



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 3 | Number 1

Article 16

1991

John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*

William Hamblin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Hamblin, William (1991) "John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 3 : No. 1 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/msr/vol3/iss1/16>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011 by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.



NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title

Author(s) William Hamblin

Reference *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3/1 (1991): 154-57.

ISSN 1050-7930 (print), 2168-3719 (online)

Abstract *Review of Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography* (1990), by John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish.

John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*. Provo, UT: Research Press, 1990. 2 volumes. Hardbound, \$89.00. Computer disk version (IBM compatible), \$19.00.

Reviewed by William Hamblin

Although *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans* will probably not be purchased by the average student of the Book of Mormon, it represents a major step forward in Book of Mormon studies. All serious students of the cultural implications of the transoceanic migrations of Book of Mormon peoples will find this work an invaluable resource. The bibliography provides a foundation for addressing the question, "To what degree were the pre-Columbian American peoples and their cultures dependent on or independent of those in the Old World?" (p. v). The bibliography focuses not so much on internal issues of pre-Columbian American studies, but on the material remains, customs, myths, traditions, and historical accounts of both the Old and New worlds that can help answer this fundamental question. They include references to possible pre-Columbian contacts with Europe, Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia, in other words, with every geographical region of the Old World. Although there are some references to Latter-day Saint studies on the Book of Mormon, there is nothing overtly Mormon in Sorenson's and Raish's bibliography. Indeed, they make no mention of Mormonism in their introduction at all. Although most of the studies cited in these volumes do not directly address the Book of Mormon, they deal indirectly with the fundamental issues of the interpretation of possible archaeological and ethnohistorical remains of Book of Mormon peoples.

The bibliography consists of 5,613 individual citations (p. xii), each given a code number for reference. Although the compilers claim that the work is not "complete" (p. iii), the breadth and inclusiveness of the bibliography are very impressive. Certainly all major studies on pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts are included, and this work clearly represents the fundamental starting point for all future research on the subject.

The excellent annotations to the references are especially impressive and useful. Most entries are accompanied by at least a brief note on the contents. Many references include paragraph-length descriptions, while annotations on major entries are sometimes over a page. These annotations are useful on a number of levels. First, they provide clues to the major arguments of works which are often unclear from titles alone. Second, they assist in sifting the wheat from the chaff. In rapidly changing fields such as pre-Columbian history, a great deal of older work is dated by recent advances in understanding. Furthermore, like Egyptology with its "Pyramidiots," there is a substantial body of writing on pre-Columbian America derived from the lunatic fringe. Sorenson's and Raish's annotations can alert us to these tendencies in some works. Third, the annotations frequently serve as a type of intellectual cross-reference system, with Sorenson and Raish providing explanations of how certain books or articles are rebuttals or extensions to arguments raised by previous scholars. This allows the researcher to construct an intellectual history of scholarly arguments quickly and to view all sides of controversial issues.

The extensive index at the end of the second volume consists of 1250 terms (p. xii), with entries for each term ranging from one to the hundreds. It may surprise the average reader of the Book of Mormon to discover that there are over twice as many references to possible Chinese contacts with pre-Columbian America (257) as there are to possible Jewish contacts (Hebrew, 46; Israel, 44; Jew, 30; total, 120). Thus one of the values of this bibliography for Latter-day Saints is to help place the migrations of Book of Mormon peoples in the broader context of other possible pre-Columbian migrations and contacts with other peoples in the Old World. This helps us recognize that not every possible cultural parallel between the Old and New worlds should necessarily be seen as directly relevant "evidence" for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

As an example of the possible use of the annotations and index, we can take the term "chariot." The index references twelve citations. Examining just the annotations to these references, I learned that cultic and mythic chariots and wheeled vehicles (as opposed to war-chariots) were widespread throughout the Old World (C-248, F-139, L-80, S-365) and could be drawn by a wide variety of real or mythic animals, including lions, deer, dogs, and even birds (G-152, S-365,

