



Type: Journal Article

Instant Expertise on Book of Mormon Archaeology

Author(s): John L. Sorenson

Source: *BYU Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (1976), pp. 429–432

Published by: BYU Studies

Abstract: One of the cultural tragedies of these times is the looting of the sites and monuments of the past. A prime force behind this piracy is the desire of foolish people of wealth to possess tangible emblems of taste and refinement. They rarely invest their own efforts in order to understand history or to sense meaning in the art of past civilization. They are satisfied with the mere externals—with instant evidence of being cultured. And the gluttony of these ignorant rich is at least as condemnable as the looting itself.

The LDS book market shows similar swashbuckling. Many Mormons are willing to spend money for instant evidence of knowledge rather than to labor for the knowledge themselves. The result is consumer demand for intellectual loot. This is especially true about scholarly study of Book of Mormon archaeology. At least from the time of George Reynolds the Saints have avidly bought books which claim to offer them inside information on this scripture, particularly on its geography or what are termed "external evidences." Some of these sources have actually been helpful to the serious reader. Many more, and these are the concern here, have harmed more than helped.



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Book Reviews

INSTANT EXPERTISE ON BOOK OF MORMON ARCHAEOLOGY

A review article by John L. Sorenson, professor of anthropology and sociology at Brigham Young University.

One of the cultural tragedies of these times is the looting of the sites and monuments of the past. A prime force behind this piracy is the desire of foolish people of wealth to possess tangible emblems of taste and refinement. They rarely invest their own efforts in order to understand history or to sense meaning in the art of past civilizations. They are satisfied with the mere externals—with instant evidence of being cultured. And the gluttony of these ignorant rich is at least as condemnable as the looting itself.

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In terms of sales, these works have been dominated by the books by Dewey Farnsworth and his wife Edith, whose *The Americas before Columbus* has recently been reissued ("Fourth Printing," Sacramento, California: Rich Publishing Co., 1975, \$4.95, 176 pp.), nearly thirty years after its first appearance, but unchanged except for muddier-looking plates and a soft cover. Long ago I wrote a detailed review of Farnsworth's *Book of Mormon Evidences in Ancient America*, which differed little from the one now on sale. The naive use of sources, logical inconsistencies, cut-and-paste quotations, and harmful effects on the Church are pointed

out there (*University Archaeological Society Newsletter* No. 18 [25 February 1954]:2-5; and in the UAS anthology *Progress in Archaeology*, 1963) in excruciating detail which I have not the heart to repeat.

Another perennial favorite in the same class has also reappeared: Jack West's *Trial of the Stick of Joseph* (Sacramento: Rich Publishing Co., 1975, \$2.90, 92 pp.). An expanded, cartoon-illustrated version appeared in 1971 as *The Book of Mormon on Trial* (Compiled by John W. Rich, Sacramento: Rich Publishing Co., 1971, \$4.95, 245 pp.). The evidence and argument in either version are, if anything, more distressing than those in the Farnsworth book. At least the latter only reprints snippets from outdated sources to construct a picture which is thoroughly confused but not hostile to anyone. The West books use a "trial" format to misrepresent scholarship and show scholars as at best bumbling fools and at worst as willing enemies of truth. The assertions put into the mouths of the experts cannot be checked for accuracy because of inadequate documentation, but many of the statements are implausible and some are absurd. The overall impression given is that if Latter-day Saints use a few rhetorical tricks and imaginative selection of "evidence" in the worst tradition of the trial lawyer, those so-called experts who refuse to believe the Book of Mormon can easily be put in their places and we'll live happily ever after.

Paul Cheesman's books are bidding to take the place of Farnsworth's in current LDS publishing. His *These Early Americans: External Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974, \$5.95, 298 pp.) was heavily promoted last year in the wake of an earlier book of pictures. *These Early Americans* is based directly on a thesis he completed at BYU. More a catalog or compilation than an exposition, the writing is disjointed, and a consistent argument is hard to discern. If there is a central idea, it is that certain cultural features mentioned in the Book of Mormon are indeed attested by non-LDS scholars. Quotations from or paraphrases of those scholars constitute a very large part of the text (one quote is three pages long). In some instances the intent of the scholar is turned on its head. For example, Robert Wauchope of Tulane University, who wrote a chapter in his *Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents* (1962) which pokes fun at the Book of Mormon, is made by Cheesman (page 24) to appear to support an Old World origin for New World civilization, which he absolutely does not. In others the "evidences" are of doubtful significance,

although in some cases information of value is conveyed, as concerning wheeled “toys,” for example. The sources cited, though somewhat more frequently sound than Farnsworth’s, still indiscriminately mix oddballs with reliable scholars. Too often the latter’s statements are torn from context.

