

INTERPRETER

— ∞ —
A JOURNAL OF MORMON SCRIPTURE

Volume 1 · Issue 1 · 2012 · Pages 91-109

An Open Letter to Dr. Michael Coe

John L. Sorenson

Offprint Series

© 2012 *Interpreter Foundation*



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, 444 Castro Street, Suite 900, Mountain View, California, 94041, USA.

Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture is an independent nonprofit organization, and is not owned, controlled by or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. All research and opinions provided on this site are the sole responsibility of their respective authors, and should not be interpreted as the opinions of the Editorial Board, nor as official statements of LDS doctrine, belief or practice.

This journal is a weekly publication. Visit us at MormonInterpreter.com

AN OPEN LETTER TO DR. MICHAEL COE

John L. Sorenson

Abstract: In August 2011 John Dehlin conducted a three-part interview with famed Mesoamericanist Michael Coe.¹ Dehlin operates the podcast series Mormon Stories, which features interviews discussing the faith and culture of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This article examines a large number of dubious claims made in those interviews, providing clarifications, responses, and references to numerous sources dealing with those issues. Much more detail will be forthcoming in Dr. Sorenson's new book, Mormon's Codex.

Dear Mike:

Some people see a placid stream ahead of them and think the water must be safe to cross, only to find that their depth perception was faulty and deep holes await them. Something like that has happened to you in regard to your podcast with Mr. Dehlin about the Book of Mormon. Before you and other readers repeat the difficulties you encountered, I venture to offer some corrections.

1. Michael Coe, "Dr. Michael Coe—An Outsider's View of Book of Mormon Archaeology," podcast interview by John Dehlin, parts 1–3, at <http://mormon-stories.org/?p=1880>; hereafter cited as "Coe interview." Approximate time stamps are included in individual citations. A version of this open letter is also available on Sorenson's own website and the FAIR website: <http://johnlsorenson.com/docs/OpenLetterCoe.pdf>. <http://www.fairlds.org/authors/sorenson-john/an-open-letter-to-dr-michael-coe>; the editors are grateful to Dr. Sorenson and FAIR for permission to reprint it here.

About Archaeology

- “These things don’t disappear forever. They leave traces. . . . If you had iron or steel, you would expect to find these things, even if they were all rusted. . . . You’d find chemical remains.” [Part 1, 24:27]

It is interesting to see your loyalty to the ideals of archaeology, but surely you know that the realities are quite different. The first place where the two collide is in sampling. Probably no more than two hundred ancient Mesoamerican sites have been seriously excavated, and those excavations have rarely dug into more than a small portion of the inhabited area of those sites. It would be surprising if as much as one ten-thousandth of the information potentially obtainable by studying the material remains has so far been disclosed. Sure, much of the rest would no doubt yield data mainly duplicative of what is already known, but some would not. And a large proportion of what has already been excavated has not been studied by contemporary methods or is not accessible for study.

So ancient remains of metals may “leave traces.” But can anybody name even a single site where “chemical remains” have been widely sought by modern methods? I doubt it.

An example of the sampling problem is evident at the site of Utatlan (in Guatemala, dated AD 1300–1500). Fox, Wallace, and Brown reported finding by chance a location “just outside” the site proper where two hundred molds for the manufacture of copper at an industrial level came to light.² The facility would have been far larger than what was needed for the city’s requirements. What is the chance that such an isolated facility *outside* the central ceremonial centers where excavation usually goes on would ever be discovered at other places?

2. John W. Fox, Dwight T. Wallace, and Kenneth L. Brown, “The Emergence of the Quiche Elite: The Putun-Palenque Connection,” in *Mesoamerican Elites: An Archaeological Assessment*, ed. Diane Z. Chase and Arlen F. Chase (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 185.

Then there is the problem of accessing the information that does exist. I have spent considerable time searching site reports for mentions of metal objects that have been found that apparently date before the “metal curtain” of about AD 900 in Mesoamerica in the area but are conventionally ignored in discussions of the history of metallurgy.³ There have proved to be several hundred such specimens dating from 400 BC to AD 900, 153 of which were excavated by professional archaeologists.⁴ (Why bother to seek “chemical traces” of metal when actual specimens are totally ignored?) This incidence of metal objects would be even more surprising were it not for the fact that terms have been reconstructed in *five* major Mesoamerican language families that mean “metal” or “(metal) bell,” all the words thought to refer to times prior to 1000 BC.⁵

Obviously, excavational archaeology still has a long way to go in reconstructing a complete history of Mesoamerican metallurgy, including both terrestrial and meteoric iron among

3. See, for example, “Preclassic Metal?,” *American Antiquity* 20 (1954): 64; “Indications of Early Metal in Mesoamerica,” *University Archaeological Society Bulletin* 5 (Provo, UT, 1954): 1–15; and “A Reconsideration of Early Metal in Mesoamerica,” *Katunob* 9 (March 1976): 1–18.

