

MEXICANS, TOURISM, AND BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY

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In April 2011, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints announced that it had distributed the 150 millionth copy of the Book of Mormon. The first copy had been printed in 1830. By the year 2000, the Church was printing one copy every seven seconds. Translated into eighty-two languages, the book is considered by Latter-day Saints to be “another testament of Jesus Christ.”¹ While Mormons and non-Mormons alike have conducted literary analysis on the text, there are only a few studies that consider the history of the book itself.² Even more rare—perhaps

1. “Book of Mormon Reaches 150 Million Copies,” *Church News and Events*, April 20, 2011, <https://www.lds.org/church/news/book-of-mormon-reaches-150-million-copies>.

2. Latter-day Saint explorations of the Book of Mormon are extensive but certainly not approaching the number of studies of the Bible. Recent examples of this genre include: Grant Hardy, *Understanding the Book of Mormon: A Reader's Guide* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Royal Skousen, ed., *The Book of Mormon: The Earliest Text* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009); Robert A. Rees and Eugene England, eds., *The Reader's Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Press, 2008); S. Kent Brown, *From Jerusalem to Zarahemla: Literary and Historical Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1998); Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1988); and John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 10 (Autumn 1969): 69–84.

For cultural histories, see Terry L. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture that Launched a New World Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and its abridgement, *The Book of Mormon: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) as well as Paul C. Gutjahr, *The Book of Mormon: A Biography* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2012).

nonexistent—are studies of how the Book of Mormon touches the lives of Latter-day Saints. This essay attempts to remedy, in part, that lack.

One of the challenges of any textual religion is to create an environment where people can develop relationships with the characters and events documented in a sacred book. In the case of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, an additional challenge is to maintain a commitment to the literal truth of the text. The text is not merely a guide to facilitate a relationship with God; it is a history of that relationship. The Book of Mormon is not solely an ethical guideline; it is a report from the past. For orthodox Mormons, Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon from real gold plates, and the text documented the complicated history of real ancient peoples. Throughout his life, Joseph Smith rejected the Protestant notion that the extraordinary experiences of Jesus and the apostles were trapped in the past. As a prophet, he unlocked the world of the supernatural—making the divine-human interaction simultaneously more literal and more personal than was customary in Protestant America. Over the centuries, as influential groups of Americans became more rational and more willing to accept layered interpretations of the Bible, Mormons continued to call potential believers to ask: is the Book of Mormon true or is it false?

Maintaining a conviction of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon is no easy task in the era of DNA studies, archaeological excavations, and aggressive attacks by evangelical Protestants. Latter-day Saints cultivate commitment to the veracity of the Book of Mormon in many different ways. Some techniques are obvious: private scriptural study, church-going, and being open to the impromptu and sometimes miraculous revelations of the Holy Spirit. Other ways of practicing the truth are less conventional but increasingly popular.

I want to stress that I use the word “practicing” deliberately. Like playing the piano, if one stops practicing, one’s skills get rusty. In order for religious truths to become normal, natural, and transparent they

must be made familiar.³ To maintain a conviction in a truth one must not simply “believe it.” Belief must be cultivated through bodily acts and through spiritual experiences. For those who have made a statement of the truth of the Book of Mormon, this process must be continual, communal, and creative. How is it that Mormons acquire a “taken-for-granted” understanding of the Book of Mormon?

An increasingly popular way of practicing the truth of the Book of Mormon is through tourism. Mormons who travel to Mexico and Central America often visit ancient ruins in order to enliven their relationship with the scriptures. I prefer “tourism” to “pilgrimage” to underscore the nature of such religious travel. Tourism is enabled by leisure and stimulated by the desire for entertainment. Tourists seek diversion, pleasure, authenticity, education, and uplift. They visit religious places as a part of that wider desire. Spiritual uplift is secondary and not the intended result of travel. Religious tourism, I would argue, lacks the conscious spiritual focus of pilgrimage. This is not to say that tourists do not find spiritual or religious inspiration in their travels; in lived religion, there are no clear boundaries between sacred and profane.⁴ Most of us move easily between our roles as tourist and pilgrim.

I also eschew the term pilgrimage because pilgrimage studies tend to be focused on the religious experiences of the pilgrim. Pilgrims go on pilgrimages, but there is no easy term for those who create and maintain the pilgrimage site. In this essay, I am primarily interested in what *enables* the pilgrim rather than the pilgrim per se. Consequently, my

3. I discuss the importance of practicing religion in *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 2, 272. For theoretical explanations of practice, see Manuel A. Vásquez, “‘Ceci n’est pas un texte’: From Textualism to Practice,” in *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford, 2011), 231–57 and Courtney Bender, “Practicing Religions,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 273–95.

4. McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 4–8.

focus is not on the American Mormon tourists who hope to “see” Book of Mormon lands. A fuller examination of the various types of Latter-day Saint tourists is left for other scholars. What I am looking at are the Mexican Mormons who interpret their homeland to visitors. How did Mexico become a site for Mormon tourism? I am less interested in the transformative power of the journey for visitors and more interested in how a sacred text becomes enlivened through a parachurch entity—a tour guide company. Since more Mormons currently live outside of the United States than inside, it also behooves us to pay particular attention to how non-Americans practice this quintessentially “American” faith.

Using recent theoretical work developed by historian of American religions Robert A. Orsi, I argue that in order for the Book of Mormon to have a vivid and compelling immediacy it has to be “enlivened.”⁵ For most Latter-day Saints, this occurs through private or family scripture study. This is where they feel the truth of the scriptures that makes the text more real than symbolic. Within tourism to Book of Mormon sites, however, one family of tour guides use what I will call “fragmentary presence” to bring life to the sites. Such presence makes the ruins more than dramatic backgrounds to history stories and gives them sacred power. Well aware of the discrepancies between archaeological dating and Book of Mormon events, the guides discuss the ruins and the people who made the ruins in terms of their ability to carry the fragmentary remains of an ancient truth. The role of the Mormon tour guide is to both exemplify Latter-day Saint belief in his or her life and to point out where one can see the fragments of the Book of Mormon events within the ruins of the Maya. It is in the process of experiencing both the faith

5. See Robert A. Orsi, *History and Presence* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 1–47. Art historian David Freedberg provides the classic argument on how objects become alive in his book *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 283–316.

of the Mexican tour guide and the architectural decoding that Latter-day Saints emotionally connect with the enduring legacy of the sacred.

