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Type: Newsletter

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## Insights, Vol. 11, No. 1 (January 1991)

Editor(s): FARMS Staff

Published by: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies

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The Foundation for  
Ancient Research  
& Mormon Studies

# INSIGHTS

AN ANCIENT WINDOW

1991, No. 1

"...by study and also by faith." D&C 88:118

January

## Sorenson Retires from F.A.R.M.S. Board

After ten years of leadership and service, John L. Sorenson has retired from the board of directors of F.A.R.M.S. to devote more time to his own research and writing, such as his project on Book of Mormon geography featured in this issue. We thank him for the incalculable help he has given to the Foundation and to the cause of scholarly research on the Book of Mormon.

Professor Sorenson has been associated with F.A.R.M.S. since its beginning. His devotion to standards of scholarship has helped shape the Foundation's agenda, and his wry wit has enlivened the meetings of the board. His own research has been important to F.A.R.M.S.—witness his many articles listed in the F.A.R.M.S. catalog and especially his books, *An*



*Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* and, most recently, *Pre-Columbian Contacts with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*.

He has also been instrumental in helping F.A.R.M.S. foster significant research by others on topics related to the Book of Mormon. He has led our efforts to help scholars through working groups, peer review, research grants, planning, networking, and editorial assistance.

Sorenson, who retired from BYU in 1985, is Professor Emeritus of Anthropology and past chair of the Anthropology Department.

We wish him well in his continued research and look forward to featuring more of his work in future issues of this Newsletter.

## Fourth Annual Book of Mormon Lecture Slated

The fourth annual F.A.R.M.S. Book of Mormon lecture will be presented by Dr. Allen J. Christenson on February 27. The title of his lecture is "The Mayan Festival of Resurrection and the Book of Mormon." This presentation will be based on years of research into contemporary and ancient Highland Mayan religious festivals. Dr. Christenson will trace these festivals through time, examine their symbolic treatments of the tree of life and of the conflict between death and the underworld, and note Book of Mormon parallels. He will illus-

trate his presentation with numerous slides.

Dr. Christenson has broad experience with the Mayan language, both as a free-lance anthropological researcher in Guatemala and as a translator for the Church. He is a practicing dentist and teaches part-time at BYU in the Humanities Department.

Previous annual F.A.R.M.S. Book of Mormon lectures have included Richard L. Anderson's presentation on the covenant and 3 Nephi in 1988, the F.A.R.M.S. Symposium on Warfare in

the Book of Mormon in 1989, and Richard D. Rust's 1990 lecture on literary aspects of the Book of Mormon designed for our day. This year's lecture promises to be just as significant and interesting.

The lecture will be given February 27 at 7:30 P.M. in room 151 of the Tanner Building at BYU. Ample parking is available in the lot to the west of the Tanner Building and in the adjacent parking lot next to the Richards P.E. Building. The public is cordially invited to attend without charge.

The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies is a nonprofit research and educational organization dedicated to the study of ancient scripture. Your tax-deductible contributions enable F.A.R.M.S. to sponsor and coordinate a wide range of research projects that enhance our understanding of these sacred writings.

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# F.A.R.M.S. UPDATE

The Foundation for Ancient Research & Mormon Studies

Number 74

January 1991

## Sherem's Accusations against Jacob

An interesting encounter is reported in Jacob 7 between Sherem and Jacob. In light of the ancient Israelite criminal law that was in force among the Nephites at this time and at least to the reforms of Mosiah (2 Ne. 5:10; Jarom 1:5; Mosiah 17:7-8; Alma 1:17), it is evident that Sherem's accusations were serious allegations. On three accounts, he accused Jacob of offenses punishable by death:

Ye have [1] *led away much of this people that they pervert the right way of God, and keep not the law of Moses which is the right way; and convert the law of Moses into the worship of a being which ye say shall come many hundred years hence. And now behold, I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is [2] blasphemy; for no man knoweth of such things; for he [3] cannot tell of things to come* (Jacob 7:7).

