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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (1998), by John L. Sorenson.

**John L. Sorenson. *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*. Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1998. viii + 241 pp. \$31.95.**

Reviewed by Diane E. Wirth

The demeanor, format, and fine presentation of John Sorenson's book *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* are impressive, making a real contribution for the Latter-day Saint who has an interest in Mesoamerica as it relates to the Book of Mormon. For the general reader, Sorenson's text is informative and outlines parallels between Mesoamerican cultures and traditions referred to, or implied, in the Book of Mormon. The high-quality photographs and illustrations are also a credit to this volume. However, there are a few points dealing with the interpretation of Mesoamerican iconography that I believe need to be clarified and may be taken into consideration for any future printings. With the exception of one comment, all these points refer to captions describing pieces of artistic expression.

In the text of this book, page 16, there is a comment on DNA findings. Footnote 16 on page 228 cites V. Morrell, rather than Virginia Morell, as the source of this information. Not available to Sorenson at the time of the publication of his book is another news-breaking genetic study by Dr. Morell that is worthy of mention.<sup>1</sup>

On page 74 the description of a Maya slate mirror back shown on the next page is given as "a Maya father exhorts a son." This phrasing was no doubt used to show relationships between rulers

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<sup>1</sup> See Virginia Morell, "Genes May Link Ancient Eurasians, Native Americas," *The American Association for the Advancement of Science* 280/5363 (1998): 520. She reports: "Now a new genetic study may link Native Americans and people of Europe and the Middle East, offering tantalizing support to a controversial theory that a band of people who originally lived in Europe or Asia Minor were among this continent's first settlers. The new data comes from studies of a genetic marker called Lineage X, which has been found both in living Native Americans and in certain groups in Europe and Asia Minor, including Italians, Finns, and certain Israelis—but not in any Asian population."

and their sons in the Book of Mormon, especially since a comparison is made with Benjamin and his sons. However, the hieroglyphs on this object identify the relationship of these individuals, and they are not father and son. Michael Coe informs us that this is a king and a younger brother who is an *ah k'u hun*, a "keeper of the books."<sup>2</sup> Sorenson correctly makes the supposition that books are next to the young man—two are in baskets.

Steam baths are briefly mentioned in a caption for an illustration of the same on page 87. Sorenson writes, "It is not clear whether women had access to this facility." Steam baths, or sweat baths as they are referred to in most studies, were for "curing, rest, and maintenance of health."<sup>3</sup> Although used by men, steam baths were especially important to midwives and women ready to give birth, or those women who had recently delivered.<sup>4</sup> This purification rite is still practiced by women today.

On page 99 the illustration of a dancing man reminds Sorenson of a "clown." This is a deity known as the Maya Long-Nosed Merchant God, or God M.<sup>5</sup> One of his identifying accoutrements is the fan he carries—an item typically held by merchants. Clowns do perform today in Mexican and Central American ceremonies, which is a good indication that they may have done so in pre-Columbian times; however, we do not have sufficient evidence to support the conjecture that men dressing as god impersonators of this particular merchant god performed as clowns for spectators.

The beautifully carved Maya panel on page 109 is described by Sorenson as follows: "An officer (a virtual 'lawyer') of the royal court informs the ruler, who is acting as high judge." According to the hieroglyphic text, the man at the right bears the title of *Ah K'in*, which identifies him as a priest. But in this particular scene he has the additional role of a soldier as he is dressed in the garb of a warrior; his headdress in particular is similar to those

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<sup>2</sup> Michael D. Coe and Justin Kerr, *The Art of the Maya Scribe* (New York: Abrams, 1998), 200, plate 95.

<sup>3</sup> Mary Miller and Karl Taube, *Gods and Symbols of Ancient Mexico and the Maya: An Illustrated Dictionary of Mesoamerican Religion* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 158–59.

<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, 160.

