



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

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Introduction

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Author(s): John L. Sorenson

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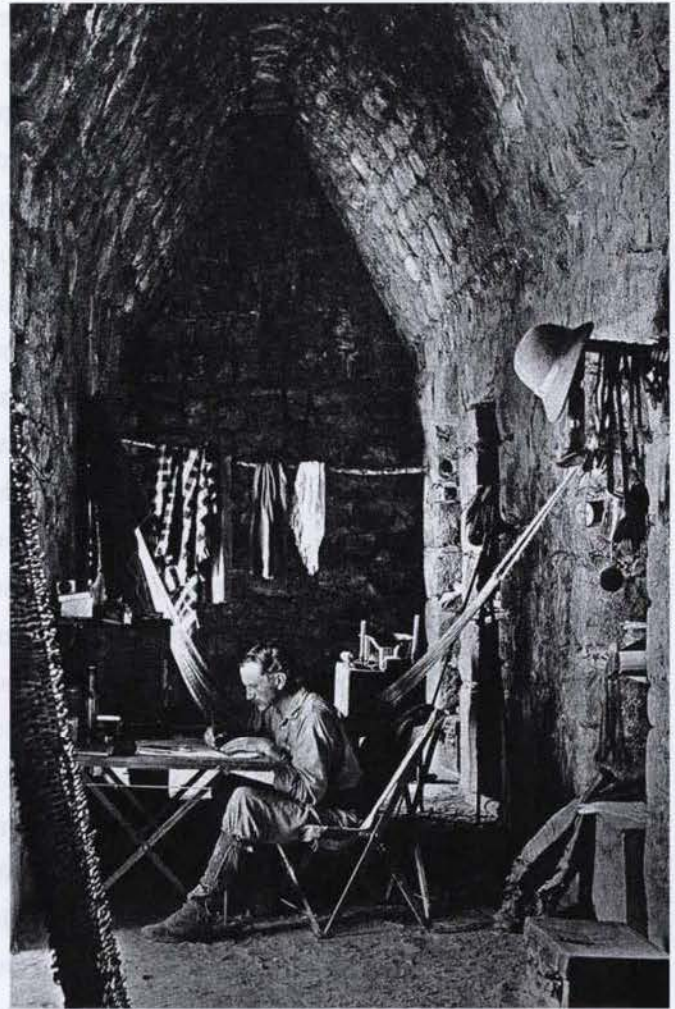
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Introduction

This volume is primarily about ancient civilization in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Central America). It also shows ways in which that civilization relates to the life of peoples described in the Book of Mormon. The connection will be unclear to 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. How, both groups may ask, can what has been learned by scholars about ancient America help in visualizing Book of Mormon life, as the title of this volume implies? An explanation of what the author sees as the connection will help readers get off on the right foot.

The author has studied, taught, and published on ancient Mesoamerica at a professional level for nearly five decades. This book’s discussions and choice of images reflect that experience. Yet most of his career has been as a socio-cultural anthropologist, not as an archaeologist. From his perspective even the best books describing the civilization of Mesoamerica are disappointingly narrow, being far more concerned with material remains than with the people who left them behind. This volume tries to redress that failure by constructing a picture using striking visual materials and words that communicate a fuller scope of Mesoamerican culture and society.

Latter-day Saints in the past have often grasped at archaeological straws in



Alfred Percival Maudslay, an English gentleman archaeologist, is shown at work in a room in the Monjas structure at Chichen Itza in 1891. This classic scene epitomizes both the drudgery and the glamour of traditional archaeology in Mesoamerica.

supposing that all the ruins are somehow “Nephite” or “Lamanite.” Moreover, few readers of that record compiled by Mormon have gained from it an accurate picture of how the Nephites or Lamanites may have lived.

Latter-day Saints accept the Book of Mormon as scripture, comparable in importance to the Bible. Most secular scholars of course have a different view. Historically most of the scant attention they have paid to the Book of Mormon has focused on the dispute about its origin. Few of the critics of the LDS position consider the volume ancient; most have claimed that it is merely a literary product of young Joseph Smith, or of some other nineteenth-century New Englander.

In recent decades, a growing cadre of Mormon (and a few non-Mormon¹) scholars have approached the book as an ancient text that deserves analysis in its own right, without particular concern for its status in Latter-day Saint religion. This development has shifted some attention from the apology/criticism conflict toward research that follows the canons of conventional scholarship as applied to the study of other ancient documents. Although non-Latter-day Saint researchers remain largely unaware of this work, these studies have demonstrated that there is indeed new light to be shed on and by the volume. It is not implausible now to view the book as a source from and a neglected window on ancient life and history.²

