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**Abstract** Editors of the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* interview renowned Book of Mormon scholar John L. Sorenson to discuss his experience in doing Book of Mormon research for more than fifty years. Sorenson tells of becoming interested in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerican anthropology and archaeology. He also articulates how to be a faithful member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints while conducting objective and scholarly research on the Book of Mormon. Sorenson explains how this approach has helped people throughout the world better understand the Book of Mormon and how it will continue to help.

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
**JOHN L. SORENSON**

*Publishing the following interview with the departing editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies takes a step that we will continue to follow, at least for a brief period. The editors have observed that there is a small group of individuals who have devoted much of their lives to teaching and studying the Book of Mormon and who, when invited, can offer important insights into the book itself as well as into what Book of Mormon research might look like in coming years. The natural starting place is with John L. Sorenson. In coming issues, the Journal will publish a few such interviews as opportunities arise. In April 2002, two of the new editors of the Journal sat with John L. Sorenson to ask about his own involvement with the Book of Mormon, about his perception of studies related to the Book of Mormon, and about his view of the future of Book of Mormon studies. Here are excerpts from that interview. —ED.*



Photography by Mark Philbrick

**JBMS:** *How did you first become interested in the Book of Mormon?*

**John:** I don't know how to answer that. I had no special interest in the Book of Mormon before going on my mission. Then I imbibed the living waters of Polynesian tradition—about Hagoth. In New Zealand, members had been taught by generations of mission presidents and missionaries that they descend from Hagoth. Everyone pointed to the Book of Mormon. In the Cook Islands, where I was assigned, people were so new in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1947 that they didn't really know enough to think any complicated thoughts, and the Book of Mormon wasn't translated into their language. So we had to answer their questions at a basic level. I guess that activity made me somewhat interested. Furthermore, while I was there, Thor

Heyerdahl was on his raft *Kon-Tiki* going from Peru to the Society Islands. As a matter of fact, where I was serving there was a very odd American who was a ham radio operator. He invited us once to come to his home while he was trying to make radio contact with the raft *Kon-Tiki*. He was unsuccessful that night, but for me it was a moment of contemplation about oceanic crossings.

I also read a couple of articles that Hugh Nibley wrote from 1947 to 1949.

He had just started to write for the church. Wells Jakeman published an article, and Sidney Sperry had something published at the same time. I thought that was kind of interesting stuff. Earlier than that, before I went into the military in World War II, I had been studying electrical engineering. I went over physics and math so many times that I was just sick and tired of it. It wasn't for me. So I guess I was looking for something romantic. I wanted to study archaeology, although I had no idea really what that meant. I had never read anything about it. But that is how I got into the field, from a totally uninformed level. In 1949 I came to Brigham Young University and declared archaeology as my major. There were very few students in that program. One of my teachers, Wells Jakeman, had his views on the Book of Mormon, which were very valuable to me in some ways. But I soon learned that I did not want to follow his approach. I went on from there.

However, I never had any questions about the Book of Mormon that troubled my faith. My life has been one of belief from the beginning. It has been obvious to me since I was a child that the Book of Mormon is true. Even when I learned of arguments that people could throw against it, I thought, "That's stupid." I just had no patience for dealing with such

issues. Those who torture themselves up and down and over and under on some of these subjects, I have a certain sympathy for the dilemma they have made for themselves, but I can't empathize with them. We each must soldier on and do the best we can to reconcile what we find of concern.

My interest in the Book of Mormon never needed any sustaining. It just rolled. I have always been interested in it. In career terms, I never had a career. I just had jobs and bounced from place to place pretty much by what seemed accident. Mine were fortunate accidents in almost all cases. That's how I got into archaeology, through minor accidents. Then I happened to be in the right place at the right time to be chosen as one of two students at BYU to go with the first expedition of Thomas Ferguson's New World Archaeological Foundation, in January 1953. I was in Mexico for five and a half months. Only two of us were LDS. There were four graduate students from other schools and the director who was a Ph.D., a Spaniard. There I learned to listen and learn. I picked up a great deal about how to think in terms familiar to archaeologists. The boss was a quasi-Marxist who had no interest in Ferguson's Book of Mormon concerns. His assistant, from Harvard, was soon to be a Ph.D. but had quite a bit of experience already. He became an important figure in Mesoamerican archaeology. His *Festschrift* came out about three years ago. There was also a Mexican who became famous; when he died last year, he was probably the most eminent Mexican archaeologist. But he was a student then. I was trying to make sense of what these other folks were saying. While I understood a good deal about how they viewed matters, it was a challenge for me to relate it to the Book of Mormon. In my view, we were in the middle of Book of Mormon territory. I asked myself, Where are we to go? What are we to do? What are we to look for? Challenged by these issues, I have continued asking