Mormons in Mexico

The intermingling of US Mormons and residents of Mexico has a long and complicated history.⁶ Mormons first came to Mexico in 1875 when Brigham Young sent Daniel W. Jones and four other men to scout out land for possible Latter-day Saint colonies. Ten years later, when anti-polygamy laws tightened the noose around Utah Mormons, seven communities were established in northern Mexico. By the turn of the century, Mormons had replicated their Zion in the Casas Grandes River Valley: canals and dams brought water to irrigate crops, wide streets bisected neatly kept villages, and English-language schools were built. Ward leaders made sure that order was maintained. Almost 4,000 Latter-day Saints, many living in plural marriages, were residing in the states of Chihuahua and Sonora in 1912. While some Mexican converts were made, this was essentially an American enclave. Mitt Romney's father, for example, was born into this community.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 severely disrupted the Mormon colonies, so leaders in Salt Lake City called members back to the United States. A few Mexican Saints kept the faith but times were difficult for all religious people in Mexico. Once a privileged religious organization, Catholic religious, political, and social influence had been severely limited by liberal anticlericalism. In 1926, all foreigners were banned from missionary work. It would not be until 1940 that US citizens could enter Mexico as missionaries. At that point, Mormons joined with a host of evangelicals, Pentecostals, Seventh-day Adventists, and Jehovah's Wit-

6. See F. LaMond Tullis, *Mormons in Mexico: The Dynamics of Faith and Culture* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1987).

nesses from “El Norte” to convince Mexican Catholics to leave their church. By 1961 there were 25,000 Latter-day Saints in Mexico.⁷

Being a Latter-day Saint in Mexico was not easy. For many Mexican Mormons, conversion meant facing the distinct possibility of rejection from family and fellow workers. Mexican society was defined by Catholic folkways that expected kinship networks to be strengthened by baptismal sponsorship and lubricated by drink—activities not permitted to Mormons. As in other Latin American countries, family ties also enabled children to find and secure jobs. Catholic rituals, family commitments, and economic structures were tightly interwoven. To leave Catholicism for a “foreign” religion like Mormonism was to make a strong statement that could break families apart. Employers were suspicious and often hostile to those who rejected Catholicism.

As the Latter-day Saint community in Mexico grew, however, a fictive kinship network developed. Mormons cultivated emotional and economic ties that circumvented both family and Catholic folkways. When Mexican Mormons began businesses, they employed other Mormons. Knowing that those hired did not drink or get caught up in expensive family celebrations was reassuring. Minority cultures often support each other financially and socially; Mexican Mormons were no different.

Finding the Book of Mormon

Mexicans and other Mesoamericans had always been of interest to Latter-day Saint missionaries, but in the mid-twentieth century Mormons also became fascinated by the ruins of their southern neighbors. In 1952 Thomas Ferguson, a Latter-day Saint and lawyer, founded the New World Archaeological Foundation with the purpose of studying

7. “Facts and Statistics,” *Newsroom*, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/facts-and-statistics/country/mexico>. Member statistics in this essay are those reported by the LDS Church, who counts all who have been baptized. Very frequently individuals stop going to church but are not taken off of Church rolls, so the numbers are inflated.

pre-classical New World archaeology. His intention was to find material proof of the Book of Mormon in the jungles of Central America. Ferguson and his friend J. Willard Marriott (of hotel fame) had travelled to Mexico in 1946 and filmed sites that they believed could prove that ancient Israelites had landed in the New World. As with most Latter-day Saints of that time, Ferguson believed that the Book of Mormon “is the only revelation from God in the history of the world that can possibly be tested by scientific physical evidence. . . . Thus, Book of Mormon history is revelation that can be tested by archaeology.”⁸ Initially using his own money, but eventually receiving funds from the LDS Church and Brigham Young University (where he had been hired as an anthropologist), Ferguson conducted a series of excavations in Mexico.

Although the Book of Mormon describes how families sailed from ancient Israel to the New World, it provides no place names that would be recognizable to a modern reader. Joseph Smith did not provide any geographical insights prior to his death in 1844. However, Joseph Smith did say that the angel Moroni “said there was a book deposited written upon gold plates, giving an account of *the* former inhabitants of this *continent* and the source from which they sprang” (Joseph Smith–History 1:34; emphasis mine). Early Mormons argued that the Native American burial mounds that dotted the US countryside were the “sacred archives” of lost peoples.⁹

Throughout the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, most Mormons agreed with the sacred geography laid out by early Mormon apostle Orson Pratt (1811–1881). Between October 1850 and

8. Thomas Ferguson, Letter to the First Presidency, Jan. 27, 1955, as cited in Stan Larson, “The Odyssey of Thomas Stuart Ferguson,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 64.

9. Elias Higbee and Parley Pratt, “An Address,” *Times and Seasons* 1, no. 5 (March 1840): 69, as cited by Samuel Morris Brown, *In Heaven as It Is on Earth: Joseph Smith and the Early Mormon Conquest of Death* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 73.

January 1851, while Pratt served as the president of the British Mission, he wrote an extensive essay titled “The Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon.” In it he argued that the Book of Mormon should be seen as either totally true or totally false. The story either happened literally as it was written or it did not. To substantiate his position that the Book of Mormon was true, he called on archaeological and historical evidence. Ruins had recently been found in Central America that to his mind substantiated the Book of Mormon’s veracity.¹⁰ “In the 384th year,” Pratt wrote in the *Millennial Star*, “the occupants of Yucatan and Central America, having been driven from their great and magnificent cities, were pursued by the Lamanites to the hill Cumorah in the interior of the state of New York, where the whole nation perished in battle.”¹¹ When Pratt prepared the 1879 edition from the original 1830 Book of Mormon text, he included explanatory footnotes among other revisions. Seventy-five geographical references identified where the events took place.

While the names of families and general geographical markers are included in the 1830 Book of Mormon, Pratt provided modern names and biblical references in his notes to help the reader connect to the sacred history. For instance, the Book of Mormon explains how after the fall of the Tower of Babel, one set of families (Jared and his relatives, “Jaredites”) boarded eight barges and sailed to the New World (Ether 2:1–21). Pratt added notes explaining that they traveled through

10. John L. Stephens and Frederick Catherwood, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841) and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1843). For the cultural impact of their discoveries, including on Joseph Smith, see R. Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination, 1820–1915* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004). Stephens’s discoveries were mentioned in *Times and Seasons* 3, Oct. 1, 1842, 927 and in “Conference Minutes,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 10, Nov. 15, 1848, 343 and in “Yucatan,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 10, Nov. 15, 1848, 346–48.

11. “Yucatan,” 347.

