

# Archaeology and the Book of Mormon

LDS critics frequently claim that while the Bible has been proven to be accurate by the discoveries of archaeology, the Book of Mormon has no archaeological support. We can break down this anti-Mormon charge into three issues: 1) Can we compare Biblical archaeology with Book of Mormon archaeology? 2) Is the Bible “proven” by Biblical archaeology? 3) Is the Book of Mormon without any archaeological support?

## 1. Can we compare Biblical archaeology with Book of Mormon archaeology?

First, it is important to understand the Old World archaeology began as early as the 15th century and Biblical archaeology can be traced back to at least the mid 1800s, if not earlier. In contrast, Mesoamerican antiquities were virtually unknown to most of the world until John L. Stephens made his journey to Mesoamerica in the mid 1800s.<sup>1</sup> Not only have more energy and finances been devoted to Biblical archaeology for a longer time, but also the environmental conditions between Biblical sites and possible Book of Mormon New World sites are dramatically different. Unlike the humid jungles of Mesoamerica, the desert lands of the Bible tend to preserve artifacts.

The critics would have us believe that there is little if any difference between Biblical archaeology and Book of Mormon archaeology. They frequently claim that because certain aspects of the Bible have been verified by archaeological evidence, that the Book of Mormon must have the same verifiable support from New World Archaeology. What kind of evidence must be found? Names – names of places or names of people. “Nephi slept here,” or “10 kilometers to Bountiful.” Perhaps the most accurate means of determining an ancient location is by a surviving place name, or *toponym*.

In Bible lands we have three advantages when it comes to toponyms. (1) Some toponyms have remained the same since biblical times – in other words they are known by the same place names in modern day as they were in ancient days; (2) Many biblical toponyms continued to be used in not only the Hebrew language, but in Aramaic and Arabic as well; and (3) Egyptian inscriptions and papyri, as well as Mesopotamian documents and the writings of Eusebius (260-340 A.D.) supply biblical archaeologists with toponyms from the Holy Land as well as detailed lists (in some instances) of distances between cities. Knowing the exact location of one city helps biblical archaeologists locate other cities.<sup>2</sup>

Many people would be tempted to think that toponyms generally continue from one generation to the next, but this is often not the case. Generally, a toponym changes in periods of major changes to that city – because of political transformations or major cultural or language changes. Many Old World cities have changed toponyms through the years. As one of many examples,

the classical Greek, Byzantium became Constantinople in the fourth century A.D. and then Istanbul in the fifteenth century A.D. We even see the same phenomenon in the Book of Mormon where the Jaredite hill Ramah is later called the hill Cumorah by the Nephites. (See Ether 15:11 and Mormon 6:6).

What do we find in Mesoamerican archaeology in regards to toponyms? First, unlike the biblical lands where many toponyms survived through related languages, there is no reason to assume that Maya languages and Nephite languages were related. Secondly, we find that in Mesoamerica, toponyms often disappeared from one era to the next. Many of the Mesoamerican cities today have Spanish names such as San Lorenzo, La Venta, and El Mirador. We don’t know what many of the original names for these cities were (be they Book of Mormon names or Mayan names).<sup>3</sup>

A third problem arises with Mesoamerican toponym inscriptions, or glyphs (and not all scholars are in agreement that such glyphs represent city names). These glyphs are not only rare (there are only about forty out of hundreds of Mayan sites), but they are symbolic rather than phonetic. In other words, when archaeologists find an inscription designating the place with a glyph of a *Hill of the Jaguar*, the pronunciation of this glyph would be dependent on the language of speaker – be it a Zapotec, a Mixtec, or a Nephite.<sup>4</sup>

Barring further discoveries, that we may never know how the names of Mesoamerican cities were pronounced in Book of Mormon times.