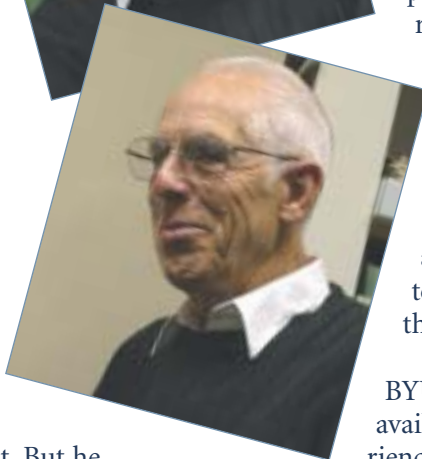
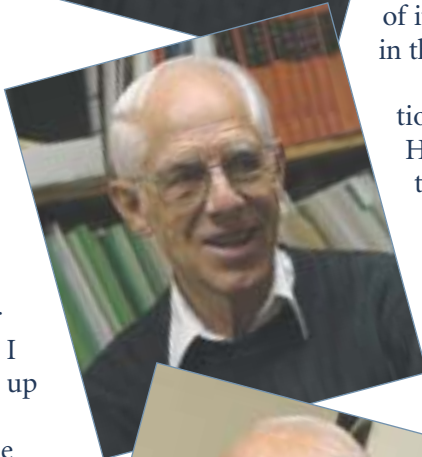
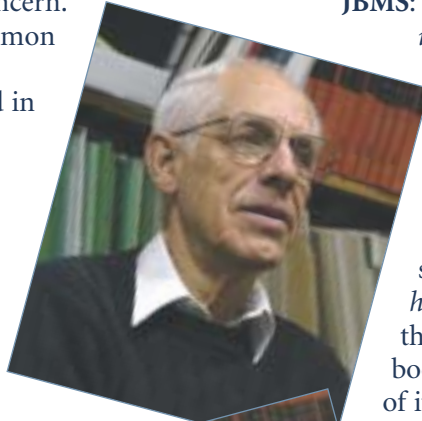
those questions for 50 years now. But I had never questioned whether it was possible to make sense of the whole thing simultaneously in scriptural and professional terms. I have been trying to make sense of the book and its archaeological setting ever since.

**JBMS:** *To us it appears that, at an early point in your life, the Book of Mormon stood center and you saw issues that needed to be solved and have worked on those for a long time.*

**John:** Actually, I have seen so many issues. A person could ask the question in another way: What are some of the topics that I wished I *could* have researched? The list would go into the hundreds. There is nothing about the book that doesn't interest me. Some parts of it interest me much more than others in the sense of having to make choices.

I guess the one comprehensive question of greatest concern to me has been, How did the Book of Mormon events take place? After my mission, it was not at all clear to me that reading the book would tell one how events took place. It told a person some "whats" and some "whys," perhaps, as interpreted by Mormon. But it didn't recount what was going on. I found the same kind of disappointment with conventional history too. It didn't satisfy me with an understanding of how life was lived. I guess that is why I resonated with anthropology, because it purported to try to find out how people live their lives.

I started as an archaeologist at BYU because that was the instruction available. I liken my broadening experience to having lightning hit the roof and make a hole in it, and when I crawled up through the hole and looked around, there was a whole world out there called "anthropology." What happened is that I went to graduate school at UCLA to become an archaeologist. The first semester my mentor, the only Mesoamerican archaeologist there, with whom I planned to study, died of a heart attack. Since I was on a National Science Foundation



scholarship, I had about a month to get somebody to back me up so I could get my support renewed for the next year. I explored among the rest of the department faculty to assess the prospects and was encouraged to take up social and cultural anthropology. Actually, it turned out, that sort of anthropology was a much better preparation for my real interests than archaeology would have been. I found potsherds to be completely boring. I could do without them. But I wanted to know about the natural world. I wanted to know what people were thinking. I wanted to know what they wrote. I wanted to know traditions. I wanted to know their hearts—the whole thing. Archaeology as it was conceived in the 1950s didn't do much of that. So this “accident” opened me up to a scholarly world that I welcomed. There were so many prospects. My dissertation was on “The Effect of Industrialization on American Fork.” That was social anthropology by the standards of my department. My work could have focused on any other place, but my advisor and I decided that Utah Valley was probably the best example of a farming community being suddenly struck with an industrial presence. It was an exciting study.