4. See John L. Sorenson, *Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992).

5. Byron Cummings, “Cuicuilco and the Archaic of Mexico,” *University of Arizona, Bulletin IV*, no. 8, *Social Science Bulletin* 4 (Tucson, 1933): 38–39; Robert F. Heizer and James A. Bennyhoff, “Archaeological Investigation of Cuicuilco, Valley of Mexico, 1957,” *Science* 127/3292 (31 January 1958): 232–33; R. E. Longacre and Rene Millon, “Proto-Mixtecan and Proto-Amuzgo-Mixtecan Vocabularies: A Preliminary Cultural Analysis,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 3 (1961): 22; Terrence Kaufman, “El Proto-Tzeltal-Tzotzil: Fonología Comparada y Diccionario Reconstruido,” *Cuadernos* 5 (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro de Estudios Mayas, 1972): 118; Marcelo Alejandre, *Cartilla Huasteca con su Gramática, Diccionario y Varias Reglas para Aprender el Idioma* (México: Secretaría de Fomento, 1899), 84, 88; Hyacinthe de Charency, “Les Noms des Métaux chez Différents Peuples de la Nouvelle Espagne,” *Compte-Rendu, Congrès International des Americanistes, Paris, 1890* (Paris, 1892), 539–41; and “A Linguistic Look at the Olmecs,” *American Antiquity* 41 (1976): 80–89. See discussion in John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 278–88.

more than a dozen known metals and alloys. Eminent metallurgical expert Dudley Easby commented regarding this history, “The relative [apparent] absence of metals in the early Americas constitutes one of the most infuriatingly enigmatic subjects in the history of technology.”⁶

The question of the presence of the horse in civilized Mesoamerica further illustrates the problem of what is “adequate” archaeological sampling and documentation. C. E. Ray’s report⁷ of finding horse bones in deep layers of the water hole at Mayapan (Yucatan) raised anew an issue that Mercer⁸ and Hatt⁹ had earlier noted with their finds of horse bones in Yucatan caves. The matter was compounded by Peter Schmidt’s 1988 work in Loltun Cave that found horse bones scattered through a number of layers of early pottery-bearing debris. He observed, “Something went on here that is still difficult to explain.”¹⁰ (Interestingly, he was not aware of Ray’s finds.) There are also further evidences for pre-AD 1500 dates of other horse bones (including three radiocarbon-dated finds from North America).¹¹ This, like the metals, is an “unfinished” archaeological story, in this case defying the dictum that “there were no horses” for the last ten thousand years in America. Simultaneously it shows the limits of the data revealed by excavations about which so much is said.

6. Dudley T. Easby Jr., “Early Metallurgy in the New World,” *Scientific American* 214 (April 1966): 72–83.

7. C. E. Ray, “Pre-Columbian horses from Yucatan,” *Journal of Mammalogy* 38 (1957): 278.

8. Henry C. Mercer, *The Hill-Caves of Yucatan: A Search for Evidence of Man’s Antiquity in the Caverns of Central America* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1896), 172.

9. Robert T. Hatt, “Faunal and Archaeological Researches in Yucatan Caves,” *Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bulletin* 33 (1953).

10. Peter J. Schmidt, “La entrada del hombre a la peninsula de Yucatan,” in *Origenes del Hombre Americano*, comp. Alba Gonzalez Jacome (Mexico: Secretaria de Educación Publica, 1988), 250.

11. Wade E. Miller, *Science and the Book of Mormon: Cureloms, Cumoms, Horses and More*. (Laguna Niguel, CA: KCT Associates, 2009), 75–78.

