2000

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Title  Connecting the Nephite Story to Mesoamerican Research

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ISSN  1099-9450 (print), 2168-3123 (online)

CONNECTING THE NEPHITE STORY TO Mesoamerican Research

Cherry B. Silver

Introduction

Readers will be attracted to Images of Ancient America by its clear type, colorful layouts, and beautiful photographs and drawings. The haunting and sometimes grotesque artifacts of early cultures framed on the pages of the book convey the wonder of an ancient world. John L. Sorenson's commentary lays out, chapter by chapter, a remarkably full picture of the lives of ancient Mesoamericans, based on substantial research by himself and others. As the subtitle Visualizing Book of Mormon Life suggests, the book invites readers to visually question and explore the life of Mesoamerica as it probably was experienced by Book of Mormon peoples. From this volume, readers see vividly and realistically a world whose prophets speak from the dust.

This volume obviously represents more than a photo depiction of ancient artifacts. The book offers the fruits of a lifetime of thoughtful reading and writing by a scholar of sociocultural anthropology, an emeritus professor from Brigham Young University. Research Press goes to considerable expense to publish an impressively illustrated

and printed volume, obviously because both author and publisher judge this a very important effort.

In this book, Sorenson aspires to readjust the thinking of readers with contrasting attitudes toward the Book of Mormon. He addresses “two types of readers, who come to the book with contrasting assumptions. The first consists of those (generally not members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) who do not consider the Book of Mormon to be factual. The second are religious believers (‘Mormons’) who reverence that book as scripture but are not well acquainted with what is known about the ancient world” (p. 1). Such a pragmatic approach aims to clarify Book of Mormon claims through known facts and brings a “sense of realism” to readers of the book (p. 3). Sorenson applauds the growing shift in “attention from the apology/criticism conflict toward research that follows the canons of conventional scholarship as applied to the study of other ancient documents” (p. 2) and invites Mesoamericanist scholars to take seriously “unexpected information” they may find in “Mormon’s codex” (pp. 3–4).

In my response to Images of Ancient America, I will examine the structure of this volume, describe its distinctive contributions, and offer my impressions of Sorenson’s achievement.

Structure and Sources

How Is the Book Divided?

In the first part, which treats material topically, Sorenson reviews “The Land and the Peoples” and “Mesoamerican Civilization” in general. He underscores the variety of environments, cultures, ethnic groups, and languages to be found in this “diverse ancient scene” (p. 15). And he takes issue with theories too narrow or biased about the origins of these peoples. At a meeting of physical anthropologists in 1990, “the argument for a straightforward origin of Amerindians via the Bering Strait was said to have been ‘undone’ by certain archaeologists, linguists, and geneticists. One study reported at the meeting used the recently developed DNA technique to show ‘that
there were at least 11 major lineages [or biological lines in the Americas], possibly more” (p. 16).

Sorenson also speaks correctly to LDS readers concerning ethnic origins: "Throughout most if not all of Book of Mormon history, the terms Lamanite and Nephite signaled political and cultural affiliations, not biology. . . . Obviously, much more was going on and more peoples and cultures were involved in Book of Mormon history than modern readers usually detect when reading Mormon's terse, one-sided account.” To support his corrective, he reminds us: “Given such uncertainties, it is well to remember Hugh Nibley’s caution, 'There is not a word in the Book of Mormon to prevent the coming to this hemisphere of any number of people from any part of the world at any time’” (p. 17).

Essentially, Sorenson is amassing evidence to discount persistent wrong thinking. We might say that he wages war on authoritarian ignorance. In the section titled “A Gallery of Ancient Faces” (pp. 18–21), for instance, he points to faces on ancient statuary with noses and beards that could link Mesoamerican people to the Middle East. He argues this link in contradiction to anthropologists who show only statues carrying features that are Asian and Mongolian. “The faces shown here [with Israelitish features] are portraits of such individuals, although their very presence in Mexico and Central America is ignored or denied by conventional physical anthropologists” (p. 18). He counters static beliefs and invites consideration of broader evidence. With languages, too, he persists, “There is much to be learned yet. A few linguists have shown that a significant portion of Hebrew vocabulary and grammar is mixed into certain Mesoamerican languages. Studies on that interesting matter continue” (p. 25).

After the opening section on land, peoples, and civilization, Sorenson’s chapters encompass everything from daily living to war to religion. Each chapter explores various details of Mesoamerican life.

Sorenson divides the first part of this book from the second with the heading “Book of Mormon Peoples and History” (p. 188). There he explains another way to look at this civilization: “The first part of this book related information on Book of Mormon peoples and
cultures to their Mesoamerican setting, topic by topic. While that approach has value in being systematic, it leaves issues of history and geography in limbo. What follows will connect the Nephite story to the Mesoamerican scene in terms of the broader topics of times and places” (p. 188).

