

# 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 2  
(Edited from Semester 3, 4)

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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.



# Contents

Preface . . . . .	7
About Hugh Nibley . . . . .	9
Lecture 57 Alma 45 . . . . .	11
Lecture 58A Review of Book of Mormon Themes . . . . .	19
Lecture 59 Alma 46 . . . . .	31
Lecture 60 Alma 46 . . . . .	40
Lecture 61 Alma 46 . . . . .	49
Lecture 62 Alma 46 . . . . .	57
Lecture 63 Alma 47 . . . . .	69
Lecture 64 Alma 47 . . . . .	82
Lecture 65 Alma 48 . . . . .	95
Lecture 66 Alma 48 . . . . .	107
Lecture 67 Alma 48-49 . . . . .	123
Lecture 68 Alma 49—50. . . . .	131
Lecture 69 Alma 49-52 . . . . .	141
Lecture 70 Alma 52-54 . . . . .	157
Lecture 71 Alma 54-57 . . . . .	171
Lecture 72 Alma 57-61 . . . . .	183
Lecture 73 Alma 62-Helaman 1 . . . . .	200
Lecture 74 Helaman 1-3 . . . . .	212
Lecture 75 Helaman 3-6 . . . . .	224
Lecture 76 Helaman 6 . . . . .	242
Lecture 77 Helaman 6 . . . . .	249
Lecture 78 Helaman 6-10 . . . . .	259
Lecture 79 Helaman 11-13 . . . . .	272

Lecture 80 Helaman 13 – 3 Nephi 2 . . . . .	281
Lecture 81 3 Nephi 3-5 . . . . .	294
Lecture 82 3 Nephi 6-7 . . . . .	308
Lecture 83 3 Nephi 8-11 . . . . .	321
Lecture 84 3 Nephi 11-15 . . . . .	340
Lecture 85 3 Nephi 16-20 . . . . .	361
Lecture 86 3 Nephi 6 . . . . .	384
Lecture 87 3 Nephi 6 . . . . .	391
Lecture 88 3 Nephi 6-7 . . . . .	398
Lecture 89 3 Nephi 7-8 . . . . .	408
Lecture 90 3 Nephi 9 . . . . .	416
Lecture 91 3 Nephi 9-10 . . . . .	430
Lecture 92 3 Nephi . . . . .	447
Lecture 93 Nephi; Psalm 19 . . . . .	449
Lecture 94 3 Nephi 9-13 . . . . .	454
Lecture 95 3 Nephi 11-17 . . . . .	470
Lecture 96 3 Nephi 11-19 . . . . .	490
JOHN WELCH 97 3 Nephi 11 . . . . .	507
JOHN WELCH 98 3 Nephi 11 . . . . .	518
JOHN WELCH 99 3 Nephi 12-14 . . . . .	534
JOHN WELCH 100 3 Nephi 15-18. . . . .	551
JOHN WELCH 101 3 Nephi 19-4 Nephi 1 . . . . .	564
Lecture 102 4 Nephi 1 . . . . .	582
Lecture 103 4 Nephi 1 . . . . .	591
Lecture 104 4 Nephi 1:27-Mormon 2 . . . . .	607
Lecture 105 Mormon 2-5 . . . . .	622
Lecture 106 Mormon 1-5 . . . . .	638
Lecture 107 Mormon 8-9 . . . . .	652
Lecture 108 Mormon 9 . . . . .	663
Lecture 109 Ether 1-2 . . . . .	666
Lecture 110 Ether 7-14 . . . . .	680
Lecture 111 Ether 2-8 . . . . .	691
Lecture 112 Moroni 1-10 . . . . .	705

# 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

**H**ugh 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 57 Alma 45

## **Periodic Extinctions** **[Nibley on Extinction of the Wicked]** **[Book of Mormon is like a Fossil]**

1,2 This is one of those great periods of extermination. I mention this because this is the theme of the Book of Mormon in which the words destroy or destruction appear [354] times. . . . The first [extinction] was the one discovered by the Alvarez of Berkeley; [it occurred] 66 million years ago. The big question was why the dinosaurs suddenly disappeared. At least twelve mass extinctions have taken place.

2,3 We used to say the fossil record was too imprecise, but all this is changing now. The rules of evolution are being rewritten. Within the time of human history there is no evolution at all. This isn't in our creation story. This doesn't belong to our story. Genesis isn't concerned with this. This isn't where Adam comes in. These are other creatures here. Remember, we believe in the gospel and we preach other things. Joseph Smith's teachings are much more explicit on this than we realize because we get into them more today; namely, that the whole universe is multiple use, and so is the earth. Well, there are creatures on the earth that we know nothing about. They don't concern us; they have nothing to do with our affairs. We have our own thing to concern us. Adam had his family. We are his people, and his history is our history. But there are other histories that have nothing to do with him. That shouldn't disturb us at all,

the idea that there should be anything else besides us. But it is very clear what is happening here. “Most scientists now concur that at least one great extraterrestrial object stuck the planet around the time the dinosaurs died out.” There are lots of diagrams and pictures here; it’s very nice. Here’s the description, and it’s a very apocalyptic description. It’s what you read in the apocalypses of the scriptures. You will recognize these things here in the Book of Mormon. “In the first days after earth was hit, dust blanketed the entire world. It grew pitch-dark for one to three months.” Remember in the Book of Mormon it was a local upheaval, but it was the one that wiped out Nephite civilization. The people could feel the darkness. They couldn’t strike a light, it was so heavy. The same sort of thing may have caused it. It could be meteoric or volcanic; the two go together actually.

