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Abstract Many critics deny that the first five books of the Old Testament were written by Moses and consider them to be childish myths. However, when Nephi and Lehi examined the brass plates, they found them to contain “the five books of Moses.” And in the Book of Mormon, the Savior himself confirms their authorship. The book of Ether also offers confirmation of the Tower of Babel story.

The Book of Mormon and the Problem of the Pentateuch

Abstract: Many critics deny that the first five books of the Old Testament were written by Moses and consider them to be childish myths. However, when Nephi and Lehi examined the brass plates, they found them to contain "the five books of Moses." And in the Book of Mormon, the Savior himself confirms their authorship. The book of Ether also offers confirmation of the Tower of Babel story.

The Book of Mormon contains four outstanding literary problems; these all stem from the fact that the Nephite scripture quotes certain Old and New Testament books with resulting technical implications of interest to students of these records. We may list the problems as follows: (1) the problem of the Pentateuch, (2) the problem of Isaiah, (3) the problem of the Sermon on the Mount, and (4) the problem of 1 Corinthians 12–13. There are additional problems of less importance involving other books. In this chapter we shall deal with the first-named problem.

Before the relation of the Pentateuchal problem to the Book of Mormon can be understood, it will be necessary to explain the literary problem of the Pentateuch in the Old Testament. Many scholars, particularly the followers of the great German professor Wellhausen, consider it proper to study the first six books of the Old Testament as a unit, and refer to the problem as the problem

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of the Hexateuch. In this chapter we shall limit ourselves to the Pentateuch.

Critical writers for many years have denied that Moses wrote the Law, i.e., the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (the Pentateuch). Indeed, some important critics have gone so far as to affirm that a daring literary fraud attributed the origin of these books to Moses, thus creating the tradition that he was the great Hebrew lawgiver and the founder of the religion of Israel. The critics profess to sense the presence of four perfectly distinct though closely interwoven written sources in the books of Moses: the Yahwist (J), the Elohist (E), the Deuteronomist (D), and the Priestly Code (P). Most of these in turn are supposed to be made up of narrative and statutory sections and to admit of further source division, or at least to give evidence of several editorial revisions. It is held that several centuries elapsed from the time the earliest sources were written down, until the editing of the Pentateuch in substantially the form we now have it—from about 900 until 400 B.C.

These, in brief, have been the views of most so-called “liberal” scholars until comparatively recent times. Even now the number who hold such views is very great. Their influence has been such as to convince many intelligent people that the books of Moses are a mythical and jumbled account of the origin of the people and institutions of Israel. To be a little more specific in respect to certain views held, let me call attention to a small book by a well-known American Bible scholar (now deceased), George R. Berry, entitled *The Old Testament: A Liability or an Asset*.¹ In his first chapter, Professor Berry asserts that the historical element in the early chapters of Genesis is very slight, “if, indeed, it is present at all.” Genesis 1–11 are relegated to the realm of “myths and legends.” The patriarchal narratives, Genesis 12–50, are held to be legends. In these Professor Berry professes to detect a “thread of history.” But even here he finds the history to be that “of clans and tribes, not of individuals.” So we might continue in similar vein, showing how much material in the Pentateuch

¹ George R. Berry, *The Old Testament: A Liability or an Asset* (Hamilton, NY: Republican Press, 1941).

belongs to the "shadowland of history," to quote Professor Berry.

Now, the question follows: What is the relationship between the so-called "liberal" criticism and the Book of Mormon? This we shall attempt to show. The reader should bear in mind (1) that the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch has been, and is now, widely denied, and (2) that much of the narrative element in the Pentateuch, particularly in the book of Genesis, is held to be unhistorical and of limited value.

To these assertions we may add a third. Many of the critics deny the reality of any supernatural intervention in the origin and development of the religion and institutions of Israel, holding that her history follows the pattern laid down by naturalistic evolution.