This part thus treats geographic sites and time lines. The first section, “Mormon’s Map in Relation to Mesoamerica” (p. 188), deals with place. Further sections explore what happened in specific sites from “Nephite History” to “The Nephites’ Fall,” “Nephites, Lamanites, and Successor Peoples,” and “The Jaredites.” Keeping these facts in mind, Sorenson explains formerly confusing allusions in the Book of Mormon, such as the use of the terms up and down to describe migrations (see pp. 194, 196) and the notion of limited population (see p. 194).

Following these two major parts, two appendixes review “How We Learn about the Past” through archaeology and complementary studies (pp. 218–23) and “Old World Connections with the New” (pp. 224–27). In his attempt to educate scholars, Sorenson reports that he worked with Martin H. Raish in documenting contacts with the New World prior to Columbus. Images of Ancient America describes voyages and immigrations in such a way as to counter notions commonly taught by archaeologists that all early inhabitants crossed a Bering Straits land bridge from Mongolia to Alaska. Yet the Book of Mormon migrations are only three among many: “One version of the Near Eastern theory is recounted in the Book of Mormon. It remains a question for future research to determine, however, what degree of influence the three Book of Mormon voyages had on Mesoamerican cultures, or whether other voyages, say by Polynesians or Chinese, had major, direct influence on New World areas” (p. 224).

1. Endnote 218 of Images refers to John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish. Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1996). In a personal interview, 6 September 1998, John Sorenson affirmed that this 1,200-page, two-volume bibliography of transoceanic voyages “rubbs some people’s noses in some things they ought to know.”
Even Nephi, son of Lehi, Sorenson argues, denied attempting to transplant Israelite culture: "Nephí was explicit in saying that he tried to weed out many Jewish notions in founding his new colony (see 2 Nephi 25:1–5), although a version of the law of Moses was followed."

Sorenson concludes that "a huge body of writings" convinces him that sea voyages must be considered "despite the fact that a majority of scholars still refuse to examine the evidence seriously" (p. 224).

The final pages of the book provide endnotes, illustration credits, references, and scripture and subject indexes. Here, to my mind, lies a possible fault, and certainly an inconvenience. Sorenson provides endnotes and gives credit for illustrations to a wide range of sources. But his list of references covers mostly external scholars and does not cite his own articles and books nor all of the LDS scholars he refers to. One regrets this disappointing shortening because the blending of Mormon with secular scholarship in his commentary and endnotes makes a great contribution to our understanding.

Where Does He Obtain His Information?

Sorenson draws on the findings of academics ranging widely across research disciplines in depicting the Mesoamerican way of life. His sources range from codices written by the Spanish conquerors to the work of anthropologists like Michael Coe and H. B. Nicholson, geographer Paul Kirchoff, physical anthropologist Eusebio Davalos Hurtado, and analyst of clothing in the codices Patricia Rieff Anawalt. He refers to research by Book of Mormon specialists such as Hugh Nibley, Wells Jakeman, John Welch, Noel Reynolds, and Brian Stubbs. He also reports on his own extensive studies of ancient America, the results of which have appeared in books and articles across "nearly five decades" of scholarship (p. 1). His text and comprehensive endnotes tap those decades of research.

While describing the debates that occur within the field of anthropology, Sorenson pays tribute to the level of civilization found in Mesoamerica (see p. 26). He also commends the work of Mexican investigators who "probe . . . sources" hidden to the methods of
European-trained scholars and who are discovering that "the Meso-americans also possessed immense bodies of systematized lore in astronomy, mathematics, engineering, medicine, botany, literature, art, philosophy, cosmology, and other fields of knowledge and creativity" (p. 30). "Impressive," he concludes. "Very useful," I would add, thinking of how I teach students of early American literature to visualize a realistic and varied civilization. I have used *Images of Ancient America* in my classes to provide a needed corrective to the standard stories of conquest of an ignorant native people by "civilized" Europeans.

On another level, Sorenson visually substantiates his theories by connecting the people to geography with precise photographs of Guatemalan and southern Mexican terrain. And on still another level he re-creates the thinking of the times through evidence from early Spanish literary documents and hints drawn from monuments, artifacts, pictographs, and inscriptions. The resulting riches of information could be overwhelming, but Sorenson so nicely catalogues them that one feels able to dip back at will to refresh and deepen first impressions.

**Contributions**

*Images of Ancient America* enriches Book of Mormon studies in three important ways:

1. It illuminates the Book of Mormon as a genuine artifact of an ancient culture. Sorenson describes a people and a time in Mesoamerica by combining anthropological insights with the Book of Mormon's religious text. He finds clues within the text to sites and cities and sees evidence for patterns of living. He presents the cultural context of the Book of Mormon peoples, seeing them realistically as participants in a society, shaped by traditions, subject to political forces, and constrained by geography and natural resources.

