

# Archaeology and the Book of Mormon

## The Bible and Book of Mormon in History

The Bible is unique among the holy books of the world inasmuch as it is not simply a collection of myths, principles and commands but tells about God's dealings with real people, in the real world and in real time. From Abraham to Moses, from Moses to David and Solomon and from David and Solomon to Jesus and the early Christian Church there is historical provenance and a cultural context in which the Bible sits. This is so much the case that the Bible has acted as a guide to archaeologists in exploring the lands in which it is set. It is important to understand at the outset that the Book of Mormon lays claim to having the same cultural and contextual characteristics as the Bible. It is supposed to be a real time account of God's dealings with real people in the Americas.

While the metaphysical claims of both books are not readily susceptible to secular/scientific study and exploration – they are a matter of faith, nevertheless it seems eminently reasonable to expect that accounts of real events in real places involving real people would be so susceptible. Indeed, it surprises many people to discover that, while the ultimate claims of the Bible are a matter of faith, it is a book that is evidence-based.

While it is not possible for everyone who comes to faith to have the same experiences as first-hand witnesses – Jesus famously said to Thomas, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (Jn.20:29) – nevertheless Bible witnesses testify to what they saw and heard (1 Jn.1:-4). Their interpretations of those events were faith-based and God-given (Mt.16:13-16) but the facts of those events are evidence-based. Believers today, while not sharing the exact same experiences can, nevertheless, know for certain of places, people, historical facts, social and cultural mores, etc. because history and archaeology confirm them.

Not only that but secular scholarship, while questioning some Bible claims, has no difficulty in confirming in broad terms biblical history. Places, people, cultures, lands, societies, etc. are self-evidently there in real time at some point in history, indeed in many cases are still there today.

## New World Archaeology

In the absence of parallel evidence for Mormon claims Mormons will insist that, "New World archaeology is in its infancy". This seems plausible, suggesting that there is much more to find and, who knows, they might come up with a temple or city sometime when the discipline is more developed.

This is an argument from silence however and, while we agree that the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, nevertheless, it is absence all the way with

Mormonism. Not a coin, not a bone, not a shard, not a brick, not an arrowhead, not a piece of jewellery, not a single item to link the Book of Mormon with the continent in which it is set. Compare this with biblical evidence: places; names; people; coins; pottery; culture; buildings; rivers; lakes; seas; mountains; manuscripts and documents that authenticate our Bibles, and evidence from both the religious and the secular worlds.

The truth is that archaeology *per se* is in its infancy. While people have been digging in the earth for thousands of years, it was only in the early nineteenth century, during Napoleon's North Africa campaign (1798-1801), that an interest developed in understanding what was being found. Previously, old materials were dug up to build new structures and tombs were raided for treasure.

So archaeology itself is no older than New World archaeology, yet look what we have discovered in the Old World in just 200 years! The reason for this difference is embarrassingly obvious, i.e. there is something of biblical significance to find in the Old World, while in the New World all the evidence points to totally different cultures and developments than those portrayed in the Book of Mormon.

While, therefore, archaeology is a relatively new discipline evidence for the Bible has been relatively easily accessible from its very inception. Indeed, at the risk of stating the obvious, there was a Jerusalem long before there was archaeology. On the other hand it is not insignificant that there are no maps at the back of the Book of Mormon.

### **The Experts**

Since the Book of Mormon claims a history and provenance similar to that of the Bible one would expect some archaeological evidence to show God's dealings with the people of this book. But what do the experts say?

In our latest, updated, version of the Reachout book, *Mormonism, a Gold-Plated Religion*, we observe the following:

Mormons claim that the Book of Mormon is authenticated by archaeological evidence. No such evidence has been found:

1 Nephi 1:2 & Mosiah 1:4 state that the native language of the Hebrews between 600 & 130 B.C. was Egyptian. Archaeological discoveries show that they spoke Hebrew prior to the Babylonian captivity of 586-538 B.C. and then the common language became Aramaic.

1 Nephi 18:24 mentions seeds which were supposed to have been brought from the land of Jerusalem to America where they were blessed in abundance. No trace of these crops is found until after the Europeans brought them much later.

Alma 11:4-19 mentions 8 different coins, not one example of which has ever been discovered.

Ether 9:18,19 mentions a number of animals for which there is no evidence of their existence at the time. It also mentions cureloms and cumoms as animals that were especially useful for man. Nobody even knows what they are!