2,3 [June 1989 National Geographic] “If the impact was on land, it probably got bitter cold. . .The entire world caught fire.” Of course, this is apocalyptic, the earth going up in flames. This is actually what happened. It talks about Yellowstone and says that was nothing. “Yet this holocaust is insignificant compared with what Wolbach believes happened that day 66 million years ago when earth was hit. The entire world caught fire. . . To get the amount of soot we find [distributed throughout the world at a certain level between the Cretaceous and the Tertiary] as much as 90 percent of the world’s forests must have burned.” We are taking care of that now. “The fireball would have had a radius of several thousand kilometers. Winds of hundreds of kilometers an hour would have swept the planet for hours, drying trees like a giant hair dryer. Two-thousand-degree rock vapor would have spread rapidly. . . In addition, lightning discharges like those in a volcanic eruption could have ignited windswept fires on all landmasses that marched far faster than those at Yellowstone.”

It’s on a much greater scale than that in the Book of Mormon, of course, but it follows the same pattern. The same sorts of things are happening. It’s very depressing and very alarming. It says, “Such doomsday scenarios

strain our belief.... No matter what causes them, mass extinctions do occur. They force a new perspective on the history of life." They also force a new perspective on history, as I said before. In 1200 B.C. Troy fell, and that should concern us—that great tragedy of which Virgil said, *sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangunt* ("hereto there are tears for misfortunes, and mortal sorrows touch the heart"). Matthew Arnold said that's the most moving and the most tragic line in history. When we read that we are all in the same boat. You can't help crying when you read that. There are these times when this hits.

3,4 Then, in Lehi's time the thing hit again. The year 600 B.C. was what Jaspers called the pivotal period. We wrote all about this in that book called *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*,

4 Mass extinctions do occur, and when they strike it is not necessarily the most fit that survive. This is the interesting thing, of course. Who survives? The problem of the Book of Mormon is survival. Remember, you always have the one man against the world—whether it's Alma, or Ammon, or Jared, or Lehi. You always have the one man. Right at the end there you have Mormon and Moroni. Who plans the survival? Survival is a tragic word; we use it too much. Survival is a dirty word as far as I'm concerned, because it means "I stay here while everybody else is wiped out."

4 It's not necessarily the most fit that survive. "Mass extinctions thus promote new beginnings." Well, that's the purpose of them. The Lord wipes the old slate clean and then he brings more on. This is a principle stated again and again in the Book of Mormon. When the cup is full it can't be filled any further. It can't be diluted; there's nothing to do about it. When the fruit is ripe there's no point to letting it ripen any more. This is the promise on this land here. Then the Lord will cause extinction. They will be utterly destroyed, he says. After the winning of a great battle, the Nephites were celebrating, and Alma had to tell them, four hundred years from now they would become extinct if they

were wicked. That's the word he uses. The Lord takes care of these things in order to supplant them. It says in the Book of Mormon that the Lord leads away the righteous into precious lands, and he destroys the wicked. How do you get out of it? Well, it's the story of Abraham, the story of the children of Israel and Moses. Remember, Moses' migrations took place during great world upheavals of the same kind. That's the 1200s, the same time that Troy was destroyed, that the Israelites went out of Egypt into Palestine.

4       The best evidence of the greatest extinction of all, the Permian extinction in which 94 percent of all life on earth was extinguished, is in Utah's House Range west of here. The Air Force is going to [take] it. They are going to use it as a range to practice mass extinction, including biological warfare. They are practicing mass extinction out there now.

5       “A plague of little Asian mammals invaded North America and ... they ate the last of the dinosaurs out of house and home. The earth “was hit not by one great object but rather by a shower of comets that bombarded the planet over several million years.” This is how they are trying to explain it now. “The final terminating impact, says Kauffman, probably occurred on land, where it produced fire storms, soot, and a pall of dust.” There shall be a vapor of smoke and it shall cover the earth, says the Book of Mormon

5,6     Every 26 million years we have these things happen. What could that be? Well, there are two theories. There is one of the Oort Cloud between Pluto and all this Neptune stuff. See how it has caught us by surprise overnight? Between them is a mass of stuff circulating on an almost galactic scale. Every 26 million years in the sun's course around the galaxy we pass through that, and then we get showered by this stuff. The other [theory] is that the sun has a companion star, a dark star, that we can't see at a great distance. They go around each other every 26 million years, and they call that Nemesis. Nemesis brings with it a cloud of planets in its own dust. When we pass through all that stuff, we get showered and plastered again.

