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The Flimsiest Show on Earth

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The Flimsiest Show on Earth

Blake T. Ostler

Review of Lars Nielsen, *How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass: The Second Greatest Show on Earth* (Minnetonka, MN: self-pub., 2024). 390 pages. \$19.95.

Abstract: *Every so often an anti-Mormon book comes along that lowers the bar for attacks on the faith. How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass is one such work. It relies on speculation, conjecture, and tenuous connections to render, out of whole cloth, a hypothesis for the Book of Mormon's creation that is almost laughable.*

For those who prefer to jump to the bottom line, I believe it would be a vast understatement to say that *How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass*¹ is one of the worst attempts to explain the existence of the Book of Mormon ever written. Strong words? Perhaps, but the assessment is compounded by it being the most banal book I have ever come across. After reading the book, my first inclination was to conclude that it really doesn't deserve a formal review. That reaction, however, must be tempered by the glowing reviews and reports by fawning fans evident in some quarters of the online world. Thus, my final decision was to pen this review, in the hopes of helping some

1. Lars Nielsen, *How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass: The Second Greatest Show on Earth* (Minnetonka, MN: self-pub., 2024). In his book, Nielsen chooses to always refer to the Book of Mormon as *The Book of Mormon*, in italic. In choosing to do so, he indicates his belief that the book is a fiction, as opposed to the Bible, which he never italicizes and, presumably, views as holy scripture. In this review, I have chosen to not refer to the Book of Mormon in the same way as Nielsen does, at least in the title of the book. In any direct quotes from Nielsen's work, I use his preference of capitalization and italic.

unsuspecting reader who may be tempted to invest in the book. (Hint: save your money for something more valuable. Perhaps a ham sandwich.)

Nielsen is not shy in declaring how amazing his book is. Nielsen presents his “theory” with expansive, unqualified declarations that what he gives us is indisputably true. On the back cover he confidently asserts that his book is the “most comprehensive, evidence-based” explanation and that it is the “true story” of how the Book of Mormon was created. Nielsen even includes an ominous trigger warning:

Trigger Warning: This book is not written for true-believing Mormons (TBMs). If you are a TBM and you do not yet have a robust support system outside of the Mormon church, do not read this book. If you continue to read it, you accept the responsibility of managing your immediate or eventual faith crisis in a way that will not result in harm to yourself or others. (Back cover)²

Duly forewarned by this amazing and brazen assessment of the persuasiveness of his own work, Nielsen presents a theory of how the Book of Mormon was created:

Nephi in *The Book of Mormon* was to some degree intentionally modeled on (or named after) Kircher’s Barachias Nephi. . . . More than one hundred years after Kircher had passed away, memes from his life and works got into the mind of Dartmouth’s Professor of Oriental Languages (the second link in the Kircherism chain) as he read, translated, and studied the works of the immortal encyclopaedist. Professor [John] Smith transmitted some of those memes to his student, Solomon Spalding (the third link) as part of his graduate-level research and in the form of a fiction that Professor Smith had started but did not publish, fearing that it might injure his reputation as a theological writer. Professor Smith was therefore both a source and an influence on what eventually became *The Book of Mormon*. After finishing his master’s work, Spalding served as a Dartmouth missionary for ten years, after which he deconstructed his faith and became an atheist. When Professor Smith died in 1809, Spalding decided to finally finish what I now call *Stories*

2. The same trigger warning also appears in the front of Nielsen’s book, right under his dedication (p. v).

from *Lost Manuscripts Found*, which consisted of several nested storylines, including the F, N, J, and M texts. Some or all of these sources ended up in the possession of Sidney Rigdon (the fourth link). (pp. 245–46)

What we can say definitively is that there is absolutely no evidence at all for any of these supposed "links." But we can say much more than that. It is demonstrable that the claimed links are extremely improbable given more solid evidence. There is no evidence that John Smith ever heard of Kircher, read Kircher, or even had access to anything written by Kircher. Indeed, Kircher (1751–1809) was almost unknown in scholarship during John Smith's lifetime and copies of Kircher's works were extremely rare. Nielsen speculates that perhaps Sydney Rigdon accessed Kircher through John Smith, who was at Dartmouth. But the catalogues of Dartmouth's library holdings in 1775 and 1825 don't list any works by Kircher.³ Dartmouth College Library didn't contain Kircher's three-volume *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* or any other works by Kircher during Smith's lifetime. There were no books by Kircher in the library in 1775, when Smith started teaching at Dartmouth, and there were no books by Kircher in the library in 1825, years after his death. The student society libraries didn't have any books by Kircher either. Further, the Dartmouth student library also didn't have any Kircher works.⁴

