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Author(s): John L. Sorenson
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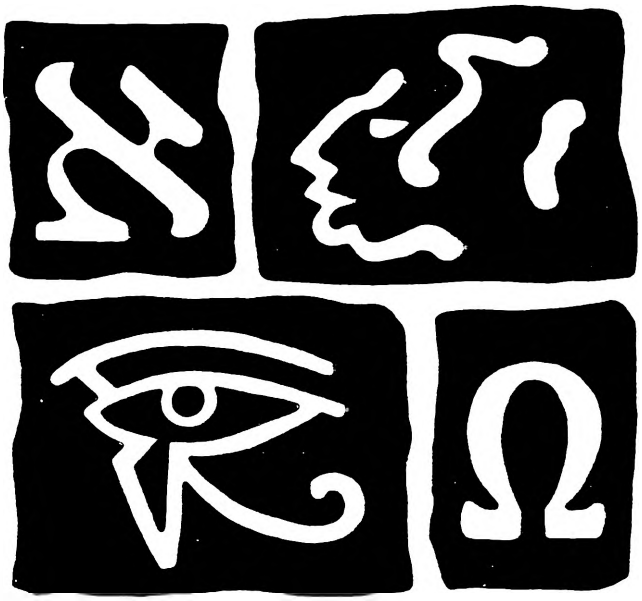

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Preliminary Report

FOUNDATION FOR ANCIENT RESEARCH AND MORMON STUDIES ■ F.A.R.M.S. P.O. BOX 7113 UNIVERSITY STATION PROVO, UTAH 84602

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For many years the Smithsonian Institution in Washington has received inquiries concerning the Book of Mormon, its role in the Institution's scientific activities, and a number of specific informational questions about ancient American archaeology. At least twenty years ago the Institution began responding to such inquiries with a form letter prepared by its Department of Anthropology. Statements in this letter (the content having changed several times over the years) are used by some opponents of the Mormon Church to support the idea that the Book of Mormon account is contradicted by scientific findings; some Latter-day Saints have been daunted in their faith in the book by these statements. This article critiques the method and content represented in the SI statement in order to put it into perspective.

A fascinating study in folklore could and should be done tracing how the Smithsonian has been put in the middle of this Book of Mormon matter. It is clear that for decades at least LDS missionaries and other proselyters for the church have represented the Institution as having used the Book of Mormon to guide archaeological research it has conducted. I remember being told some version of this story as I was growing up many years ago. The tale is passed from missionary to missionary and Sunday School teacher to student in the classic process of all folklore. A new crop of discoverers of this "hidden truth" comes up every year, and no known means can staunch the process.

The frustration and irritation of Smithsonian officials is understandable as they had to deal with such naive inquiries year after year. The form letter response has been a reasonable way for them to cope with this one among many persistent questions from the public. The content of the letter, however, has its own problems.

It would be quite another folkloristic project to determine how the Smithsonian became established in the public mind as the most respected source of scientific assurance. Its long existence and the extent of its massive museum facilities in the nation's capital have contributed, of course. In any case, people willingly accept the notion that the SI should be able to provide authoritative word on any problem about the past.

Knowledge has expanded so vastly, however, that no one institution can possibly encompass real expertise on more than a fraction of the huge number of specialties in the world of scholarship and science. Valid information on an issue must involve a person equipped with current, specific data on that matter. We aren't satisfied with the opinion of an eye surgeon about what makes our feet hurt, nor do we depend on a historian knowledgeable in medieval European events to answer our inquiries about modern China. The Smithsonian as a source of information on Book of Mormon matters suffers on this basis. It simply lacks people able to speak with authority on this matter.

What is needed in the case of the Book of Mormon is, obviously, experts in both the scientifically-derived information which, with few exceptions,

only professionals control and the scripture itself. The most erudite archaeologist who has not also become expert in analysis of the Book of Mormon record is in no position to make a comparison. Conversely, the scriptorian ignorant of appropriate details from the best researchers on the ancient world has nothing significant to say about how scientific findings compare with the claims of the Book of Mormon. Virtually nobody has examined the Book of Mormon as a cultural document. It has to be viewed from the perspective of what it contains about cities, houses, pottery, artifacts, patterns of custom, and the other sorts of information which the archaeologist and his collaborators usually deal with. Furthermore, the expert on the ancient world must have studied precisely the right time period and location. If the Nephites lived, fought, worshipped, and died in Guatemala, for example, no one whose expertise is on ancient Brazilian peoples has anything worth contributing to the discussion.

