

“Proving” the Book of Mormon: Archaeology Vs. Faith

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STAN LARSON’S ARTICLE “The Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson” (DIALOGUE, Spring 1990) showed the world some of the backstage drama accompanying efforts of Book of Mormon enthusiasts to link the book with demonstrable reality. As a warning against the dangers of misguided zeal, Larson’s piece reminds us that efforts to “prove” the Book of Mormon have produced not only startling successes but wrenching disappointments.

Ferguson’s determination to vindicate the Book of Mormon drove him on innumerable occasions into the remotest reaches of the Mesoamerican jungles to carry on his archaeological research. It is cruelly ironic that although he found abundant archaeological evidence supporting the Book of Mormon, and authored a number of publications to that effect, in his own mind, he had failed. He had started out believing himself destined to find the kind of ultimate proof that the world would be compelled to accept. He envisioned something like a Mesoamerican Rosetta Stone—ancient native inscriptions that could be matched with corresponding Book of Mormon passages. After twenty-five years, time ran out, and his stone remained undiscovered. According to Larson’s account, Ferguson was shattered by cruel disappointment. Plagued by failures and by serious questions about the Book of Abraham, his walls of faith came tumbling down, and he recanted.

This loss of faith was all the more remarkable because he had previously committed such prodigious amounts of physical and emotional effort to the success of his venture. Significantly, his previous well-publicized discoveries had given him a taste of success and recognition

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that made it even more difficult to cope with his ultimate failure and rendered his experience all the more humiliating.

Ironically, the spiritual strength to be found within the covers of the Book of Mormon itself could have buttressed his sagging faith at this critical juncture, but apparently his passion for exploring exotic ruins had never led him to serious exploration of the labyrinthine interior passageways of the book itself.

As Larson's article pointed out, however, Ferguson did not give up. The faith-doubt-faith cycle, familiar to many in their youth, ran its course for him in mid-life. Not surprisingly, therefore, he mellowed as he advanced in years and, according to his son Larry, regained his paradise lost by the time he died in 1983. Whether or not this was the case, let it be remembered that during his lifetime he made an undeniable contribution to our understanding of the physical setting of the Book of Mormon. No one can now rob him of this contribution, not even he himself.

My principal concern here is not to assess the scientific validity of Ferguson's conclusions but rather to consider the role of faith in his search for confirmation of the Book of Mormon's assertions. It would not be inappropriate, however, to observe that one of Ferguson's errors, apart from the question of his faith, was in not anticipating how rapidly newly discovered scientific information would accumulate, even within his lifetime. If indeed he was unable to find evidence of such things as wheat, figs, grapes, wheels, horses, and elephants in ancient Mesoamerica, it is undeniable that considerable scientifically respectable evidence of these items is now being discovered, albeit still somewhat equivocal in its probative value (see Sorenson 1985; Warren and Ferguson 1987; Hauck 1988; Wirth 1886). But further supportive scientific evidence is continuing to accumulate, in crescendo.

Stated simply, Ferguson's strategic error was in fixing a time frame at the outset within which all of his miraculous discoveries were to be completed. He assumed that the Lord, without whose help he knew he could never succeed, would agree with him that all of the key discoveries needed to establish the truth of the Book of Mormon should be made by him well within the limits of his own lifetime. He was shocked when the Lord did not comply.

Viewed even from a strictly scientific point of view, his fixing of certain arbitrary time parameters for finishing the job seems both unrealistic and presumptuous. He apparently forgot that scientific exploration must also abide by its own inflexible timetable. Mesoamerican archaeology is still in its infancy, and the preponderance of recoverable archaeological evidence is still awaiting discovery. The exploration and interpretation of multiple Mesoamerican civilizations, piled

atop one another, stretched over hundreds of miles of densely vegetated jungles, is not a work for impatient archaeologists with unrealistic deadlines.

Perhaps a more fundamental error was Ferguson's gradual adoption of the narrow assumption (often voiced by detractors of the Book of Mormon) that the discovery of certain yet-undiscovered artifacts is a *sine qua non* to the establishment of the book's validity. But in doing so, he totally failed to call attention to the overwhelming amount of virtually uncontested historical and archaeological evidence establishing the book's authenticity. By applying the *sine qua non* argument in reverse, one might with equal validity reason that until this mass of favorable evidence is convincingly refuted, one is logically required to accept the book's authenticity.

For example, it is self-evident to all serious readers that the Book of Mormon contains an amazing complexity of diverse compositional systems—theological treatises and innovations, sequential narratives, prophetic utterances, literary styles, and commentaries on historical, economic, sociological, political, and numerous other subjects. The component elements of this awesome literary mixture all miraculously fit together without incongruity or anachronism, in perfect harmony and consistency with one another and with the Bible. The book touches upon theological and philosophical truths whose depths still challenge the most profound thinkers. This undeniable reality, resulting from a literary work created in less than three months by an unschooled man of twenty-three, cannot be swept aside as if it did not exist.

Notwithstanding the glamor accompanying the ongoing effort of scholars to "prove" the authenticity of the Book of Mormon through archaeological, literary, or any other type of exploration, their efforts must ultimately be recognized as only tangential to our obtaining that special inner spiritual light requisite to reaching a certainty of its truth (Moro. 10:4). Our tools of enlightenment are not so much a Rosetta Stone and cryptograph as a love of God and complete submission to his will. Our principal effort should be not so much to seek knowledge *about* the Book of Mormon as to seek knowledge *of* the Book of Mormon.

Does the Lord approve our searching for physical corroboration of the truth of this enigmatic book? The Saints are instructed to teach each other "all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient . . . to understand," including things both "in the earth, and under the earth" (D&C 88:78-79). Joseph Smith apparently showed interest in locating various Book of Mormon geographical sites (Sorenson 1985, 1-3). In modern times, the First Presidency has also supported such pursuits (as with Ferguson), but with caution.

It appears that scientific research is praiseworthy as long as we understand that nothing can replace the need for a testimony born of the Spirit and based upon faith, prayer, and study. External evidence can be fascinating and enlightening, but it cannot alone engender faith. If the Lord had intended our conversion to the Book of Mormon to depend on irrefutable *physical* proof, it would have been easy for him to provide such, sprinkled throughout the pages of the book itself. Unfortunately, matters of faith are not that simple. Conversion requires spiritual exertion and a testing (Ether 12:6). Those who bypass this process by relying uniquely on physical proof will find their faith to be built on sand. In New Testament times, a knowledge of the historical Jesus by his contemporaries, based on their eyewitness experiences alone, was not enough to establish in their minds the reality of his atoning sacrifice. Their heaven-endowed knowledge depended on their acceptance of evidence recognizable only through the eyes of faith and illuminated by the power of the Spirit.

“Him [Jesus] God raised up . . . and shewed him openly; not to all the people, but unto witnesses chosen before of God . . .” (Acts 10:40, 42). This scripture leads us to believe that although the resurrected Lord could have appeared to Pontius Pilate, or to anyone else important enough to authoritatively establish the reality of his resurrection, he did not do so. He appeared instead to a handful of faithful witnesses and commissioned them to carry the message to the world, on wings of faith. Thus it is with the Book of Mormon.

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