## 2. Is the Bible “proven” by Biblical archaeology?

While some critics claim or imply that the Bible is supported (or “proven”) by mounds of archaeological evidence, we find that only slightly more than half of all place names mentioned in the Bible have been found. The majority of these identifications are based on the preservation of the toponym. Only about seven to eight percent of biblical locations have been identified to a degree of certainty where there is no toponym preserved, and about another seven to eight percent of biblical locations (without preserved toponyms) have been identified with some degree of conjectural certainty.<sup>5</sup> The identification of these locations without place names could not have been made were it not for the identification of locations *with* preserved toponyms. If (like in ancient Mesoamerica) few or no toponyms had survived, few biblical locations could be identified with any certainty.

Despite the identification of *some* biblical sites, many important Bible locations have not been identified. For example, the location of Mt. Sinai is unknown although with over twenty possible candidates. Some scholars reject the claim that the city

of Jericho existed at the time of Joshua. The route taken by the Israelites on their Exodus is contested among biblical scholars, and some scholars dispute the biblical claim that there ever was an Israelite conquest of Canaan.<sup>6</sup>

Non-LDS biblical archaeologist, William Dever, a professor of Near Eastern archaeology and anthropology at the University of Arizona and head of the Near Eastern Studies Department, claims that “after a century of modern research, neither Biblical scholars nor archaeologists have been able to document as historical any of the events, much less the personalities, of the patriarchal or Mosaic era.”<sup>7</sup>

Archaeology, he notes, should never be supposed to *prove* the Bible in *any sense* and has never substantiated a variety of biblical narratives, including the existence of Abraham, Joseph of Egypt, Moses, or an Israelite presence in Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. *Is the Book of Mormon without any archaeological support?*

While the primary evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon comes from the Holy Ghost, many people wonder if there is any archaeological support for the Book of Mormon. As already explained, we may never be able to determine the ancient phonetic toponyms for Pre-Classic Mesoamerican sites. And if we did find a Book of Mormon city, how would we recognize it? John Sorenson in his most recent book, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*,<sup>9</sup> describes the culture and lifestyles of the ancient Mesoamericans and suggests

how the Book of Mormon may be interpreted against this information.

Because it is possible that the names Book of Mormon personalities or locations may never be deciphered (see discussion above), the only current support available from the field of archaeology comes by demonstrating that cultural features mentioned in the Book of Mormon are *not incompatible* with current knowledge of ancient Mesoamerica.

A recently discovered carved altar in Yemen also lends archaeological support to the Book of Mormon. This altar, discovered by non-LDS archaeologists, lists the tribal name of NHM in the same vicinity in which the Book of Mormon describes the Lehitites stopping in Nahom to bury Ishmael (1 Nephi 16:3-4). The site was unknown to modern readers until relatively recent times and would not have been known to Joseph Smith.<sup>10</sup>

It is interesting also to note that for years the critics (and even LDS scholars such as B.H. Roberts) have had long lists of supposed Book of Mormon anachronisms—details mentioned in the Book of Mormon which are supposedly incompatible with what is known of ancient Mesoamerica. In recent years, however, this list has diminished. Why? Because it becomes increasingly clear that the casually mundane lifestyle features mentioned in the Book of Mormon—those things which Joseph most certainly would not have known about, and those things which the critics latched upon first as evidence of fraud—now find support from the studies of archaeology, anthropology and history.<sup>11</sup>



For a more detailed version of this paper see <http://www.mormonfortress.com/bibarch1.html>

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<sup>1</sup> T. Patrick Culbert, “Maya-Treasures of an Ancient Civilization,” *Archaeology*, March/April, 1985, 60.

<sup>2</sup> William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* v2:1 (Provo: FARMS, 1993), 164-165.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 169-70.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> William G. Dever, *Recent Archaeological Discoveries and Biblical Research* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1990), 5.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 24, 26.

<sup>9</sup> John Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo: FARMS, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> S. Kent Brown, “New Light: ‘The Place That Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* v 8:1 (Provo, FARMS, 1999), 66-68.

<sup>11</sup> See <http://www.mormonfortress.com/crit-fr1.html> for discussions on some of these supposed anachronisms.