China to the coast. Centuries later, around 600 BC, two other groups of colonists arrived in the New World from Israel. Followers of Mulek are mentioned as coming from Jerusalem, but the Book of Mormon gives few additional details. The land the “Mulekites” settle on is also called “Mulek” (Helaman 6:10) as is their city (Alma 52:16). Pratt has them landing near the “straits of Darien” (Isthmus of Panama) and then emigrating to the northern parts of South America.¹²

The main Book of Mormon narrative, however, centers around the Jewish family of Lehi who sailed from a land they called “Bountiful” (1 Nephi 17:5). Pratt notes that they landed in Chile.¹³ For nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints, the descendants of the original families lived throughout the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. Book of Mormon lands could be almost anywhere.¹⁴

By the turn of the century, Mormon intellectuals began to question Pratt’s two-hemisphere geographical model. Out of that questioning, two perspectives on Book of Mormon geography emerged. One set of thinkers argued that while the Book of Mormon was true, the geography was irrelevant. Church leaders in particular promoted this perspective. At a conference on the Book of Mormon in 1903, Latter-day Saint president Joseph F. Smith explained that while geographical questions were interesting, if specific cities “could not be located the matter was not of vital importance.”¹⁵ Most importantly from a doctrinal point

12. Orson Pratt, “Sacred Metallic [sic] Plates,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 28, Dec. 1, 1866, 761.

13. Pratt wrote the references for the 1879 printing of the Book of Mormon. He annotated 1 Nephi 18:23 as such (footnote K): “1 Nep 2:20, believed to be on the coast of Chili S. America.”

14. For instance, see John Taylor, “The Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Northern California,” *The Latter-day Saints’ Millennial Star* 13, Mar. 15, 1851, 93–95.

15. “Book of Mormon Students Arrive,” *Deseret News*, May 25, 1903. All quotations in this paragraph are from this source. According to Terry Givens in *By the Hand of Mormon*, archaeological ruins would not be found because “the cataclysmic upheavals in the Western Hemisphere accompanying the death of

of view, “if there were differences of opinion on the question it would not affect the salvation of the people.” Mormons should not consider geography “of such vital importance as the principles of the Gospel.” A leading Church intellectual and general authority, B. H. Roberts, reiterated this point at the conference. The Book of Mormon was not a “physical geography” but rather “a history of the hand dealings of God with this people on this continent” [sic]. This institutional disinterest in sacred geography was solidified when the geographical footnotes were removed from the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon. Rather than make authoritative statements about where the Book of Mormon took place, Church leadership decided not to make any definitive assessment. They backed away from the literalness that drove early Latter-day Saints to root the Book of Mormon in place as well as time.

That a 1903 conference on the Book of Mormon included a long discussion of geography, however, indicated the strength of the second perspective. If the gold plates were real, and if the Jaredites, Nephites, and other ancient peoples were real, then surely smart people should be able to unearth evidence of where these monumental events took place. In 1900 Benjamin Cluff Jr., host of the conference and president of what would become Brigham Young University, had mounted an unsuccessful expedition to Colombia with the purpose to discover the Nephite capital of Zarahemla.¹⁶ Since Church leaders had decided not to make geographical matters central to faith, interested Latter-day Saints could embark on a detective adventure without fear of contravening established Church doctrine. The doors of speculation swung wide open.

Debating the specifics of Book of Mormon geography became a preoccupation for a set of Mormons. Using internal textual evidence, comparative history, and modern archaeological techniques, Latter-day

Christ, as described in 3 Nephi, would render modern-day identification of Nephite monuments and places impossible” (107).

16. Givens, *By the Hand of Mormon*, 105–06.

Saints began to rethink the “two-hemisphere” model of Orson Pratt. Maybe ancient tribes did not settle the New World from Chile to upstate New York? In 1927, Janne M. Sjö Dahl published *An Introduction to the Study of the Book of Mormon*, a seven-volume commentary on the sacred text. A Swedish convert to the Church, Sjö Dahl introduced a “limited geography model” to Latter-day Saint readership.

Sjö Dahl proposed that the Book of Mormon took place entirely in Central America, perhaps going as far north as Mexico. From that point onward, Mesoamerica became the homelands of the Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites with scholars arguing over the geographic details. Sjö Dahl’s ideas were published in the Church publication *Improvement Era* in 1927. The descendants of Lehi all settled in a limited area in Mesoamerica, where they waged their battles and where Jesus visited. While their descendants would later spread north and south, the Book of Mormon events only took place in the original area.¹⁷ A 1938 Church Department of Education study guide, while warning that no one theory was correct, noted the trend to greatly reduce the area of Book of Mormon history to a small area in Central America.¹⁸ By the 1960s, Brigham Young University professor Sidney B. Sperry could even argue that the final battle of the Nephites, once thought to have taken place in upstate New York, actually occurred in Mesoamerica.¹⁹ Archaeological attention was now firmly focused on the ruins of Guatemala, Hondu-

17. Janne M. Sjö Dahl, “Suggested Key to Book of Mormon Geography,” *Improvement Era*, Sept. 1927, 977, as cited in Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 262.

18. William E. Berrett, Milton R. Hunter, Roy A. Welker, and H. Alvah Fitzgerald, *A Guide to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1938), 44-45, as cited in Roper, “Limited Geography,” 263.

19. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), as cited in Roper, “Limited Geography,” 264–65. An overview of this argument is found in David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981).

ras, El Salvador, Belize, and the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Touring in Mexico, much more accessible than other areas of Central America, increasingly held allure.

While it made sense doctrinally to retreat from specifying where the Book of Mormon events took place, devotionally it did not. Increasingly, Mormon leaders wanted the people in the pews to cultivate both knowledge of Book of Mormon events and a spiritual relationship with its truth.²⁰ Up until the mid-twentieth century, average Mormons were more familiar with the Bible than the Book of Mormon.²¹ Conservatives within the hierarchy also wanted to stop any liberal movement toward turning the Book of Mormon into allegory.²² To encourage Latter-day Saints to read and meditate on the Book of Mormon, Church leaders directed attention toward appropriating the text in multiple ways. In the early 1950s, Primary general president Adele Cannon Howells paid for twelve illustrations by Arnold Friberg to appear in *The Children's Friend*.²³ These muscular depictions of Book of Mormon heroes eventually became classic depictions. In 1961, BYU instituted, for the first time, a required course in the Book of Mormon. When the Church reprinted the 1920 edition in 1963, photographs of Mesoamerican archaeological ruins were added to the Book of Mormon.²⁴ This popular paperback edition

20. Noel B. Reynolds, "The Coming Forth of the Book of Mormon in the Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 38, no. 2 (1999): 7.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 22–26.

23. Robert T. Barrett and Susan Easton Black, "Setting a Standard in LDS Art: Four Illustrators of the Mid-Twentieth Century," *BYU Studies* 44, no. 2 (2005): 25–80.