Another possibility is that some other species was counted as a horse. For example, upon seeing Spanish horses, the Aztecs referred to them as “the deer that people ride,” and there are artistic representations of riders-on-deer. So what is a “horse”?¹²

About the Book of Mormon

- The Jaredites “didn’t really survive terribly long.” [Part 1, 18:30]
- The Jaredites “go back, what, something like four, five hundred BC.” [Part 1, 28:00]

The Jaredites left Mesopotamia at the time of the “great tower,” presumed to have been around the time of the earliest ziggurat, perhaps a little before 2500 BC. Their demise as a functioning society was after 600 BC.

- The Nephites “were highly civilized people.” [Part 1, 18:30]

In origin, yes, except that their small initial party (fewer than thirty-five men, women, and children) slogged twelve hundred miles through the rugged mountains of western Arabia over an eight-year period and subsisted mainly on uncooked meat. This would take most of the “civilization” out of anyone. When they embarked from the coast of Oman on a voyage of more than twenty thousand miles, they took no animals with them and little technology except what knowledge they carried in their heads. Upon landing, Lehi’s crew must have been about as *deculturated* as a frazzled band of people could be.

- “They had cattle, they had horses, they had wheat.” [Part 1, 18:30]
- “Maize, by the way, isn’t really mentioned in the Book of Mormon.” [Part 1, 24:35]

See above regarding horses. Immediately after landing (probably in coastal Guatemala), Lehi’s people “did find . . .

12. See the discussion in Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 293–97.

beasts in the forests” (“cow,” “ox,” “ass,” “horse,” “goat,” “wild goat,” 1 Nephi 18:25). At length some of those creatures ended up domesticated, by means and hands not described. Clearly the animals consisted of native American species to which the newcomers, by a process familiar to groups encountering exotic fauna, applied “nearest look-alike names” to the newly encountered critters.¹³

The first mention of grain cultivation occurred nearly four hundred years later—“corn” (maize, contrary to your claim), “wheat,” and “barley”; corn was the grain of choice (Mosiah 7:22; 9:9).¹⁴ What crop the name “wheat” was given to is never clarified, but of course it probably would have been some native one (eventually Mesoamericans cultivated at least thirteen species of grains). Domesticated barley was discovered in archaeological sites in Arizona and midwestern states twenty-five years ago, and it could well have grown in Mexico too.¹⁵

- “They had the compass to navigate by.” [Part 1, 19:00]

Not at all. What they had was a device that gave Lehi’s original party travel instructions, but it worked by “faith,” not on any mechanical (“compass”) principle.

- [Dehlin:] “There are steel swords mentioned in the Book of Mormon, or shields or helmets or whatever.” [Coe:] “Yes, that’s correct.” [Part 1, 23:00]

13. In *Ancient American Setting*, 288–99, I suggest candidate native American species that might have been those listed/labeled animals.

14. Terry B. Ball and Wilford M. Hess, “Agriculture in Lehi’s World: Some Textual, Historical, Archaeological, and Botanical Insights,” in *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David R. Seely, and JoAnn H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 149–92.

15. See discussion in John L. Sorenson and Robert F. Smith, “Barley in Ancient America,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992): 130–32; Robert R. Bennett, “Barley and Wheat in the Book of Mormon” (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute), updated August 2000, <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/transcripts/?id=126>. The original paper on domesticated barley is Daniel B. Adams, “Last Ditch Archeology,” *Science* 83 4/10 (December 1983): 32.

Lehi's party carried with them on their trek a sword of steel that was preserved as a sacred relic. When Nephites and Lamanites by the thousands were armed with swords, they obviously would not necessarily have been of metal, nor is there any reason from the text to suppose that they were. At one point a large group of Lamanites fled from military service by going to "the place of arms" to defend themselves. The description of the situation makes it appear to be an obsidian outcrop (possibly El Chayal). Their swords were very probably the obsidian-edged weapons called *macuahuitl* by the Aztecs. However, at one point in Jaredite history the record says that they made "swords out of steel." This is clearly an unexplained anomaly. (However, note that the term that is read "steel" in the King James Bible is currently translated by experts as "bronze.")¹⁶

A large variety of shields is known to have been used by Mesoamerican warriors from Pre-Classic times onward, but "helmets" are *not* mentioned at all in the Book of Mormon.