An inquiry about whether permissions had been solicited for the extensive quotations drew the response that it was not felt necessary. This loose procedure should be challenged on ethical grounds.

I do not presume to judge the motives of Farnsworth, West, Cheesman and others who publish in this vein. They seem to be zealous believers in the Book of Mormon. But zeal does not improve poor scholarship.

Then what is the harm from such publications? First, they train the reader that serious, critical thought is unnecessary and maybe even undesirable, that any source of information will serve no matter how unreliable, and that logical absurdity is as good as sound analysis. Second, the reader gets the false impression that all is well in Zion, that the outside world is being forced to the LDS point of view, and that the only role LDS scholars need play in Book of Mormon-related studies is to use scissors and paste effectively. Third, the underlying complexity and subtlety of the Book of Mormon are masked by a pseudo-scholarship to which everything is simple. This third effect encourages critics—e.g. John Price in *The Indian Historian* (1975) or Michael Coe in *Dialogue* (1973)—to set up a straw-man Book of Mormon to attack based on what Mormons have said about it instead of what it says itself. Coe, for example, knows little about the book, but he wrote from Mormon sources, after all. If we are willing to settle for surface reading and shallow study, why should a non-Mormon scholar expend energy to dig seriously into the Book of Mormon?

The Book and the Map. New Insights into Book of Mormon Geography, by Venice Priddis (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1975, \$3.95, 169 pp.), differs in focus from the volumes discussed above, but the quality of scholarship is similar. Ignoring all past serious study on Book of Mormon geography, Priddis picks one “key” statement and builds a fanciful picture of the Book of Mormon lands to accord with it alone—a picture, incidentally, that requires the Amazon and the Plate River basins to lie entirely under water. The evidence adduced is trivial, and the arguments are fatally flawed at point after point. Anyone willing to be this selective in

what is to be noted and what ignored could construct at least two dozen other geographical correlations for the Nephite scripture which could be equally (im)plausible.

As with ancient art for the ignorant rich, the "demand" from large numbers of Saints for easy explanations of difficult subjects which they are unwilling to pay the price to understand lies behind the exploitation represented by these volumes. Ancient Israel insisted Samuel give them a king, and with equal impatience, LDS readers today bring down on their heads the kind of books that serve them right.

But all this criticism may be too narrow. There is plenty of evidence that we Latter-day Saints are gullible on many subjects, not just this one. President Harold B. Lee expressed impatience with the rumor-mongering which is endemic among Mormons. Our folklore is rich from similar impulses. The too-generous standing ovations at BYU are becoming legendary. Salt Lake City has earned a nationwide reputation as a center for stock fraud, and Douglas Stringfellow beguiled Utahns for years. Now, if these tendencies are necessary accompaniments of the naivete of the meek, it is a small price to pay: far better to associate with a people having enough faith left that they *can* be gulled than to endure the company of the permanently cynical who fill so much of the world. But couldn't we find a compromise position in which the wisdom of the serpent protected us more often from the consequences of dove-like innocence? Hyrum Smith observed in 1844, "It is better not to have so much faith as to have so much as to believe all the lies." The burden of repentance, I suggest, rests upon us all: on the reader who must be more critical and demanding of the writer whose work he buys, and on the writer who must be more critical and demanding of himself.

ELIASON, JOYCE. *Fresh Meat/Warm Weather*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974. 145 pp. \$6.95.

Reviewed by Mary L. Bradford, editor of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.

The jacket on *Fresh Meat/Warm Weather* proclaims this book a "novel." But "Notes for a Therapist" would be a more fitting designation: a collection of dreams, jottings, letters, poems, reminiscences and jokes prepared by the patient in the hope that the