing it (preserving the pages, etc.), because as they tell us, "This is the only way our knowledge can be preserved." That's why they had to go back and get the brass plates. The only device that has defeated time and space—and it does that, as Galileo says. But it's not a human invention, of course. We are told it is a superhuman invention. Writing is so minimal, so extremely simple. Any instrument that will make a scratch on any surface will record the most subtle message for any period of time over any amount of space. That's astonishing what you can do. Of course, it has to be a rather permanent surface and things like that, but it's so simple. All you have to do is scratch something on a surface, and you have done it. To read it again you don't need elaborate electronic equipment or anything like that. But the price is this (this is where it comes, of course): How do you unravel it? You don't need an elaborate electronic machine to feed it back into. You have to feed it back into yourself. You have to riddle (to read means to riddle; it's the same word). You have to unriddle what is written there.

That's up to you; this is the thing. Reading is an act of faith. When you read, you riddle. You use your wits. That's why to say you've read the Book of Mormon doesn't mean a thing. It's how much you have applied to it here. You have to extract the meaning, and you have to do almost all the work. There's an immense lot of meaning in most of the verses of the Book of Mormon, an enormous lot. I've never noticed it until this year.

7,8 When you read the Book of Mormon, every sentence is a whole proposition, and it presents a number of possibilities. It may or may not contain a vast amount of information (that's for you to find out). So all reading is a miracle actually. It's like the flight of the bee; there's no reason why it should take place. There's no reason why you should be able to read, except that there's something takes place in your mental processes that's transferred from that. Last night I was reading an Arabic text. Now this is quite remarkable. In an Arabic text you don't have any vowels written. You do not separate the words. There's just the flow of consonants, nothing else. You do not have any capital letters. There is no punctuation whatever. There is no division between paragraphs, sentences, things like that. It is all just a stream of consonants and nothing else, and it's the easiest thing in the world. When they start dividing up the words and start putting in the vowels to help you out—which is required for the Koran because you can't take risks of giving your own interpretation—it is much harder to read (when they try to help you along). It's the same thing with Hebrew. A pointed Hebrew text is an annoyance. It gives you a headache. Take away all those shaddas [Arabic diacritical mark indicating the doubling of a consonant], all those little dots and things, and it's much easier to handle. Then you hear the sound; then it speaks to you. But why does it speak to you? This is just the way you react to it; these things are intuitive. But when you are reading, it is just the same thing. What marvels might be there that you are not aware of at all?

8 So I'm going to make three points which are quite relevant to the Book of Mormon from something I wrote 1

years ago: “Few people realize that in Joseph Smith’s day no really ancient manuscripts were known [none at all]. Egyptian and Babylonian could not be read; the Greek and Latin classics were the oldest literature available, preserved almost entirely in bad medieval copies no older than the Byzantine and Carolingian periods [at the earliest].” (Of course, today it’s a different story entirely, but not in Joseph Smith’s time.) “If Joseph Smith is right, the written records should be as old as the human race itself, for he tells us, ‘a book of remembrance was kept... in the language of Adam’ (Moses 6:5). . . . And what does the actual state of the documents attest? If writing evolved gradually and slowly as everything was supposed to have done, there should be a vast accumulation of transitional scribblings [people trying this out, trying that out, throwing them away, etc.] as countless crude and stumbling attempts at writing would leave their marks on stone [that was predicted], bone, clay, and wood over countless millennia of groping trial and error [that’s the way it’s supposed to have happened]. Only there are no such accumulations of primitive writing anywhere.” No such records exist anywhere, though they should. And slate palettes (Egyptian palettes beginning with the palette of Narmer—the hunting palette, the predynastic palette) you find in Egypt with pictures that are supposed to be the most primitive, stumbling writing. It’s very funny that the oldest one, the palette of Narmer, has a picture of the Pharaoh, and he is accompanied by his scribe. The scribe is carrying the two ink wells of red and white ink that a scribe uses to write on paper. This is supposed to be a crude scribbling on stone, but he has his scribe there and the scribe has been writing. This is realized today. “Given the evolutionary hypothesis, any healthy, normal, growing boy can describe in convincing detail how long ago ‘the naive child of nature’ everywhere drew crude pictures to convey his simple thoughts, and how out of this process moved ‘everywhere inexorably ... toward the final stage, the alphabetic writing.’ “

8,9 “But if it really happened that way, we would find traces of evolving writing ‘everywhere’ [as the man says]; veritable middens of scratched rock and bones and shells

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