Dr. Hugh Nibley began this type of analysis forty-five years ago in his work *Lehi in the Desert*. He carefully examined the initial portion of the Book of Mormon and documented that what it says about the departure of Lehi and his family from the land of Judah soon after 600 B.C. and their subsequent history includes details about the ancient Near East that even scholars could not have known until after publication of the Book of Mormon in 1830.³ Subsequent studies have done the same thing in reference to the American scene; the text presents facts about the geography, history, and cultures of the peoples of America that could not have been known to Smith or any other nineteenth-century writer.⁴ These studies have also demonstrated an internal consistency in the Book of Mormon text that would not be expected in a work of historical fiction.⁵

What portion of America was the scene for the Nephites and other peoples treated in the Book of Mormon? Nearly all qualified scholars who have dealt with that question have come to agree on Mesoamerica, that is, the area of high civilization in central and southern Mexico and northern Central America. Despite some disagreement over specifics, a significant consensus among LDS researchers now correlates the central lands spoken of in the Nephite record with the territory between Guatemala City and the city of Veracruz, Mexico.⁶

Some of the features of culture and history mentioned in the record are still puzzling when compared with modern scholarly knowledge about Mesoamerica. Still, a large majority of the record's statements are reconcilable, and in fact are congruent, with secular findings on Mesoamerican civilization. Striking and subtle agreements are found between certain details in the book and those uncovered by the work of scholars.⁷

A more extensive treatment of how the Book of Mormon relates geographically to Mesoamerica is given in the last quarter of this book.

The research just sketched has shown that we can be certain that only Mesoamerica could have been the scene on which the events recorded in the Nephite account were played out. A premise of this book, *Images of Ancient America*, is that the Book of Mormon account (aside from its short treatment of founding events in the Near East) is an ancient record mainly of certain events in part of Mesoamerica between approximately 600 B.C. and A.D. 400.

This does not mean that the scripture constitutes "a history of Mesoamerica." Mormon edited the account in the late fourth century A.D. from earlier documents, and apparently the form and content of the record from which the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith were similar in important ways to a Mesoamerican codex or native book.⁸ Mormon was the last leader of the Nephites, the central people he described and with whom he was destroyed in battle. His abridged account treats events spanning a thousand-year period that was of key concern to his royal lineage, the Nephites.⁹ Yet the text of the Book of Mormon makes clear that other peoples were on the scene besides his line and descendants of the other parties who arrived from the Old World by boat as reported in the record.¹⁰ In short, while Book of Mormon groups were involved in Mesoamerica, there had to remain much that was Mesoamerican not alluded to in the Nephites' lineage history.

Agreement between information in Mormon's text and facts known from scholarship can shed light in three ways. First, ideas, motives, behavior, social roles, sites, and artifacts mentioned in or implied by the Book of Mormon text may be clarified by reference to facts known about Mesoamerica. Second, relating Book of Mormon statements to the world known from external research can bring to readers as they consult the Book of Mormon a sense of realism that they could not have experienced by relying on the text alone. Just as books that connect Bible scenes, events, and characters to ancient Near Eastern life benefit readers of the Bible who study them, the present work can enlighten anyone seeking contextual information about the world in which Book of Mormon events took place. And third, when they read with sufficient care what we might call Mormon's codex, Mesoamericanist scholars can

discover unexpected information about the area of their concern at an early time period.

The most ambitious work showing how the peoples and cultures in the Book of Mormon articulate with groups and scenes in Mesoamerica is the author's 1985 book, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*.¹¹ Many readers have found it a useful resource in linking the two bodies of data. But its nature and scope did not allow doing justice to the visual dimension. The present volume aims to make up that lack.

The word *visualizing* in this book's subtitle is intended to suggest that when readers carefully study the verbal sketches and visual images, they will equip themselves better to picture the conditions under which the Nephites and Lamanites lived. Those who do so can understand Mormon's record more completely. I particularly hope 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. The subtitle does not mean, however, that I think the illustrations show specifically Nephite artifacts or scenes.

Unfortunately, high-quality visual images are not available on every relevant subject. The more subjective areas of any people's culture, such as beliefs and feelings, are hard to document from objects. It would have been ideal had the pictures that are available come exclusively from the portions of Mesoamerica where the Nephites most likely lived and had they dated specifically from their era. Instead, it has often been necessary to use illustrations from pre-Nephite and post-Nephite times and from localities where that people probably did not live. Yet it is as reasonable to use those complementary resources as for books on Bible lands to use pictures of, say, modern desert-dwelling Bedouins to illustrate certain lifeways that may not have changed basically since the days of the Old Testament patriarchs thousands of years ago. Similarly this book takes advantage of illustrations of Aztec or Maya (i.e., clearly non-Nephite) and even modern-day scenes and objects to show what some elements of Nephite culture could have been like generally. Until a more specific identification can be made of who the Nephites were in Mesoamerican terms, we must often be satisfied with generic pictures of their culture that accessible sources provide us.

In any case the burden of picturing Book of Mormon scenes, or of Mesoamerican scenes as such, remains on the user of this book. May your visualizing be both accurate and exciting.

The Land