Nielsen relies solely on an 1850 reference in *Bibliotheca Sacra and Theological Review* as the sole evidence to link John Smith to Kircher (p. 139).⁵ But Nielsen had access to the 1809 Dartmouth library catalogue showing that Kircher's works were not present in the Dartmouth library at the time. He claims, without substantiation, that John Smith owned the book and not the library, but allows that his 1850 source may be mistaken:

It may be that other New England professors mistakenly assumed that the book belonged to Dartmouth when in

3. See the relevant library catalogues: for 1775: exhibits.library.dartmouth.edu/s/CurriculumVitae/item/541; and for 1825: babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nnc1.cu55873677&seq=1

4. *A Catalogue of Books in Dartmouth College Library* (Hanover, NH: C. & W. S. Spear, 1809). *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Social Friends' Library at Dartmouth College, October 1831* (Hanover, NH: Thomas Mann, 1831).

5. Nielsen provides a link to the volume: google.ca/books/edition/Bibliotheca_Sacra_and_Theological_Review/CfkRAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=oedipus+aegyptiacus&pg=PA405&printsec=frontcover.

reality Professor Smith retained ownership, which would explain why it appeared in the census but not in the catalogues. Alternatively, it may have been donated or sold to the school sometime after [Smith's] second wife died in 1845. Could there be marginalia in this copy (or some other copy of *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* that would show beyond peradventure that Professor Smith himself had studied it intimately? Further research into the whereabouts and contents of Professor Smith's personal collection of books is required. (p. 139)

In other words, Nielsen built his “link” on speculation and, in the process, has fudged the facts and sources. Nielsen fills in historical facts with fictional narratives or “gap filing narrative” to pretend to give us a cozy relationship between John Smith and Solomon Spaulding.⁶ There is no evidence for Nielsen's theory except for his sheer creative imagination.

Further, it is unlikely *in extremis* that John Smith wrote an unpublished novel about Native American civilizations because no one—except apparently Lars Nielsen—ever knew about it. John Smith's immediate family and contemporaries clearly knew nothing about any such alleged works. There was not a single work by Kircher in John Smith's library at the time of his death.⁷ If he had such a passion for Kircher's works, as Nielsen posits, then we would expect Smith to at least have something from Kircher. But there is nothing. Nielsen doesn't provide one iota of evidence to the contrary.

Moreover, there is no link between Spaulding and John Smith. Solomon Spaulding did not engage in “graduatelevel research” at Dartmouth as Nielsen claims (p. 246). Spaulding's 1875 AM degree (in modern times, equivalent to an MA degree) was “conferred in course upon a bachelor of science of three years' standing or more, on payment of \$5.”⁸ But Nielsen doesn't let a few facts get in the way. He even

6. Nielsen, *How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass*, chapters 12 (pp. 157–79) and 18 (pp. 272–89).

7. See drive.google.com/file/d/1_Bsfz2ZnL3qsyvL4_ozlqF7WTqYEoSvs/view.

8. George Ripley and Charles A. Dana, *The American Cyclopaedia: A Popular Dictionary of General Knowledge* (New York: D. Appleton, 1874), s.v. “Dartmouth College,” archive.org/details/americancyclopd00unkngoog/page/694/mode/2up. See also, Charles H. Whittier and Stephen W. Stathis, “The Enigma of Solomon Spaulding,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 10, no. 4 (Fall 1977): 70–73, dialoguejournal.com/articles/the-enigma-of-solomon-spaulding-2/#pdf-wrap.

approvingly cites the work of Rick Behrens, speculating that there is a link between Dartmouth College and Hyrum Smith, who attended Moor's Indian Charity School, which was associated with Dartmouth (p. 136). No matter how tenuous the link, Nielsen is not above adopting it to fit his narrative.

There is no evidence that Sidney Rigdon ever knew about either Kircher or John Smith. Nielsen posits that perhaps Rigdon obtained a copy of a missing Spalding manuscript from Patterson's printing press (pp. 247–50). However, the suggestion that Sidney Rigdon accessed a Spalding manuscript at Patterson's printing office in Pittsburgh is tenuous; there is simply no evidence that Rigdon was ever there.