The Smithsonian Institute in Washington has had so many requests from people believing that there is archaeological evidence, and that the Book of Mormon has been used by the Institute for their research, that they have issued an official disclaimer.

We also reproduce the standard letter issued by the Smithsonian Institution in response to all inquiries regarding Book of Mormon archaeology which, in part clearly states:

1. *The Smithsonian Institution has never used the Book of Mormon in any way as a scientific guide. Smithsonian archaeologists see no direct connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book. (For the full statement see Gold-Plated Religion, p.191)*

Yale University had the following to say:

*As far as I know there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is not a Mormon, who sees any scientific justification for believing the foregoing [that Hebrew immigrants build a civilization in ancient America as described in the Book of Mormon] to be true, and I would like to state that there are quite a few Mormon archaeologists who join this group.*

*The bare facts of the matter are that nothing, absolutely nothing, has ever shown up in any New World excavation which would suggest to a dispassionate observer that the Book of Mormon, as claimed by Joseph Smith, is a historical document relating to the history of early immigrants to our hemisphere.*

Even the official Encyclopedia (sic) of Mormonism recognises:

*Many scholars see no support for the Book of Mormon in the archaeological record, since no one has found any inscriptional evidence for, or material remains that can be tied to any persons, places, or things mentioned in the book' (Smithsonian Institution).*

## **The Squeaky Wheel**

It has been pointed out that the statement from the Smithsonian is rather out-of-date (1980) and that it has been revised in recent years. Commentary on this change can be found on the FARMS web site as follows:

### **New Light: Smithsonian Statement on the Book of Mormon Revisited**

For many years, the Smithsonian Institution has given out a routine response to questions posed to them about their view and 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 scriptures 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 (sic) 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: <http://farms.byu.edu>.)

Note that the Institution still maintains that *"The Smithsonian Institution has never used it in archeological (sic) research and any information that you have received to the contrary is incorrect."* One has to ask what exactly prompted the Smithsonian to make such a statement in the first place. It is also noteworthy that they have nowhere renounced their previous statement; rather they have come to an accommodation that allows them to wash their hands of Mormonism.

What has happened, of course, is that the Mormon Church, in the guise of BYU and its associate organisations, has pestered, brow beaten and otherwise worn down both the Smithsonian and their friends in Washington until they have arrived at a compromise in which the Smithsonian hit the ball into the religious long grass, heave a sigh of relief, and declare, "not our problem!" No one will object to this because it is commonly believed these days that "religion" has nothing to do with the real world. It is this real world that concerns us since it is in the real world that Book of Mormon events are purported to have happened. If that world cannot be identified then the events must be questioned.

The so-called "revised" Smithsonian form letter changes nothing. The revision was entirely cosmetic and designed to pander to the sensibilities of Mormons who simply can't stop complaining whenever others' fail to think the best of them, condone their beliefs or authenticate their claims. It is said that it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil. The message from the Smithsonian Institution however is exactly the same, i.e. no one uses the Book of Mormon for serious archaeological research into the ancient Americas, except Mormons who always come up empty-handed. Yale, of course, concurs (See Gold-Plated Religion, p.193)

But, of course, the ultimate authority has to be the Mormon Church itself, and the Encyclopaedia of Mormonism concurs completely with Yale and the Smithsonian:

*Many scholars see no support for the Book of Mormon in the archaeological record, since no one has found any inscriptional evidence for, or material remains that can be tied to any persons, places, or things mentioned in the book' (Smithsonian Institution)*

The reference to the Smithsonian here is in the original, showing that even the Mormon Church uses the Smithsonian statement, revised or otherwise, to authenticate the official Mormon assertion that there is no evidence for the Book of Mormon.

### **Prophets vs. Evidence**

Now Mormons argue that they have a prophet and modern revelation while those who cling to the wreckage of traditional and apostate Christianity have the heavens closed to us - but who has the evidence? Who can "walk Bible lands", while Mormons pay top dollar to tour guides to take them through non-existent "Book of Mormon lands", point to Inca and Maya ruins and declare "it might have been something like this"?