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Taube, *The Major Gods of Ancient Yucatan* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, 1992), 88–92.

worn by warriors portrayed in the Bonampak murals.<sup>6</sup> The man to the left on the throne to whom the victor presents his captives is not the "ruler," but a subsidiary officer of the court who served the king of Yaxchilan.<sup>7</sup>

Page 123 has two illustrations: one of an Olmec man holding a possible banner and the other a depiction over 2,000 years later from a postconquest manuscript of a group of Tlaxcalan lords. Sorenson claims they are similar. How, may I ask? The hand of the Tlaxcalan ambassador is not holding the same object as that held by the striding Olmec. Years ago this monument from La Venta was dubbed the "Ambassador," and it is perhaps for this reason an association was made by Sorenson with the Tlaxcalan ambassador. The message on the Olmec stone has not yet been fully determined, but a look at the Olmec's clothing reveals that he is simply clad with a piece of fabric that is less than a loincloth. Is this the finery that would be worn by an ambassador? In fact, Jacques Soustelle comments that the physical type of this person closely resembles depictions of Olmec wrestlers or athletes.<sup>8</sup> Perhaps this man just won the Olmec Olympics and is carrying his victory banner around the field. The point here is that assumptions of this type weaken rather than strengthen a statement. As Saburo Sugiyama notes, "ascribing meaning to an earlier period on the basis of later evidence is always risky."<sup>9</sup>

At the bottom left of page 140 Sorenson shows an artist's reconstruction of a temple from Uaxactun, which he claims is Structure E-VII-sub. The identification of the structure, however, is Structure H-X-sub-3, which makes a considerable difference. Sorenson claims this illustration is that of the "sun god." If he had used the correct plaster sculptures from E-VII-sub, that would be true—they represent the Jaguar God of the Underworld (the

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<sup>6</sup> See Linda Schele and Mary Ellen Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: Braziller, in association with the Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, 1986), 226.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> See Jacques Soustelle, *The Olmecs: The Oldest Civilization in Mexico*, trans. Helen R. Lane (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 168–69.

<sup>9</sup> Saburo Sugiyama, "Rulership, Warfare, and Human Sacrifice at the Ciudadela: An Iconographic Study of Feathered Serpent Representations," in *Art, Ideology, and the City of Teotihuacan*, ed. Janet C. Berlo (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 221.

Night Sun).<sup>10</sup> His illustration, on the other hand (from Structure H-X-sub-3), depicts two stacked monster heads, neither one of which is a representation of the "sun god." The top section symbolizes what is known as "Snake Mountain," of which there were many in Mesoamerica.<sup>11</sup> As Linda Schele and Peter Mathews have pointed out, "Since the Maya conceived of mountains as living beings, they represented them as zoomorphic creatures, complete with eyes, muzzle mouth, and ear ornaments."<sup>12</sup> Snakes emerge from the mouth of this monster—it has nothing to do with the sun god. The lower head symbolizes "Sustenance Mountain." It has maize foliation at the top, and the primordial sea can be seen below with little shark heads. This is from the Late Preclassic period—the theme of these two mountains prevailed for over a thousand years through Aztec times.<sup>13</sup>

On page 160 Sorenson would have done better just to show the typical Maya scribe as he does on the following page. His example on page 160, from Monte Alban, Oaxaca, Mexico, is not regarded today as being that of a scribe. According to Dr. Mary Ellen Miller of Yale University, the so-called Scribe of Cuilapan was dubbed a "scribe" only because of his meditative face and cross-legged, seated position. We cannot assume that because this individual is posed in a position similar to the manner in which Egyptian scribes worked that this particular man was of the same profession. In Miller's opinion the Cuilapan figure "is just a red herring."<sup>14</sup> This man has no tools of the trade on or near his person. Maya scribes, for example, often wore a large, spangled turban with bunches of pens tucked in their headdress. Inkpots were also present on or near the scribe. The Cuilapan figure has two calendar dates on his person: 13 Flint on his chest and 13 Water on his headdress. Neither has anything at all to do with scribes.