Latter-day Saint believers in the Book of Mormon as well as critics of that book and mere interested bystanders commonly suppose that the Book of Mormon represents the events it reports as having taken place throughout the entire western hemisphere. All detailed studies of the book, on the other hand, have reached the conclusion that only a limited area is presented as the scene of Nephite and Jaredite life. It cannot be more than five or six hundred miles in length and considerably less across. All the happenings in the record, including the final destructions of both Nephites and Jaredites, took place there, on the basis of an intricate network of statements on geographical matters in the text itself.

Where was this scene? It is essentially certain that only Mesoamerica could be it. That name is given to the culture area which included some (but not all) the high civilizations between central Mexico and northern Central America. The matter is much too complicated to be treated here, but in that area it has been possible to show that the Book of Mormon's statements about customs, the rise of cities, wars, climate, distances, directions, and so on, fit nicely at point after point with the most up-to-date findings about Mesoamerican culture history.1

As to the time period of concern, the scripture makes clear that it is reporting almost exclusively events and characteristics of what the archaeologists call the "pre-Classic" era, prior to around A.D. 300.

Now we see what kind of expert is qualified to comment usefully on the Book of Mormon peoples in relation to scientific findings. We need persons who are highly- and fully-informed about southern and central Mesoamerica in the time prior to the most famous or Classic cultures such as the Maya. We are talking about highly specific data which is controlled by only a handful of scholars. Unfortunately the Smithsonian, as is true of practically any other research institution in the USA or abroad, lacks such people. But even those who do control this data need also to know the Book of Mormon in terms to permit their making a relevant, informed comparison.

Realizing that people have been expecting too much of the Smithsonian scholars, who are certainly highly competent in their own areas of specialization, we can now examine the content of the nine-point "Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon" to see how it stacks up.

These remarks are with reference to the Summer 1979 version of the "Statement." Earlier versions varied considerably; the general tendency seems to have been for later versions to make fewer and more general statements than earlier ones.

Of the nine points included in the two-page handout, numbers one and nine are straightforward and clarifying: the Institution has never used the Book of Mormon as a scientific guide; their archaeologists see no direct connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book; and there are copies of the Book of Mormon available in the Institution's library facility should they feel the need to consult them. One would hope that the pointless inquiries from the public on those elementary points of fact could cease completely in the face of these disclosures.

The second numbered item mentions "the physical type of the American Indian," which is said to be "basically Mongoloid." This is a standard textbook-type characterization which dodges many significant issues. Certain biological characteristics of the American native populations are generally, if not universally, shared throughout the hemisphere, but there are not many such features. Dr. T. Dale Stewart of the Smithsonian, one of the respected senior physical anthropologists, chooses to emphasize what is shared, as in his book, The People of America (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1973). Other, equally-respected experts see substantial variety among "the American Indian." For example, Dr. Juan Comas, Mexico's most prominent physical anthropologist, answered the question "Are the Amerindians a biologically homogenous group?" with a firm "no."[2] Evidence of blood grouping led Dr. G. A. Matson, one of the most noted workers in that field, to say "the American Indians are not completely Mongoloid."[3] Professor Earnest Hooten of Harvard strongly agreed[4] and thought he saw Near Easterners as a component. Polish anthropologist Andrzej Wierçinski analyzed a large series of skulls excavated at major sites in Mesoamerica and found much variety. He considered there to be three "primary Amerindian stocks" out of Asia to which were added features "introduced by . . . migrants from the Western Mediterranean area." In summation, Wierçinski feels that "ancient Mexico was inhabited by a chain of interrelated populations which cannot be regarded as typical Mongoloids."[5] Now, the Smithsonian people may disagree, but by making a categorical, brief statement on this complex matter, they appear to betray either lack of awareness of current research or intent to "stonewall" the issue by ignoring uncomfortably different views.

Item number two also maintains that "the ancestors of the present Indians came into the New World -- probably over a land bridge . . . [at] Bering Strait . . . -- in a continuing series of small migrations beginning from about 25,000 to 30,000 years ago." Actually this standard opinion is backed up by very little "archeological evidence." Such evidence as there is is commonly interpreted by mainline archaeologists to support this picture, but the facts on which the interpretation is based are actually very limited. I agree that the Bering Strait view is a reasonable reconstruction of how some ancestors of some of "the Indians" reached the Americas, but the statement again fails to do justice to a complex situation.