Who can walk in the footsteps of Abraham as he travelled from Ur to Haran and Lower Egypt and to Beersheba; or of Israel as they travelled from Egypt, across the wilderness, to the promised land; or of St Paul if they wish, to Seleucia, Lystra, Philippi, Corinth, Athens, Galatia and Rome; or those of Jesus himself as he walked the shores of Galilee or the streets of Capernaum and Jerusalem, while no one can tell us where Nephi walked, where Mosiah reigned as king, where Alma, son of Alma was judge over his people and high priest over the church, where the wars recorded by Helaman took place and many Lamanites were converted; not even where Jesus walked when he supposedly "walked the Americas".

New World archaeology has not turned up a coin, a shard, a brick, a name, a hill or mountain, a valley or river, a city, town or village to support Mormon claims for the Book of Mormon. If the places and people didn't exist then the events cannot have taken place.

### **Faith, Evidence and Mormon Experts**

But there is a deeper problem and that is our understanding of "evidence", both its nature and its significance. The Mormon approach is quite different from the Christian biblical approach and we need to address this. The Mormon Church has managed to get people to subscribe to the erroneous notion that because the Book of Mormon is a religious book it does not lend itself to the ordinary rigours of secular scholarship and should be excused from such examination.

But no one is asking Mormons to come up with secular proof for religious claims. Rather, we are asking Mormons to do what every major group in the Judeo-Christian tradition has already done, and that extensively, i.e. come up with some evidence that the world in which these claims are set exists. Perhaps it is unreasonable to ask a Mormon to prove that God visited America in the person of Jesus Christ, but we are asking for some evidence that the America he purportedly visited existed.

Now, of course, in the absence of evidence, the Mormon is thrown back on the speculations of their "experts" at FARMS and BYU. Mormons are left with unofficial sources such the "Book of Mormon Evidences" web site maintained by Jeff Lindsay.

We haven't looked at all the "evidences" presented but simply looking at the introduction you find things that should prove disquieting - to a Mormon.

*Book of Mormon Evidences discusses some of the factors that suggest the Book of Mormon may be an ancient document. Contrary to the claims of our critics, there are impressive findings that make it difficult to explain away the Book of Mormon as a nineteenth-century*

*fraud from Joseph Smith. Such evidence is not "proof" but represents indications of plausibility that demand further attention. This page presents a sampling of such evidence, further supplemented by my collection of Book of Mormon Nuggets. It is maintained by Jeff Lindsay, a Book of Mormon aficionado, who takes full responsibility for the statements and opinions offered on this page. This page is neither sponsored nor endorsed by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (see the official LDS Web Site).*

The first thing to note here is that there is no evidence that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document. There are only "factors that suggest the Book of Mormon may be an ancient document" and that only to certain people i.e. Mormons. Let's make this clear. No one in the world disputes that the Bible is a collection of ancient writings. Christians and non-Christians alike do not dispute its historicity. Archaeologists have explored Bible lands with an open Bible and found it a fruitful exercise. Only Mormons find "factors that suggest the Book of Mormon may be an ancient document". No one else finds any reason to give it the time of day as an ancient document.

Secondly, while Mormons are continually fighting a rearguard action against a plethora of evidences, claims and challenges that the BOM is a nineteenth century fraud, no one has suggested that the Bible is a fraud. The very fact that such a debate over the historical integrity of the BOM exists should be a worry to any thinking Mormon. Laying aside claims to any supernatural content, after 180 years Mormons are not off first base in proving the book's authenticity. Are Mormons really happy with nothing more than "indications of plausibility" that appeal only to other Mormons?

Finally, we note that the usual codicil is always appended to these things to the effect that this is not "official" and that the Mormon Church should not be held to account for it. Now we're not pedantic but if the Mormon Church does not endorse this material, indeed if it has nothing to say on this subject except to acknowledge that there is no archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon why should we believe it?

These just a Mormon hobbyists (or latter-day civilian as some are calling them) putting up their speculations, recycling unofficial Mormon claims, something the Mormon Church is happy to see as long as that codicil is always there. The world gets the erroneous impression that Book of Mormon archaeology is coming along fine, but the church doesn't have to carry any responsibility for anything that is written.

Of course, Mormon academics are undoubtedly qualified in their field. We note that any number of professors, teachers etc, are qualified in issues connected with the history and archaeology of the Middle East, for example. Others I am sure will be qualified in other areas. However, the only place where they will be found applying their work

directly to Mormon claims, if at all, will be within Mormon circles, symposia, journals etc. This simply begs the question of why wider academia finds nothing of interest in this application.

