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Disciplined Geography

An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon by John L. Sorenson (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Company and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985), xxi, 415 pp., \$14.95.

Reviewed by Lavina Fielding Anderson, an editor and writer in Salt Lake City.

MY ACQUAINTANCE WITH this information-packed, attractively printed, and modestly priced volume began in manuscript as a member of the *Ensign* editorial staff in 1975 when Sorenson, at the invitation of managing editor Jay M. Todd, spent an afternoon a week for two or three months presenting various aspects of his research tying the Book of Mormon to a Mesoamerican setting. It was a graduate seminar with a master teacher who, though sometimes brusque and bristly on paper, was invariably pleasant and undefensive in person.

In my early teens when my prime demand on literature was a strong plot, my favorite part of the Book of Mormon had been the account of the wars in the latter half of Alma. Of all those autumn afternoons on the twenty-second floor of the Church Office Building, the one that stands out in my mind was spent tracing, under Sorenson's guidance, the routes of armies "over," "down into," "around," and "up to" various military objectives that corresponded with mountain valleys and passes,

lowland plains, and river courses in Mesoamerica. The Book of Mormon thereby acquired a solidity and reality by being tied to terrain that it has never lost for me.

Although the *Ensign's* initial plans to publish Sorenson's manuscript as a series was eventually abandoned, I was delighted to know that the project continued on until this joint publication by Deseret Book/FARMS was possible.

My previous exposure to Book of Mormon geography had been from hobbyists whose esoteric efforts, to be quite frank, I had classified among those of most genealogists and vegetarians—of passionate and absorbing interest only to themselves and therefore, if published, usually self-financed. The breadth and eclecticism of Sorenson's disciplined and multi-disciplined approach remains one of its strongest appeals.

The book is carefully written for the lay reader. It contains no abstruse terminology and no assumptions that the reader is supposed to already have. He is careful to claim "plausibility" and "probability," not certainties, nor does he rely on appeals to authority or testimony. The logic of its organization intelligently deals with most of the associated questions by way of clearing the ground for a detailed examination of the text.

A preface jointly written by Leonard J. Arrington, Truman G. Madsen, and John W. Welch provides reassurance to an LDS audience that the book is worthy of serious consideration. Sorenson's important intro-

duction spells out his own priorities and premises in a discussion that provides the foundations for the rest of the book.

Until recently, after 150 years since the Nephite record was first published by Joseph Smith, we had neglected to pin down the location of a single [New World] city, to identify confidently even one route the people of the volume traversed, or to sketch a believable picture of any segment of the life they lived in their American promised land. In many respects, the Book of Mormon remains a sealed book to us because we have failed to do the work necessary to place it in its setting (p. xvii).

He does not disguise his love for the Book of Mormon nor his strong personal interest in the Mesoamerican thesis, to him the most plausible: "But strong feelings need not rob disciplined inquiry of merit" (p. xix).

The text is illuminated by thirteen fine maps including a topographical map of Mesoamerica on the endpapers. Five of these maps appear in the first chapter, "The Book of Mormon Mapped," where he deals with the potentially vexing questions of what view General Authorities since Joseph Smith have held of the Book of Mormon's location, carefully presents a case for the possible size of the land based on distances within the book itself and the probable speed with which various parties and individuals were able to cover terrain, the reasonableness of a "two-Cumorah" hypothesis, why the Nephites might have used conventional north-south terminology when Mesoamerican quite distinctly runs northeast-southwest, and why it is still useful to study geography despite drastic alterations at the time of Christ's crucifixion.

His answer to this last question is: "Mormon and Moroni both lived and wrote *after* the catastrophic changes. They had no trouble identifying locations they personally knew . . . with places referred to by Alma and Helaman before the catastrophe. Nothing about the pre-crucifixion geographically seems to have puzzled them. . . . The

narrow pass was still in its key position during the final battles as it had been more than four centuries before. The River Sidon ran the same course, and Ramah/Cumorah, the landmark hill, presided unchanged over the annihilation of its second people" (pp. 45-46).

