

FROM THE EDITOR

ON THE DEATH OF NEPHI

By Dan Wotherspoon

CALL FOR REFLECTIONS

As part of our May 2005 SUNSTONE issue, we plan to include a celebration of the life and work of Hugh Nibley. Please send us a short reflection about Hugh. How has his approach to the gospel affected your outlook or spiritual journey? Tell us about your most memorable encounter with the man or his writing. *Deadline for submission: 25 APRIL.*

IN MY ROLE here at Sunstone, I am often asked about my own take on the Book of Mormon. Given my exposure to Book of Mormon controversies over the past couple of decades, especially the recent challenges from DNA studies, how has the Book of Mormon survived for me?

When I answer my conversation partners that I really haven't come to a conclusion, they usually seem disappointed. Surely after years of thinking about it, I've had time to get my mind around what I think the book is! "Come on," they'll seem to plead, "just say it." I'm usually not sure what exactly they're hoping to hear from me, but there's something about their desperation for a succinct statement that makes me even more determined not to offer one.

To some degree, my hesitation comes from feeling that I have an inadequate knowledge of the relevant materials—all the arguments for and against its historicity. I've watched and listened to all sides as they've brought out their best stuff, but I still can't say that I'm fully conversant with the strengths and weaknesses of every approach. There's no personal image more unseemly to me than that of the blustery buffoon who has a little knowledge yet waxes long and loud, pretending to know more than he does, feigning a confidence he hasn't earned.

But mostly I hesitate because my walk with the Book of Mormon is a sacred journey for me. It is littered with milestones that mark all sorts of shifts in perspective—and is still ongoing. I'm not really in a hurry to see this journey end.

I GREW up active LDS and, for most of my youth, was seen by my teachers and leaders as a kind of rising star—the kid most likely to be stake president, that kind of thing. I was blessed with a good, grasping

mind and an ability to recall scriptures in context while applying them to most any gospel topic. I wasn't shy as a public speaker. "Oh, what a missionary you'll make!" I liked the approval I received.

But as with anything that is too easily attained, I didn't value what I had been given. As with any image that is bequeathed to us by others, my "golden boy" mantle never truly rested well upon my shoulders. And so I shrugged.

By the time I finally read the Book of Mormon five years later, I was no one's golden boy. Years of sabotaging every gift I'd been given and obliterating every line I'd ever drawn in the sand (as if to say "Here's the limit to how far I can fall") had left me without hope. One of the profound moments of my life was hearing what I understood to be the voice and laughter of Satan in my head, saying, *Gotcha! You've rejected every good thing that has ever come into your life. You couldn't make a good choice if you tried.*

I've shared in a past editorial how through the grace of an aunt and uncle, and the magic of living with their loving family, I was slowly able to challenge the taunt of that voice, to prove it wrong and make good choices again. One of those choices was finally to read the Book of Mormon.

It was there that I met Alma the younger and the sons of Mosiah. They were me. And in their transformation, I found hope for my own. *Maybe I, too, can be a person of worth again.*

I'VE read dozens of commentaries on the Book of Mormon's weakness as narrative—how, if it is fiction, it's pretty formulaic stuff. Nephi, Laman and Lemuel, Alma, Ammon, and the other sons of Mosiah—they're pretty one-dimensional, not very interesting as characters go, arche-

types more than depictions of genuine human beings. And I agree. But I'll always be grateful for my encounter with those poorly drawn people. I'll never be able to deny how, toward the end of my mission, I was blessed to experience what the Book of Mormon says of Ammon and his brothers: that "they were desirous that salvation should be declared to every creature, for they could not bear that any human soul should perish; yea, even the very thoughts that any soul should endure endless torment did cause them to quake and tremble" (Mosiah 28:3). In those final days, I came to experience what the Book of Mormon says of Nephi: that "the fullness of [his] intent" being a desire to call all persons to God (1 Nephi 6:4).

MANY voices, some in the letters on the preceding several pages, have begun to use recent DNA studies as decisive grounds to declare their own version of Nietzsche's "death of God"—in this case, we could say, the death of Nephi. When understood in proper context, however, Nietzsche's declaration was really about the death of an *image of God*, an understanding of God that modernity had surely shown to be inadequate, even harmful. For those who had ears to hear, Nietzsche was announcing an opportunity for human beings to re-think, re-value, re-imagine. "How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?" he asks of those who through study and faith in modernity have killed God. "Must not we ourselves become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."¹

Given my experiences with the Book of Mormon, Nephi still lives for me. After all my reading and reflection through the years, I haven't fully decided if he and the others described in the Book of Mormon ever really lived, ever drew real breath; I simply know that they gave life to me and that at times, they've taken my breath away.

Killing Nephi is no light matter. As I've pondered and continue to ponder this act, I recognize that I am on holy ground. Is what I would offer as justification for my deed something that would serve as a higher truth for those who come after me?

I'm on a sacred journey with Nephi and company. I feel no need to rush to the end. 🙏

NOTE

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 3: 125, 181.