**JBMS:** *More than a year ago, you made a presentation to one of the FARMS brown bag sessions, and you reviewed projects that you want to finish. Can you briefly describe what you see yourself doing in coming years?*

**John:** I'm not sure that I can divide my interests easily. Partly out of my missionary days and the *Kon-Tiki* experience, I have always wanted to know more about transoceanic voyaging. My master's thesis was on evidence for Polynesian contacts with America. This came partly from living on islands. In the war, I was on Ascension Island in the middle of the South Atlantic for six months, and the boundedness of such a place always made me want to look over the horizon. I have been working on the significance of “primitive” voyaging all of these 50-plus years since I began. Some very important things—important for me—to provide closure on the issue have come clear in the last few years. Of course, this topic is related to the Book of Mormon. It has fallen to me to see it through for an LDS audience. I guess



that is one of the maintaining motivations that I have had all the way along.

I have been disappointed that there are not any LDS people who seem interested in doing what I have wanted to do—to learn how Book of Mormon peoples lived. I have never been one to particularly want to “prove” one thing or another or to engage in controversy about it. But I do have this desire to set the life of scriptural people in context. It appears that, if that task is going to be done, it must be done

by me. I am not aware of a single person in the LDS world who has an interest that's even close to mine. So I will try to stay alive and finish my work so far as it can be finished. That is what I am trying to do.

My question about ancient voyaging is a part of the more general problem of how things took place in early times. Those are the two things—voyaging and the context within which the recorded events took place—that are most important to me. I split off portions of those from time to time, manageable as projects. I also have strong interest in the lands of the Bible—not to make a major contribution myself, which is one career too many for me. But from a New World point of view, serious study requires a background in the Old World. I am about as familiar dealing with some aspects of Palestinian archaeology as I am with Mexican archaeology, as far as it seems helpful to my concerns.

**JBMS:** *You seem to have nurtured an interest in the Book of Mormon homeland—you have even published Ensign articles on this topic.*

**John:** People tend to label me a “Book of Mormon geographer.” That is an accident in itself. That is just the first stage of everything I want to see done. I simply haven't got entirely past the first stage yet! Geography is a foundational piece of the work in treating the Book of Mormon. I have satisfied myself, though tentatively, where the Nephites lived, at least enough that I have a basis for other studies. I don't expect to visit that subject again. I am now at the point where I am trying to synthesize all of what I have learned that seems to me to relate to the Book of Mormon. I am trying to get a product out there so that it can be seen before I pass away and leave it in the form of incomplete notes. My urge, before my brain is dried up, is to put the results of my studies on

paper in a form that satisfies me. I don't expect anyone else to do it. I would be delighted if somebody came along who really wanted to be involved, but I have never found anyone willing and able. I can't even find students to partake of my vision enough to do anything about it. So I borrow students and take them as far as I can and then get somebody else.

**JBMS:** *You have spent time in some interesting places during your set of careers. You have been a department chair, and you have written a couple of major volumes on the Book of Mormon.*

**John:** I was seven years in think-tank work that had no connection whatever with religion, let alone archaeology.

**JBMS:** *But your work was analysis, right?*

**John:** Yes. I was involved in analysis of difficult real-world problems, problems for which an appropriate approach was not even apparent. We had to come up with a comprehensive, effective approach on the wing, so to speak. Furthermore, I never specialized in anything. It was never my privilege. I kind of cobbled together an academic preparation in anthropology. For example, some of the most exciting anthropology I tasted but could not master was linguistics. At UCLA, Harry Hoiijer, who was one of the major figures in the mid-20th century in anthropological linguistics, took a real liking to me. He was a Navajo and Athabascan specialist. But I found the whole, wide-ranging span of anthropology interesting. I got interested in studying the Mormons. On the basis of my study of Utah communities, I was the first one really to examine the Mormons as a "tribe," so to speak. One of my professors, Bill Lessa, was a comparative religionist, and he wrote what was a standard textbook for many years. While I was still a student, he used to have me come talk to his classes at UCLA about the Mormons from an anthropological point of view. Of course, one of my challenges was to *be* a Mormon and still talk about Mormonism in useful academic terms. So I became analytical about my role as an anthropologist, about my people, and subsequently about Mormon culture, as well as the Book of Mormon and my relationship to it. So I have chosen to be analytical all the way along. Why? I don't know. It was born into me, I guess.