- "Wheeled toys are known in Classic times . . . in Vera Cruz." [Part 1, 33:51]

Actually these begin, at Teotihuacan at least, immediately after the time of Christ, not just in the Classic.¹⁷

- "Let's do the coins. . . . If there were coins they would be chocolate beans. Why aren't chocolate beans mentioned in the Book of Mormon?" [Part 1, 24:45]

Years ago the word *coinage* was gratuitously inserted in the heading of Alma 11 by LDS editors (it has since been removed). There is no use of the term *coins* in the text. The Nephites used "money," but evidently Nephite money, like that in the Israelite

16. See John L. Sorenson, "Steel in Early Metallurgy," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15/2 (2006): 108–9, at <http://maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/jbms/?vol=15&num=2&id=423>. See also William Hamblin and Stephen D Ricks, eds, *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, at maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/publications/books/?bookid=66.

17. Florencia Müller, *La cerámica del centro ceremonial de Teotihuacán* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1978), 82.

homeland (the “shekel”), was in weight-determined units of some valued substance.

Cocoa beans were in use (how early we do not know) among the Maya, but throughout Mesoamerica a variety of other materials also served as “money.” The constant fallback on Maya culture is understandable in the podcast and in terms of your archaeological background, but Nephite culture was not closely congruent with Maya culture.

- “Silk. Nothing.” [Part 1, 31:50]

The Spaniards described at least five Mesoamerican varieties of what they termed “silk” or its equivalent; none of them used the species of silkworm that prevailed in East Asia.¹⁸

- “Seven-day calendar was unknown in Mesoamerica.” [Part 1, 31:55]

Helen Neuenswander agreed with Eric Thompson that there was a seven-day-week feature, one based on a logical division (one-fourth) of a twenty-eight-day lunar month.¹⁹ In any case, the three mentions in the Book of Mormon of “week” do not say that the period was seven days; “weeks” of other lengths are known in various cultures around the world.

- “Chariots? They [Mesoamericans] never had chariots.” [Part 1, 33:45]

This may be correct. The meaning of “chariots” mentioned in the Book of Mormon text remains mysterious. They are mentioned only on two occasions, in very limited geographical areas, in connection with horses. And, by the way, no chariot has ever been excavated in Palestine, despite documentary statements implying that they were very numerous.

18. A treatment of this topic appeared in Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 232. The Mesoamerican “silk” materials were from various plant and animal fibers.

19. Helen Neuenswander, “Vestiges of Early Maya Time Concepts in Contemporary Maya (Cubulco Achi) Community: Implications for Community,” *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 13 (1981): 125–63.

- “Pig. Zero. Not one pig bone has ever shown up in pre-Columbian excavations.” [Part 1, 38:00]

Oh, come now. Peccaries were hunted, kept, and even herded, and they surely are “pigs.”²⁰

- “Elephants, there’s nothing. Absolutely zero.” “The Clovis people . . . about . . . 10,000 BC . . . killed them all.” [Part 1, 42:00]

You have converted Paul Martin’s hypothesis into “fact” without checking the data. Mastodon remains have been dated by radiocarbon to around 5000 BC in Florida,²¹ around the Great Lakes to 4000 BC,²² in the Mississippi Valley to near 3300 BC,²³ perhaps to near 100 BC near St. Petersburg, Florida (“low terminal [C-14] dates for the mastodon indicate . . . lingering survival in isolated areas”),²⁴ and at sites in Alaska and Utah dating around 5000 BC.²⁵ In the Book of Mormon, mention of elephants occurs in a single verse, in the Jaredite account (“There were elephants,” Ether 9:19), dated in the third millennium BC, after which the record is silent (indicating spot extinction?).

20. Brian D. Dillon, “Meatless Maya? Ethnoarchaeological Implications for Ancient Subsistence,” *Journal of New World Archaeology* 7/2–3 (June 1988): 59–70; and Lyle K. Sowls, *The Peccaries* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1984), 1–3.

21. Robert A. Martin and S. David Webb, “Late Pleistocene Mammals from the Devil’s Den Fauna, Levy County,” in *Pleistocene Mammals of Florida*, ed. S. David Webb (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1974), 144–45.

22. Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., *Report for 1974* (New York, 1975), 22, reporting work by Dr. Warren L. Wittry.

23. Steven Williams, “The Island 35 Mastodon: Its Bearing on the Age of Archaic Cultures in the East,” *American Antiquity* 22/4 (April 1957): 359–72.