He reminds us along the way that members of the ruling classes, the educated elite, wrote the Book of Mormon mainly for their own spiritual purposes. Only unconsciously do the writers suggest something about the everyday pursuits and daily lives of the people. He then matches ideas from the text with evidence turned up by archae-
ologists, whose artifacts and digs of ancient sites show details of the life of ordinary people only implied by Book of Mormon writers. Although he finds strong relationships between text and research, Sorenson is cautious and uses many qualifiers, not claiming that all information is compatible. In this he wants to warn believers away from enthusiastic invention beyond reasonable knowledge, and so he is careful to qualify his conclusions.

For the most part, anthropological findings help Book of Mormon readers and believers reach sound judgments. In turn, Sorenson believes, a close reading of the text could help researchers expand their understanding of Mesoamerican life. Images of Ancient America's first achievement, therefore, lies in creating a picture of ancient humanity that is illuminated by these two important sources.

2. Sorenson evaluates theories from an anthropological standpoint. Research methods in anthropology have changed and, consequently, findings have increased. Sorenson uses a clever contrast to illustrate this change: He begins this book with a photograph of Alfred Percival Maudslay, the early classic archaeologist who single-handedly masterminded a dig and analyzed its results (see p. 1). In contrast, he closes the book with an appendix on modern archaeology, describing the "sophisticated imaging equipment," the "large team of researchers" (p. 218), and the many "complementary studies" (pp. 222–23) that interpret remains with a degree of sophistication and subtlety far beyond what Maudslay could have imagined.

Because he has so thoroughly assimilated material dealing with ancient America, Sorenson can present his views in an informative, yet almost conversational tone. Taking a stance for impartial veracity, he admits that much is not yet known and chides the overzealous among both Book of Mormon defenders and skeptics. He commends and cites the work of many contemporary scholars, both non-Mormon and Latter-day Saint. He himself paints a picture so detailed that it becomes convincing, if not irrefutable, particularly when broadly supported by contemporary research.

3. The format of the book, including added sidebars, enhances the reader's perusal of the text. After recounting known anthropological information under each topic, Sorenson dramatizes aspects of the
lives of Book of Mormon peoples with evidence from the Book of Mormon itself. In many of the sections, a sidebar entitled "Visualizing Book of Mormon Life" blends what is known about Mesoamerica with what is known from the scriptures. Sorenson provides context for Book of Mormon stories through geographic, cultural, and social information. The author's commentary here is wide-ranging and generally focused on known facts, but it is sometimes chatty and usually lively. The attractive graphic design enhances the reader's understanding. This multifaceted substantiation of the Book of Mormon world is the book's greatest contribution.

To observe an example of Sorenson's method, see the section entitled "Cities, Towns, and Villages" (p. 102). He explains that Mesoamerican cities were small and villages were seen as the "ideal pattern," although some centers like Teotihuacan in central Mexico might have had a population exceeding 100,000. Sorenson reminds readers that in biblical terms cities meant "administrative centers over regions" and even "tiny posts for armed garrisons" (p. 102). Then in a sidebar, he reports:

The Book of Mormon distinguishes five levels of settlement size: great cities, cities, towns, villages, and small villages. Book of Mormon cities are often named, but their size clearly varied greatly. Perhaps on the small end of the scale was Helam, built by Alma's people. It was designated a city almost from the moment it was settled—by fewer than five hundred people (see Mosiah 18:35; 23:20). Only four of the more than forty Nephite and Lamanite cities whose names are given in the record are termed "great cities," although others, unnamed, were conceived as having the same rank (see Helaman 7:22; 3 Nephi 8:14). But we should be cautious about overestimating the actual population size of even the largest of those, for Mormon's record also refers to Jerusalem in Palestine as a "great city" (1 Nephi 1:4) even though its population down to Lehi's time may never have exceeded twenty-five thousand inhabitants (in Solomon's fabled day it had only around three thousand). (p. 103)
Here Sorenson’s information about numbers and terms helps clarify proportions and set the scene. His method includes referring to specific scriptures. He also includes biblical data for comparative purposes, thus relating the ancient world to conditions in modern Mesoamerica. Through such explanations he introduces the reader to Book of Mormon peoples in a tangible, believable context.

