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Abstract Review of *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* (2000), by Jerry L. Ainsworth.

DISCOVERING MORMON AND MORONI

T. Lynn Elliott

Have you ever wondered what kind of woman Mormon married? Or why Mormon was made commander of the Nephite armies at age fifteen? This book promises to address these and other Book of Mormon related questions. Its intent is to give a broad overview of the lives of Mormon and Moroni, and its author, Jerry Ainsworth, brings a heavy dose of enthusiasm plus over twenty years of work, travel, and exploration in Central America to the task.

Unfortunately, he faces the same problem as have other authors who have dealt with these issues, namely the paucity of source material. Taken together, the books of Mormon and Moroni make up only thirty-one pages in the current English edition of the Book of Mormon, and much of this space is dedicated to doctrinal subjects rather than to biography, history, geography, or culture. To these pages one can add the occasional marginal notes that both Mormon and Moroni make at various places in the Book of Mormon, but even so, one is left with very little firsthand material with which to reconstruct the “lives and travels” of these two men.

To his credit, Ainsworth recognizes the difficulties of working with such a limited amount of source material. He notes that “it was

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necessary to take small pieces of information [including additional material from Mesoamerican oral histories, archaeology, and the records of the early Spanish friars] and with these pieces weave a net, show a pattern, and build a foundation” (p. xx). Like a historical novelist, Ainsworth has taken what little is known of these two men and has put together a narrative that both is believable in human terms and fits the known facts. While few, if any, of his conclusions can be proven unequivocally true given the evidence we have, all of them seem plausible based on the information he presents.

Perhaps because of the paucity of material available on the lives of Mormon and Moroni, most of this book deals with subjects other than these two men. The largest part of this book, in fact, consists of speculation on the geography of the Book of Mormon. In this area, Ainsworth presents several compelling conclusions. For instance, rather than the commonly held belief that the Jaredites traveled across the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Ainsworth argues that after initially traveling northward from the Tower of Babel (see Ether 2:1), the Jaredites continued north and west on their voyage to the New World, traveling through Asia Minor, Europe, and across the Atlantic Ocean. The scriptural reference says “And it came to pass that they did travel in the wilderness, and did build barges, in which they did cross many waters, being directed continually by the hand of the Lord” (Ether 2:6). To which could be added, “And the Lord said: Go to work and build, *after the manner of barges which ye have hitherto built*” (Ether 2:16). Building barges and crossing “many waters” in the course of their trip to the seashore could certainly imply a route across the Black Sea and through Europe.

To this scriptural background, Ainsworth adds a discussion of ocean currents—which would have made the Atlantic route easier than the Pacific route—and the oral traditions of the Quinamis, or “ancient ones,” of Central America (p. 48). These traditions describe the founders of the nation traveling across the ocean in “caves” and landing on the east coast of Mexico near Tampico. “Caves” could be a good description of the inside of a Jaredite barge, and landing on the east coast of Mexico opens up other possibilities for Book of Mormon geography.

These, of course, are not the only possible interpretations of either the scriptural or the oral history evidence. After the initial reference to traveling northward, the book of Ether makes no other comment on the direction the Jaredites traveled beyond saying that they went “into the wilderness . . . into that quarter where there never had man been” (Ether 2:5). And since no account gives a definite length of time that the Jaredites wandered before they came to the seashore, the plausible location of the Old World departure point for the Jaredites could be anywhere from Europe to India or maybe even China. Similarly, the traditions of the Quinamis are certainly open to other interpretations. These traditions refer to the founders traveling in seven “caves” rather than the eight barges discussed in the book of Ether (see Ether 3:1). Ainsworth handles this discrepancy by speculating that the eighth barge carried only fish and thus could be excluded from the total number of “caves” that carried people as well as animals. But it is also possible that the traditions are an amalgamation of several unrelated historical or mythical events and don’t refer to the Jaredites at all.

Ainsworth likewise provides compelling evidence for the location of the cities of Bountiful, Zarahemla, and Moroni (which sank into the sea at the time of the appearance of Christ), the hill Cumorah, and other sites. Of special note is his location of the land of the Ammonites, the descendants of the Lamanites converted by Ammon and his brethren during their missionary labors. According to the Book of Mormon, these people eventually settled in the land of Melek (see Alma 35:13) on the fringes of Nephite civilization. These people were known for their religious devotion, and Ainsworth speculates that over time they continued their migration north- and westward and ended up founding the religious center of Teotihuacan, thus tying the Book of Mormon to one of Central America’s most interesting archaeological sites.

There is plenty of food for thought in all this speculation, and Ainsworth presents his views in a straightforward and engaging way. The reader should be aware, however, that most of the issues Ainsworth discusses have been dealt with by other LDS authors, though one would not guess this by reading the text. As is the case

with his conclusions about the travels of the Jaredites, different interpretations of the available evidence can be made. It is unfortunate that Ainsworth pays so little attention to the work done by other LDS researchers. He may have considered examining their work to be beyond the scope of his book, but by not at least acknowledging the presence of other schools of thought, the overall result is weaker than it needs to be.