24. Jim J. Hester, “Late Pleistocene Extinction and Radiocarbon Dating,” *American Antiquity* 26/1 (1 July 1960): 74. See also Jim J. Hester, “Agency of Man in Animal Extinction,” in “Pleistocene Extinctions: The Search for a Cause,” ed. Paul S. Martin and H. E. Wright Jr., *Proceedings of the International Association for Quaternary Research, VII Congress* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967), 6:185.

25. Paleontologist Wade Miller, personal communication.

- “Every time you look at the illustrations in the popular edition of the Book of Mormon, you see that’s a Maya city.” [Part 1, 54:18]

What do popular illustrations have to do with actual history? And even then, how would you know that the illustrator had in mind a “Maya” city instead of merely a Mesoamerican city? There is too much gratuitous “Mayanization” going on throughout this entire discussion. The text’s “Nephites” were not Maya in all probability; the “Lamanites” may have been in part.

- “There are no King Benjamins or anybody like that” in Maya literature. [Part 1, 56:00]

Fallacious thinking. Would you say, “There are no Jesus Christs or anybody like that in Roman (or Greek, Egyptian, Syrian, Jewish, etc.) monuments or literature”? Would you expect there to be? This has no relevance to the question of whether there was a Jesus Christ. Furthermore, “history” was often rewritten by successors. Islamic records of Tunisia make no mention of St. Augustine or Hannibal, the most famous theologian and warrior of pre-Islamic times. As Nigel Davies noted, “I am more than ever convinced the codices were destroyed at intervals and history was then rewritten to suit the ruler of the day.”²⁶

- When “we start getting extensive Maya inscriptions, . . . they don’t mention any of these wonderful people out of the Book of Mormon. Nothing.” [Part 1, 1:03:00]

See the point immediately above. But how do you know the Nephites are not mentioned? “Mention” is a matter of using a name or ethnic label, but what name would “the Maya” use if they *had* referred to the Nephites? Surely not the English

26. Nigel Davies, “The Aztec Concept of History: Teotihuacan and Tula,” in *The Native Sources and the History of the Valley of Mexico*, Proceedings of the 44th International Congress of Americanists, ed. Jacqueline de Durand-Forest (Oxford: BAR, 1984), 10.

translation, “Nephites.” Of course we do not know the “native” name, in any language, that the “Nephites” bore.

- There is no writing for the Olmec, “which is peculiar if these people came from the Middle East.” [Part 1, 1:00]

Not quite. The Cascajal “block” is joined by the tread-upon figure at San José Mogote²⁷ and the item reported by Rust et al. from near San Lorenzo.²⁸ All are dated to the “Olmec” era. Mike, in 2006 you coauthored a paper on the Cascajal block in *Science* describing it as the “oldest writing in the New World.”²⁹ Your discussion and description seem confused because you tell Dehlin that this block contains “Olmec writing” dating to 900–800 BC immediately after claiming that there is “no writing for the Olmec, none, zero.”

Moreover, Fred Peterson found a cylinder seal at Tlatilco that was reported on by Dave Kelley³⁰ and that both he and John Graham at Berkeley believe to bear writing. That seal has been dated at Oxford by thermoluminescence at “2000 to 3200 years ago.” Coming from Tlatilco and dating so, it is probably Olmec. (It has tentatively been connected stylistically to cylinder seals in Iran of the third millennium by a Near East seals expert, who was not told of its Mexican provenience!)³¹

27. Joyce Marcus, “Origins of Mesoamerican Writing,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 35–67. For a contrary view, see Robert Cahn and Marcus Winter, “The San José Mogote Danzante,” *Indiana* 13 (1993): 39–64, at <http://www.iai.spk-berlin.de/es/publicaciones/indiana/numeros-publicados/indiana-13.html>.

28. William F. Rust, “Olmec Settlement Evidence from La Venta,” paper presented at the 54th Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Atlanta (1989); William F. Rust III and R. J. Sharer, “Olmec Settlement Data from La Venta, Tabasco, México,” *Science* 242 (1988): 102–4.

29. Ma. del Carmen Rodríguez Martínez, Ponciano Ortíz Ceballos, Michael D. Coe, Richard A. Diehl, Stephen D. Houston, Karl A. Taube, and Alfredo Delgado Calderón, “Oldest Writing in the New World,” *Science* 313/5793 (September 2006): 1610–14, at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/16973873>.