Each of Sherem's accusations can be traced to specific provisions in pre-exilic Israelite law:

1. *Causing public apostasy.* Leading other people or a city into apostasy was recognized as a serious infraction under the law of Moses and the Talmud. Deuteronomy 13:1-18 condemns to death any person, whether a prophet, or brother, or son, or wife, who says to the inhabitants of their city, "Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known" (Deut. 13:2, 6, 13). "Thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; . . . but thou shalt surely kill him" (Deut. 13:8-9).

In essence Sherem first claimed that Jacob had led the people away, i.e., into a state of apostasy from the way of God. Sherem claimed that Jacob had caused the people to pervert *the right way of*

God, to keep not the law, and to convert the law into the worship of an unknown god. Indeed, the law of Moses defines the crime of causing apostasy as trying to thrust the people "out of *the way* which the Lord thy God commanded thee to walk in" (Deut. 13:5).

Moreover, Sherem's point that Jacob had converted the observance of the law of Moses into the worship of an *unknown* future being seems to have been based on the Deuteronomic prohibition against turning to serve new gods "which ye have *not known*" (Deut. 13:2, 6, 13).

2. *Blasphemy.* Sherem's second accusation also raised a capital charge. It was a felony under the law of Moses to blaspheme (Ex. 20:7; Lev. 24:10-16). Leviticus 24 established that any person who blasphemed, even in a brawl, was to be stoned to death. Sherem raised the charge of blasphemy against Jacob when he formally accused him, saying, "I, Sherem, declare unto you that this is blasphemy" (Jacob 7:7).

While the ancient history of the crime of blasphemy is obscure, this offense apparently embraced many forms of insolent or seditious speech, whether against God, against the king (1 Kings 21:10), against another man, or against holy places or things, including the law (cf. Acts 6:13).

3. *False prophecy.* Sherem's words also advanced a claim of false prophecy. The test for whether a prophet had spoken truly or falsely was usually to see "if the thing follow not, nor come to pass" (Deut. 18:22). Apparently Sherem tried to preclude this defense when he objected that Jacob had spoken of things too far distant in the future. When Sherem asserted categorically that "no man knoweth of such things,"

he seems to be arguing that prophecies of that nature should not be easily tolerated under the law. With shorter-term prophecies, one has the chance to test them within a reasonable time.

Deuteronomy 18:20 requires that a man shall be put to death if he speaks "in the name of other gods." One can understand how Jacob's "preaching . . . the doctrine of Christ" (Jacob 7:6) could have been deviously characterized by Sherem as a form of speaking "in the name of" another god, for the Nephites had begun worshipping God only in the name of Christ (2 Ne. 25:13-19; Jacob 4:5). Perhaps Book of Mormon prophets insisted so emphatically that God and his Son were but "one God" (2 Ne. 31:21; Alma 11:28-29, 35), partly to affirm that speaking in the name of one was not to be construed legally as speaking in the name of any other god.

Thus, Sherem's allegations were not merely vague rhetorical criticisms; they were well-formulated accusations, logically derived from specific provisions of the ancient law. Sherem's words put Jacob's life in jeopardy. If allowed to stand, these accusations would have justified Jacob's execution.

At the same time, Sherem also put his own life on the line. The ancient punishment for a false accuser was to suffer that which "he had thought to have done unto his brother" (Deut. 19:19). Not only does this show that Sherem was deeply committed to his views and dead serious about the charges he raised against his "brother Jacob" (Jacob 7:6), it also explains the sense of legal justice that exists in the fact that, in the end, Sherem was smitten by God and himself soon died.

Based on research by John W. Welch.

## Biblical Law Bibliography Published

Last month a technical 339-page listing of Biblical Law scholarly sources was published as number 51 in the Toronto Studies in Theology by the Edwin Mellen Press in New York.

This work was compiled over the last 8 years by John W. Welch, with the assistance of Bernard Jackson, many members of the Biblical Law Group of the Society of Biblical Literature, and several BYU law students and F.A.R.M.S. assistants, including Brenda Miles, Gary Gillum, and

DeeAnn Hofer.

As Welch's preface states, "The specialized study of Biblical Law is still a relatively young discipline," one that has generated a vast body of scholarly literature in recent years. This increased understanding of ancient Israelite law has already yielded subtle insights into the legal backgrounds of the Book of Mormon (as in the case above of Sherem's accusations) and promises to yield many more.