24. The 1963 copyright edition contained the same text as the 1920 edition but included illustrations. This reprint was widely circulated, especially by missionaries. It sported a blue paperback cover with an image of the angel Moroni. The year before, Deseret Book Company published a larger format Book of Mormon that contained the Friberg illustrations and even more photographs of Mesoamerican ruins, gold jewelry, and wall murals.

became the standard missionary scripture and was handed out by the thousands at the New York World's Fair (1964–65). LDS publications and meetinghouses made John Scott's *Jesus Christ Visits the Americas* (1969) famous by widely reprinting it. Scott places the Chichen Itza pyramid from the Yucatan prominently in his painting's background. Visual representations of ruins increasingly appeared in LDS publications, and a wide range of Mormon writers debated exactly where in the jungles of Central America could be found the ruins of Zarahemla.²⁵

Luis Petlascalco

In the early 1970s, Luis Petlascalco was one of millions of Mexicans with little education and not much hope for the future.²⁶ He had, however, a few things going for him. He had married well, falling in love with the daughter of a Mexican mother and German father. His wife set high standards for the family. A stint working in New York gave him a foundation in spoken English. With facility in a global language and a love for the archaeological heritage of Mexico, Luis began offering tours of historic sites near Mexico City to North American tourists. Perhaps

25. Examples of studies of Book of Mormon geography published prior to the 1970s include: Verla Leone Birrell, *The Book of Mormon Guide Book: An Internal Reconstruction of the Archaeology, History, and Religious Teachings of the Ancient Peoples of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Verla Leone Birrell, 1948); Thomas Stuart Ferguson and Milton R. Hunter, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, Calif.: Kolob Book, 1950); Dewey Farnsworth, *Book of Mormon Evidences in Ancient America* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1953); Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1956); J. Nile Washburn, *Book of Mormon: Lands and Times* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1974); and Paul R. Cheesman, *These Early Americans: External Evidences of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974).

26. All biographical information on the Petlascalco family as well as quotes from their tours is based on interviews with Alma and Helaman Petlascalco, Miguel Rodriguez Diaz, Carlos Aleman Artiz, and Arnie [Arnulfo Rodriguez Diaz] in March 2013.

most important of all, in 1959 as a young man Luis converted to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Luis discovered that the growing LDS community valued his skills as a guide. In the early 1970s, when Luis had lost his job as a guide at the sites near Mexico City, he received a call from one of the men in his ward. There was an adventurous Mormon couple coming from Utah, and they wanted to tour the Aztec and Mayan ruins. They would need a Spanish-speaking guide and driver to help them navigate the foreign country. Would he be available to show them around the area?

The trio travelled together for a month, even though Luis had thought they only wanted to see the ruins at Teotihuacan near Mexico City. Luis Petlactalco ended his trip with the gringo Mormons at the Mayan site of Tulum on the northeast coast of the Yucatan. There they saw a dramatic series of temples and stone homes lining the edge of a cliff that overlooked a turquoise blue ocean. The site was stunning and especially evocative to the young Mexican who spoke Nahuatl, the language of the natives of central Mexico. There was something that drew him to this place settled long before the Spanish had conquered.

Returning to his family in Mexico City, he described what he saw to his wife. The few tourists who were at Tulum were simply wandering around the ruins. Some had guidebooks but most were just trying to figure things out on their own. The ruins were extensive and the location beautiful. The government had made a commitment to build a tourist resort about an hour north in a town called Cancun. They were going to build hotels and an airport. One of the things the state was advertising was the resort's proximity to the major ruin of Chichen Itza. Foreigners were being told that they could lie in the sun during their snowy winters as well as visit Mayan cities from centuries ago. Luis wanted to move the family to the Yucatan and start a business guiding tourists through the Mayan ruins.

Luis's wife Luz Estella was not impressed. In the early 1970s, this part of Mexico was an undeveloped wilderness. Tulum, where Luis wanted

to move his family, had no electricity, no running water. There were no schools or churches or department stores. Luz Estella agreed with those who said that the Yucatan had nothing but “Mayas and mosquitos.” And for residents of Mexico City, Mayans were not the architects of grand ancient cities; they were tiny brown people who lived in thatched huts in the jungle. Luis should go, she concluded, but the family would stay in Mexico City. Seeing the logic of her argument, Luis left his family for the promise of steady employment as a tour guide. Every two weeks, he would get into his beat-up old car and make the twenty-six-hour drive back to Mexico City. Luis took seriously his religious commitment to serve as leader and spiritual head to his growing family.

Luis made sure that his children bore the stamp of their Mormon heritage. While his first daughter was called Julia and his first son carried his own name of Luis, most of the other children had Book of Mormon names: Moroni, Mosia, Limhi, Helaman, Alma. Daughter Ruth was named after the Old Testament heroine and only the youngest, Dayana, eluded the mark of the scriptures. “When we were little, my mother told us we had to read the Book of Mormon,” recalled daughter Alma, “so we could learn where our names came from.” Luz Estella was a strong woman who kept her children in line and managed Luis’s growing income with aplomb. They sent their children to the Latter-day Saint school in Mexico City.

The growth of Luis’s family paralleled the growth of tourism in the Yucatan, which in turn paralleled his own economic rise. In 1974, the Mexican government selected the newly formed state of Quintana Roo as the site for the nation’s first master-planned resort. Cancun, an empty spit of land wedged between a lagoon and the ocean, was to be transformed into an international tourist destination by the Mexican government.²⁷ Each year more and more high-rise hotels were being

27. Rebecca Maria Torres and Janet D. Momsen, “Gringolandia: The Construction of a New Tourist Space in Mexico,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 95, no. 2 (2005): 314–35.

built and soon the area looked like Las Vegas on the beach. During the early 1990s, a deep-water pier was built on the nearby island of Cozumel. Cruise ships now could dock, and their travelers also were looking for a diverting adventure on land. After several days of sunburns and margaritas, tourists wanted something different. A day trip to Tulum, with an hour tour of the Mayan ruins by an English-speaking local guide, fit perfectly into vacation itineraries.

By the turn of the millennium, the “Mayan Riviera” was the premier travel destination in Mexico. In 2002, almost four million stay-over visitors and two million cruise ship passengers visited the area.²⁸ After a business partnership with a fellow Mormon turned sour, Luis looked to his children to cater to the ever-growing number of tourists. All nine of the Petlcalco children would work as tour guides at Tulum, which had grown into a real town with electricity and schools. Luis agreed to build a cement house for his wife, and the family moved to Carrillo Puerto, a village ninety kilometers from Tulum.

As the number of tourists rose at Tulum, the Petlcalco guides noticed that their names were gaining attention from the tourists. More and more, after some of the Americans learned their names, they would ask their guides: “Are you Mormon?” The Church had discontinued publishing photographs of ruins in its new 1981 edition of the Book of Mormon, but Mesoamerica had long been joined to the struggles of the Nephites. Especially through visual culture, fascination with sacred geography and history had become a critical part of Latter-day Saint culture.