30. David H. Kelley, “A Cylinder Seal from Tlatilco,” *American Antiquity* 31/5 (1966): 744–45.

31. Professor Victor L. Mair, personal communication.

- Population: “The Aztecs could field fairly good-sized armies, but never that size [hundreds of thousands.]” [Part 2, 36:00]

The following facts are documented: The Quiché force opposing the Spaniards numbered 232,000 despite the fact that some groups abstained from the alliance. The Aztecs mustered a force of 400,000 in a fairly routine campaign against a nearby kingdom. More problematic is Alba Ixtlilxochitl’s account of central Mexican history, according to which a combined Aztec army at one point consisted of 700,000 men. Of the hazier past, the historian said that in the last war of the “Tultecs,” which lasted three years and two months, a total (including women) of 5,600,000 persons were slain.³² Even if we skeptically and arbitrarily reduce that figure by 90 percent, the number would be of the same order of magnitude as that reported in the Book of Mormon for the final battle at Cumorah.

- “There are no Semitic words whatsoever in it [Mayan]. It’s got no relation whatsoever with any languages that we know of in the Old World.” [Part 1, 56:00]

No archaeologist is qualified to speak in these absolute terms on this abstruse subject. Brian Stubbs, a leading scholar on the Uto-Aztecan language family, has shown that languages of that group show major similarities with Hebrew and Egyptian.³³ He concludes that the Uto-Aztecan family devel-

32. Don Domingo Juarros, *A Statistical History of the Kingdom of Guatemala, in Spanish America*, trans. J. Bailly (London: Dove, 1823), 389; Fray Diego Durán, *The History of the Indies of New Spain* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 420; Ross Hassig, *Aztec Warfare: Imperial Expansion and Political Control* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 55; Alfred Chavero, trans., *Obras Históricas de Don Fernando De Alva Ixtlilxochitl* (Mexico: Editora Nacional, 1959), 58; and Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, CA: Kolob, 1950), 385.

33. He did so preliminarily in *A Few Hundred Hints of Egyptian and Two Dialects of Hebrew (or Northwest Semitic) in Uto-Aztecan*, a 142-page manuscript, 2004; it is presently in revision as a book, *More on Uto-Aztecan*. See earlier treatments in Brian D. Stubbs, “Looking Over vs. Overlooking Native American Languages: Let’s Void the Void,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*

oped as a creole tongue formed from Hebrew, Egyptian, and a native ancestral language of central Mexico that then divided multiple times. Some, but not all, other Mesoamerican tongues show similar characteristics.

Meanwhile, a number of other Native American languages have been shown to be connected to Old World sources, few of which had been suspected.³⁴ Morris Swadesh was among other linguists who felt that “it is perfectly possible that a group of people having arrived speaking a new language [in the New World] eventually was absorbed into an already established linguistic community.”³⁵

The phenomenon he describes would be like what took place with native “Toltecs” who migrated into Guatemala, where they came to dominate local populations: “Linguistic patterns of highland Guatemala suggest that Toltec influence involved no mass migration of Nahua speakers to the highlands. Only small numbers of the Toltecs must have come in contact with a well-established indigenous population, the invaders’ tongue being absorbed within the linguistic milieu of the more numerous indigenous population.”³⁶ After only about five hundred years, Robert Carmack found very little linguistic or cultural, let alone archaeological, evidence for their presence there as their history in the Popol Vuh reported. Yet today no Mesoamericanist scholar considers the Popol Vuh anything

5/1 (1996): 1–49; “Elements of Hebrew in Uto-Aztecan: A Summary of the Data” (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988); and “Hebrew and Uto-Aztecan: Possible Linguistic Connections,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 279–81.

34. Bede Fahey, “Mayan: A Sino-Tibetan language? A comparative study,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 130 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, Department of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, 2004).

35. Morris Swadesh, “Linguistic Relations Across Bering Strait,” *American Anthropologist* 64/6 (December 1962): 1262.

36. Robert M. Carmack, “Toltec Influence on the Postclassic Culture History of Highland Guatemala,” in *Archaeological Studies in Middle America*, Middle American Research Institute, Publication 26, ed. E. Wyllys Andrews IV et al. (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1970), 46–92.

but a fundamental source on the native pre-Spanish culture. The Book of Mormon is in the same situation.

About Joseph Smith

- [Dehlin:] “Joseph Smith himself, you know, would walk around and see a pile of bones and say that was the famous Nephite warrior Zelfh, or whatever; he would see a city and say this was the ancient city of blah, blah, blah.” (Not contradicted by Coe.) [Part 1, 48:30]

This statement is vastly overblown in terms of Smith’s real history. He made no such practice.