Consider the following:

Jason J. Barker, Director of the Southwest Institute for Orthodox Studies, Arlington, TX, in a paper entitled *Who is the Representative Mormon Intellectual? Assessing Mormon Apologetics*, examines the LDS educational philosophy. Whilst recognising that "an increasing number of Latter-day Saints are currently active in mainstream academics", he goes on to quote Karl Sandberg, a Mormon and a French professor (emeritus) at Macalester College, who observes;

*"There are Mormons who do scholarship in all of the various disciplines — they play by the same rules as everyone else, they participate in the same dynamics, and they produce the same kind of knowledge. This is not the case, however, when Mormons do scholarship about Mormonism or directly related subjects."*

Barker goes on to explain that "The primary reason for this discrepancy...is that Mormon-specific scholarship in the LDS Church is necessarily limited by the boundaries of Mormon orthodoxy and orthopraxy." He quotes Sanburg further who elaborates;

*"There are prominent examples of Mormon scholarship whose purpose appears to be that of giving scholarly permission to people to believe what they already believed on subjective grounds and of answering and repulsing any perceived attacks on the Church."*

In other words, there are distinct boundaries to Mormon scholarship as the Mormon Church insists on favouring faith over intellect. With this sort of reputation why should the world trust exclusively to Mormon scholarship?

Some Mormons press the argument that Mormons alone are best qualified to comment upon these issues because they are not only qualified in Mesoamerican archaeology but especially qualified in Mormonism. This, of course, is nonsense. To suggest that only Mormons can really understand Mormonism makes about as much sense as insisting that if you want to know what the government is doing you should consult only the administration; Or if you had wanted to know the truth behind the Enron scandal you should have spoken to Kenneth Lay. Of course non-Mormons can deal competently with Mormonism and especially with Mormon claims that impinge upon their own areas of expertise, e.g. archaeology, DNA, biblical theology.

## **The Credibility Gap**

What is missing from Mormon claims is a credible "therefore". By that we mean that there is a huge gap between what Mormons and Mormon academics present as evidence and any reasonable conclusion that this evidence points to the credibility of Mormon claims.

Something is put up as "evidence" and assumptions are made along the lines of, "Iron ore workings have been found in Mesoamerica - 'therefore' the indications are growing that the Book of Mormon is true." But it doesn't work like that. There has to be more than a jump to conclusions. There has to be credibility in the "therefore" and that is gained by having an authority confirm that there is some significance in archaeological findings in relation to the Book of Mormon. Until such a credible "therefore" is forthcoming Mormon claims are incredible.

The two most important sources are, of course, that part of non-Mormon academia that studies these things and the Mormon Church leadership, both of whom have no credible "therefore" to offer. Mormons, therefore, must make do with making their own dubious and questionable links between the real world and Mormon claims knowing that such claims carry no true credibility, lacking as they do endorsement from the most important authorities on the subject.

## **The Great Irony**

This is a great and tragic irony. Mormon thoughts on New-World archaeology and the Book of Mormon are, at best, scholarly speculation, with papers, books and symposia littered with maybes, could be, might have been etc. The irony is in the fact that Mormonism was founded on the claim that, with a living prophet, all such speculation was over. Yet what light has been shed by sixteen prophets and any number of apostles over the years? Surely those who carry the mantle of Joseph Smith would be able to declare truth on these issues with the same confidence as their prophetic forebear! It seems not and while a plethora of unofficial sources keep bombarding us with their findings there seems to be nothing to which the Mormon Church feels it can put its name.

If the Mormon Church cannot give us a lead on Book of Mormon archaeology and geography, secular or divine, then we wonder what we are to make of it all. You see, Mormons keep telling us that the only authoritative source on all things Mormon is the *magisterium* that is the General Authorities of the Church and only then when they concur with the Mormon Standard Works. Indeed, critics who cite sources are always told "that's his opinion" and instructed to cite only those sources recognised by Mormons

as official, yet Mormons can quote the most obscure sources and expect to be taken seriously. This is a double standard. If the sources they cite are so impressive the Mormon Church leadership would put their name to it, but they haven't so they cannot be that confident in this so-called proof. So we are told only to cite official sources and those official sources have nothing to say. We can see how this might be a dilemma for Mormons but for us it is pretty cut and dried, i.e. there is no evidence for the BOM - official!

