Reviews

THE SECULAR RELEVANCE OF THE GOSPEL

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Since Cumorah. By Hugh W. Nibley. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co. xx + 451 pp., $4.95.

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What message has the Book of Mormon for our world? Does it speak to those who sense their own involvement in the greatness and the misery of secular existence? Hugh Nibley, in a portion of *Since Cumorah*, strives to provide an answer to these questions. We are badly in need of a serious discussion of the issues he raises. Usually, however, an abashed silence has followed his scholarly contributions. In order to see what he is up to in the closing portion of *Since Cumorah*, which is my intent in this essay, it is useful to understand something of his role in Mormon intellectual life. Nibley has been a source of dismay in certain circles, but why should he cause consternation? The answer is simple, though consequential.

Hugh Nibley has long been waging a major two-front war: his best-known campaign is against what might be called "Cultural Mormonism"; but an equally significant campaign is now under way against a form of "Sectarian Mormonism" now having some popularity, especially in certain academic circles. Both the Cultural and Sectarian types are eager to effect an accommodation of the gospel with features of the prevailing culture. That Nibley has defended the integrity of the gospel against the Cultural Mormons is rather well known; what is not nearly as well known is that he has evoked the Book of Mormon against the efforts of Sectarian Mormons to align certain American middle-class values with the gospel, as well as the recent attempts of some Mormons to sanctify a radical political ideology by attributing it to God.

In *Since Cumorah* we see Nibley in a somewhat new role; one, however, that is remarkably open and free of rancor. He has often appeared to his Mormon audience as a warrior with a verbal rapier who busies himself in the defense of the faith by impaling the enemies of Joseph Smith and the Mormon scriptures. Both *Sounding Brass* and *The Myth Makers* reveal Nibley in this role.[1] He has both a taste and a talent for irony, and is tempted to sarcasm and mockery. I like his style. All the blundering, pompous, self-assured folly of this world, and especially that manifest in the opposition to the gospel, deserves what it gets. Such verbal fireworks do not always accomplish their mission; however, the style and tone of *Since Cumorah* is different, and those readers who know Nibley only in one role might do well to examine the book carefully.

Since Cumorah is a massive effort to test the Book of Mormon. Such an endeavor is an affront to those Cultural Mormons who feel that the book has already flunked, while some Sectarians reject the scholarly enterprise as wholly irrelevant to the truth of the gospel. However, the material I wish to examine constitutes a special kind of test. Mormons who are genuinely concerned about (and perhaps even those engaged in) the current struggle over political ideologies which threatens to polarize and split the Church should give some serious attention to Nibley's argument, even though it is not presented in the familiar form of an "ism."

He begins with the recognition that among Mormons generally there is an astonishing degree of indifference toward the doctrinal content of the Book of Mormon, as well as a rather profound awareness of its prophetic message. For the Saints, the Book of Mormon is often a sign of God's revelatory activity, and, as such, they may feel a deep commitment to it. However, as Nibley points out, the book itself "claims to contain an enormously important message for whoever is to receive it, and yet until now those few who have been willing to receive it as the authentic word of God have not shown particular interest in that message." He insists, and I think correctly, that everything about the book is "of very minor significance in comparison with what the book actually has to say. As we see it, if an angel took the trouble to deliver the book to Joseph Smith and to instruct him night after night as to just how he was to go about giving it to the world . . . , that book should obviously have something important to convey. The question that all are now asking of the Bible — 'What does it have to say that is of relevance to the modern world?' applies with double force to the Book of Mormon, which is a special message to the modern world." His feeling is that "the ultimate test of the Book of Mormon's validity is whether or not it really has something to say" to our age.

Nibley's effort to show the secular relevance of the Book of Mormon will

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[1]Nibley entered the Mormon academic scene in 1946 with *No Ma'am, That's Not History* — a criticism of Fawn Brodie's famous "biography" of Joseph Smith. This earned him the undying hostility of numerous Cultural Mormons. For some reason they could not get over the impertinence of the "upstart" Nibley criticizing the likes of Brodie, although his early impressions have now been mostly vindicated.

come as a shock to some Mormons. Thus far he has avoided being caught in the narrow, partisan controversy between the party-men whose world is either "liberal" or "conservative." But this does not mean that he has neglected to say things of relevance about problems like, for example, the current polarization of political opinion within the Church — he has, but his contributions, until recently, have been either "hidden" in essays in academic journals,[2] or couched in the words and hence the authority of Brigham Young. In *Since Cumorah*, and especially in the part entitled "The Prophetic Book of Mormon," there is an extended discussion of the secular relevance of the prophetic message of the Book of Mormon wherein Nibley addresses himself to issues that genuinely and deeply concern, as well as divide, the people of God.

