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Review: John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*

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JOHN L. SORENSON. *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*. Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1998. viii; 241 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Allen J. Christenson, Assistant Professor of Humanities, Classics, and Comparative Literature, Brigham Young University.

John Sorenson's new book is a welcome addition to the field of Book of Mormon studies. It is the first serious attempt by a noted scholar trained in the cultures of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica to describe the lifeways of the indigenous inhabitants of that region as they may relate to the artistic, social, and literary heritage of peoples described in New World scripture. Each chapter presents a concise vignette summarizing an aspect of ancient Mesoamerican society: geography, subsistence, societal organization, government, militarism, religion, science, and art.

The real strength of the work, however, is its outstanding compilation of more than five hundred high quality photographs, maps, drawings, and reconstruction paintings that span the major cultural phases of Mesoamerica from ca. 1000 B.C. to modern indigenous groups that conserve traditional social practices whose roots lie in the pre-Columbian past. These carefully selected images bring to life the pre-Columbian world in a way otherwise impossible with a written text. Each illustration is well attributed and referenced with regard to date and provenance. This alone will make the book an indispensable tool for further research.

For much of this century, most LDS readers of the Book of Mormon had their conception of scriptural settings in the New World shaped by the work of artists like Arnold Friberg or Minerva Teichert. Until recently, Friberg's imaginative paintings were published in many editions of the Book of Mormon, becoming a well-beloved part of the way we in the Church imagine ancient America to have once looked. Unfortunately, there is little that is authentically Native American in Friberg's artworks. The majority present a pastiche of visual references to the dress and architecture of the ancient Near East and medieval Europe, with the occasional inclusion of minor Mesoamerican motifs to give them a bit of New World flavor.

Sorenson's greatest contribution in his new book is to provide both the serious scholar and the average interested reader an opportunity to see authentic views of ancient-American life and art relevant to the experience of cultures contemporary with the Book of Mormon. *Images of Ancient America* therefore fits nicely into the same category as numerous books that illustrate artifacts and scenic views from the Holy Land as an aid to understanding the world of the Bible.

Sorenson begins his book with the premise that Book of Mormon events took place in the general area of Mesoamerica. He bases this conclusion on the plausible geographic and environmental fit, as well as the Book of Mormon's description of densely populated nations with millions of inhabitants who occupied large cities (built at least in part with stone masonry), their extensive commerce, literacy, metallurgy, finely woven textiles, and complex religious, monetary, and political institutions, including kingship. The author contends that only Mesoamerica evinces all these cultural traits at the appropriate time in the centuries immediately before and after Christ, a thesis he proposed in much fuller detail in his book *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*,<sup>1</sup> published in 1985. This seminal work set the standard and direction for further research in the field and was primarily responsible for outlining the terms of the debate over possible settings for Book of Mormon lands. Although it is generally unwise to identify a region as the setting for ancient events based solely on the contention that no other candidate satisfies the necessary criteria, Sorenson's arguments in favor of a setting in Mesoamerica are useful and generally persuasive.

The Book of Mormon describes a number of fully literate cultures who preserved the records of their people on nonperishable materials. Mesoamerica is the only area in the New World where indigenous cultures possessed sophisticated writing systems capable of recording such complex information. Most of the history described in the Book of Mormon took place during the preclassic period in Mesoamerica, from about 1500 B.C. to A.D. 250/300. This was a time of widespread cultural interaction and trade throughout the region. The Book of Mormon also suggests that Nephites

and Lamanites engaged in long-distance trade networks as a means of increasing their prestige and wealth (Mosiah 24:7; Hel. 6:7-8).

If we cannot with any degree of certainty identify specific sites with Book of Mormon events, we can at least surmise that Book of Mormon people were aware of the greater world around them and were familiar with neighboring cultures. Given the premise that Jaredites, Nephites, Mulekites, and Lamanites were authentic lineage groups who occupied a significant area somewhere on the American continents, it is legitimate to search the archaeological record for those contemporary ancient peoples that bear identifiably similar traits in an analogous contemporary geographic setting.