Suggesting that Sydney Rigdon met Joseph Smith before or during the translation process in 1829 is an even greater stretch. The John Whitmer history written in 1831 tells us how Sydney was introduced to the Book of Mormon by Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, and Ziba Peterson in 1830.⁹ John Whitmer was there when Joseph was translating the Book of Mormon and certainly would have known if Sydney Rigdon had been milling about. The history of Rigdon receiving the Book of Mormon is buttressed by Rigdon's son, John Wickliffe Rigdon, in a lecture composed shortly after his father's death in 1876:

Along came Parley Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, and one Ziba Peterson with the Book of Mormon. It was a bound volume and it was the first time Sidney Rigdon ever saw it or ever heard of the man called Joseph Smith. Parley Pratt presented the book to my father in the presence of my mother and my oldest sister, Athalia Rigdon Robinson, who was a young girl of ten years of age. Parley Pratt used to be a Baptist minister and was somewhat acquainted with Sidney Rigdon.¹⁰

John Rigdon, after recounting the conversion and baptism of his father, tells how his father moved to Hiram and then met Joseph Smith. (This occurred in December 1830.)

9. "John Whitmer, History, 1831–circa 1847," p. 1, *The Joseph Smith Papers*, josephsmithpapers.org/paper-summary/john-whitmer-history-1831-circa-1847/5.

10. See Karl Keller, "'I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith': A Son's Record of the Life and Testimony of Sidney Rigdon," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 1, no. 4 (1966): 23, dialoguejournal.com/articles/i-never-knew-a-time-when-i-did-not-know-joseph-smith-a-sons-record-of-the-life-and-testimony-of-sidney-rigdon/.

[Rigdon] took his family and his little belongings and went to a little town called Hiram, about two and a half miles from Kirtland, and then lived with those people who had been baptized by Parley Pratt and his associates at Kirtland.

When he had got there with his family, they wished him to go to Palmyra to see Joseph Smith, and he went and saw Joseph at that time, being the first time he ever had seen or met him, and he never saw the Book of Mormon until Parley Pratt presented it to him at Mentor, Ohio. He did not see the plates from which Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, but he talked with him and also the witnesses who saw the plates and helped to write the book as translated by Joseph Smith from the plates. After spending a few days with Joseph Smith, he came back to Hiram firmly convinced that he had found the everlasting gospel to preach to the children of men.¹¹

Nielsen purports to overcome this gaping hole in his posited chain of transmission by referring to an 1887 article in the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* written by Ethan Smith's grandson, Ethan Sanford Smith, speculating about a manuscript that was written by John Smith.¹² Nielsen relies on this double hearsay within hearsay by Ethan Smith's grandson:

It is true that Spalding was deeply impressed with Professor Smith, but by the time that Spalding received a copy of his unpublished manuscript, neither professed to believe in the pet doctrines that Wheelock had advocated concerning the genealogy of the Native Americans. To be sure, Professor Smith treasured Wheelock as a friend, as an employer, and as a de facto family member (he even named his firstborn son John Wheelock Smith) — and he duly stayed in his academic lane like the humble and obedient servant that he said he was in the closing of his letters. But that doesn't mean that it wasn't something of an inside joke between the professor and his star graduate student that Wheelock, too, had a bit

11. Keller, "I Never Knew a Time When I Did Not Know Joseph Smith," 24–25.

12. "The Book of Mormon: A Puritan Minister Partly Responsible for Its Production," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (24 April 1887), 10, solomonspalding.com/Lib/Smith1887.htm.

too much of the same orthodox scholasticism *mediated by dogmatic faith* that had *doomed* both Kircher and Mather.

Spalding's story will be told in his own upcoming chapter, but it is enough for now to say that Spalding's true passion was to be a writer and a storyteller; Professor Smith knew it, and he could not deny it. He believed that Spalding had the laudable and emulous industry that would, with divine grace, qualify him for eminent utility to mankind as both a Dartmouth missionary and as an author, which gave him an inexpressible pleasure. (113–14)

The problem with Nielsen's unadulterated speculation is that Ethan Smith and Solomon Spalding were not classmates. Spalding was a student from 1781–1785 and Smith was a student from 1786–1790. Moreover, Nielsen asks us to assume, without evidence, that Ethan Sanford Smith knows all his grandfather's associations and has detailed knowledge of information passed between them as some sort of family tradition passed down by Ethan Smith, or his son Lyndon, who was at Dartmouth.

