

Book of Mormon Archaeology and Faith : New Perspective-Part 1

by Shirley Heater

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Since The Book of Mormon was first published in 1830, believers have wondered about the great civilizations portrayed within its pages. Throughout the last 176 years this interest has grown, first as the remains of ancient civilizations came to light (e.g. Stephens and Catherwood travels published in the 1840s), and then the growth and development during the last century of organized study of these remains through Mesoamerican archaeology. It has only been in recent years that parallel patterns have grown clearer, as increasing archaeological evidences converged with and validated The Book of Mormon account. Now, in 2006, I would like to present a new perspective for your consideration as we move into the future—starting with the term Book of Mormon archaeology.

Book of Mormon Archaeology vs. Biblical Archaeology

In order to define Book of Mormon archaeology, let's look at Biblical archaeology for comparison. Biblical archaeology is well-known as a specific area of study and research. Belief in the historicity of the Bible is foundational, although there are varying degrees. You can attend a Bible college, university or seminary and obtain Bachelor's, Master's and Graduate Degrees in Biblical archaeology; several Christian schools also offer programs, including field experience. Specific research projects in the field explored evidences of the Bible, eventually presenting and publishing their results. *Biblical Archaeology Review* has

the largest subscriber base of any archaeological publication in the world. However, in spite of this rich background, a growing attitude that Biblical archaeology is no longer a valid

discipline is troubling. The trend is toward offering Ph.D. degrees in Near Eastern Studies, with a major in Palestinian archaeology which is broader than Biblical archaeology. The problem is that a lot of teaching is negative toward the Bible, questioning its historicity and theological implications.¹ (I was exposed to some of this teaching when I took graduate classes in Biblical archaeology at UMKC in the early '90s.) For purposes of this article, my comparison is based on the longstanding viewpoint of Biblical archaeology from the perspective of a believer.

Turning to The Book of Mormon, I would suggest to you that, in light of traditional Biblical archaeology, there is no such thing as "Book of Mormon archaeology"! I base this on the following observations:

- there is no Book of Mormon discipline in the study of archaeology
- there are no degree programs in Book

of Mormon archaeology²

- there are no research designs, field work or grants to explore specifically archaeology of The Book of Mormon
- there are no professional publications, either books or periodicals, of specific research results based on the previous point

So what is Book of Mormon archaeology? Before I suggest the answer to this question, let's briefly review the general outline of The Book of Mormon. It represents in its pages an account of three groups of people led by God to the New World—the earliest, the Jaredites, from the Great Tower at the time of the confusion of languages (c. 3000 BC), and two additional migrations several centuries later, about 600 BC, from the land of Jerusalem (Lehi's family, which became the Nephites and Lamanites, and a separate group known as the Mulekites, which later merged with the Nephites). Each group brought with them their culture, their religion and their records. They built buildings, temples and cities, grew crops, waged wars, migrated from place to place and generally left a mark in this new land. Most important is the central event the account leads up to—the visit of Jesus Christ to the Nephites after His resurrection. Then, after nearly two hundred years of peace and prosperity, a spiritual decline led to the ultimate destruction of the Nephite nation by the Lamanites. The record closes at AD 421 following an account of the bloody genocide. It is Mesoamerica that most Book of Mormon students and scholars believe to be the location of events chronicled in its

¹ The current state of Biblical archaeology is a larger topic than can be explored here.

² BYU has three Book of Mormon classes, two which are part of basic religion classes, and one general anthropology class—The Bible and The Book of Mormon compared with archaeological findings on early civilizations.

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pages. The study of the ancient civilizations we equate with The Book of Mormon is Mesoamerican archaeology.

Mesoamerican Archaeology

In relation to Biblical archaeology, and Old World archaeology in general, Mesoamerican archaeology is a very young discipline, only a little over one hundred years old. Mesoamerica is a cultural, geographic and archaeological term of an area that encompasses the southern two-thirds of Mexico, Guatemala and Belize, and also includes portions of the countries of El Salvador, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Within this area, a variety of cultural traits were shared (such as building pyramids, hieroglyphic writing, and a calendar). Early archaeologists divided the time periods into Archaic, Pre-Classic (1800 BC - AD 250), Classic (AD 250 - AD 900) and Post-Classic (AD 900 - AD 1521). From the beginning most attention was on the later Classic period, primarily because these remains are on top of the earlier occupation. Actually, during the first fifty years of the last century, most archaeologists believed that civilization occurred *only* during the Classic period—after the end of The Book of Mormon account.

Yes, there were evidences of an ancient civilization found, but nothing even remotely matched The Book of Mormon time periods. That began to change in the 1950s with the application of radiocarbon dating discovered in 1947. Until 1955 most scholars believed that the Olmec were contemporaries with the Classic Maya (AD 300). In that year radiocarbon dating shocked the archaeology community when

results determined that the Olmec site of La Venta was “a thriving community by 800 BC and was abandoned in the fifth century BC, 700 years before the Classic period even began.” (Diehl 2004:15)³

This discovery clearly moved the Olmec back in time to the Pre-Classic period. Previously, no archaeological correlation came close to matching The Book of Mormon timeline. Scholars now fix the Olmec culture as early as 1800 BC (Early Pre-Classic), with the Pre-Olmec extending back into the third millennium BC. The earliest appearance of pottery is now confirmed at 2950 BC in the Acapulco area on the Pacific coast. Although this is outside the designated Olmec heartland, the area is a good candidate for the original landing site of the Jaredites. In fact, major Olmec & Pre-Olmec patterns parallel The Book of Mormon account in relation to the Jaredites—archaeological patterns that were totally unknown when The Book of Mormon came forth.