### **The Lost World of Mormonism**

The Book of Mormon cannot tell us where this world is (there are no helpful maps at the back unfortunately), other Mormon "Scriptures" cannot tell us where this world is, the Mormon prophet cannot tell us where this world is, Mormon scholars can only guess and speculate about where this world is, and secular scholars refuse to endorse Mormon archaeology, not recognising that the world described by Mormons ever existed. Indeed, secular scholars offer an alternative model of the Americas accompanied by solid archaeological proof.

Mormons, however, consider it a virtue to believe in the absence of evidence and facts and ask people to give emotional consent to what cannot be intellectually verified, indeed is intellectually implausible, and to make a personal commitment on the basis of emotional subjectivity based on Moroni's promise. We don't see anything to pray about however, do you?

Let's not forget that this is not just a discussion about the nicer points of religious differences between two groups who would otherwise just get along fine. That is what many would have us believe but it is a fable put about by people like Bloomberg and Robinson, Richard G Grant and so-called "New Order Mormons". This is about eternal truths and Mormonism is laying claim to people's devotion and loyalty on the basis that it is restored Christianity.

As already noted, people are being taken on so-called tours of Book of Mormon lands (who else would pay to hear someone say, "this is where buildings might have stood, where people might have lived, and events may have occurred?"); a whole industry is taking money from people on the basis that the products they are buying, from books and manuals to temple clothing, represent a sound investment for their eternal hopes, and those same people's money in tithes and offerings is utilised to build temples that serve a foreign god in a foreign way. It is well to remember that the "Bridge of Reason" of Reachout Trust is not a bridge that leads to common ground. It is there to communicate eternal truths to people standing on the wrong side of the bridge - Mormons *et al.*

## Horses and the Man who Wasn't There

We recently saw on you tube a short presentation by Mormon experts talking about the possible discovery of horses in the Americas from a period before the coming of Europeans <http://www.youtube.com/user/fairldsorg> Received wisdom has long held that there were no horses in America in the time covered by the Book of Mormon. It is worth a viewing just to hear all the maybe, could be, and might have been, statements. Mormon apologetics at its best.

The idea that there may be some evidence that horses were used in pre-European America means nothing. Firstly, Joseph Smith speculated about all sorts of things, drawing ideas from all around him, the culture, newspapers, and issues of his day and it is not surprising in the least that a man who is used to seeing the horse as a domesticated work animal in his own community should place the horse in the story he is writing. The possible discovery of evidence of horses means only that he made a good guess and got lucky. The "proof" would be credible only if those non-Mormon agencies interested in New World Archaeology changed their minds about the BOM and declared it a useful source of information in their further investigations and if the Mormon Church was prepared to put its name these claims.

Secondly, it is true that, in any investigation of our past, discoveries are made that contradict established theories. The discovery of Ur of the Chaldees is a good example. However, while Bible archaeology throws up substantial and widely recognised proof of its historicity and only those parts are challenged for which there is yet no such proof forthcoming, there is nothing that is recognised outside Mormonism or indeed by the official spokesmen of Mormonism to authenticate the BOM.

The book tells a story with a cast of millions living in vast cities, building large temples, and fighting and dying in major battles that would make the battles in Europe's history before the twentieth century seem small by comparison. Yet not a bone, not a shard, not an arrow-head, not even a location, mountain, hill, valley, stream, city, town, village, brick, stone, inscription, not even a rubbish tip, usually a rich source for archaeologists.

***It is as if these people were never there!***

It is fashionable these days, in the face of DNA evidence, to insist that populations of "Hebrew" Americans were so small compared with the wider population as to be insignificant, nevertheless, when you look at the numbers in the book and study carefully the claims made by past generations of Mormon teachers and leaders, this doesn't stack up. We are talking about millions not hundreds or thousands; we are talking about vast cities not small communities; we are talking about established, settled populations, not just nomadic tribes; we are looking at a picture akin to the European

model of society, of cities and states, commerce and politics, religion and culture, i.e. established, advanced and significant. Indeed, exactly the picture in the mind of a nineteenth century citizen of upstate New York. ***Yet it is as though they were never there!***

The challenge, then, stands. Show us any reputable, secular academic institution prepared to lend credence to Mormon claims for the history of the Book of Mormon and its stories of the Americas and we will have something to discuss. Indeed, show us a definitive statement of proof from the Mormon Church and we have a beginning! Otherwise, all we have is a group of people who insist they are enlightened by modern revelation - stumbling about in the dark, led by maybes, might-have-been, could have/should have, and falling over the stumbling block that is Christ crucified.

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