The biggest problem with the John Smith manuscript theory is that John Smith had written in his lectures that he didn't believe the Americas were peopled by Jews:

It is almost certain the aboriginal inhabitants of America are not the descendants of Jews, Christians, or Mahometans because no trace of their religions have ever been found among them.¹³

It is improbable *in extremis* that John Smith would pass on a secret and unpublished manuscript describing Jews in America when he held no such belief. John Hamer does a good job showing why the Spaulding theory is not accepted by any recognized historian.¹⁴

Nielsen purports to offer two previously unknown items in his book (the rest is a bad rehash, at best, of theories regarding Solomon Spaulding and Ethan Smith): (1) The supposed use of the name *Nephi*

13. John Smith, Lecture 13, Natural Philosophy Lectures, Dartmouth College, 6 January 1779, quoted in Richard Lyman Bushman, *Jospeh Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 95. "Smith thought the Indians were most likely descended from Phoenicians . . . and from Scythians and probably others." Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 584n47.

14. John Hamer, "The Spaulding Fable," *By Common Consent* (website), 18 July 2009, bycommonconsent.com/2009/07/18/the-spaulding-fable/.

in Kircher's writings and (2) supposed parallels between Kircher's writings and the Book of Mormon. Neither item, when it comes to explaining the Book of Mormon, has even one iota of merit.

The problem with Nielsen's assertion that Joseph Smith cribbed the name *Nephi* through the bewildering maze of "links" that he constructs is that it is impossible. The only place that Kircher uses the name *Nephi* is in (until recently) unpublished letters to Pietro della Valle between 1628 and 1632, which are now only located in the Vatican archives.¹⁵ In published books, the reference is, without exception, to Abenephius the Arab. Nielsen relied on recently published sources that refer to the name "Rabbi Barachias Nephi." However, the name was not available to Joseph Smith or any other reader in the nineteenth century from anything related to Kircher. As Jason Colavito, the translator of "The Fragments of Abenephius (Rabbi Barachius Nephi)," stated in his introduction to the 2017 translation:

The Renaissance polymath Athanasius Kircher (1602–1680) was a pioneer in what would become fringe history, exploring Egyptian mysteries, the lost continent of Atlantis, the bones of the Nephilim, and many other extraordinary topics that continue to make up the backbone of the unusual edges of history today. Kircher was enormously learned but not always rigorous in his scholarship. In the 1630s, he claimed to possess a manuscript by Rabbi Barachias Nephi of Babylon (the old name for Cairo) in which the mysteries of Egypt were treated and the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs could be discovered. No one ever saw the complete manuscript, and so its authenticity cannot be evaluated. No information about the author's identity has ever been uncovered. Indeed, many have suggested that Kircher was himself the author, fabricating the excerpts from the text.¹⁶

Nielsen apparently ran across the name *Nephi* and jumped to the conclusion that somehow, somewhere, sometime, knowledge of the

15. See R. Buonanni and A. Kircher, *Musaeum Kircherianum sive musaeum a p. Athanasio Kirchero in Collegio Romano Societatis Jesu [...]* (Rome: Typis Georgii Plachi Caelaturam, 1709), archive.org/details/musaeumkircheria00coll/mode/2up.

16. Jason Colavito, "The Fragments of Abenephius (Rabbi Barachias Nephi)," Jason Colavito (website), 2017, jasoncolavito.com/fragments-of-abenephius.html.

manuscript (or concept) of a "Nephi" who had authored a manuscript of the mysteries of Egypt made its way to Joseph Smith. Nielsen thus creates out of whole cloth a tortuous chain of connections to make his case. Unfortunately for Nielsen, the manuscript referring to Nephi from Kircher never existed in print. As Colavito states:

By the time excerpts from the manuscript saw print in Kircher's works, the author's name had been transformed first to Barachias Abenephi and then to Abenephius the Arab, by which name he is conventionally known today. Of the contents of the book, very little is known. A contemporary account said that it was "a little volume by the Rabbi Barachias Nephi, a tract on the history, antiquity, origins, characters, hieroglyphics, religion, and obelisks of the Egyptians." According to Kircher, the text was called *The Book of the Mysteries of Egypt*, but at times Kircher refers to excerpts on Judaica as coming from a *Book of the Servitude in Egypt* and those on religion as deriving from a *Book of the Egyptian Religion*. The antiquary and astronomer Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who was allowed to see only a page of the manuscript, reported that it contained a section comprising a lexicon of hieroglyphic symbols.¹⁷

Thus, Nielsen's primary "find" simply falls apart. The use of the name *Nephi* is completely coincidental. Nielsen intentionally misleads his readers by referring to the speculated translation by Kircher as the "translation of the record of Nephi" (p. 75). But there was never a printed work by Kircher that referred to the name *Nephi*, nor by Ethan Smith or Spaulding. No writer before Kircher makes reference to Abenephius, and no one after Kircher has ever found the non-existent book or translation speculated into existence by Nielsen.