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<sup>10</sup> See Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 6th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), 74.

<sup>11</sup> See Julia G. Kappelman and Linda Schele, "What the Heck's Coatepec?" in *Tollan as Political Currency: Myth and Image in Mesoamerica* (paper presented at the Texas Symposium, Austin, Texas, 12 March 1998).

<sup>12</sup> Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *The Code of Kings: The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 43.

<sup>13</sup> See Kappelman and Schele, "What the Heck's Coatepec?"

<sup>14</sup> Personal communication from Mary Ellen Miller to Diane E. Wirth, 11 July 1989.

Furthermore, scribes were not typically portrayed in sculpture in this part of Mexico, whereas they were ubiquitous in Maya art.

The Jaina-style figure shown on page 174 does not suggest "the use of priestly or lordly rhetoric to teach." This is clearly a statuette of a dancer with heels raised, back arched, and arm extended. His closed eyes may even be indicative of a trance state.<sup>15</sup> This dancer may not be speaking words of wisdom to his viewers as Sorenson surmises.

A painted vase on page 179 is used by Sorenson to show that dance was important to Mesoamericans, and indeed it was. Here we see the raised heels of dancers similar to the Jaina figure on page 174. Sorenson's caption reads, "Men dance near a lord or priest seated on a platform." The man Sorenson refers to is not actually seated on the stick-frame sacrificial scaffolding, which I believe Sorenson refers to as a "platform." A jaguar has already been killed and three death eyes are affixed to the wooden framework. It is doubtful the man seated above the row of hieroglyphs (perhaps this is Sorenson's "platform"), which are positioned over the scaffolding, is a "lord or priest." According to Justin Kerr, the name glyph located to the right of his head identifies this individual as a "fire sacrificer." The first glyph in his name phrase is the same as the burning, smoking fire-deity glyph that he holds. Kerr believes this bowed personage is one of the supernatural Hero Twins of the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché Maya. His bowed head is merely an artistic convention to keep him in the picture.<sup>16</sup> The point to be made here is that the dancers are probably not performing in honor of a high-ranking official. The message of this vase is that of offerings and sacrifice. The dancer on the left holds a personified disc-shaped decapitator's ax, and the dancer on the right has a personified bloodletter instrument affixed to his belt.

Regarding Stela 25 at Izapa, shown on page 186 and described on page 187, Sorenson writes: "This scene represents a specific mythic event told in the Popol Vuh in which a crocodile bites off the arm of a hero-god." This is not so! According to the

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<sup>15</sup> See Linda Schele, *Hidden Faces of the Maya* (Mexico: Impetu Comunicación, 1997), 127–28.

<sup>16</sup> Personal communication from Justin Kerr to Diane E. Wirth, 2 December 1998.

Popol Vuh story, it is Vucub Caquix, the vain bird who represented the sun of the previous world, who tore off the arm of one of the Hero Twins, namely Hunahpu. Sorenson cites Michael Coe for this information; however, giving a description of Vucub Caquix and this particular incident, Coe writes, "This creature was a gigantic bird-monster of magnificent appearance. . . . The overproud bird puffed himself up on his perch. . . . The Twins knew that each day the bird-monster came to a *nance* tree to eat its fruit. There, Hunahpu shot him. . . . Vucub Caquix seized Hunahpu's arm and tore it off."<sup>17</sup> Coe then goes on to say that this scenario is portrayed on Izapa's Stela 25. It is therefore the bird Vucub Caquix who tore "off the arm of a hero-god"; it was not bitten off by a crocodile. In fact, the crocodile in Mesoamerican art when in an upright position, as portrayed on Stela 25, was often used as one of the forms to represent the World Tree. When the ceiba tree is young it is not only green but is covered with spikes that resemble Hershey kisses. This visual oddity may be equated with the color and rough, spiked back of a crocodile.<sup>18</sup> Mesoamerican cultures were noted for their keen use of metaphors and puns in both art and language.