Mesoamerican peoples in particular related many traditions to the Spanish explorers that their ancestors had come from across the ocean. For example, Father Sahagun in the sixteenth century reported, "Concerning the origin of this people the account which the old people give is that they came by sea . . . in some vessels of wood. . . ."[6] From Guatemala a native document reports that "these, then, were the three nations of the Quiches, and they came from where the sun rises, descendants of Israel, of the same language and the same customs."[7] Whatever we make of these and the other traditions in historical terms, they demand consideration, particularly in view of the scantiness of evidence for the overland Asian origin theory.

Item number three is related; it claims that the first people to reach the New World by sea were the Norse, around A.D. 1000. Once more the "Statement" exhibits a highly limited and even puzzling selection of viewpoints from the wide array held by professionals. Very conservative archaeologists do not even accept the evidence of Viking arrival in northeastern North America, while other equally competent specialists hold that a number of water-borne parties reached this hemisphere over a period of several thousand years. In fact one of the Smithsonian's own most eminent archaeologists, Dr. Betty Meggers, is in disagreement with this sweeping statement. In 1975 she published "The transpacific origin of Mesoamerican civilization" in the journal American Anthropologist (Vol. 77, pages 1-27). She claimed there that Olmec culture, the first high culture in Mesoamerica, originated on the basis of a sea-borne connection from China around 1200 B.C. A more detailed work on the issue of contacts between Old and New World civilizations is Man Across the Sea. Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts (Editors C. L. Riley, J. C. Kelley, C. W. Pennington, and R. L. Rands. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971). It contains papers on many aspects of inter-hemispheric communication, including, in potential relation to the Book of Mormon, my paper on "The significance of an apparent relationship between the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica" (pp. 219-241). Whoever wrote the Smithsonian "Statement" can hardly have paid attention to this standard volume. Still more recently, Professor Harold K. Schneider of Indiana University has argued on theoretical grounds that deriving American civilizations from across the ocean makes more sense than claiming that they originated independently in this hemisphere.[8]

The very least that must be said about item three from the Smithsonian Institution is that it almost succeeds in ignoring the question of trans-oceanic contacts in relation to the ancient American cultures but that to ignore the issue cannot make it go away. The assertion in that two-sentence paragraph is simply unsupportable in the light of today's knowledge.

Item four continues the line of thinking of the previous paragraph by making over-simplified pronouncements about the nature of the evidence for inter-hemispheric contacts. None of the principal "Old World" domesticated food plants or animals were in the Americas before the arrival of the Spaniards, it is said. Of course, when we examine the situation in the Old World, we find an interrupted distribution of those features there. Europe lacked rice and camels, for example. Cultural items do not spread automatically or inevitably even when people are aware of those

items. In the eastern hemisphere, areas quite close together often failed to share what we might consider "principal" techniques or objects. Why this is so has been discussed at length in the first three articles in the Man Across the Sea volume. The mere lack of certain shared elements in two areas in no way rules out the possibility that there were contacts between them. What is important is what is shared, and lists of features which support the notion of early connection between the hemispheres are extensive, including a substantial number of crops.[9] This item four is a red herring drawing attention away from the serious methodological issues involved in research on the topic. It is difficult to believe that the serious anthropologists at the Smithsonian could have had a hand in drafting such an anthropologically unsophisticated statement as this one.

Item five lists four materials said not to have been used in the New World before A.D. 1492: "iron," "steel," "glass," and "silk." Those words in the Book of Mormon lead many to suppose that the same substances were used by the Nephites as come to our minds when we encounter these terms today. Any English words in the translated Book of Mormon must, of course, be considered in the same cautionary terms as other terms that translators must use when dealing with an ancient text. For example, some of the Hebrew words translated as the names of certain metals in the Old Testament are problematical. Several original words yield a single English term (such as "bronze"), while a single expression in the early language may get translated variously in the hands of modern writers. Anybody who has done translation realizes the difficulty sometimes in finding exact equivalents. Just what was the referent of "silk," for example, is unclear in the Book of Mormon. It is simple-mindedness to suppose automatically that the Nephites must, like the east Asians, have had silkworms eating mulberry leaves. The early Spaniards in the New World encountered precisely this problem. There was in fact a wild silkworm in Mexico whose spinnings were gathered by the Indians to make a terribly expensive fabric, but also fine hair from the belly of rabbits was woven into a cloth which the Spanish considered the equivalent of silk.[10] Or, take "wine" as a further example. Mesoamericans did have one or more kind of grape, but we do not know that they produced a beverage from that fruit. The conquerors did, however, refer to "wine" and even "vineyards." What they meant was pulque, the alcoholic drink made from juice of the maguey plant, and the vineyards were the orderly plantings of that cactus-like plant. (Another drink, made from fermented bananas, was also called "wine" in Spanish, although a closer equivalent would have been "beer."[11]) So we must be careful lest our own cultural naivete lead our minds too easily to look for parallels where none should be expected.