Even a cursory examination of the Book of Mormon will reveal clearly to the student the great esteem in which Moses and his work were held by the Nephites. It appears that the Nephites had access to the Pentateuch, which was found written upon the brass plates brought from Jerusalem about 600 B.C. When Father Lehi examined these plates, it is recorded that:

He beheld that they did contain the *five books of Moses*, which gave an account of the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve, who were our first parents. (1 Nephi 5:11)

The Book of Mormon thus confirms the age-old tradition that Moses wrote, or caused to be written, five books. Moreover, the allusions made by the Book of Mormon to the Pentateuch imply that the latter had been written and edited, and were in common use long before 600 B.C. A prophecy, the substance of which is found in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19, is quoted by both the Savior and Nephi, son of Lehi, as coming from Moses and is approved by our Lord as having its fulfillment in him. These are the words of the Savior:

Behold, I am he of whom Moses spake, saying: A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that every soul who will not hear that

prophet shall be cut off from among the people.
(3 Nephi 20:23; cf. 3 Nephi 21:11; 1 Nephi 22:20–21;
Acts 3:22–23)

This passage is presented, not only because the book of Deuteronomy is regarded by scholars as a late product, representing the final result of a number of editorial expansions (of an important collection of Hebrew law; Deuteronomy 12–26) beginning in 621 B.C. and ending about 400 B.C., but also because most modern Bible scholars reject prophetic prediction of future events. In this particular instance the Savior himself places his divine sanction and approval upon the words accredited to Moses.

From what has already been said, it is evident that the Book of Mormon is almost at complete loggerheads with that influential branch of biblical criticism which holds that Moses did not write the Pentateuch or have it composed; it seems also out of harmony with the view that the Pentateuch reached its final form about 400 B.C. Let us emphasize again the fact that Nephi and his father seemed to view "the five books of Moses" (1 Nephi 5:11) as a well-known religious production when they examined the brass plates about 600 B.C. Nor should we miss the implications inherent in the statement made by Nephi about Laban, the keeper of the brass plates:

And Laban also was a descendant of Joseph, wherefore he and his fathers had kept the records. (1 Nephi 5:16)

Since the records of Moses dealt with "the creation of the world, and also of Adam and Eve" (1 Nephi 5:11), they were probably the oldest records on the brass plates and had doubtless been kept for generations in Laban's family (see 1 Nephi 5:11–16).

Let us now probe a little into the Book of Mormon views which have a bearing upon the historicity of the Mosaic account, particularly that of Genesis.

In Alma 13:14–19 is found a discourse upon Melchizedek, the great high priest mentioned in Genesis 14. Not only is Melchizedek accepted as an individual to whom Abraham paid tithes (cf. Genesis 14:20), but he is accepted as one of the greatest

spiritual characters who ever lived. Details are given of him which are not found in our present Old Testament.

This view of Melchizedek is a far cry from that taken by Dr. Pfeiffer of Harvard University, who looks upon the Melchizedek episode (Genesis 14:18–20) as a “late” production whose purpose was to glorify the priesthood of Jerusalem.²

We call attention also to the serious use made by Lehi of the Creation narratives in Genesis (2 Nephi 2:15–25). This use by Lehi is also to be contrasted with the views of our modern critics, including Dr. Pfeiffer, who says that the Creation narratives are in the class of rather primitive and childish myths and legends.³

Since he, along with many of the other critics, relegates the Tower of Babel narrative into the same class, let us see the implications such a view, if true, would have upon an important book in the Nephite scripture—the book of Ether.

The book of Ether is a fifteen-chapter abridgment of the twenty-four plates found by the people of Limhi in the days of King Mosiah. It gives an outline history of a people who were led to this continent from the Tower of Babel and became a great nation. These people, called Jaredites, had a national history of possibly sixteen centuries or more. The Tower of Babel record is the factual basis of the book of Ether. The Lord did not confound the Jaredite language, but guided his people and made of them a great nation. Ether, the last great prophet and historian of this people, gives his own genealogy, covering twenty-nine generations or more back to Jared, who lived at the time of the Tower of Babel episode. If, now, the tower episode is unhistorical and in the realm of childish myth, it requires no great thought to determine the embarrassing position of the Book of Mormon; the book of Ether must be an extension of a childish myth! In short, the Book of Mormon is at extreme odds with modern critical views respecting the historicity of the Tower of Babel narrative.