Performing Latter-day Saint History

Parallel to the rise of the Yucatan as a tourist designation was an upswing in Latter-day Saint interest in its own historic sites. While some sites had been renovated by the Church in the 1970s and 1980s and staffed by volunteers, vigorous efforts to fund, maintain, and staff historic

28. *Ibid.*, 315.

sites became an institutional priority in the 1990s. Just as Cancun and Cozumel were becoming popular vacation sites, Latter-day Saints were being schooled in understanding the link between material culture and spiritual experiences. Geographer Michael Madsen maintains that under the influence of President Gordon B. Hinckley, historic sites were increasingly transformed from amateur museums into “sacred spaces.”²⁹ Millions of dollars had been spent renovating Nauvoo, and in 1999, Hinckley announced the rebuilding of the Nauvoo Temple (destroyed in the mid-nineteenth century) on its original footprint. He also oversaw construction of a new temple close to the Sacred Grove, where Joseph had his visions, near Palmyra, New York.³⁰ Sister missionaries replaced local volunteers as guides through sites like the Grandin Building, where

29. Michael H. Madsen, “Mormon Meccas: The Spiritual Transformation of Mormon Historical Sites from Points of Interest to Sacred Space” (PhD diss., Syracuse University, 2003), summarized in Michael H. Madsen, “The Sanctification of Mormonism’s Historical Geography,” *Journal of Mormon History* 34, no. 2 (2008): 228–55. A more critical appraisal of the same trend is Barry Laga, “In Lieu of History: Mormon Monuments and the Shaping of Memory,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 131–54. Kathleen Flake argues that after the final end of polygamy, Mormons sought to link their “peculiar” religious identity to the visions and history of Joseph Smith. Monuments became key to establishing the memory of early LDS history. See her “Re-placing Memory: Latter-day Saint Use of Historical Monuments and Narrative in the Early Twentieth Century,” *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation* 13, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 69–109. For examples of Mormons using the term “sacred” to describe special sites, see the six volumes of LaMar C. Berrett, *Sacred Places: A Comprehensive Guide to LDS Historical Sites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999–2007).

30. “President Hinckley and the Nauvoo Temple,” *Ensign*, July 2002, <https://www.lds.org/ensign/2002/07/president-hinckley-and-the-nauvoo-temple?lang=eng>, and “Palmyra New York Temple,” *Church News*, Mar. 9, 2010, <http://www.ldschurchnewsarchive.com/articles/58961/Palmyra-New-York-Temple.html>. In 2001, a temple was dedicated near the “Winter Quarters” in Omaha, Nebraska. It sits on a hill adjacent to the cemetery and across the street from the Mormon Trail Center.

the Book of Mormon was first published in New York, and Brigham Young's home in Salt Lake City. Their presentations to visitors are now carefully scripted to reflect core Latter-day Saint values as well as Mormon history. Buildings and spaces were more than just repositories for historical information about the past. Objects and places, members were told, could evoke intense spiritual experiences.

While initially Latter-day Saints hoped that non-Mormons would visit their historic sites in order to learn more about Mormonism, it soon became clear that the vast majority of visitors were Mormons. Latter-day Saints were visiting historic sites as a part of family vacations. Such religious tourism accompanied increased interest in Mormon history, which spiked in 1997 after the sesquicentennial celebrations of the great trek to Utah. Visiting historic sites accompanied reading historical novels, watching inspirational films about the frontier, dressing children in nineteenth-century garb for Pioneer Day celebrations, and reenacting pulling handcarts to Zion.³¹ Each year, hundreds of Mormons perform

31. Historical fiction written by Mormons about their experiences begins with Susa Young Gates, *John Stevens' Courtship: A Story of the Echo Canyon War* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1909) but does not flourish until the end of the twentieth century. Examples of this genre include Samuel W. Taylor, *Nightfall at Nauvoo* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), Marilyn Brown, *The Earthkeepers* (Provo: Art Publishers, 1979), the multiple novels of Dean Hughes, and the nine-volume series by Gerald N. Lund, *The Work and the Glory* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990–1998). In their *Standing on the Promises* series, Margaret Blair Young and Darius Aidan Gray have told the stories of African American Mormons in three novels (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000, 2002, 2003). See also, Lavina Fielding Anderson, "Fictional Pasts: Mormon Historical Novels," in *Excavating Mormon Pasts: The New Historiography of the Last Half Century*, edited by Newell G. Bringhurst and Lavina Fielding Anderson (Draper, Utah: Greg Kofford Books, 2006), 367–94. Two volumes of *The Work and the Glory* (2005, 2006) have been made into films. See also, *Saints and Soldiers* (2004); *Emma Smith: My Story* (2008); and *17 Miracles* (2011).

On Mormon pioneer nostalgia, see Paul L. Anderson, "Heroic Nostalgia: Enshrining the Mormon Past," *Sunstone* 5 (1980): 47–55; Eric A. Eliason, "Pioneers and Recapitulation in Mormon Popular Historical Expression," in

in historical pageants and thousands watch this theater.³² Historian Davis Bitton referred to these efforts as the “ritualization of Mormon history.”³³ No other American religious community has gone to such an extent to represent its past to its members.

Visiting the archaeological ruins in the Yucatan became part of a wider Mormon practice of visiting Church history sites while on family vacation and participating in the performance of Latter-day Saint history. For Mormons, these are emotional “testimony-building” activities that connect them with the faith, sacrifices, and accomplishments of their religious ancestors. While the pageants and historic sites were initially constructed and run by local Latter-day Saints, most are now sophisticated professional productions. After Latter-day Saints visit Salt Lake City, Palmyra, Kirtland, and Nauvoo—they look farther afield to Israel and, of course, Book of Mormon lands.

Usable Pasts: Traditions and Group Expressions in North America, edited by Tad Tuleja (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), 175–214; and Megan Sanborn Jones, “(Re)living the Pioneer Past: Mormon Youth Handcart Trek Re-enactments,” *Theatre Topics* 16, no. 2 (2006): 113–30. For general instructions on commemorative handcart pulls, see “Pioneer Treks,” *Youth Activities*, <http://www.handcarttreks.com/General/generalindex.html>.

32. In the United States, the LDS Church sponsors: the Hill Cumorah Pageant in Palmyra, New York; the Mesa Easter Pageant in Mesa, Arizona; the Oakland Temple Pageant in Oakland, California; the Castle Valley Pageant in Castle Dale, Utah; Manti—The Mormon Miracle Pageant in Manti, Utah; and the Clarkston Pageant—Martin Harris: The Man Who Knew in Clarkston, Utah. In 2013, it started The British Pageant: Truth will Prevail in Hartwood Green Chorley, Lancashire, England. On pageants’ cultural function, see Martha S. LoMonaco, “Mormon Pageants as American Historical Performance,” *Theatre Symposium* 17 (2009): 69–83 and Kent Richard Bean, “Policing the Borders of Identity at the Mormon Miracle Pageant” (PhD diss., Bowling Green State University, 2005).

33. Davis Bitton, “The Ritualization of Mormon History,” *Utah Historical Quarterly* 43 (January 1975): 67–85, reprinted in Davis Bitton, *The Ritualization of Mormon History and Other Essays* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 171–88.