As a matter of fact, however, iron was reported by the Spaniards to have been used among the Indians of Mexico, and iron artifacts have been found.[12] Few of these specimens have been examined to determine whether they are composed of iron from meteorites, although we are sure some are. The possibility that smelted iron was also used is enhanced by a find at Teotihuacan in the Valley of Mexico by Sigvald Linne, the famous Swedish archaeologist, of a pottery vessel which had been used for smelting a "metallic-looking" mass which contained iron and copper.[13] The same researcher found a piece of iron in a tomb at Mitla, Oaxaca, which he considered of smelted metal.[14] Moreover, knowledge of metallurgy in

Mesoamerica is being pushed back by new finds; where once A.D. 900 was supposed to be the early limit, now specimens extend back to the time of Christ. Besides, linguistic studies have shown that in three major language groupings--Proto-Mayan, Proto-Mixe-Zoquean, and Proto-Mixtecan--words for metals occurred on the time level of 1000-1500 B.C., although archaeological specimens in no case come even close to that period. At least for Peru, actual metalworking has been shown at the 1900 B.C. level, however.[15] It is obvious that a great deal is yet to be learned about metals and other substances used in ancient America. Categorical statements about what was not in use, or when, such as we have in paragraph five in the Smithsonian "Statement," are clearly inappropriate in the present state of knowledge.

On the same basis, paragraph six is ill-considered. It says that if there were any transpacific voyages, they were of little or no effect and would have resulted only from accidental voyages. The fact is that this whole paragraph is constructed solely from speculation. Negative statements of this kind are particularly hard to document at best, of course. Again the Institution's own archaeologists, Dr. Meggers and Dr. Clifford Evans, vigorously disagreed with this they-couldn't-cross-the-ocean assertion. Both scholars have been convinced that transpacific trips were made from thousands of years ago.[16]

The seventh item in the "Statement" concerns whether a connection existed between Egypt and Mexico in precolumbian times. It is not apparent why this particular statement is included, since the Book of Mormon itself does not make any particular claim of an Egyptian connection. I am unaware of a single Egyptologist who has paid significant attention to this sort of comparison; no doubt none of them has found any evidence. As pointed out earlier, a person would have to become expert in both areas, Egypt and Mexico, in order for us to take seriously his/her statement that there was no connection between the two. No such expert exists, to my knowledge. However, my own work pointed out earlier offers scores of detailed parallels between the two areas in question which Schneider and other scholars have found significant.

Paragraph eight is easier to agree with in general. Finds of "ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, and other Old World writings in the New World in pre-Columbian contexts" are nearly all subject to question. Not all have been carefully investigated, and some of the purported investigations and translations of such inscriptions are fanciful. Still, conventional archaeologists or epigraphers, such as the Smithsonian statement apparently relies on, have generally ignored this matter. It is simply not possible at this time to rule out the possibility that some inscriptions found were from the pre-European era. But that would not make any particular difference in terms of the Book of Mormon. According to that book, the writing system used by its people was not known to any other group (Mormon 9:34). Obviously it was not "Egyptian" as such, although it was considered conceptually linked with Egyptian writing by its users. (Linda Miller Van Blerkom of the University of Colorado has recently shown that "Maya glyphs were used in the same six ways as those in Egyptian" writing.[17])

In summation, careful reading of the Smithsonian Institution's 1979

"Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon" persuades me that it was a justified attempt to deal with a public information problem but that the substance it offers is often suspect and unduly narrow. It consistently oversimplifies like a professor speaking down to a curious and somewhat pesky child. The answers reveal no serious knowledge of the actual cultural claims or implications of the Book of Mormon, while the facts concerning ancient America are seriously flawed.

