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First Nephi and Archaeology

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Abstract: This article discusses specific archaeological findings and a number of legends that deal with the book of 1 Nephi. It further argues that neither Solomon Spaulding nor Joseph Smith could have known about the archaeological findings nor the legends.

First Nephi and Archaeology

By Nephi Jensen, President of the Canadian Mission

Every student of American history can instantly recall the time and place of the first landing of Christopher Columbus on American soil. But many of these students would hesitate before answering as to the date of the landing of John Cabot. Nor is it at all strange that the first event should be more easily remembered than the second. The mind naturally seeks for a starting place in history; and the circumstances incident to the beginning of an epoch impress themselves the most vividly upon the mind.

Besides the almost universal custom of erecting monuments commemorative of historical beginnings, the equally prevalent ceremonial celebration of these events also tends to perpetuate the memory of great world movements.

It is for these same reasons that mythology retains the most distinct stories of migrations and colonizations. Nor is America an exception to this rule. Each new effort of the American archæologist to look behind the enigma of the American Indian reveals new proof that the circumstances attending the first settlement of America as told in the Book of Mormon, are the most perfectly preserved in the traditions of the American tribes.

And to one who believes the Book of Mormon, it is not at all surprising that T. Athol Joyce's recent work, *South American Archæology*, published in 1912, should furnish new and additional corroboration of the story of the Nephite migration to the "promised land."

The salient historical incidents connected with this migration, as recorded in First Nephi are as follows:

(1) That the four sons of Lehi, who left Jerusalem, 600 B. C., were the chief figures in the colonization of South America (I Nephi 2-3); (2) that Nephi, the youngest, became the ruler (Ib. ch. 2-3); (3) that shortly after leaving Jerusalem, Lehi was shown, in a dream, that the four sons should return to Jerusalem for the brass plates containing a record of their forefathers, and that before these plates were obtained Laman, the oldest brother, became angry with Nephi and attempted to dissuade him from his determination to obtain the plates (Ib. 3-4); (4) that before they embarked for the promised land a peculiar compass

was given them which continually pointed in the direction they should sail (Ib. 16); (5) that the land they sailed for was called the "promised land" (Ib. 18); (6) and that the people were named after their first leader, "Nephites."

Here are six historical items relating to the Nephite colonization of South America, as detailed in the first book of the Book of Mormon. Are they facts? Did these events really occur? What answers do the archæologists give to these important questions?

1. That the knowledge of the coming of the four brothers, Laman, Lemuel, Sam and Nephi, to South America, and that Nephi, the youngest, became the ruler, was not forgotten by South American tribes, is evident from statements in Baldwin's *Ancient America*. On page 264 of his work, Baldwin makes the following quotation from Montesinos:

"It [the civilization of South America] was originated, he says, by a people led by four brothers, who settled in the Valley of Cuzco, and developed civilization there in very human way. The youngest of these brothers assumed supreme authority, and became the first of a long line of sovereigns."

Daniel Brinton, a more recent writer on American archæology, in his *Myths of the New World*, page 94, gives a similar account of the settlement of South America:

"Hardly a nation on the continent but seems to have had some vague tradition of an origin from four brothers, to have at some time been led by four leaders or princes, or in some manner to have connected the appearances and action of four important personages with its earliest traditional history."

2. Professor Joyce also relates a distorted story of the coming of four brothers whose names he gives as Ayar, Manco, Cachi, Auca; and what is more remarkable is the story he gives of a dispute which took place between Manco, the oldest of these brothers, and the youngest. To quote *South American Archæology*, page 79, by T. Athol Joyce:

"Apparently Manco became jealous of his brothers, and took means to remove them, but the account of their fate has become invested with the glamor of the supernatural. Ayar was persuaded to return for certain golden vases, and the figure of a llama, the latter being a kind of a sacred standard, which he was told had been left in a cave."

It is not difficult to find in this quotation some confirmation of Nephi's story of the return for the brass plates. It will be observed that it was the younger of the brothers who was "persuaded to return for the golden vases," and that it was the older brother who manifested the jealousy towards the younger.