Book of Mormon Tours

The Petlascalco guides knew how to recognize their fellow Mormons, who increasingly recognized them by their Book of Mormon names. In a land where the bikini is queen and cut-off shorts are considered appropriate eveningwear, Mormons had to cover their priesthood garments with shorts and t-shirts. Neatly groomed and often wrestling with multi-generational families, Mormon tourists were easy to spot among the vacationers. Guides and tourists each recognized the marks of Mormonism in the other. That recognition strengthened their mutual identity as belonging to a universal religious community. Key to making ruins come alive for Latter-day Saint visitors is conveying the religious convictions of the men and women who provide the tours. The Mormonism of the guides is critical to opening up the ruins to their religious potential.

Soon a list evolved at Tulum of LDS guides who were available for Mormon tourists. Mormon tourists sought tours to illuminate how the ruins connected to the Book of Mormon and believed that Mormon guides would be honest and fair with their fees. As cruise ships brought more and more tourists to the region, Mormon entrepreneurs in Utah began to organize tours and book blocks of rooms on the ships. Life was good for the Petlascalcos. As he aged, Luis began to pass more of his business to his children. They worked at the site and, most days, took home enough money to provide for their families. Not too much money, but then, not too much work.

In 1999, however, life began to change. Luis was almost retired and his son Helaman was taking over most of the tours. Two LDS couples that Helaman took on a tour of the ruins of Tulum asked to see Chichen Itza, an even more elaborate Mayan site located a two-hour drive west. Chichen Itza was the largest site in the Yucatan but had no LDS guides. The group and Helaman enjoyed their time together. At the end of the tour, one man asked Helaman for his email address. "Email?" Helaman responded, "I don't even have a computer." The Americans quickly laid

out how important it was to move beyond just selling his knowledge to the random tourist who turned up at Tulum. Helaman should start a tour company geared toward Mormon visitors to Mexico. “LDS tourists need you,” they explained. Helaman remembers that he was skeptical, but the American wives in particular stressed that their husbands were successful businessmen; their advice was worth considering.

Helaman listened patiently to the gringos, but he knew that creating a business would mean leaving his hometown of Carrillo Puerto, a sleepy town south of Tulum, and moving to the bustling city of Cancun. Helaman was experiencing what his Church leaders told him would happen if he worked hard, followed the principles of the gospel, kept the Word of Wisdom, and donated ten percent of his earnings to the Church. Faithful Mormons would prosper. Now Helaman Petlacalco was about to build his dream home in Carrillo Puerto. Starting a business that would take Mormon tourists around the Yucatan would mean forgoing living that dream for a while.

Helaman also had ethical concerns about starting a company for Mormon tourism. He was not so sure it was a good idea to use the scriptures to make money. It was one thing to respond to the needs of Mormon tourists who arrived at Tulum and another thing to focus exclusively on explaining Mayan ruins through the Book of Mormon. Would it look like he was using his religion in order to make money? Did his training for teaching seminary give him enough background to interpret not only Tulum but also Chichen Itza and Coba? After praying, he talked with his wife. “Let’s try it,” she said. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll come back to build the house.” They launched their business, Helaman Tours, in 2000.

The timing was not perfect. The Twin Towers bombings, the Great Recession of 2008, and increasing Mexican drug violence weakened the tourist economy of Cancun. However, the North American businessmen were right. Helaman Tours took off. Mormons could now search with Google using words like “tour” and “LDS” and come across Helaman’s

web page. They then could send him an email and get information back. Dates could be set and confirmed. Cell phones made it easier to contact clients when they arrived in Mexico. The Mormon population was growing, and American Latter-day Saints were increasingly prosperous. Even the promotion of a “heartland model” that places the Book of Mormon lands squarely in what is now the United States did not diminish interest in the Yucatan.³⁴

Helaman’s success in his business paralleled his increasing responsibilities at church. He served three times as branch president and four times on his stake’s high council. Holding leadership positions at church cultivated practical talents that supported small business activities. Church leaders learned how to accommodate members who were having personal or family problems, manage finances, efficiently run meetings, and negotiate with authorities in the Salt Lake City headquarters. In addition, casually mentioning his callings would reassure potential clients of his trustworthiness. While Helaman’s father, Luis, had never been financially secure enough to support his children to be missionaries, Helaman’s son Nefi (also a Book of Mormon name) was able to accept a mission call.

While most of Helaman’s brothers and sisters stayed as guides at Tulum, his sister Alma and her husband Miguel began a similar tour company in Cancun, and they are now Helaman’s major business competition. Alma Petlcalco snaps up the returned Mexican missionaries who come back from North America fluent in English and teaches them to be guides. One of her daughters attended Brigham Young University and married a fellow student. Miguel and Alma’s children now work in

34. In recent years, proponents of a “heartland theory” have challenged the Mesoamerica theory. Rod L. Meldrum and Bruce H. Porter vigorously promote the heartland theory in books, videos, and tours. See Rod L. Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America’s Heartland* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legend Press, 2011) and Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum, *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and the United States of America* (Salt Lake City: Digital Legend Press, 2009).

their business. If Alma's comfortable Mercedes-Benz is any indication, business is good. After completing his mission and studying aviation, Helaman's son Nefi also decided to become a tour guide and begin a company. Joining with Helaman's brother Lemuel and cousin-in-law Carlos, they formed LDS Tours Cancun. The men have also held leadership positions in the ward, and in 2013, Lemuel became stake president.

The Petlascalco family exemplifies the fluid nature of religion. For them religion is not a discrete, isolated entity but rather is bound up in a web of family and economic dynamics. Commitment to Mormonism and faith in the truth of the Book of Mormon cannot be untangled from business success and church leadership. Even though there is rivalry between the siblings that causes tension in the family, there also is an unrelenting spirit of optimism that the tour companies will continue to prosper because they are doing the Lord's work. Strengthening the commitments of Latter-day Saints serves both a religious and economic good.

Fragmentary Presence

When the Petlascalco family members give tours, what do they hope to accomplish? How do they understand the ruins through which they walk? First and foremost, they carry with them the assumption of the absolute truth of the Book of Mormon. This truth is not simply a belief, but rather it is the full culmination of the experiences of an individual embedded in a family and a community. The Book of Mormon is enmeshed in the lives of tour givers who as second-generation Latter-day Saints have felt it as immediately and undeniably real. The Petlascalco family perceives the Book of Mormon as "holy"—defined by Robert Orsi as "something that is more than the sum of its social parts . . . [with] a life of its own independent of the humans out of whose imaginations, inheritances, and circumstances it emerged."³⁵ Consequently, the Book of Mormon is

35. Robert A. Orsi, "The Problem of the Holy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies*, edited by Robert A. Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 91.

not simply words in a text but it has “come to have a vivid and compelling immediacy in the present.”³⁶

This “vivid and compelling immediacy” is clearly described within the Book of Mormon itself. Before Christ can begin his teaching, the physical reality of his presence must be experienced. “Arise and come forth unto me,” he explains, “that you may thrust your hands into my side, and also that ye may feel the prints of the nails in my hands and in my feet, that ye may know that I am the God of Israel, and the God of the whole earth, and have been slain for the sins of the world” (3 Nephi 11:14). The Book of Mormon recounts how “the multitude” put their hands into Christ’s side, hands, and feet. “One by one until they had all gone forth,” the text continues, “and did see with their eyes and did feel with their hands, and did know of a surety and did bear record” (3 Nephi 11:15). It is only then, after this very physical experience of God, “did they fall down at the feet of Jesus and did worship him” (3 Nephi 11:17). When Christ visits the New World, he does not simply calm one doubting Thomas (John 20:24–29); he invites a whole people to intimately touch him so they can then “bear record.”