The next chapter, entitled "Getting Some Things Clear," chews its way steadily through some vital topics: the nature of a lineage history, which Sorenson argues the Book of Mormon is, rather than a political or social history, Mesoamerican cosmology, what we learn from archaeology, anthropology, and accounts of early Spaniards, what dated Mayan monuments have to teach us, the usefulness of dendrochronology (the study of growth rings in trees) and carbon-14 dating combined, language history, the Nephite writing history, and biological characteristics we could expect from the Semites of Lehi's area in the Old World.

For example, on this last point, Sorenson notes from the evidence of skeletons, art, and living descendants, that men were approximately five feet six inches, women five feet, and relatively few weighed more than 130 pounds. "Their build was slender and gracile, unburdened by heavy muscles. (This information was not known to the artist who prepared the illustrations used in the Book of Mormon in recent years.)" (p. 82)

An important chapter on cultural history in the area follows — the history, religion, political structure, social patterns, and traditions of the Aztecs and Olmecs. The discussion examining the evidence for equating Olmec and Jaredite traditions is particularly interesting.

The heart of the book for me is chapters 4-8 which basically follow the chronology of the Book of Mormon from first landing through final destruction. I encourage the reader to work through this section of the book with Book of Mormon in hand, following the maps and reading beyond the quotations for contextual understanding.

After the careful preparation of the earlier chapters, it is illuminating to appraise the case Sorenson makes for locating some of the important cities of the Book of Mormon at identifiable Mesoamerican sites: Kaminaljuyu on the suburbs of Guatemala City with the city of Nephi, for instance, or Santa Rosa on the upper Grijalva with Zarahemla (pp. 141–52). Map 10 on p. 199 which uses both Book of Mormon and Central American place names was particularly helpful.

These chapters also include illuminating cultural discussions of, for example, the Maya calendar, dating the birth of Christ, the use of metals in the Book of Mormon, an analysis of the twelve animals mentioned in the Book of Mormon and their probable presence in Mesoamerica, the operation of secret societies, Quetzalcoatl as Christ (Sorenson argues for a much more limited identification than has been popular in seminary classes), and military strategies and remains.

An example of Sorenson's blending of Book of Mormon reports and Mesoamerican reconstructions is his discussion of the flourishing of the church in the generations immediately after Christ's visit. After acknowledging that "we would not expect a high degree of administrative and ritual uniformity" because of the "linguistic, cultural, and social differences . . . and also because of difficulties in routine communication, . . . still, we ought to be able to detect new religious practices in the Mesoamerican materials around the mid-first century A.D. And we can."

Certain old incense burners went out of use or changed form, and the use of the little clay figurines, which probably had some sort of religious significance, was abandoned in many places. Both those features, the burners and the figurines, had parallels in Palestine, where they represented religious practices either of a folk nature or con-

nected with Mosaic orthodoxy (pp. 330–31).

I found occasional drawbacks. Though charitable, Sorenson's custom of not identifying by author the theories he displaces makes it difficult for the beginning student to form a very clear idea of the dialogue on this subject that has been going on for much of the twentieth century.

Given the wealth of material in the book, not all of which can be logically predicted by reading the chapter headings, the index could have been much more helpful. It usually confines itself to the main discussion of a particular topic, rather than the three or four places in the text where it is discussed. (I recall at least two other discussions of the use of clay figurines as cultural/dating devices, for instance, but *figurine* does not appear as an index entry.)

Furthermore, one of the most impressive archaeological reinforcements of a Mesoamerican setting is Stela 3 at La Venta (p. 121). My memory of sketches of this stela shows a short, broad-faced and broad-nosed individual facing a taller, thinner man with a pronounced hooked nose. Sorenson hypothesizes that this stela, which dates to "about the sixth century B.C. seems to show the meeting of leaders of two ethnic groups," possibly the Mulekite landing. However, the photograph of this stela on page 121 is virtually unintelligible; and since Sorenson does not include a physical description in the text, a possibly telling point is lost.

Certainly an archaeologist, anthropologist, or cultural historian reviewing this book would find other problems and raise other questions. And certainly the dialogue of Book of Mormon geography will continue. Sorenson was neither the first nor the final word on this topic. But his volume is clearly the most persuasive landmark in that wreckage-strewn landscape.