In the section on cities, towns, and villages, Sorenson includes an aerial photograph of a contemporary Pacific Coast hamlet to illustrate modern housing clusters and a photograph of a mountain valley in the present-day Cunén area of Guatemala to illustrate how a “land” might be defined either as a territory like a valley with an “administrative center” or as an “economic entity” with wider boundaries (p. 102). He also adds a sketch of an archaeological site from late Olmec times and, more prominently, an artist’s re-creation of a magnificent city from 200 B.C.: El Mirador, in northern Guatemala. The site was excavated in the 1980s by BYU archaeologist Ray T. Matheny, but Sorenson declares in an endnote that it “has no identifiable connection with Book of Mormon lands” (p. 229 n. 74).

The diversity of these illustrations in style and time periods highlights a limitation inherent in this book—its lack of conclusive evidence. Clear and dramatic as the photographs and drawings are, they must be interpreted from a certain viewpoint in order to relate them to the Book of Mormon. And the interpretations given here depend on Sorenson’s personal skill and intuition, although he offers, where possible, documented scholarship.

In another example of his method, under “War and the Military,” Sorenson discusses weapons and armor in ancient times. Turning to what is known about this from the Book of Mormon, he says:

All the weapons employed in native Mesoamerica may be referred to in the Book of Mormon. Often the connections are obvious (for example, “spears,” Alma 17:7). Certain other names of weapons in that text (for example, “axe” and “sword”) leave us unclear in both the Nephite record, as in Spanish descriptions of native weapons that speak, vaguely, about the appearance and function of the mentioned weapons. Yet enough plausible matchups are apparent that
seeing Mesoamerican weapons gives us valuable clues to understand those of the Nephites. (p. 130)

On pages 130 and 131, *Images of Ancient America* shows museum specimens of an Aztec spear-thrower and sketches of weapons and a hunter. Sorenson cites five other passages from Alma about armor and clothing and ways of "casting over . . . arrows' at the enemy" (p. 130). His endnote guides the reader to articles from Latter-day Saint scholars William J. Hamblin and A. Brent Merrill that specifically explore weaponry. Leaving the minute evidence to these individual works, Sorenson offers general explanations that link Mesoamerican life with the scriptural account in a logical but tempered way.

**Evaluations**

**Melding Two Worlds**

In this intriguing volume, John Sorenson sets himself a dangerous task, apt to be misunderstood by both critics and advocates of the Book of Mormon. While both want to compare the worlds of scholarship and religious faith, critics underscore differences; advocates find similarities. However, because Sorenson aims to successfully meld the worlds of scholarship and religious text in one volume, he attempts to upset stereotypes and advance understanding of an ancient religious world from two bases, as it has never been clarified and illustrated before.

Not every reader will approve Sorenson's stepping back from making absolute connections. Groomed on early discoveries of impressive links between stela, pyramids, and Book of Mormon culture by Sidney Sperry, Milton R. Hunter, Paul Cheesman, Bruce Warren, Thomas Ferguson, and others, LDS readers may expect greater certitude in this volume. Instead Sorenson offers reasoned hypotheses and, where evidence is scanty and ties are vague, acknowledges the uncertainties. However, for the reader who presses ahead through the whole book, the sheer mass of evidence builds confidence in the story told by Book of Mormon narrators. Page by page, through
more than fifty topics, Sorenson's cautiously developed links build an exciting picture of a complete civilization. He is obviously not so much trying to prove the authenticity of the Book of Mormon by the anthropological detail as aiming to enrich its story by representing a complex, accurate view of ancient life. And for one segment of his Mormon audience, Sorenson proposes the book as a guide and corrective. "I particularly hope," he writes, "that artists, filmmakers, pageant producers, and writers who deal with the Book of Mormon will enrich and discipline their creative work by use of the information in this book" (p. 4).

Offering "Slant" Insights

Since tracing commonplaces of people's lives occupies the sociocultural anthropologist, he must draw hints from and make connections with the physical evidence by looking at the texts slantwise. Sorenson thus hunts for suggestions from the Book of Mormon text and does not expect its authors to fully clarify and depict social conditions or cultural customs.

Arguments for geography take on new meaning in Images of Ancient America. Sorenson is known for his earlier book, An Ancient Setting for the Book of Mormon, in which he speaks effectively for the Guatemala highlands and southern Mexico as a setting for Nephite and Lamanite cities. Not until viewing the magnificent photographs included in Images of Ancient America, however, did I feel strongly that this richly varied land could convincingly hold the peoples and events of Book of Mormon history as other suggested lands could not.

I find Images of Ancient America to be a landmark book, providing a substantial bridge between research and religious communities in its scholarship, answering questions long posed by Book of

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2. In poem 1129, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant," Emily Dickinson suggests how the poet reveals subtle truths.

Mormon readers about the actual life of these peoples, and setting forth key verbal and visual arguments for a Mesoamerican setting for this narrative. Its page design and format help present those messages strongly, and readers should appreciate its value as a reference work. *Images of Ancient America* weighs in not only as a large book, but as one large in considerations worth heartfelt study.