Enough has been pointed out to give a fair understanding of the implications the Pentateuchal problem raises in modern Book of Mormon study. In general we may conclude that the Nephite record supports the ancient traditions of the Mosaic authorship of

² Robert H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941), 161.

³ *Ibid.*

the Pentateuch and sustains the historicity of its narratives where it touches them in any way.

These conclusions have disturbed some of my good friends, who have been strongly attracted to the modern views of the Pentateuch as set forth in standard textbooks on the Bible. These textbooks by well-known scholars in the field give what seem to be reasonable and convincing solutions to the difficulties posed by Bible narratives such as the Creation, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, and so forth. If the narratives are assumed to be primitive and childish myths, such as might be expected in the childhood of a race of people like the Hebrews, then most intellectual difficulties disappear. Hence the popularity of modern views. These friends say to me, "Sperry, the Nephites were Hebrews, and had all the traditions of the Hebrews. Why, then, does the Book of Mormon present any hindrance to the acceptance of modern critical views on the Pentateuch? Take your book of Ether problem, for instance; the Nephites believed in the Tower of Babel story like their Hebrew contemporaries in Palestine. Couldn't one expect them to write narratives based on the myth such as the book of Ether? We do not impugn their motives in writing them. Even if the tower story is a myth—looking at it from the modern view—the book of Ether does not condemn the Book of Mormon or brand it as a fabrication." I hope that I do no one an injustice when I say I cannot believe that my friends have given the problem the critical study and thought necessary to understand it completely. Let us notice some inconsistencies in the view that one can accept at the same time the Book of Mormon and the modern critical position respecting the Pentateuch.

First, the Book of Mormon accepts and develops the view that the gospel was in the world from the beginning. Indeed, the Nephite scripture teaches that Christianity was taught to Adam and his descendants from earliest times. Read Lehi's sermon in 2 Nephi 2, in which Adam and Eve's experiences in the Garden of Eden are connected with the atoning sacrifice of the Messiah who was to come. Observe in the very next chapter Lehi's remarks concerning Joseph who was sold into Egypt and the prediction that a "choice seer" should be raised up in the latter days, like unto him. This seer, we believe, was Joseph Smith. What modern critical scholar of the Old Testament is willing to accept these

doctrines? Not one. Not even the most conservative scholars outside our own faith hold these beliefs.

Second, we must point out that the evidence in the Book of Mormon decidedly opposes the modern contention that the Pentateuch was canonized about 400 B.C. First Nephi 5:11-16 seems to imply that not only was the Pentateuch canonized and in common use long before 600 B.C., but also some of the prophetic books, including part of the writings of Jeremiah.

Third, let us revert back to the problem raised about the book of Ether. The Book of Mormon makes plain that a representative of the Jaredite people actually lived to see a people from Palestine inherit this land. The representative in question was none other than Coriantumr, the last Jaredite king. The book of Omni records the following:

And it came to pass in the days of Mosiah, there was a large stone brought unto him with engravings on it; and he did interpret the engravings by the gift and power of God.

And they gave an account of one Coriantumr, and the slain of his people. And Coriantumr was discovered by the people of Zarahemla; and he dwelt with them for the space of nine moons.

It also spake a few words concerning his fathers. And his first parents came out from the tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people; and the severity of the Lord fell upon them according to his judgments, which are just; and their bones lay scattered in the land northward. (Omni 1:20-22; cf. Ether 13:21)

This passage is absolutely fatal for the belief that the Tower of Babel narrative and the narratives in the book of Ether are myths without a basis of historical fact. The fact that Coriantumr was seen by the Mulekites makes it plain that the book of Ether was not based on myth. The fact also that the twenty-four plates of Limhi were actually in possession of the Nephites will require some real explaining. Did the Nephites manufacture these plates for the express purpose of perpetuating a Tower of Babel myth? Common sense says, "No."