Moreover, Abenephius' identity is not consistent in Kircher's own work. Originally, he referred to the writer as Rabbi Barachias Nephi of Babylon, and in time he became Abenephius the Arab, a scholar. The only thing that actually remained consistent was the claim that an Arab scholar wrote a treatise on the hieroglyphs of Egypt divining how to interpret them. The interpretations were, in the fragments Kircher preserved, Neoplatonic musings.

That leaves us with the supposed parallels as the only new relevant information provided by Nielsen. But even the most overactive pattern

17. Colavito, "The Fragments of Abenephius (Rabbi Barachias Nephi)."

recognition ability could not identify anything suggested by Nielsen as something constituting either direct or indirect influence. Moreover, the “parallels” are simply contrived. Here are the six “Kircherisms” in the Book of Mormon, as fashioned by Nielsen:

1. The first character in *The Book of Mormon* is Nephi, a Jew from a prior millennium, who journeys through Arabia and sails to the promised land of America.
2. Nephi is guided by a spiritually magnetic compass, which is a spherical ball made of brass that has pointers, spindles, and writing on its sides. It only works when its holder maintains a state of personal righteousness, which idea is clearly based on Kircher’s concept of spiritual magnetism. The text calls this instrument “the Liahona,” which is undeniably the most well-known magical object in Mormonism.
3. Nephi makes use of brass and golden plates, chiseling into them the untold religious history of the New World going back to the Tower of Babel.
4. This rather Kircherized history also includes a “rediscovered message of Christianity in the hieroglyphic writings of the Aztecs”—with Jesus Christ showing himself to white Native Americans, who are referred to as Nephites in the text.
5. The entire narrative presents itself as having been written in a reformed Egyptian language (due to its supposed efficiency relative to Hebrew).
6. Mormon is the eponymous prophet-historian who serves as the chief architect of *The Book of Mormon*. (p. 46)

Each of these supposed parallels is contrived and rather dishonest. I will address them in order:

1. There is no Nephi in any work by Kircher that Joseph Smith could have even conceivably had access to. There is no mention of Arabia in the Book of Mormon. Further, Abenephius is not a Jew but an Arab. The entire parallel is based on misrepresenting Kircher as referring to Nephi.
2. There is no “spiritually magnetic compass” anywhere in the Book of Mormon. In fact, there is no magnetic *anything* in the Book of Mormon. The only supposed connection suggested by Nielsen is to a “spiritual magnetism” that simply doesn’t exist anywhere in the Book of Mormon.

The Liahona is not regarded as a magical object in the Book of Mormon.

3. Kircher doesn't posit or anywhere suggest a Nephi who utilized gold or brass plates—and his only discussion of anything related to the Tower of Babel is an effort to prove that the notion of Babel is scientifically defensible. Kircher's treatment of the Tower of Babel never made it in any written source in America other than a footnote.¹⁸
4. There are no hieroglyphic writings of Aztecs in the Book of Mormon. There is no visit of Christ in any of Kircher's writings. There are no Nephites in Kircher's writings.
5. Nothing written by Kircher suggests that Hebrews wrote in reformed Egyptian. Indeed, Hebrew is regarded as the primal language by Kircher.
6. Neilsen wastes numerous pages musing about references anywhere in Europe, Greece, or America that have anything that sounds like "Morm."¹⁹ There is literally no connection between *Mormon* and anything written by Kircher. Even Neilsen, who assures that his evidence is so solid that it is faith shaking, admits that: "The antiquated derivation of Mormon . . . may be deemed only a *coincidence*" (p. 215). Given that Joseph Smith didn't know Greek or French, it is really all but certain that any such connection is contrived.

Conclusions

What can we conclude from Nielsen's self-vaunted work? Absolutely nothing—except perhaps that flights of fancy, speculation, sheer bravado, and self-aggrandizement are not a substitute for actual evidence. Reading the book is a sheer waste of time. Neilsen leads us through supposed connections to explain the existence of the Book of Mormon, connections that are based on a lack of evidence and

18. See Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babelonia Sive Archontologia*, archive.org/details/turrisbabelsivea00kirc/page/n5/mode/2up.

19. For musings on the French basis for *Mormon*, see Nielsen, *How the Book of Mormon Came to Pass*, 48, 89, 174, 214–16, 220–26, 231. For the Greek basis for the word Mormon, see pp. 214, 222, 225–31.

leaps of logic so great that not even Mike Powell, the world-record long jumper, could make the leap.



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