- Joseph Smith “claimed that it [the Book of Abraham] was in reformed Egyptian and that he could read it.” [Part 2, 29:00]

Factually untrue. Joseph never said the record was in “reformed Egyptian.” He said he translated the Abraham record from “Egyptian” by inspiration, not because “he could read it.”

- Joseph Smith “sees the incredible people like the Comanche and the Sioux and Cheyenne and people like that. . . . That probably would have influenced him a lot. He had to have horses.” [Part 1, 37:30]

Patently impossible. Nothing was known in the eastern United States about horse-using Plains Indians in Joseph’s day, the 1820s. In any case, the Book of Mormon never suggests that horses were ridden by anybody.

About “Book of Mormon Archaeology” and the NWF

On the New World Archaeological Foundation:

- “They really never found plates of gold or wheels, or steel swords, or anything of the sort. . . . Constantly arriving there in early days were slight screwballs out of Salt Lake and places like that, coming down with metal de-

tectors, . . . running around trying to find plates of gold and whatnot.” [Part 3, 00:00–14:00]

This must be based on gossip or rumor at best. The NWAFF’s history yields nothing that suggests such an objective was held or that such weird visits ever took place, nor do surviving personnel know of anything like this.³⁷

- John Robertson, a “fantastically good linguist . . .” [Part 1, 55:30]

Perhaps of interest: after Robertson retired from the BYU faculty, he and his wife served an LDS mission during which, among other things, they averred the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

- “Land bridge into Asia—this is something the Book of Mormon archaeologists don’t really like to talk about.” [Part 3, 36:50]

Why this statement was made is a complete mystery, in the first place because the frequent expression “Book of Mormon archaeologists” has no actual referents.³⁸ Not a single archaeologist I know, or of whom I have heard, does or would call him- or herself a “Book of Mormon archaeologist.” I know of only two who ever did so, Wells Jakeman and Ross Christenson, both of whom have been deceased for quite a while. A few pseudo-archaeologists of a journalistic stripe lurk around the fringes of the Mormon intellectual community, but they are all pretension and no substance. Moreover, there is no reason that archaeologists who are Mormon would hesitate to discuss the Bering Strait route.

37. For more details on the history of the NWAFF, see Daniel C. Peterson, “On the New World Archaeological Foundation,” *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 221–34.

38. Dehlin refers to John Gee and Daniel Peterson, and Coe classes them as “Book of Mormon archaeologists, essentially” (part 3, 15:20). Gee’s expertise is in Egyptology, and Peterson is an Islamicist. Neither has claimed or does claim to be a “Book of Mormon archaeologist.”

“Book of Mormon archaeologist” implies someone trained to a professional level who focuses inordinately on relating that book to the results of archaeology, to the exclusion of following professional archaeological goals. Frankly, none exist.

Assertions or intimations that NWAFA archaeologists have striven to find “proof” for the Book of Mormon are completely false. Nothing could be further from the truth. Starting with the first season of the NWAFA (in 1953), even before it had any connection with the LDS Church, the operational guidelines were that the research be conducted according to professional standards without any reference to the Book of Mormon, although the funding was from private LDS donors. Pedro Armillas was chosen as the first year’s field director upon the advice of Drs. Alfred V. Kidder, Gordon Willey, and Gordon Ekholm, who constituted a professional advisory committee for Tom Ferguson. Gareth Lowe and I were the only archaeological people aboard the first season who were LDS. Other student staff members included Bill Sanders and Román Piña Chan (both of whom later became premier Mesoamericanists), who could hardly be supposed to be closet Mormons. From the beginning, non-LDS archaeologists working for the NWAFA have outnumbered the archaeologists there who were LDS believers.

From 1955 on, after Ferguson had appealed to the church for support funds (having exhausted his private funding sources), the eminent J. Alden Mason, an emeritus professor at the University of Pennsylvania who had become editor of NWAFA publications (and who also assisted with archaeology), supported a judgment from Ed Shook (Carnegie) about the NWAFA when Mason made a definitive statement on the noninvolvement of the LDS Church authorities in planning or reporting the NWAFA research.³⁹ That position never varied from then to

39. Mason’s statement reads in part as follows: “No statement respecting the landing places of these groups or the identification of any of the lands settled and cities established by them has ever been officially made by the Church.

the present. With such powerful professional assurances, your own assessment visit to the Chiapas operation was hardly necessary. Moreover, your current intimation that there was a hidden church agenda behind its generous support of the NWAFF is both flat-out wrong and prejudicial to any fair discussion of the foundation's role.