## New Edition Helps Book of Mormon Study

A new "Fireside Edition" of the Book of Mormon is now available through F.A.R.M.S. This edition contains the text of the Book of Mormon in seven paperback volumes, with lines in the wide margins that are suitable for taking brief notes and making cross-references. In addition, at the end of

each volume is a short appendix dealing primarily with eyewitnesses to the Book of Mormon.

Developed and produced by Eldin Ricks, these handy volumes will be useful for studying specific sections of the Book of Mormon.

## Time to Renew?

The date in the upper-right corner of your address label indicates when your subscription expires. We hope that you will renew your subscription when it is time so you *and we* can continue to enjoy the benefits of your association with F.A.R.M.S.

## Building Bridges

In 1986 Roger R. Keller, a former Presbyterian minister, published his *Reformed Christians and Mormon Christians: Let's Talk*. The book lays a foundation for helping Protestants and Latter-day Saints discover the overlapping precepts of their convictions in Christ. Chapter 5 is on the Book of Mormon and the concept of scripture. The book is offered at a discount at this time through the generosity of Truman Madsen, a longtime member of the F.A.R.M.S. advisory board.

## ORDER FORM

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## New Work on Book of Mormon Geography

John Sorenson has completed a major work on a topic of long-time interest to Latter-day Saint readers of the Book of Mormon. Called *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, it includes information that anybody dealing with this topic hereafter cannot do without. Sorenson focuses on events in the Americas; his ultimate goal is to move students of the subject toward consensus.

The first part gives a history of LDS and RLDS thought on "Book of Mormon geography" from 1829 to the present. He has prepared summaries of some 68 "models" of geography that have been offered, a number previously unpublished. These summaries are supplemented by copies of maps where available and full bibliographic references. Sorenson concludes that all these models have been flawed.

He next proceeds to a sentence-by-sentence analysis of all the geographically significant information he can discover in the Book of Mormon text, consisting of several hundred facts and inferences. He displays his own thinking about each verse in the hope that others will be equally open; by starting a process of open discussion in this manner, Sorenson intends that consensus might be reached on what is said about geography in the scripture's own words. He sees such agreement as

prerequisite to fruitful discussion of correlation with the external map.

This analysis and commentary is summarized and indexed several ways, including a seven-page "report card" by which readers may "grade" any model on how well it matches the scriptural text. Finally Sorenson offers his own purely internal map of Book of Mormon lands based exclusively on the statements in the scripture; it turns out to have much more detail than previous efforts have yielded.

Sorenson includes three appendices: one gives the complete texts of known statements by LDS Church leaders on the geography of Book of Mormon events, another discusses the problem of establishing distances, and the third deals with directions.

The 435-page volume is offered exclusively as a F.A.R.M.S. Study Aid. To make it generally available, it is offered for a limited time at our cost. This is a preliminary edition, and Sorenson solicits correspondence from readers, after they have worked through the book, to supplement and correct the content before a revised edition is published. If you wish to contribute to the completion of the revised edition or to further research in this area, you may earmark a donation by marking *geography* on your check or next to the donations box on the order form.

## New Evidence for Date of Christ's Birth

Between the birth of Christ and the death of Herod there was a lunar eclipse. Attempts to date Christ's birth have involved trying to establish the date of this eclipse. For many years it has been believed that the eclipse occurred on March 13, 4 B.C., which would place Christ's birth in either 5 or 6 B.C.

However, other lunar eclipses occurred within a few years of the one in 4 B.C., and an article by John Pratt recently published in *The Planetarian* argues that an eclipse that took place on December 29, 1 B.C., better fits the evidence. He also argues from other historical and cultural evidence that if this eclipse is accepted as the one immediately preceding Herod's death, the birth of Christ likely took place at the Passover season in April of 1 B.C.

Reprints may be ordered at cost on the order form in this issue.

### New Testament Books

Don't forget to order books about the New Testament at a discount on the flyer sent to you in December. If you would like copies of this flyer to give to your friends, check the appropriate box on the order form in this issue of the Newsletter.



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