Aside from these considerations there is a stronger one still; it lies in the moral realm. What conception of God must one have to believe that he would approve the extension or propagation of a "childish" Tower of Babel myth and declare it to be "true and translated correctly"? My friends, I am sure, do not desire to hold a questionable concept of God.

I am convinced that Mormon scholars cannot be consistent and logical if they maintain that belief in the "critical" hypotheses respecting the Pentateuch is not incompatible with the Book of Mormon view of it. Most of us, I am sure, have no desire for watertight intellectual compartments in our religious teaching—one compartment in which we have the most up-do-date critical theories of the Old Testament; another for the New Testament; and still others for the Book of Mormon, the Doctrine and Covenants, the Pearl of Great Price, and so forth. Hence the need in the Church for more careful scrutiny of hypotheses and theories which have to do with the scriptures. We ought to be well informed not only on what the theories are, but on their implications on all of our scriptures. In the present chapter we have seen that the Book of Mormon is not very complimentary to critical theories respecting the Pentateuch, and vice versa.

In conclusion it should be emphasized that a goodly number of great scholars through the years have opposed the Pentateuchal theories or variations of them now so common. It isn't necessary to invoke the aid of the Book of Mormon or any Church works in order to make out an excellent case for the conservative position. This position has been explained by Dr. Robert D. Wilson of Princeton University as follows:

The Pentateuch as it stands is historical and from the time of Moses; and Moses was its real author, though it may have been revised and edited by later redactors, the additions being just as much inspired and true as the rest.⁴

This chapter has been written solely because the critical position is so widely held and taught at the present time. For the bene-

⁴ Robert D. Wilson, *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1926), 11, slightly adapted.

fit of those who may desire to investigate the problem on its own merits, we are adding a brief bibliography herewith.⁵

Conservative Views

Gerhard C. Aalders. *Recent Trends in Old Testament Criticism*. London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship of Evangelical Unions, 1939.

A small pamphlet by a professor in the Free University of Amsterdam.

Oswald T. Allis. *The Five Books of Moses*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1943.

With the resources of modern scholarship at his command, Allis could have done a better job than he did; nevertheless, he delivers some telling blows against the critical position.

Joseph Coppens. *The Old Testament and the Critics*. Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild, 1942.

A very temperate and valuable work by a great Catholic scholar from the University of Louvain.

William H. Green. *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1895.

William H. Green, *The Unity of the Book of Genesis*. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1895.

Two able books by one of the greatest of American Hebraists.

James Orr. *The Problem of the Old Testament*. New York, Scribner's Sons, 1895.

One of the most able books ever published on the subject.

Harold M. Wiener. *Essays in Pentateuchal Criticism*. Oberlin: Bibliotheca Sacra, 1909.

By an able Jewish lawyer.

⁵ Editor's note: See Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), and Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1978-84), for more recent works on the same subject.

Robert D. Wilson. *A Scientific Investigation of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1926.

By a professor at Princeton University, who was an outstanding foe of the critical position.

Critical Views

George R. Berry. *The Old Testament: A Liability or an Asset*. Hamilton, NY: Republican Press, 1941.

George R. Berry, *Higher Criticism and the Old Testament*. Hamilton, NY: Republican Press, 1937.

Two small books by a well-known American scholar.

Joseph E. Carpenter and George Harford. *The Composition of the Hexateuch*. London: Oxford University Press, 1902.

A standard work.

Samuel R. Driver. *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, new ed., rev. New York: Scribner's Sons, 1913.

By a great English scholar whose views still have immense popularity.

Robert H. Pfeiffer. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1941.

By a Harvard University expert whose views are given at considerable length; see especially pages 129–270.

David C. Simpson. *Pentateuchal Criticism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1924.

The modern views are marshaled with great skill in this text.