Just as it is in the Book of Mormon that the immediacy of touch is attached to the miraculous and not to a moral system, so it is in the Petlascalco mind. At no time during any of their tours did the family members refer to the ethical dimension of the Book of Mormon. They were not giving tours to point out how the Book of Mormon could act as a guide in the lives of Latter-day Saints. While actions within the Book of Mormon were often mentioned, they were not used to point to something beyond themselves. When Book of Mormon events were discussed, they were presented as carriers of something unique and special. Petlascalco guides were focused on the miraculous, enduring nature of the Book of Mormon narrative rather than its ability to provide guidelines for moral living. That the immediate, holy, and profoundly real character

36. *Ibid.*, 101.

of the text was stressed is not surprising. Latter-day Saints come to a site of ruins not to experience the moral or symbolic force of the Book of Mormon text but to tap into its enduring power.

What the Petlcalco family does is to bring Mormon families into a web of intimacies and associations, thus intensifying both groups' feelings about the sacred text. Obviously, this is not done through scriptural study but through listening and seeing. The Petlcalco guides speak almost continuously, and when they stop speaking, there is silence in the touring vans. The touring model is not of question and answer but of testimony. The guides speak biographically and devotionally, offering their personal history to the tourists. Before arriving at the ancient sites, the Petlcalco guides have already presented themselves as decipherers of the holy. The guides' ability to convince their guests of their authentic faith and insightful knowledge works to eliminate, perhaps for just this trip, the concerns that guests might have about the literal veracity of the Book of Mormon.

The Petlcalco guides seek to unlock the inner meaning of the sites. While they all are aware of the contributions of modern archaeology, it is their understanding of the Book of Mormon that enables them to understand the ruins in a deeper way. The Mexican guides and the American tourists both share the Book of Mormon, but the Petlcalco guides can "see" the sacred text in the ruins. "I want you to imagine yourself back in time," Carlos explains to a Mormon family from Dallas, "near one of those temples . . . round about the Land of Bountiful. That day you hear a voice that you don't understand. But that voice causes an effect that makes your body shake and your heart pierce." It is Jesus Christ whose voice "sounded in the sky" and who eventually walks among Nephites. This is the core holy event.

The Petlcalco guides are quick to point out that neither the ruins at Tulum nor at Chichen Itza are the remains of the Land of Bountiful where Jesus walked. The Maya ruins date from a much later period. The Book of Mormon also explains that prior to Christ's coming, there

were storms, earthquakes, fires, and whirlwinds that destroyed cities and deformed the face of the earth (3 Nephi 8:5–18). Whatever existed prior to the sacred moment was significantly rearranged. “If Chichen Itza, Coba, or Tulum were occupied during Book of Mormon times,” Helaman observed, “then we don’t get to see the structures. They were buried or destroyed. What you see on top was built way after the Book of Mormon times.” Both time and space disconnect the present-day viewer from the sacred time when Nephites actually touched Jesus and then went on to follow his religion. Unlike a Catholic pilgrim who can see the exact Lourdes grotto where the Virgin Mary appeared to Bernadette, Mormons cannot see the Land of Bountiful.

What Petlacalco guides offer instead is what might be called “fragmentary presence” and is more equivalent to visiting a replica shrine of Lourdes.³⁷ This is not the “real presence” that Catholics believe reside in the Eucharist and that religious historian Robert Orsi argues has been banished by modernity.³⁸ It is a trace of the sacred. At one real point in time and in space, a holy event occurred. The Nephites touched the Christ, and he went on to teach them true religion. However, the people did not stay true to that religion. Carlos explained that they “twisted the gospel,” creating other churches. This happened in both the Old and the New Worlds. “What we can find at Tulum,” Carlos summarized, “is just a few remains of the few things they preserved from the gospel. They never forgot Christianity; they just twisted and perverted Christianity. Therefore, every aspect of Mesoamerican religion can be perfectly understood from the perspective of a perverted Christianity.” Alma voiced the same sentiment: “At one time the people of Tulum had the truth. At the beginning, they had the truth but later they got mixed up.” Full connection with the holy, complete “presence” is unobtainable, but

37. For a discussion of religious replication, see McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 154–62.

38. Orsi, *History and Presence*, 37–42.

fragments and traces of the truth remain. What the Petlascalco guides do is help Latter-day Saints recognize this fragmentary presence.

Arnie, who served his LDS mission in Arkansas and works for Alma Petlascalco, stands at the Great Ballcourt in Chichen Itza and describes the bloody religion of the Maya. He points out the shapes of human skulls chiseled into walls and describes how decapitated heads and bodies would be rolled down the steps of the temple. "In this case," he clarifies, "they would participate [in the rite] by eating the flesh and drinking the blood." The Maya, it seems, had forgotten what the Lord had taught them. They had twisted the meaning of blood and flesh. "We as Latter-day Saints, every Sunday," also eat "of the body and blood, but of course [we do it] symbolically. They did it literally." The Maya and the Mormons share the truth of the presence of God, but the Maya only have a fragment of that presence. Making that fragmentary presence apparent is the goal of the Petlascalco guides. Arnie has an Idaho woman read from the Book of Mormon: "And it is impossible for the tongue to describe, or for man to write a perfect description of the horrible scene of the blood and carnage which was among the people, both of the Nephites and of the Lamanites; and every heart was hardened, so that they delighted in the shedding of blood continually" (Mormon 4:11). "As we are reading about it," Arnie reiterates, "we have the picture and then the scene right here."

Carlos and Helaman see fragmentary presence in the Maya stone statues of chacmool that dot the sites. The chacmool are sculptures of reclining figures, leaning on their elbows, with propped up knees. On their stomachs sit a disk or a bowl. The Petlascalco guides tell tourists that human hearts sacrificed to the gods were placed in the bowls. Helaman explains that the Maya believed they were "taking our broken hearts to God." And, in this, they got it partially right. They had "twisted" what Jesus had earlier told the Nephites: to no more offer up "the shedding of blood" but instead a "broken heart and a contrite spirit" (3 Nephi 9:19, 20). The same message existed in ancient Israel before it, too, was

twisted. “The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart,” sang the Psalmist, “and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit” (Psalms 34:18; see also, Psalms 51:17). And, in 1831, Joseph Smith revealed that they would be blessed who “offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (Doctrine and Covenants 59:8). God gave the full truth, which then echoed through the religions of the Jews and the Maya and was restored by Joseph Smith.