Two examples illustrate this point. The first deals with the question of why Mormon was given command of the Nephite armies at such a young age. Ainsworth argues that this happened because Mormon was a strong religious leader. One need only think of Joan of Arc leading an army at age seventeen to realize that such a scenario is possible. But alternatively, Mormon could have been made commander because of his military competence. The first war Mormon mentions in his book started around A.D. 322 at about the same time that he, as an eleven-year-old boy, was brought to the land of Zarahemla by his father. It is possible that this was the beginning of Mormon's military career, especially if his father was in the military. And like Emory Upton or George Custer—both of whom were made generals at ages twenty-four and twenty-three respectively during the American Civil War—Mormon's promotion through the ranks could have come as a result of both success in battle and his ability to lead men into combat.

A third explanation could be that Mormon belonged to a military caste.¹ Although Mormon does not mention it, it is possible that his father was the commander of the Nephite armies. If this position was hereditary, and if Mormon's father was incapacitated in some way, it would make some sense for Mormon to assume command even at a young age. The young Alexander the Great provides a historical example of how such a thing is possible, but one need look no further than the Book of Mormon itself to find a precedent for this option. The first Moroni (of Standard of Liberty fame) was replaced

1. For further discussion of this possibility, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 317–19.

as commander of the armies by his young son Moronihah when the latter was in his twenties or younger.²

Ainsworth's contention that Mormon came to power following the "Joan of Arc" model, then, is not the only possibility; his argument would have been much more compelling had he explained why his theory should be accepted over the alternatives.

The second example of how reference to other research could have strengthened this book has to do with Ainsworth's interpretation of the golden plates. The commonly held picture of the plates, based on Joseph Smith's description, is of a stack of gold pages six inches high. Ainsworth speculates that such a stack of solid gold plates would weigh between 120 and 150 pounds (see p. 240), and that, at any rate, this many plates would not be needed. So, he argues, the stack of plates was actually much smaller, perhaps only about an inch high. Such a stack could have as few as twenty-four plates for the translated portion of the Book of Mormon and another forty-eight plates for the sealed portion. This stack would not only be much lighter than a six-inch stack, but it would also revolve around the symbolic number twenty-four.

This is one solution to the problem of the weight of the plates, but others, looking at the same question, conclude that the traditional six-inch stack of plates is certainly possible if the plates were not *solid* gold but rather an alloy. For instance, had the plates been made of a copper-gold alloy, a six-inch stack would not only have been much lighter than 120 pounds, but the individual plates would also have been much easier to etch.³ Given these two possible explanations, one wonders why readers would accept Ainsworth's more complicated theory over the simpler explanation (which also happens to correspond with the traditional description of the plates).

2. Alma 43:17 informs us that Moroni was twenty-five years old when he was appointed commander of the Nephite armies. The editors estimate that this event took place in 74 B.C. Moroni later turned command over to his son Moronihah around 57 B.C. (Alma 62:43), or seventeen years later, which would make Moronihah no older than his midtwenties, and possibly younger, when he came to command.

3. See "The 'Golden' Plates," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 275-77.

Because of the growth of research on Book of Mormon topics in recent years, the author should probably not be faulted too much for not addressing every alternative theory or explanation. But since Ainsworth's interpretations of the geography and of the events of the Book of Mormon are different in many respects from those proposed by other authors, he really should have explained why we should accept his version over theirs.

Alternative theories aside, Ainsworth could have had gone further in buttressing his own theories. For instance, much of his geography is built on the assumption that large segments of Central America either were under water or were swamps during the Book of Mormon times. He bases this assumption on early native names (like "wet or flooded lands," see p. 66) for the regions in question, the lack of ancient ruins in the supposedly flooded areas, and a fifteenth-century map that shows the northern Yucatan as an island in the Gulf of Mexico. Using this assumption, he creates a geography that fits very well with the evidence presented in the Book of Mormon. But, besides the obvious question of whether one should trust the accuracy of fifteenth-century cartographers, the question arises of what, if any, physical evidence exists to support his assumption about where the water was. It seems likely that such widespread inundation would leave some kind of geological sign that would go a long way toward supporting Ainsworth's contention. If such evidence exists, though, he does not discuss it.

Consider also his argument that the Jaredites were commanded to build a barge to carry fish to the New World because the lakes and streams of the promised lands needed to be restocked after the devastation of the flood. Since the scriptural evidence on this is slim, Ainsworth could have strengthened his bit of speculation by answering such questions as (1) Do major floods kill freshwater fish, including eggs that may have been laid before the flood? And if they do in some cases, do we have reason to believe that they would have in the case of Noah's flood? (2) Is there a zoological relationship between the freshwater fish of Central America and those of the Near East (or Europe, if one assumes that the Jaredites came this route)? (3) If the Jaredites were commanded to carry fish to repopulate the rivers and

lakes of the New World, were they also given the responsibility of repopulating the forests of Central America with animal life and, if so, is there a zoological relationship between the animals of the Old World and those of the New?

Ainsworth has certainly given much thought to his subject, and his enthusiasm is infectious. His accounts of travel and exploration are quite entertaining. Added to this are plenty of maps to illustrate his arguments as well as many colorful photographs of the areas in question. Whether or not this book becomes a "classic," as its dust jacket claims, it does provide considerable food for thought in a very accessible way.