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Making the Case for Cultural Diffusion in Ancient Times

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Insights

A WINDOW ON THE ANCIENT WORLD VOLUME 26 | 2006

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<http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu>

Making the Case for Cultural Diffusion in Ancient Times

Old theories die hard in academia, at least when they are entrenched and have been defended intellectually with fervor. Only with overwhelming evidence to the contrary does the institutional status quo crumble and make way for new theories to find legitimacy within the academic mainstream. Illustrative of this struggle for acceptance in the academy has been the contest between the establishment position that ancient American civilization evolved in complete independence from the Old

World and the “cultural diffusion hypothesis.” The latter proposes that American societies did not arise and develop in total isolation but were stimulated by connections from the Old World.

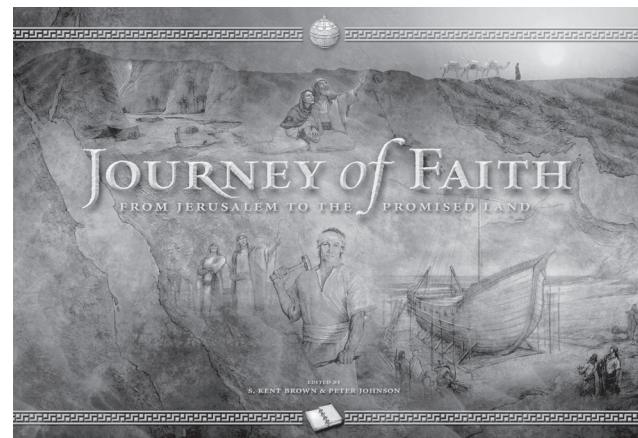
For years John L. Sorenson and a non-LDS colleague, Carl L. Johannessen, have been collecting evidence for interhemispheric contact in pre-Columbian times, a matter that readers of the Book of Mormon are quite at home with. Having amassed a veritable boatload of hard evidence, Sorenson and Johannessen (professors emeriti of anthropology at BYU and geography at the University of Oregon,

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Lehi's Epic Journey Detailed in New Book

The seamless blend of scholarship and artistry of the Maxwell Institute's DVD documentary *Journey of Faith* continues in expanded form in the new book *Journey of Faith: From Jerusalem to the Promised Land*. Complemented by numerous additional threads of historical detail and scholarly insight, this visually stunning look at Lehi's trek through the harsh Arabian desert reflects a synergistic collaboration of talented scholars, artists, and photographers seeking to illuminate an epic event in scriptural history and situate it in a real-world setting.

The popular DVD version generated much interest as well as numerous requests to publish the original artwork that was featured in the documentary. That response and the fact that a lot of excellent content had to be left out of the film argued for essentially publishing the documentary in book form. As a result, the book contains commentary and many images from the DVD but also much more: a foreword by the editors, FARMS director S. Kent Brown and movie producer Peter



Johnson; Brown's and Johnson's reflections on the project in two separate chapters; additional commentary by scholars; an appendix on the famed Incense Trail across the Arabian Peninsula; a bibliography; and for the first printing of the book a free DVD: *A Filmmaking Odyssey: The Making of Journey of Faith*.

The evocative artwork of Joseph Brickey and Howard Lyon is combined with the superb photographs of Justin Andrews and David Lisonbee to


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respectively) have published the results of their seminal research under the title “Biological Evidence for Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Voyages.” Their technical report is a chapter in an edited volume published this year by the University of Hawai’i Press, *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*.

The report catalogs over 100 species of flora and fauna that were shared by both hemispheres before Columbus’s day. The evidence is decisive that those organisms neither crossed the oceans by natural means nor were carried by humans across the Bering Strait. For instance, microbiologists agree that the Asian hookworm parasite found in South American mummies could only have reached the Americas via Asian seafarers, since the parasite, before it enters the human digestive tract, must inhabit warm, moist soil—an impossibility for passage via the cold Bering Strait, leaving human migration by sea the only conceivable alternative. The authors discuss many other compelling case studies as well, concluding that “students of the past must look to a new paradigm of human history and communication.”

In the editor’s introduction, Victor H. Mair (professor of Chinese language and literature at the University of Pennsylvania) notes that since Sorenson and Johannessen “have relied on a variety of different types of evidence . . . and have themselves exercised scientific caution in making their claims, it will be virtually impossible to dismiss out of hand all of their concrete, detailed case studies. . . . Consequently, the work of Sorenson and Johannessen is one more reason why fair and open-minded investigators will henceforth have to incorporate pre-Columbian contact in their models for the evolution of civilization in the Americas.”

An expanded version of Sorenson and Johannessen’s study, entitled “Scientific Evidence for Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Voyages to and from the Americas,” can be viewed on the Maxwell Institute Web site (maxwellinstitute.byu.edu). A less-technical version of this study recently appeared in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* under the title “Ancient Voyages Across the Ocean to America: From ‘Impossible’ to ‘Certain’” (vol. 14, no. 2, 2005). 

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The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship encourages and supports research on the Book of Mormon, the Book of Abraham, the Bible, other ancient scripture, and related subjects. The Maxwell Institute publishes and distributes titles in these areas for the benefit of scholars and interested Latter-day Saint readers.

Primary research interests at the Maxwell Institute include the history, language, literature, culture, geography, politics, and law relevant to ancient scripture. Although such subjects are of secondary importance when compared with the spiritual and eternal messages of scripture, solid research and academic perspectives can supply certain kinds of useful information, even if only tentatively, concerning many significant and interesting questions about scripture.

The Maxwell Institute makes reports about this research available widely, promptly, and economically. These publications are peer-reviewed to ensure that scholarly standards are met. The proceeds from the sale of these materials are used to support further research and publications.

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