The language that the tour guides use is visceral and embodied. While the visitors might be skeptical about the religious significance of the ruins they are looking at, the Petlalcacos are caught up in the reality of what they are describing. They participate both in an institutional Mormonism but also in a more mystical religion that comes into daily contact with special places. It is their involvement with what anthropologist Kevin O’Neill calls “affective space” that binds the Petlalcacos together with the American Mormons into a religious collective.³⁹ The physicality of the ruins and the vibrant language used to describe them and their connection to the Book of Mormon stimulate the imagination. Unlike official Church materials that tend toward the bland and disciplined, the stories of the Petlalcacos explore the terrifying aspects of religion. The Book of Mormon events happened in the distant past and so are neutralized, but through fragmentary presence a sense of the sacred violence is shared between the guides and the visitors.

To decode how the sacred past can be seen in Maya ruins is the goal of the Petlalcaco guides. Pointing at stone pillars at Tulum, Carlos reminds us “this is exactly a replica of King Solomon’s temple, with two pillars, an altar for the water container and an altar for sacrifices.” Later he describes how the “saunas” the Maya used to purify themselves connected to baptism. The Maya thought that “the maize god, the bread of life, sweated to pay for the bad works of the people.” They had a

39. Kevin Lewis O’Neill, “Beyond Broken: Affective Spaces and the Study of American Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 81, no. 4 (2013): 1093–1116.

memory that water would purify and clear their spiritual life, but they had distorted the teachings of the One True God on baptism. At Chichen Itza, Arnie pointed out that at the entrance to the Ballcourt “there is a stone box with a dome cover. Joseph Smith was shown by the angel Moroni where the golden plates were hidden in a stone box. Those were used as safes by the ancient Maya. They put important stuff, records, books, offerings, jewelry, valuable things in there. Just like Joseph Smith described.” For Helaman, even the local bees, which make sweet honey but have no stingers, could be explained using the Book of Mormon. When Jared and his family left Israel for the new promised land, they carried with them “swarms of bees” (Ether 2:3). Helaman speculated that those bees, in order to make the journey less problematic for the Jaredites, probably had no stingers. How else would such bees have gotten to Mexico?

The Petlascalco guides also set the iconic building at Chichen Itza, El Castillo, firmly within the orbit of Mormonism. The step pyramid is believed by archaeologists to be the Temple of Kukulcan, a feathered serpent deity related to the Aztec Quetzalcoatl. As with all the Mesoamerican gods and goddesses, Kukulcan is understood by the Petlascalco guides as a twisted version of the Jesus who had visited centuries earlier. Every year at the spring and autumn equinoxes, thousands of tourists descend on Chichen Itza to watch the light play on the edges of the pyramid. If you look at the northwest corner of the pyramid in the afternoon light, a set of shadows forms the body of a snake connecting to its sculpted feathered head at the base. Helaman and Arnie explain that the optimal date for watching Kukulcan descend is not the spring equinox but April 6. On that day, one can see the *full* body of the snake illuminated. And why April 6? April 6 was both the date the Latter-day Saint Church was established in 1830 and the true birthday of Jesus (Doctrine and Covenants 20:1).⁴⁰ The spring sessions of general confer-

40. The *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* states: “Presidents of the Church, including Harold B. Lee and Spencer W. Kimball, have reaffirmed that April 6 is the true

ence, when the current prophet and apostles speak to the contemporary church, is also held near April 6.

Discerning fragmentary presence is not unique to the Petlcalco guides. Deciphering the world's religions to see elements of the truth—and how they reflect Latter-day Saint theology and practice—is a common endeavor of Mormon intellectuals. Hugh Nibley's analysis of ancient history assumes that gospel truth can be uncovered and recognized in disparate sources. Nibley explained that if we examined pagan texts we would discover “that all their authors possess are mere fragments which they do not pretend to understand.”⁴¹ For Mormons, the truth is continually being established, rejected, and reestablished. Latter-day Saints teach that Adam in his pre-earth life was taught true religion (the plan of salvation), and he held a position of authority next to Jesus Christ. Adam and Eve continued to learn God's plan both in the Garden of Eden and more intensely after the Fall. However, the descendants of Adam and Eve became wicked and prideful. They

anniversary of Christ's birth, but have encouraged Church members to join with other Christians in observing Christmas as a special day for remembering Jesus' birth and teachings” (John Franklin Hall, “April 6,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, edited by Daniel H. Ludlow [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 62. Available at http://eom.byu.edu/index.php/April_6).

41. Hugh W. Nibley, “The Expanding Gospel,” in *Nibley on the Timely and the Timeless: Classic Essays of Hugh W. Nibley*, 2nd ed. (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 44, as discussed in Eric F. Mason, “The Saints and the Scrolls: LDS Engagement with Mainstream Dead Sea Scrolls Scholarship and Its Implications,” in *New Perspectives in Mormon Studies: Creating and Crossing Boundaries*, edited by Quincy D. Newell and Eric F. Mason (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 169–95. For more recent explorations of Book of Mormon geography that illustrate “fragmentary presence,” see F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988); John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo: Research Press, 1998); and Warren P. Aston, *In the Footsteps of Lehi: New Evidence for Lehi's Journey Across Arabia to Bountiful* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1994).

lost their way and would not return to the true religion until they humbly repented and other prophets appeared. Moses, for instance, taught about the Melchizedek priesthood, but the children of Israel “hardened their hearts” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:24). A similar cycle appears in the Book of Mormon. Latter-day Saints are familiar with this “pride cycle” and typically cite it to illustrate the repeating pattern of wickedness, repentance, and change—of individuals, communities, and even civilizations.

While the pride cycle warns people about the inevitability of human weakness, it can also be used to illustrate the enduring legacy of the sacred. Although people fall away from the truth and forget what they have been taught by God and his prophets, there is always some remnant of the original teaching. The holy cannot be fully forgotten. The inverse of the pride cycle could be considered a “fragmentary presence” cycle. The Petlacalco guides, like most of those who write about Book of Mormon geography, attempt to assemble traces of a sacred past from the puzzle of ruins. They look for clues of the holy, what Robert Orsi warned would be “a wedge of unpredictability [inserted] into history and society, of the unforeseeable and unaccountable.”⁴² It is through these many ways—from naming children to starting tour companies to deciphering ruins—that one family of Mexican Mormons experiences the sacred nature of “another testament of Jesus Christ.”

42. Orsi, “The Problem of the Holy,” 103.