The Nibley that surfaces at the end of *Since Cumorah* is quite likely to trouble some of his former allies. He has long been known as a critic of the efforts of those within the Church who wish to see the gospel reconciled to prevailing currents within the culture. Efforts to harmonize the gospel and the culture have taken a number of forms. Some of the most energetic efforts have come from some Mormon intellectuals who, under the influence of the Protestant liberalism of the pre-World War II period, wished to see Mormonism become fully consistent with a brand of secular humanism. Their strategy was to capitulate wherever there seemed to be a serious tension. Hugh Nibley has provided the most significant intellectual obstacle for those who strove to avoid embarrassment over the gospel by retreating into a secularized Cultural Mormonism or by transforming the gospel into a variety of Protestant liberalism or humanism.

Almost alone, Nibley has stood in the way of Mormons who have given up on the Book of Mormon as a source of doctrine (for example, because they have accepted liberal Protestant notions about man's predicament) or those who have more or less rejected the possibility that the book is genuinely the word of God. He has also become the rallying-point for opposition to the development of something like the *Kulturprotestantismus* (Cultural Protestantism) of German theological liberalism after Schleiermacher — a kind of *Kulturmormonismus* that would no longer be threatened and embarrassed by assaults from prevailing science and philosophy because the Mormon religion was to be defined simply as the highest flowering of culture and therefore fully consistent with the science and philosophy of the day.

Some Cultural Mormons have thus come to see in Nibley an ironic, biting, sarcastic, clever, erudite defender of what they understand to be an irrelevant, authoritarian theological conservatism. Further, since many have come to live and die by slogans, it has been assumed by friend and foe alike that, since Nibley is critical of those who would capitulate to the culture by

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[2]Nibley's "The Unsolved Loyalty Problem: Our Western Heritage," *Western Political Quarterly* 6(1953):631–57, can for example, be read both as (1) a straight examination of an issue that plagued the 4th century and which happens to have parallels with the politics of our own time, and, in addition, as (2) a subtle effort at reading a sermon to the Saints about their proclivities.

making Mormonism into a brand of Protestant liberalism or humanism, he must also be an arch political conservative. After all, these people reason, "is it not perfectly obvious that a theological liberal and a political liberal are the same thing?" Nothing could be further from the truth. *Since Cumorah* shows that his critics (and perhaps some of his Sectarian supporters) have misunderstood his position.

The argument of "The Prophetic Book of Mormon" provides a powerful and convincing antidote to counteract the poison of the narrow, partisan, extremist political ideology now being advanced by certain Mormon intellectuals. Nibley has done what no other Mormon could do (and some would not have even thought it possible): he has removed the Book of Mormon from the arsenal of weapons available to the conservatively oriented right wing. The current effort to align the gospel with a worldly political ideology and the Church with a political mass movement is a yeasty fermentation that is entirely inconsistent with the prophetic message of the Book of Mormon. Though his arguments and the conclusions are obvious, Nibley has not made a special effort to call attention to them (why buy trouble?), and it is with some reluctance that I do so. The mood among some Mormons is such that the mere hint that one does not share their social and political opinions is likely to generate a spasm of hostility, indignation, and revulsion, as well as charges of apostasy and heresy. The ideology of the Sectarians tends to include the following: (1) rejection of civil rights legislation that is intended to protect the freedom of conscience and speech and to prevent persecution and discrimination; (2) the abolition of public welfare programs; (3) opposition to taxation; (4) indifference, and even hostility, to the poor, indigent and otherwise unfortunate; (5) the encouragement of military aggression against the evil of other nations; (6) class, national and racial hatreds and conceits. Nibley argues that these cherished social and political nostrums cannot find support in the Book of Mormon and are inconsistent with the gospel.