Sorenson describes his field of research not as archaeology, but rather as sociocultural anthropology, a discipline that attempts to go beyond the study of artifacts and ruins in order to reconstruct the living cultures that produced them. This approach has livened up considerably in recent years, thanks in part to advancements in the decipherment of ancient hieroglyphic scripts, particularly that of the Maya. The ability to read the words of these ancient people opens new opportunities to understand their culture and history in ways that would have been inconceivable only a decade or two ago. The pre-Columbian people of Mesoamerica now have a voice with which to speak for themselves without having to rely on secondhand interpretations.

For the most part, Sorenson successfully draws on current knowledge concerning the Maya and other Mesoamerican cultures derived from indigenous sources, although the primary focus of this work concerns the way these ideas are expressed through visual imagery. As a careful scholar, Sorenson does not claim that any of the images he includes in his book belong to a specific culture mentioned in the Book of Mormon, whose account ends with the destruction of the Nephites at the close of the fourth century A.D. Indeed, the great majority of the artworks included in the book postdate this period. He asserts only that the ancient beliefs and societal practices reflected in these artifacts have similar cultural antecedents in the late preclassic (about 400-1 B.C.) and protoclassic periods (about A.D. 1-250) in Mesoamerica.

Sorenson's arguments are weakened somewhat by his tendency to generalize long stretches of history. A common practice

in ethnographic studies is to work from the known back to the unknown—a process known as “upstreaming.” This assumes a continuity of particular forms or behaviors over time to the extent that later, better-documented cultures can be used to interpret earlier ones. Upstreaming is particularly useful in studying Mesoamerican societies because of their remarkable cultural conservatism.

Considerable care must be taken, however, not to carry such analogies too far. Even in Mesoamerica, discontinuities occur with the introduction of new religious or political ideas. In addition, care must be exercised to recognize the often significant variations between cultural groups who occupy different ecological environments. Although certain core religious ideas and lifeways seem to have been prevalent throughout Mesoamerica for much of its history, readers should not assume that the everyday life of an Aztec living in the fifteenth century A.D. in the mountains of central Mexico can be used to describe the world of the Olmecs living a thousand years before Christ in the coastal swamps of Veracruz. Upstreaming and ethnographic analogy were hotly critiqued by the late art historian George Kubler, who argued that artistic form and meaning are not static and that lengthy temporal gaps inevitably create disjunctions.<sup>2</sup>

To some degree, Sorenson may be criticized for failing to consistently connect the images in his book with their appropriate historical moment, as well as for his reliance on art and literary sources that are substantially later in date than the Book of Mormon. The author likely chose this approach due to the relative paucity of well-preserved indigenous texts from the preclassic phase and the somewhat less-impressive corpus of early artworks compared to those created during later periods.

Nevertheless, Sorenson’s book would have been strengthened by including more representative examples of paintings, ceramics, and sculpture contemporary with the Book of Mormon era. Certainly the preclassic monumental art of Kaminaljuyu, Abaj Takalik, and La Mojarra rivals that of later stone carvings in beauty and importance. Sorenson includes the impressive frescoes from a ninth-century building at Bonampak and another from an even later cycle of paintings at Chichen Itza, but he does not include those from Uaxactun that were painted shortly after the time of Christ.

Sorenson is on firmer ground in his review of architecture. He presents excellent reconstruction paintings or photographs of late preclassic buildings at El Mirador, Uaxactun, Edzna, Becan, Dainzu, Chiapa de Corzo, and Teotihuacan. These are surely more useful to our understanding of contemporary Book of Mormon architecture than the constructions the author includes from Tenochtitlan and Tulum, which were built within a hundred years of the Spanish conquest in the sixteenth century and are clearly of a distinctive style easily distinguishable from earlier periods.

Had Sorenson's sensitivity in selecting pertinent images to illustrate his points been matched by a comparable degree of concern for their historical context, he may still have reached the same basic conclusions concerning the life and culture of ancient Mesoamerica, but those conclusions would then have rested on even firmer historical foundations.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

<sup>2</sup>George Kubler, *Studies in Ancient American and European Art: The Collected Essays of George Kubler*, ed. Thomas F. Reese (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 353.