We see a similar story relating to the Maya. The Classic period received the most time and attention until recently. New Late and Middle Pre-Classic discoveries have changed the focus, as hieroglyphs have been deciphered and excavations of earlier layers revealed evidence of Classic-type elements. Origins of the complex Maya civilization have been pushed back into Pre-Classic times, the primary period of The Book of Mormon.⁴ These discoveries and others in the past decades have overturned many traditional views of Mesoamerican archaeology. This has led to the identification of some major patterns that parallel beautifully with The Book of Mormon account of the Nephites, Lamanites and Mulekites over nearly 1,000 years of history.

Book of Mormon Archaeology Defined

The preceding brief overview should remind us that since The Book of Mormon was published in 1830, the intricate history of the peoples and events has not changed and still stands today. Physical remains are indelibly imbedded in the archaeological record as well, leaving patterns corresponding to their cultural and spiritual rise and fall. Accumulating evidences from Mesoamerican archaeology, particularly in the past thirty years and more, have grown stronger and stronger, building a case for the authenticity of The Book of Mormon. As parallel archaeological discoveries compounded, the basic position was clearly one

of archaeology converging and validating with The Book of Mormon record.

Until recently, this has been my understanding of the validation/authentication process. A couple years ago as an audience member at a Q&A session during a series of Book of Mormon presentations, I sat considering a question asked about geography. I was moved to stand and contribute my thoughts on this subject. At the conclusion, I added a new idea that was a complete turn in the opposite direction from the basic position stated above about archaeology validating The Book of Mormon. At that moment I recognized this as a new insight and was excited at the possibilities. Since the time I first uttered this new thought, the truth of the idea has continued to resonate as I have pondered and explored the ramifications. As a result, it is with awe that I would suggest to you as an archaeologist and as one who believes The Book of Mormon is an authentic, historical record, that it is The Book of Mormon which is validating the archaeology! This may seem like a subtle shift in perspective, but it is actually a 180° turn. From this new position, it is The Book of Mormon which becomes the standard for interpreting archaeological evidences and must be the basis for understanding new discoveries. Thus from the perspective of The Book of Mormon, Mesoamerican archaeology is the temporal revelation of The Book of Mormon. We should EXPECT to find evidences with the advantage of a written account and the long timeline.

With this new insight, we are now ready to define what Book of Mormon archaeology is. Earlier I made the statement that there is no such scientific discipline as Book of Mormon archaeology. At least

³ Dr. Diehl was my professor and advisor while working on my archaeology degree at the University of Missouri-Columbia. He is now at the University of Alabama, serving as Department Chairman. The Olmec civilization has been of special interest for over 40 years.

⁴ In The Book of Mormon, the greatest amount of detail is recorded from about 250 BC, after Mosiah and his people migrated to the lowlands, through the time of Christ's visitation. The books of Mosiah, Alma, Helaman and Third Nephi comprise over 60% of its pages and 10% of the entire timeline (including Jaredites). This time period correlates with the Late Pre-Classic period (300 BC — AD 250), rapidly becoming the central focus of current archaeology research.

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from the viewpoint of secular studies that is true—secular archaeologists⁵ are in the field making discoveries and applying their interpretations without any consideration of the authenticity of The Book of Mormon. Without The Book of Mormon, the theories and interpretations by archaeologists are subject to change and in fact are ever-changing as new evidence contradicts previously held ideas. But archaeologists are the ones doing the field work. In that respect, they are doing God's work and don't even realize it! And perhaps that makes the evidence speak even more loudly. I can say without a doubt that Book of Mormon archaeology means using The Book of Mormon to interpret Mesoamerican archaeological discoveries. Mesoamerican archaeology *must* be interpreted by The Book of Mormon. Without The Book of Mormon, interpretation from the secular viewpoint will be without a firm foundation. The best thing going for archaeology is The Book of Mormon. This unique record adds substance to mere speculation and theories, validating the archae-

ology, i.e., bringing true understanding of meaning and historicity to the remains left by the peoples of The Book of Mormon.

Most Book of Mormon Archaeology Still Hidden

This leads me to my next point about archaeology which I call the "2% factor." In archaeology, it is generally viewed that only about 2% of ancient civilizations or sites have been preserved. Of that 2% only about 2% has been explored. Of course, the percentage varies from place to place, but this is a general rule of thumb that remains fairly constant as new discoveries add to the overall total number of sites. So keep this in mind as we talk about archaeology relating to The Book of Mormon: We can state unequivocally that most Book of Mormon archaeology is still hidden. In Part Two of this article we will explore what we might anticipate in the future and the role of all Book of Mormon believers.

Summary points:

There is no such scientific discipline as

Book of Mormon archaeology
The study of the ancient civilization we equate with The Book of Mormon is Mesoamerican archaeology
Mesoamerican archaeology is the temporal revelation of The Book of Mormon
The Book of Mormon validates or brings true understanding to the archaeological record
Book of Mormon archaeology means using The Book of Mormon to interpret Mesoamerican archaeological discoveries
Most Book of Mormon evidences are still hidden

Sources

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⁵ I use the term secular archaeologist to mean non-belief in the authenticity of The Book of Mormon record.