Most Sectarians will not readily admit that I have described the content of their ideology correctly. They would, instead, want to speak in terms of fundamental principles such as individual initiative, self-reliance, freedom, or of evils such as government regulation and interference, and the welfare dole. With a peculiar kind of honesty, Nibley has torn away the silken veil which piety still draws over our own worldly ambitions and motives. What is really wrong with individual initiative, self-reliance, and so forth? Nothing if they are taken in their proper setting, but as moral absolutes they no longer conform to the law of love; they represent, instead, a crude, worldly ethic, a kind of morally blind Social Darwinism which stresses the survival of the fittest. The Book of Mormon actually describes in horror such a point of view: "every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and . . . every man conquered according to his strength . . ." (Alma 30:17). Now we often hear talk of a universal, immutable, irrevocable Law of the Harvest which determines that men get paid for whatever they do. But not according

to the gospel, which speaks for love and mercy. Nibley points out that

> for charity [i.e., *agape*, love] there is no bookkeeping, no *quid pro quo*, no deals, interest, bargaining, or ulterior motives; *charity gives to those who do not deserve and expects nothing in return*; it is the love God has for us, and the love we have for little children, of whom we expect nothing but for whom we would give everything. By the Law of the Harvest, none of us can expect salvation for "all men that are in a state of nature . . . a carnal state . . . have gone contrary to the nature of God," and if they were to be restored to what they deserve would receive "evil for evil, or carnal for carnal, or devilish for devilish." (Alma 41:11, 13.) "Therefore, my son," says Alma in a surprising conclusion, "see that you are merciful unto your brethren." (Alma 41:14.) That is our only chance, for if God did not have mercy none of us would ever return to his presence, for we are all "in the grasp of justice" from which only "the plan of mercy" can save us. (Alma 42:14f.) But God does have mercy, and has declared that we can have a claim on it to that exact degree to which we have shown charity towards our fellow man. (Italics supplied.)

Then Nibley points out that "charity to be charity must be 'to all men,' especially to those evil people who hate us, 'For if ye love them which love you what reward have ye? Do not even the publicans do the same?' Nor should we demand or expect charity in return. . . . Still, we might say that the Law of the Harvest wins after all, since we must have and give charity to receive it." How does this relate to concrete political and social issues? In this way: our ambition, pride, self-confidence, and love of status, power, and wealth negate our love of God, a love which must be expressed in our love for our fellow-man. Our actions and our rationalizing social and political ideologies do not alway express love, but often a carefully disguised and moralistically rationalized loathing, hatred, or indifference.

Though we seldom worship icons, our chief problem is still idolatry. We are constantly tempted to set our hearts upon our worldly treasures, and, when we do, these objects become our gods. Our worshipping (i.e., counting as divine) human ideas, philosophies, or value-systems must also be counted equally to fall under that which God forbids when he forbids us to manufacture gods from the things of this earth. Nibley argues that the Nephite practice of making gods out of their gold and silver was simply worshipping the stuff as if it were divine. When our hearts are set on power, prestige, influence, status, our luxurious homes, then our political and social views will surely reflect these concerns. Our ideologies often merely rationalize our commitments to the values of this world. Hence it is all too easy to see what really stands behind the pious slogans, rubrics, and clichés advanced by the Sectarian supporters of radical ideologies.

Earlier I mentioned six elements which are commonly found in the Sectarian political ideology. Nibley indicates that the prophetic message of the Book of Mormon speaks to each of these issues.

1. Nibley feels that the Book of Mormon fully supports efforts both to protect civil rights and to prevent persecution and discrimination.

> Some have felt that the attempt of the state to implement the ideas of liberty and equality by passing and enforcing laws repugnant to a majority, *i.e.*, laws restraining persecution, discrimination, slavery, and all violence whatever, is an infringement of free agency. But plainly the Nephites did not think so. As we have seen, they believed that no one was ever without his free agency: one can sin or do unrighteously under any form of government whatever; indeed, the *worse* the government the better the test: after all, we are all being tried and tested on this earth 'under the rule of Belial' himself, "the prince of this world"; but since no one can ever make us sin or do right, our free agency is never in the slightest danger. *But free institutions and civil liberties are, as history shows, in constant danger. They are even attacked by those who would justify their actions as a defense of free agency, and insist that artificial barriers erected by law to protect the rights of unpopular and weak minorities are an attempt to limit that agency.* (Italics supplied.)