**JBMS:** *What positive steps have people made in the last 40 or 50 years in Book of Mormon studies that have really moved us forward in understanding the world of this book and what its essence is?*

**John:** I think I can't really address that question without contemplating who has "moved things forward" for whom. At the level of lay people generally, they still have far to go to utilize the rich sources of knowledge about the Nephite record already available. At the level of, say, Sunday School and seminary teachers, I think considerable help has been given to them in the last 50 years in providing them with some sense of context for the scriptures. Fifty years ago they had very few helps. From the point of active LDS scholars who are not into archaeology, which includes most of those who work with FARMS material, I would ask, Have they "moved forward" in recent decades? Have they made substantial advances? I would like to think so. But I think the most important thing for further enlightenment is not tools but enthusiasm—the fact that more ambitious folks are talking about Book of Mormon studies now than used to be the case. And that, frankly, is one of the things that I was most concerned about in moving the *Journal* along the lines I started to do five years ago. I wanted to get more people excited about doing something to further our understanding of the scripture through studying the settings for the record. I really don't care what studies get done next as long as something positive is done that is a serious attempt to clarify and to shed light. I like shedding light. That is not the same as "explaining," but they are obviously related.

We have had some good tools all the way along. I am sincere when I say that George Reynolds's *Concordance* is probably the most important single tool that was ever written. Everything done on computer now is just a slight mechanical expansion of what he did. It was impossible to do any studies until he had produced his *Concordance*. On another hand, one of the areas where we have taken steps ahead is that a lot of "unlearning" has been brought to pass. There was so much for Latter-day Saints to unlearn. As a people we were once so ignorant and so confused about the Book of Mormon. (Many people still are.) Some still can only talk or think about the Nephite scripture in memorized terms. The first thing anyone needs to do before undertaking serious study of this book is to make a conscious effort to try to forget everything "scholarly" we thought we knew 40 years ago, because it was probably wrong. It is wrong at least in the sense of being highly incomplete.

**JBMS:** *Don't you feel gratified after having compiled a major bibliography of diffusionist documents?*

[This refers to the two-volume work that John did with Martin Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, published in 1996 under FARMS's Research Press imprint.] Don't you feel gratified that articles are coming out in *Scientific American* and *U.S. News and World Report*, secular sources that now agree that the Americas were populated by many peoples and that there probably were many transoceanic crossings?

**John:** These articles show a little bit of agreement. The older "experts" are still bitterly opposed to any such notions. Younger scholars will not have those same biased feelings to the same degree as they mature.

**JBMS:** We feel that this is one of your most important contributions, to bring together that body of knowledge.

**John:** The most important one is still coming this year. It will be a big article on plant evidence for crossings. When that comes out, I intend to mail reprints to foot-dragging "experts" so they may not be able to say, "I never saw that."

**JBMS:** Where do you think *Book of Mormon studies* could or should go in the next decade or two? What are profitable directions for LDS students to look?

**John:** I started to answer that in terms of varying levels and different audiences. I would say that educating many more of the public to even a moderate degree of analysis and intelligent thinking about the subject is maybe more important than the professional research itself. There is a lot of professional research that is never communicated adequately and is still hardly known to interested persons. Frankly, that was one of my intentions with the *Journal* and with my picture book, *Images of Ancient America*. Years ago I was encouraged by one of the church leaders to pay attention to improving the communication of research results on the Book of Mormon to the public, to members of the church. I have taken that seriously and have spent a great deal of time on this task, starting with the book that I coedited with Mel Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*. That was an attempt to see if scholars could speak simply so that less-informed people could share the light. That objective was part of my sense of mission with the revamped *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, to make accessible to a wider audience some of the eye-opening things that have been found. I am not yet satisfied with the results. But I am satisfied that something has been done to move in that direction.

LDS scholars dealing with the scriptures are now seen by church leaders and members as potentially faithful and good. Leaders don't agree with those findings in every case, but many more are now willing to look at the possibilities. There were some very stupid things that were done by LDS researchers in the early days when we were just starting to think in these terms (and that may still be the case). Researchers tried to eat the whole scholarly whale without being sufficiently critical.

**JBMS:** Earlier you mentioned being analytic and anthropological rather than merely apologetic. I am curious how one maintains a faithful scholarly approach, such as is defined in the FARMS mission statement, without falling into the trap of the cynical intellectual.