6 Well, this is coming quite recently now. “Whether or not we fit a cosmic timetable for an extinction, we surely are in one today.” We are in a period of extinction today is what it’s telling us now. “It began in North America about 11,000 years ago.” That early there was a brilliant culture flourishing in the Balkans. We won’t go into the chronology of the Bible now, but 3,000 or 4,000 years before the pyramids there was the Varna Culture and the people in the center of the Balkans. They’ve discovered 36,000 artifacts—temples, marvelous sculpture, and wonderful metal work. They had fabulous deep mines; it was amazing. It was almost the same time as these creatures because this would make it only 9,000 B.C. It was there then. That particular civilization reached its peak between 8,000 and 7,000 B.C. “In North America about 11,000 years ago, most large [mammals] were wiped out All perished abruptly. What happened?”

6 “All perished abruptly. . . . The extinctions, however, were so rapid—within five hundred to a thousand years—that many scientists suspect an alternate—or at least assistant—villain in this extinction: *Homo sapiens*.” That man [*Homo sapiens*] was the one who was responsible. He was the one who was responsible for that one. Now we come to ourselves, you see.

6. Now he says, “In the plant group I study, 42 percent of the species reported in 1930 have not been collected since.” This particular botanist talking is Sohmer, head of the Bishop Museum in Honolulu. Again, we only have to ask who buys the timber or beef these felled forests produce. Well, McDonalds does. They are the biggest market for the Brazilian jungles [when they buy beef]. “Though occupying less than 0.2 percent of the nation’s landmass, Hawaii contains 27 percent of the endangered birds and plants.”

6,7 This is the theme of the Book of Mormon. Destruction is mentioned 354 times in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon is a purely religious document. In fact, it’s the greatest religious document there is because it is the only one that answers the terrible question. I was going to bring

along Richard Anderson's paperback on the three witnesses and practically require it. It has come out now in paperback. That clinches things very tight now. The question that haunts everybody is (only the Book of Mormon can answer this) "Is this all there is?" Is there anything else? Well, we can talk about morals, beauty, ethics, and all this sort of thing and say that's religion. But that isn't what religion is interested in. We just want the answer to that one question. When we die is that all? Is there anything else? What comes after that? Of course, the answer comes with an angel from on high. Moroni, an angel from other worlds, from the immensity of space, comes and personally delivers the book. On top of that we have Joseph Smith's witness, and you have the three witnesses and the eight witnesses. All their lives they said they saw it. The three left the church, as you know, because of vanity and injured pride. They came back, except [David Whitmer], and they never denied their testimonies. Of course, as soon as they left the church all the newspaper reporters, ministers, and others swarmed in and descended on them like locusts. "Now you will tell us the truth; now you can tell us what really happened." They did. "We'll tell you what really happened; the angel came and showed us the plates." That's what they told them. They could never shake them [the witnesses] at all, any of them.

7 The Book of Mormon is not that. Nobody has ever been able to get around the witnesses, but it's harder to get around the book. It's a solid, compact mass of statements, a package containing thousands of clues. None of the critics that have torn into it have read it with care really. We haven't either. That's why President Benson said, let's start reading it for a change. When I was a kid we just read it because it was sort of romantic. What did it have to do with things? It has to do with us today. So we have here this dazzling procession of vivid images, these marvelous vignettes and character studies perfectly conceived. The Book of Mormon was dug up, remember, so it's a fossil. We were talking about fossils here, and the Book of Mormon is a fossil. FODIRE means "to dig up," and a FOSSA is a ditch. A fossil is something that is dug up. The Book of



Mormon is literally a fossil because Joseph Smith dug it up. He removed the rock and dug and found the book. It's as a fossil that the written word is the most marvelous invention known to man, because every ancient document is a fossil. This is fossilized thought here. Well, if you find a fossil it can tell you all sorts of things. But what does it depend on? It depends on you. You've got to bring all sorts of experience, knowledge, and acumen to the subject and see what you can do with this thing.

7. So what do you do when you have a literal fossil? The most marvelous invention of man, as Galileo and Arthur Clarke and others have told us, is the written word because it can do what nothing else can. It defeats time and place.

8 It's the same thing in reading the Book of Mormon. With a written document you have to go into it. Like the flight of the bee, the act of reading has never been explained. It's a mystery. There's no reason why you should be able to do it. It's a strange thing. The classic example of that would be Arabic and other Semitic languages in which you don't write any vowels. You don't have any punctuation of any kind. You don't have any capital letters to know when it's a personal name. You make no division between the words. You put no vowels. Every word has just three consonants. You just string these consonants along and that's it. Usually it's badly written and covered with fly specks, so how can anyone possibly read it? And yet it can be read. When people start improving on it by putting in the little shaddas and fathas and putting in the pointings to help us along, it becomes a nuisance. You say, "Take those away; we don't want those. They're a nuisance. We got used to reading this.

8 But how can it be done? In theory you have to know first what it is talking about. Then it goes. But if you don't you can be in an awful state of things. That's the condition with Egyptian today. We do not know the point of view from which to read it. Most of it still escapes us. Egyptian is a good example of limitations of which men are not aware. We think we have translated the text, and we

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