In addition, Nibley shows how the Book of Mormon stresses what we would call the freedom of conscience and religion, i.e., freedom to believe or not believe. The point was made by Joseph Smith in the King Follett Discourse: "Every man has a natural, and in our country, a constitutional right to be a false prophet, as well as a true prophet." Joseph Smith claimed that God suffered the establishment of the United States Constitution to provide first and foremost such freedom of conscience (Doctrine and Covenants 101) and the statement on government in the Doctrine and Covenants (Section 134) makes freedom of conscience the key to the legitimacy of human government. (Nibley has treated these themes at some length in the essay entitled "The Ancient Law of Liberty," found in *The World of the Prophets.*)

2. Nibley finds that the Book of Mormon does not necessarily oppose what we now call public welfare programs. King Benjamin's insistance on the necessity of equality resulted in his authorization of such programs. "He insisted that anyone who withheld his substance from the needy, no matter how improvident and deserving of their fate they might be, 'hath great cause to repent' (Mosiah 4:16-18). . . ." Nibley denies that these were merely private welfare activities.

3. Welfare programs need to be financed, and one method is through public taxation. Benjamin's son Mosiah

> wrote equality into the constitution, "that every man should have an equal chance throughout all the land. . . ." (Mosiah 29:38.) "I desire," said the king, "that this inequality should be no more in this land . . . ; but I desire that this be a land of liberty, and every man may enjoy his rights and privileges alike. . . ." (Mosiah 29:32.) This does not mean that some should support others in idleness, "but that the burden should come upon all the people, that every man might bear his part." (Mosiah 29:34.) This was in conformance with Benjamin's policy of taxation: "I would that ye should [this is a royal imperative] impart of your substance to the poor, every man *according to that which he hath* . . . administering to their relief, both spiritually and temporally, according to their wants." (Mosiah 4:26) (Italics are Nibley's.)

After giving another example of a royal order (Mosiah 21:17), Nibley adds: "Here taxation appears as a means of implementing the principle of equality. Whenever taxation is denounced in the Book of Mormon, it is always because the taxer uses the funds not to help others but for his own aggrandizement." Moroni saved the constitution of Mosiah from the king-men by enforcing equality. "This drastic enforcement of equality was justified by an extreme national emergency; but both Alma and Moroni had pointed out to the people on occasion that the worst danger their society had to face was inequality." (Cf. Doctrine and Covenants 78:5-6).

4. The last seventy pages of *Since Cumorah* are brimming with references to our neglect of the poor. Nibley sees Mormon 8:36-39 as a prophetic warning to the saints in our own time.

> "And I know that ye do [present tense] walk in the pride of your hearts; and there are none save a few only who do not lift themselves up in the pride of their hearts, unto the wearing of very fine apparel, unto envyings and strifes, and malice, and persecutions, and all manner of iniquities. . . ." (Mormon 8:36.) Here is our own fashionable, well-dressed, status-conscious and highly competitive society. The "iniquities" with which it is charged are interesting, for instead of crime, immorality, and atheism we are told of the vices of vanity, of the intolerant and uncharitable state of mind: pride, envy, strife, malice and persecution. These are the crimes of meanness; whereas libertines, bandits and unbelievers have been known to be generous and humane, the people whom Mormon is addressing betray no such weakness. They are dedicated people: "For behold, ye do love money, and your substance, and your fine apparel, and the adorning of your churches, *more than ye love the poor and the needy, the sick and afflicted.*" (Mormon 8:37). These people do not persecute the poor (they are too single-minded for that), but simply ignore their existence: ". . . ye adorn yourselves with that which hath no life, and yet suffer the hungry, and the needy . . . to pass by you, and notice them not." (Mormon 8:39.)