On page 192 Sorenson shows the beautiful onyx bowl belonging to an "old man with a Jewish-looking profile." It is true that the man does have a Semitic visage; however, I believe I would have also explained that this is a portrait of the second ruler of the great city of Palenque, dating from the Early Classic, not the "Late Classic period." David Stuart, Nikolai Grube, and Werner Nahm have all identified a glyph both on this bowl and on the early dynastic history of Palenque found in an inscription on the Tablet of the Cross, as the second ruler of Palenque. His name glyph is currently dubbed Casper, because a portion of it resembles Casper the Friendly Ghost. This ruler's birth was A.D. 9 August 422, and his accession to the throne took place on A.D. 10 August 435.<sup>19</sup> Casper, with a good-sized beard, certainly did not

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<sup>17</sup> Michael D. Coe, "The Hero Twins: Myth and Image," in *The Maya Vase Book*, ed. Justin Kerr (New York: Kerr Associates, 1989), 1:163.

<sup>18</sup> See photo of older ceiba on Sorenson's page 182.

<sup>19</sup> Discussed in Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *Notebook for the XVIIth Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop at Texas, March 13-14, 1993* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 103.



have the physical appearance of a typical Maya. Perhaps in time it will be determined that he was a charismatic foreigner who won the hearts of the people and their kingdom and was subsequently accepted as their ruler. Today it is known that foreigners from the West became rulers of such places as Tikal in Guatemala and Copan in Honduras.<sup>20</sup>

On page 207 Sorenson's text mentions the famous Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan (reconstruction pictured on page 206), built circa A.D. 200 with feathered serpent heads affixed to the exterior (museum reconstruction pictured on page 207). However, he fails to mention that nearly two hundred sacrificial victims were placed inside the temple structure as a dedicatory offering to the gods during the early stages while this edifice was being constructed.<sup>21</sup> What was the meaning of this? I suggest this temple was built after the Golden Age of the Book of Mormon began to fragment, and we do not as yet have sufficient evidence to warrant an association between all feathered serpent motifs and Jesus Christ. Many Latter-day Saint writers, including myself, were once of this opinion, but further study of the subject shows that great caution should be exercised with such determinations. I do, however, agree with Sorenson's statement on page 206 that "The historical and archaeological data are not clear enough to establish that relationship decisively [between Quetzalcoatl and Jesus Christ]; nevertheless, a reasonable case can be made in support of the proposition."

Page 208 shows a mural from Tetitla, Teotihuacan. Sorenson describes this picture as that of a hybrid eagle. It would perhaps be more appropriate to have said that bird elements compose a headdress with bloody motifs of hearts and intestines that is worn by a goddess figure who dominated Teotihuacan theology commencing about A.D. 300. Moreover, the owl, rather than the eagle,

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<sup>20</sup> See David Stuart, "Smoking Frog, K'inich Yax K'uk' Mo', and the Epigraphic Evidence for Ties between Teotihuacan and the Classic Maya" (paper presented at a symposium, *A Tale of Two Cities: Copan and Teotihuacan*, at Harvard University, 3 May 1997). See also Coe, *The Maya*, 90-93, 98, 118.

<sup>21</sup> See George Stuart, "The Timeless Vision of Teotihuacan," *National Geographic* 188/6 (1995): 14.

was the special insignia of the goddess. This particular mural is dated to A.D. 650–750.<sup>22</sup>

For some reason, the text of this book was far superior to the captions for the beautiful array of photographs. Overall, there is probably no harm done, even with some incorrect statements as to what is portrayed. As one who has studied Mesoamerican iconography for over twenty-five years, I found some of these statements impulsive and not up to current determinations made by scholars. However, for most Latter-day Saints, the points made in this review will most likely appear as mere nit-picking, and indeed they may be.

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<sup>22</sup> See Esther Pasztory, "Teotihuacan Unmasked: A View through Art," *The American Association for the Advancement of Science* 280/5363 (1994): 48–49.