3. Professor Joyce gives even a clearer corroboration of Nephi's story of the peculiar compass which was used on the voyage across the ocean. To quote:

"Manco, the leader, carried a golden staff, which, it was prophesied, would sink into the earth at the spot destined by fate for their future home. This staff was probably merely an implement for testing the depth of the soil, and thereby affording an indication of its agricultural quality" (Ib 79).

It will be observed that the characteristics of both Nephi's compass and "Manco's golden staff" were the same. Neither acted like the ordinary compass. Both assisted in the discovery of the "promised land."

4. Both Nephi and Joyce designate the land which the colony set sail for as the "promised land."

"Ayar was the last to perish; he had developed wings, and when the travelers came in sight of their promised land, his brother bade him fly to the top of the hill, where afterwards stood the great Sun-temple, and take possession" (Ib 79).

5. Even the fact of the people of the colony being named after their first leader is preserved in the traditions. Mr. Joyce says:

"The immigrants, called Cara, after their first leader, seized a number of villages, and, being better armed and more warlike than the aborigines, succeeded in establishing themselves firmly in the country."

Is there not here a striking agreement between Nephi's story and the discoveries of archæologists concerning five important historical incidents? What is the explanation of this harmony in the prophet's narrative, and the scientist's findings? Manifestly both are based upon facts. Can we escape the conclusion that the man who gave the Book of Mormon to the world had access to some source of truth concerning a hidden subject?

First Nephi is undoubtedly history and not fiction. What was the source of this historical information, in 1829, the time when the Book of Mormon was published? How did the young farmer, Joseph Smith, discover that South America was settled by a colony led by four brothers; that the youngest of these brothers became the ruler; that after they had started on their journey to the "promised land" they returned to Jerusalem for certain brass plates; that they were guided on their voyage by a peculiar compass; that the land for which they set sail was to them a "promised land;" and that the people were named "Nephites" after their first ruler? I recently asked a very learned infidel this question, and he instantly replied:

"I think Joseph Smith got his information from Spaulding's Manuscript."

When I asked my friend how Spaulding found out, he said, "He imagined it."

But the skeptic's explanation does not explain. Is it thinkable that either Joseph Smith or Solomon Spaulding just "imagined" all these things and that their guesses turned out to be facts? Is it not as easy to believe that Hamlet could be composed by shaking letters in a hat, as to believe that the man who gave the Book of Mormon to the world guessed at all these things and guessed right in every instance?

Nor were there human sources available to either Spaulding or Joseph Smith in the early part of the nineteenth century from which either could have ascertained all this historical matter. Even Charles A. Shook, the only writer who has made any serious attempt to meet the claims of the Book of Mormon with arguments based upon archæological discoveries, does not so much as hint at the availability of these historical facts to either Spaulding or Joseph Smith. Nor could the claim that these historical circumstances in First Nephi were accessible to either Joseph Smith or Solomon Spaulding, be sustained by any respectable proof. For, even at this late date, both Daniel Brinton and T. Athol Joyce agree that American archæology is yet in its infancy.

And with the alleged connection of Solomon Spaulding with the origin of the Book of Mormon completely exploded, it becomes solely a matter of determining how Joseph Smith was able to write all these undoubted historical incidents and circumstances into the first book of the American volume of scripture. What was his means of knowing all these things? He did not learn it from any book. There was no book at that time that contained this information. Nor did anyone tell him. For there was no one who could tell him.

Ingersol, speaking of the Bible once said, "If a book had been found on the earth by the first man, it might have been regarded a work of God." With equal truth it can be said, if any man should find a book which no man could write, he would know that God at least assisted in its production. Is not the Book of Mormon such a book? Can anyone who is acquainted with the unnumbered evidences of the divinity of this Book doubt its inspiration? As the voice of science, in ever increasing clearness, unites with the voice of the calm spirit of certainty that the Record breathes into the heart, we can but exclaim, "What hath God wrought!"