S375). A type of "bird-chariot" (L-80, S-178) is known in China, with possible parallels in Mesoamerica (N-16). Small wheeled vehicles, often described as "toys," may actually have been "magical" funerary models for use in the afterlife (F-139, S-365). The so-called wheeled "toys" in Mesoamerica are best understood in such a cultic and funerary setting (S-365, W-196). Since the chariot in the Book of Mormon is never mentioned in a military setting, it was undoubtedly such a cultic vehicle rather than a war-chariot. Other indexed terms of interest to students of the Book of Mormon include items such as: bow (26), elephant (40), iron (29), silk (6), horse (16) and barley (2). Thus the index can serve as an excellent springboard into further research into some of the technical problems in Book of Mormon studies.

The main value for this work is as a reference tool for the serious researcher in transoceanic contacts between the Old and New worlds. One of the major issues debated among historians and archaeologists of pre-Columbian America is whether pre-Columbian civilizations originated through diffusion of ideas from the Old World or as independent developments. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries diffusionist ideas held sway. In recent decades, independent development has increasingly become academic orthodoxy. Sorenson's and Raish's bibliography offers a fundamental challenge to current non-diffusionist thinking. Sorenson and Raish wisely do not take an extreme diffusionist position; they agree with the non-diffusionists that many of the cultural characteristics of pre-Columbian civilizations should be interpreted as the result of independent development. They are, rather, clearly moderate diffusionists, insisting that maritime technologies that would have permitted transoceanic voyages have existed for thousands of years and that at least some of the numerous cultural parallels between the Old and New worlds indicated in their bibliography can best be explained as resulting from transoceanic contacts. In a period when the long-term and ancient cultural interdependence of the various civilizations of the Old World is becoming increasingly recognized, it makes perfect sense to reexamine the hypothesis that similar cultural contacts, although certainly less frequent and intense, existed between the Old and New worlds. Solely based on the fact that a bibliography of over 5000 items can be collected on various questions of transoceanic contact one can conclude that the moderate diffusionist position can no longer be cavalierly dismissed out of hand, but requires serious

scholarly attention. The text of the Book of Mormon (as opposed to many Latter-day Saint and non-Latter-day Saint misinterpretations of the text) is best understood from just such a moderate diffusionist perspective.

For Book of Mormon studies the publication of this work symbolizes a new and important trend. As I see it, historical study of the Book of Mormon (as distinct from doctrinal interpretation) has gone through three overlapping phases: In the first phase, Latter-day Saints were mainly concerned with defending the authenticity of the Book of Mormon from outsider attacks. Works of this nature are still being published today. During the second phase, beginning perhaps in the 1950s, there was an increasing attempt to utilize the rapidly increasing knowledge of ancient studies and the Book of Mormon not only in an apologetic sense, but in an attempt to see how our advancing understanding of the broad range of ancient studies can increase our insight into the text of the Book of Mormon itself. Finally, I see Sorenson's and Raish's work as indicative of a new third phase in Book of Mormon studies that has begun to develop in recent years. Here the historical implications of the Book of Mormon are used to help us gain a more complete understanding of the history and religions of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the ancient Near East. In other words, the increase of understanding is beginning to flow both ways. Our understanding of the Book of Mormon is improved by our knowledge of other ancient civilizations, but likewise, our understanding and interpretation of ancient history, culture, and religion is now beginning to be informed by the insights derived from the study of the Book of Mormon, although these interpretations are being presented to non-Latter-day Saints in academic discourse devoid of explicit references to Latter-day Saint texts.

In conclusion, all future academic study of transoceanic contacts between the Old and New worlds will be fundamentally dependent on the bibliographical foundation created by Sorenson and Raish. For Book of Mormon studies, this work prepares the way not only for a vast improvement in our understanding of the historical implications of the transoceanic contacts of Book of Mormon peoples, but for more accurately placing the Book of Mormon in its historical and cultural context in pre-Columbian American history and in world history as a whole.