5. The entire chapter on "Military History" (chapter 11) and much of the remaining seventy pages of *Since Cumorah* is devoted to warning the saints against wishing to see political power and especially military force used to punish the wickedness of other parties and nations, *no matter how wicked they may actually be.* The proper theme, Nibley maintains, should be co-existence, a word he uses over and over, and not the venerable old though utterly insane and unrighteous notion of "kill or be killed," "it is either you or me." The saints should always practice forbearance toward their enemies and strive for peace, even sometimes at the price of other values (e.g., Mosiah 20:22 and cf. several important statements by the First Presidency); they should only fight defensively and for limited objectives. War and the threat of war is God's way of showing us that both sides are bad. "Of one thing we can be sure, however — the good people never fight the bad people: they never fight anybody: '. . . it is by the wicked that the wicked are punished; for it is the wicked that stir up the hearts of the children of men unto bloodshed.' (Mormon 4:5.)"

6. Being righteous has nothing whatever to do with our being a member of a particular family, party, class, nation or race. Likewise, according to Nibley, wickedness should not be attributed to those who do not belong to some fashionable group. It is not our business to judge other men's sins. "If they have not charity it mattereth not unto thee," the Lord told one Nephite prophet who was inordinately concerned about the sins of others. (Ether 12:37.) Instead, we must come to realize that before God we are all beggars. If we show our faith through love, God will see and respond with mercy toward us. However, when our hearts are set upon some worldly object or value, when we "seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness" (Doctrine and Covenants 1:16), we actually worship some worldly likeness instead of God. Then we lust after the riches of this world, upon which our hearts are set; then we begin to seek power and gain that we "might be lifted up one above another." The cycle is familiar: with wealth or other prosperity comes a feeling of pride and superiority, from which comes intense status-consciousness and an insatiable need for those things which assure our status (especially power and wealth). Why are we unhappy? "We seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness." Instead we set our hearts on the vain things of this world; we are anxious about the wrong things. "Please note," writes Nibley, ". . . wickedness does not consist in being on the *wrong side* — in the Book of Mormon it never does." Party, class, nation are all equally irrelevant to the question of righteousness of one and the wickedness of another group and turn us from the actual human predicament and its authentic solution.

But what about race? For the second time, Nibley has examined what he calls "The Race Question." The very title is enough to excite some anxiety, which only shows that the subject needs to be dealt with. What he examines, of course, are the ethnological teachings found in the Book of Mormon and the use of group labels (e.g., Nephite, Lamanite). The relevant issue is the problem of dark skin — "black" and "white." The terms "black" and "white" are used, Nibley argues, as *marks* of a general way of life; that is, they are cultural designations. They are marks, they are also intended by God, and they are put upon the holder by his own actions, but there is no miracle of skin color changing from light to dark ("white" to "black"?), except as one adopted a certain cultural pattern.

Nibley finds that the Book of Mormon is busy warning us about our temptation to be concerned about wealth, status, prestige, power, and influence. After all, sin is anxiety about the things of this world. The real source of our wickedness is our desire to live something that is not genuinely worthy of our love, our urge to worship a mere likeness, our tendency to be concerned about some trivial thing. The one thing we fear in this world and resent above all other things is being edged out of our (rightful?) place at the table when Mother Technology's pie is being cut. Things seem to merit status and we are *all* tempted by such ephemeral things. The trouble with the conservatively oriented political ideology with which some of the saints are now flirting and which is now being taught as God-given by some

Sectarian teachers is that it represents a setting of the heart upon the wrong things. Its motive is not charity; its much vaunted principles are merely *of this world* in spite of its many pious pretensions. The chief weakness of the Sectarian political ideology is that it is a clumsy attempt to accommodate the gospel to certain features of the prevailing culture. We are often quite anxious lest our wealth, our hard earned wealth, for example, be taxed by an evil and profligate government and given to Blacks, the poor, or someone else who did not earn it. We forget that we are all beggars before the Lord and we miss the point of the Great Commandment (Cf. Mosiah 4:16-27). We worry about our status, our influence and power, our place in this world. A vain, worldly political ideology which happens to express our fears and reflect our anxieties is seized upon as an expression of a profound truth and eagerly made a corollary of the gospel. What irony! The gospel is *not* just another ideology. The good news about Jesus Christ is an affront to all ideologies; it challenges all the presumptions we label as "isms." Our worldly wisdom is foolishness to God. We take ourselves and our world entirely too seriously when we try to insist that we can have it both ways, that our own "isms" – whatever they may be – and the gospel are both equally true. Of course, this strikes at both the Sectarian and Cultural brands of Mormonism, for they both strive to accommodate the gospel to something they prize in the secular culture.