- “The whole business of . . . Book of Mormon archaeology [is] to find Zarahemla, to find the plates of gold that were inscribed at the last trump, so to speak.” [Part 1, 19:30]

This deserves to be called nonsense, without the slightest basis in fact.

Near Eastern Links

- “So, basically, if you are looking for Old World connections and looking at the Near East, you're looking in the wrong place.” [Part 1, 42:30]

Nevertheless, some individual Mormons have made speculative deductions attempting to identify ethnic groups, archeological ruins, and geographical features of the New World with those described in the Book of Mormon. None of these interpretations to date has received either ecclesiastical or scientific approval.

As advocates of advanced education, Mormons always pride themselves for maintaining the doctrine that ignorance should be replaced by knowledge gained through intelligent research and study. Observing the lack of unanimity in professional opinions respecting the development of the early high civilizations in America as well as the dearth of scientific data, many Mormons hope that archeological research may be effective in filling this void in our knowledge. Support of the present New World Archaeological Foundation investigations is a demonstration of that attitude.

The stated purpose of this Foundation is not to seek corroboration of the Book of Mormon account, but to help to resolve the problem of whether civilization in Middle America developed autochthonously or as a result of diffused or migrated influence from some area of the Old World, and to shed light on the culture and way of life of the ancients during the formative period.

There should be no underestimation of the difficulty of this assignment to reconstruct through archeology the lost history of the once great early Mesoamerican civilizations. The task is tremendous.” J. Alden Mason, foreword to *Research in Chiapas, Mexico*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, nos. 1–4, ed. J. Alden Mason (Orinda, CA: NWAFF, 1959), iii.

- “All sorts of things that are typically American. . . . Nothing to do with the Middle East at all. . . . There’s nothing in the slightest bit Middle East about the Olmec.” [Part 1, 28:49]

You might plead ignorance of any purely Mormon efforts to demonstrate a relationship between Mesoamerica and the Near East, but how could you not be aware of my 1971 article that discussed this very point?⁴⁰ Yet that piece is now superseded by a 2009 paper accessible on-line.⁴¹

You might well not yet have seen this recent item since the outlet is relatively obscure. It contains a list, along with extensive references to the literature for each item, of 380 correspondences between cult and ideology aspects of culture between the Near East in the second and first half of the first millennium BC on the one hand and Mesoamerica on the other. The striking nature and number of the correspondences make it certain that there was a direct diffusionary event that anciently linked the two areas.

I choose not to go further with this commentary; it has become rather tedious. My intention has been to inform you about errors in your statements in the podcast. I am sure you would not wish to continue saying what is not factual.

Finally, I have a large book in the editing process that deals with these matters in greater depth.⁴² (The ninety-seven-page list of references includes twenty-one of your writings.) When it is in print, I will be pleased to send you a copy. It presents 420

40. John L. Sorenson, “The significance of an apparent relationship between the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica,” in *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*, ed. C. L. Riley (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 219–41.

41. “A Complex of Ritual and Ideology Shared by Mesoamerica and the Ancient Near East,” *Sino-Platonic Papers*, no. 195 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Department of East Asian Language and Civilization, 2009), at http://sino-platonic.org/complete/spp195_mesoamerica.pdf.

42. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex* (Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, Brigham Young University, forthcoming).

correspondences between the text of the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican cultural patterns and archaeological sequences. On that basis, I maintain there is no alternative to understanding that the Book of Mormon (“Mormon’s Codex”) could only have originated from the hands of a native Mesoamerican writer and that scholars will do well to study it seriously, not flippantly.

John Sorenson

John L. Sorenson, professor emeritus of anthropology at Brigham Young University, holds a PhD in anthropology from the University of California, Los Angeles. He originated the program in anthropology at BYU and headed it for fourteen years. His academic and professional emphasis was in sociocultural anthropology, although since his retirement he has concentrated his research and writing on Mesoamerican archaeology. He was editor of the Journal of Book of Mormon Studies for five years and is the author of more than two hundred books and articles. His book An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon sets forth criteria that cannot be ignored when searching for the geographic setting of the Book of Mormon.