**John:** Frankly, I don't know how. But I know one component, following role models. Here, in my view, is Hugh Nibley's greatest contribution. He obviously has come up against so much material and has thought deeply about it. The fact is that he has done remarkably well in that whole arena for his time and place. Incidentally, we are all in a time and place, and people will look back at me years from now and think, "Good heaven! What was he thinking?" And the answer is that I was thinking what I could think and not thinking what I had not been alerted to. Even so, role models are very important. I think that is Hugh's greatest contribution, to be able to say, "I can think with the best." And he can. There is a great deal that he doesn't know and that future scholars will know, but he thinks with the best—with power—and he is faithful. That is one of the things that makes me look at Elder Maxwell as a role model too. On the other hand, bad examples may also be helpful, seen in the right light.

**JBMS:** What advice would you give to someone who maybe could go on to contribute to answering your questions about the "hows" of the Book of Mormon, not only what they could do but what they should avoid?

**John:** As far as I know, the only solution to the problems of keeping the faith is exercising faith. I literally don't understand why people don't live faithful lives. I see some factors at work in or on them, but I don't really understand the process. I think when we have enough faithful, critical researchers on the Book of Mormon, then Book of Mormon research will be in good shape. That is one reason why, from the beginning of my editorship of the *Journal*, I have insisted that we try to get more and different people involved. I am pleased with the fact that, with the

release of the fall 2001 issue of the *Journal*, we have had 37 different contributing authors. Ten years ago, that was unthinkable. But now many of these 37 people can be held up as having done good work, as still doing intelligent work and also being faithful.

**JBMS:** *They have come from different fields—from music, geology, history, genetics, biology, and so on.*

**John:** There are so many more who could participate. The quality of the contents in *BYU Studies* has also risen in the last 10 or 15 years. And that in part is due to the sheer increase in the number of writers at work and willing to publish.

**JBMS:** *Is there a future in Book of Mormon art?*

**John:** Yes. I would say that unequivocally. But it will take unusual kinds of artists, particularly brave ones, maybe more than creative ones. I think there are many technically competent artists—hundreds upon hundreds—who could paint Book of Mormon art, but they are afraid of offending somebody, either church leaders or the public. So they copy the works of other artists who have had a measure of success. If I had a fortune, I would offer a purchase prize—\$10,000 every year—for artistic renditions of the Savior. But they would have to be based on a scripture such as “He suffered for all” and not portray Jesus as only happy-faced or staring into space. That’s so unreal to me. This issue brings me back to “how” things happened. In my view, that’s not how he lived his life. His life was deeply engaged—deep, deep, deep—and artists should try to portray that depth. But they have to have courage because there will be a lot of people who won’t like the attempts.

**JBMS:** *What kinds of articles could the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies publish that would help its readers? You have obviously thought about that as you reshaped the Journal. Is there a kind of article or a range of pieces that you would like to see published? I know that you have held to the notion of diversity in approaches. You have thought of the modern story of the Book of Mormon as part of the history of this*

*book. It is not just an ancient document. It engages modern history as well.*

**John:** And a future history too. One could write science fiction about it. One of the best compliments that I occasionally hear about my own work is, “After I read your work, I can never think of the Book of Mormon in the same terms again.” That is what I would like to see the *Journal* do a bit at a time, to turn people’s minds so they see new facets of the Book of Mormon. That is certainly what I had in mind with the multicultural slants that we started with Lou Midgely’s piece on the Māori (spring 1998).

There are other important works. Royal Skousen, for example, has provided the means for taking a drastically different look at the book. Noel Reynolds’s study “Nephi’s Political Testament” is of the same sort. And the study that advances the idea that Lehi’s party met other people in Arabia and were even in bondage.

Boy! That shakes up some old conceptions. I like the old conceptions to be shaken when we have something positive to replace them with, a responsible alternative script or scenario.

You know the list of things that I hoped for, articles that I have thought of over the years. I would be interested in any of them. It continues to strike me how incurious many of our people are, how they want to hear the same thing over and over again. Too much of our scripture “study” is like a bedtime story where, if we get one syllable wrong, the child says, “Oh, that’s not the way it goes.”

I am convinced that we have a long way to go in uncovering the stone box of meaning where the scriptures lie passively for too many of us. The first thing we need is an opening up of curiosity, a willingness to accept that it is okay to be curious, it is okay to try to learn something new. If we merely accept the status quo in our studies, we find ourselves playing the tape over and over again instead of grasping the riches of light for ourselves. ❏