Further, we misunderstand the gospel when we assume that we can deduce something from it (something always suspiciously like what Herbert Spencer, Frederick Bastiat, Robert Welch, John Dewey, et al. have already said) that will serve as a true political ideology.

As soon as we yield to the enticement to associate the gospel with a worldly ideology, we begin to ready the thought police. However, the Book of Mormon stands directly in the way of any such nonsense, as Nibley has often pointed out. It is not the job of the saints to go around forcing anyone, in any way, to do or not to do or believe or not to believe anything. "The Book of Mormon," according to him, "offers striking illustrations of the psychological principle that impatience with the wickedness of others (even when it is real wickedness and not merely imagined) is a sure measure of one's own wickedness. The Book of Mormon presents what has been called the 'conspiratorial interpretation of history.' People who accept such an interpretation are prone to set up their own counter-conspiracies to check the evil ones. But that is exactly what the Book of Mormon forbids above all things, since, it constantly reminds us, God alone knows the hearts of men and God alone will repay." Our commission is only to preach the gospel and not to enforce righteousness or judge anyone.

In fact, the wicked of this world are not our concern at all. Our problem is, instead, what Nibley aptly calls the "Nephite Disease," i.e., the temptation to set our hearts on the riches of this world, and our own ambition, self-righteousness and pride. This disease may not appear nearly as dreadful as those diseases which infect others. To the saints, however, it is fatal, if unchecked, while those infected by the far more ugly diseases may yet

be healed by the gospel. Nibley's thesis is that the Book of Mormon was made available to our world to warn *us* about the Nephite Disease. Our problem, then, is not the wickedness of others – we have no room to gloat – but our own worldliness. One should not use the Book of Mormon to blast the Russians, the Chinese, the Communists, the Blacks *or anyone else* whom we currently are being taught to hate and fear; its message of warning is primarily for the saints, i.e., for those who freely choose to heed the gospel message.

It is to be hoped that Nibley's book will be read and seriously considered – even more that the Book of Mormon will itself receive our attention. My experience with students at B.Y.U. convinces me that vast numbers of young Mormons, and often the most able and faithful young saints, are eager for the message of the Book of Mormon and deeply appreciate having it pointed out. It is a shame that so many students go through a long course of study on the Book of Mormon with, of all things, Bastiat's *The Law* as a guide. (This little book is an old criticism of the evils of socialism that has recently been promoted by the John Birch Society. In a number of "religion classes" at Brigham Young University it has actually been a requirement that one read Bastiat's book in order to receive an A in the study of the Book of Mormon.) Perhaps those teachers who see things more the way Nibley does – they are clearly in the majority – could arrange to have Part V of *Since Cumorah* reprinted in an inexpensive edition and made available to students as a commentary on the Book of Mormon, if such a thing seems to be needed. This would certainly seem to make more sense than the continual use of old (or new) tracts on socialism, communism or the welfare state, written by those wholly or partially ignorant of the gospel. Teaching the Book of Mormon in ways that fill the student's mind with irrelevancies, worldly nonsense, partisan political opinions (e.g., public education is an activity of the devil, or *all* public attempts to assist the poor and indigent are demonic) only makes the gospel message seem absurd and totally irrelevant to our world, and drives many young saints into fanaticism or eventual apostasy.

Some Mormons indeed are losing their faith altogether, simply because the expressions which they are expected to assimilate are quite divorced from the realities of man's actual existence. Thus instead of the gospel message appearing to have any deep relevance to life, it is now sometimes made to appear as something mostly, or even totally, irrelevant to the predicament of the secular world. However, as Nibley ably shows, the gospel is more than merely something that serves to give the unreflective a comfortable feeling: it has meaning for one caught up in the current sweep of tragic events. In fact, its message only really takes on meaning when man begins to sense that he is teetering on the rim of an abyss. For without God's mercy, our best efforts are only an heroic but still laughable gesture.