I suggest first that Mormons and non-Mormons alike leave the Smithsonian folks alone. The myth should be smothered that they are closet Mormons, on the one hand, or highly-informed specialists on archaeology relevant to the Book of Mormon issue, on the other. But inquiries are likely to continue, therefore I suggest that a new handout be prepared which is more carefully phrased. It ought to take account of the fact that the Book of Mormon claims only to report events in a restricted area of the western hemisphere. It should also reflect knowledge from contemporary anthropology that is more current, less monolithic, and more tentative than appears in the 1979 "Statement."

Notes

1. John L. Sorenson, "An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon," ms. Pending publication of this book, hundreds of copies of the manuscript have been to distributed to inquirers.

2. "¿Son los Amerindios un grupo biologicamente homogeneo?," Cuadernos Americanos 152 (May-June 1967):117-125. Also his Antropologia de los Pueblos Ibero-Americanos. Barcelona: Editorial Labor, S.A., 1974, pp. 35-42 and 52ff.

3. G. Albin Matson, et al, "Distribution of hereditary blood groups among Indians in South America. IV. In Chile," American Journal of Physical Anthropology 27 (1967):188.

4. Harold Gladwin, Men Out of Asia. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947, pp. 63-65.

5. "Inter- and intrapopulational racial differentiation of Tlatilco, Cerro de las Mesas, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban and Yucatan Maya," Actas, Documentos y Memorias, 36a Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Lima, 1970. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos, 1972, pp. 231-248. Also his "Afinidades raciales de algunas poblaciones antiguas de Mexico," Anales, Instituto Nacional de Antropologia e Historia (1972-1973), Mexico, 1975, pp. 123-144.

6. Bernardino de Sahagun, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España. Editorial Nueva España, S.A. Mexico. Vol. 1, 13, cited, with additional material in my "Some Mesoamerican traditions of immigration by sea," El Mexico Antiguo 8 (1955):425-438.

7. D. J. Chonay and Delia Goetz, translators, Title of the Lords of Totonicapan. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953, p. 170.

8. "Prehistoric transpacific contact and the theory of culture change," American Anthropologist 79 (March 1977):9-25.

9. George F. Carter, "Domesticates as artifacts." In Miles Richardson, ed., The Human Mirror. Material and Spatial Images of Man. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974, pp. 201-230.

10. I. W. Johnson, "Basketry and textiles," Handbook of Middle American Indians, Robert Wauchope, et al, eds. Vol. 10, Part 1. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971, p. 312.

11. Felix W. McBryde, "Cultural and historical geography of southwest Guatemala," Smithsonian Institution, Institute of Social Anthropology, Publ. No. 4, 1945, p. 36, on banana "wine." On pulque as "wine," for example, Sahagun, Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva Espana. Vol. 1. Mexico: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938, p. 313. On Mayan balche also as "wine," Alfred M. Tozzer, "Landa's Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan," Harvard University, Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Papers 18, 1941, p. 92.

12. Rene Rebetez, Objetos Prehispanicos de Hierro y Piedra, Mexico: Libreria Anticuaria, n.d. H. H. Bancroft, The Native Races (of the Pacific States), Vol. 2. San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft and Co., 1882, pp. 407-8. See also other sources cited in "An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon" mentioned in note 1.

13. "Mexican highland cultures," Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, Publ. 7, n.s., 1942, p. 132.

14. "Zapotecan antiquities," Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, Publ. 4, n.s., 1938, p. 75.

15. J. W. Grossman, "An ancient gold worker's tool kit. The earliest metal technology in Peru," Archaeology 25 (October 1972):270-275.

16. Betty J. Meggers, "Cultural development in Latin America: an interpretative overview." In Betty J. Meggers and Clifford Evans, eds., Aboriginal Cultural Development in Latin America: An Interpretative Review. Smithsonian Miscellaneous Collections 146 (1963):132, 139, 79-80. And Clifford Evans and Betty J. Meggers, "Transpacific origin of Valdivia phase pottery of coastal Ecuador," Actas, 36a Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Sevilla, 1964. Vol. 1. Sevilla, 1966, pp. 63-67.

17. Linda Miller Van Blerkom, "A comparison of Maya and Egyptian hieroglyphs," Katunob 11 (August 1979):1-8.