

haven't been seen since. Scholars have observed that no archaeological artifacts with links to the supposedly advanced and widespread Nephite civilization have ever been found in North America or anywhere else.

As history, moreover, *The Book of Mormon* is riddled with egregious anachronisms and irreconcilable inconsistencies. For instance, it makes many references to horses and wheeled carts, neither of which existed in the Western Hemisphere during the pre-Columbian era. It inserts such inventions as steel and the seven-day week into ancient history long before such things were in fact invented. Modern DNA analysis has conclusively demonstrated that American Indians are not descendants of any Hebraic race, as the Lamanites were purported to be. Mark Twain famously ridiculed *The Book of Mormon's* tedious, quasi-biblical prose as "chloroform in print," observing that the phrase "and it came to pass" is used more than two thousand times.

But such criticism and mockery are largely beside the point. All religious belief is a function of nonrational faith. And faith, by its very definition, tends to be impervious to intellectual argument or academic criticism. Polls routinely indicate, moreover, that nine out of ten Americans believe in God—most of us subscribe to one brand of religion or another. Those who would assail *The Book of Mormon* should bear in mind that its veracity is no more dubious than the veracity of the Bible, say, or the Qur'an, or the sacred texts of most other religions. The latter texts simply enjoy the considerable advantage of having made their public debut in the shadowy recesses of the ancient past, and are thus much harder to refute.

In any case, like a movie that is panned by New York critics yet goes on to become a huge blockbuster in the hinterlands, the tremendous popularity of *The Book of Mormon* makes it impossible to dismiss. The sheer quantity of copies in print—at last count over a hundred million—lends the book a certain gravitas, even among cynics. The numbers speak eloquently to the book's power as a sacred symbol and its raw narrative force. The simple truth is, *The Book of Mormon* tells a story that multitudes have found compelling—and continue to find compelling, as the swarms who flock to the Hill Cumorah Pageant every July attest.

In early nineteenth-century America, vestiges of a previous civilization—ruins such as the many Indian burial mounds near Joseph's