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## New Light

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**Abstract** The Smithsonian statement about the Book of Mormon has been revised to indicate that the “Book of Mormon is a religious document and not a scientific guide.”

James E. Talmage correctly identified various Michigan relics as fraudulent.

## Smithsonian Statement on the Book of Mormon Revised

For many years the Smithsonian Institution has given out a routine response to questions posed to them about their view of the relation between the Book of Mormon and scientific studies of ancient American civilizations. Statements in their handout pointed out what somebody at the Institution claimed were contradictions between the text of the scripture and what scientists claim about New World cultures.

In 1982 John Sorenson wrote a detailed critique of the Smithsonian piece that was published by FARMS. It pointed out errors of fact and logic in the statement. He revised that in 1995 and included the recommendation that the Smithsonian Institution completely modify their statement to bring it up-to-date scientifically. FARMS officers later conferred with a Smithsonian representative who indicated a willingness to make changes. More recently members of Congress have questioned the Institution about the inappropriateness of a government agency taking a stand regarding a religious book.

In March of this year the Director of Communications at the Smithsonian began using the following brief response to queries about the Book of Mormon:

Your recent inquiry concerning the Smithsonian Institution's alleged use of the Book of Mormon as a scientific guide has been received in the Office of Communications. The Book of Mormon is a religious document and not a scientific guide. The Smithsonian Institution has never used it in archeological research and any information that you have received to the contrary is incorrect.

The Sorenson critique, "A New Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution 'Statement regarding the Book of Mormon,'" is available from FARMS and may also be seen on the FARMS website: [www.farmsresearch.com](http://www.farmsresearch.com). □



## James E. Talmage and the Fraudulent “Michigan Relics”

From 1874 through 1920 many inscribed objects of slate and copper and baked clay tablets were reportedly dug up from Indian mounds in Michigan. The inscriptions included characters from Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Greek and Phoenician alphabets. In 1909 and 1911 geologist (and soon-to-be LDS Church authority) James E. Talmage, made a field study of these finds and the circumstances of their discovery. He published part of his conclusion in a brochure, Bulletin 2 from the Deseret Museum in Salt Lake City, entitled *The Michigan Relics: A Story of Forgery and Deception*.<sup>1</sup> (Many of these objects ended up in the custody of the LDS Church.)

Little attention was paid to the objects for years only to have several writers (none of them trained archaeologists or art historians) in the last couple of decades revive the notion that the objects were ancient. Henriette Mertz in her book, *The Mystic Symbol: Mark of the Michigan Mound Builders*,<sup>2</sup> claimed that the tablets could have been inscribed by fourth-century Christians who came to North America from the Mediterranean area to escape persecution. Don Clifford thought the signs on the objects were from a Zoroastrian (Persian) cult, writing in a medieval form of Latin together “with the characters of an ancient Mongolian alphabet.”<sup>3</sup> David A. Deal claimed to interpret some of the inscriptions as communicating a religious belief similar to an “Alexandrian, Coptic Christian doctrine” of deity.<sup>4</sup> Frank Joseph decided that some signs on the Michigan inscriptions were Etruscan, from Italy.<sup>5</sup> Betty Sodders, who lives in the area where the objects

appeared, has published two volumes on the subject. She claims that human effigy figures that were found with one of the tablets show similarities to figures found by archaeologists in the Balkans.<sup>6</sup>

Barry Fell, who became America’s most famous (or notorious) “epigrapher” devoted to turning up and “translating” unexpected inscriptions in the Americas, took up the subject of the Michigan finds in 1981. He supposed that the Newberry Tablet, the most widely discussed of those artifacts, was derived from a “Cypro-Minoan” syllabary of the eastern Mediterranean.<sup>7</sup> But by 1988 Fell had got hold of Talmage’s private journal where he described his investigations and changed his mind about the tablet’s authenticity. He wrote, “On page 315 of Dr. Talmage’s unpublished manuscript diary for the year 1911 we find his record of an interview with Mrs. E. H. Riley, Scotford’s [‘discoverer’ of the ‘relics’] stepdaughter. We learn from the diary that this lady disclosed that her stepfather had fraudulently manufactured many of the articles supposedly discovered in the ground, but before signing a declaration to this effect, she stipulated that the information not be made public during the lifetime of her mother. Thus Dr. Talmage was obliged to omit this critical evidence from his otherwise comprehensive report published in the same year.”<sup>8</sup>

This little case, unimportant of itself, directs our attention to two things worth nothing. First, it shows how avid some people are to find complicated answers to simple questions and perhaps to represent themselves as having discovered “the inside word.” The fact that many people, including Latter-day Saints,

seem anxious to support pseudo-scholarly “swashbucklers” by attending their lectures and purchasing their publications has been noted before. Hyrum Smith’s advice still seems appropriate for Mormons and others anxious to be fed explanations for “the mysteries of the past” not based on adequate, critical research. The Prophet Joseph’s brother said in Nauvoo, “It is better not to have so much faith as to have so much as to believe all the lies.”<sup>9</sup> A second point is that some LDS investigators—among them Dr. Talmage—refuse to swallow archaeological fraud easily. Some prefer to expose it where possible.<sup>10</sup> □

1. Full bibliographical citations on all works cited in this article may be found in John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, second edition, revised, 2 vols. (Provo: Research Press, 1996).
2. Henriette Mertz, *The Mystic Symbol: Mark of the Michigan Mound Builders* (Gaithersburg, Md.: Global, 1986).
3. Don Clifford, “The Mongolian Connection,” in *Dragon Treasures*, ed. Donald L. Cyr (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Stonehenge Viewpoint, 1989), 69–76.
4. David A. Deal, “The Mystic Symbol De-mystified,” *Ancient American* 1/5(1994): 16–24.
5. Frank Joseph, “The Newberry Tablet: Curiouser and Curiouser,” *Ancient American* 1/5(1994): 27–28.
6. Betty Sodders, *Michigan Prehistory Mysteries*, 2 vols. (Au Train, Mich.: Avery Color Studios, 1991); Betty Sodders, “McGruer’s Gods and the Newberry Stone,” *Ancient American* 1/5 (1994): 24–26.
7. Barry Fell, “Decipherment and Translation of the Newberry Tablet from Northern Michigan,” *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 9/218 (1981): 132–36.
8. Barry Fell, “The Michigan ‘Relics,’” *Epigraphic Society Occasional Publications* 17 (1988): 287–88.
9. John L. Sorenson, “Instant Expertise on Book of Mormon Archaeology,” *BYU Studies* 16/3 (1976): 432.
10. For other examples, see Ray T. Matheny, “An Analysis of the Padilla Gold Plates,” *BYU Studies* 19/1 (1978): 21–40; and John Gee, “New and Old Light on Shawabts from Mesoamerica,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 63–69.