Questioning the Book of Mormon

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The Book of Mormon is the central pillar of Mormon claims to being the ‘restored gospel’ and the ‘one true church’. If the Book of Mormon is discredited then Mormonism and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is also discredited. Then the Mormon must look anew for the gospel. This provides an opening for our Christian Witness.

A little background on the Book of Mormon is in order. Joseph Smith was a storyteller. His mother, Lucy Mack Smith, described the evenings around the fireplace when young Joseph would tell stories about the origin of the American Indians. She said, “I presume our family presented an aspect as singular as any that ever lived upon the face of the earth – all seated in a circle, father, mother, sons and daughters, and giving the most profound attention to a boy, eighteen years of age…. During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare” and also their religious worship. This he would do with ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them.” (History of Joseph Smith by His Mother, 1954 Edition, pages 82-83, excerpted from Mormonism – Shadow or Reality? By Jerald and Sandra Tanner, page 81.)

The question of the origin of the Book of Mormon story is a topic for another time. The question for now is whether there is any documentation from history or archaeology for the highly specific details provided in the Book of Mormon. To answer that we must go to the most highly respected authorities in the field. Those authorities are the Smithsonian Institution and the archaeology and anthropology departments of major universities. In the past the LDS have claimed that the Smithsonian used the Book of Mormon as a guide in their archaeological research. Did they?

The Smithsonian’s Department of Anthropology has written a form letter to respond to the many claims that its researchers have used the Book of Mormon. In that letter they say, “The Book of Mormon is a religious document and not a scientific guide. The Smithsonian Institution has never used it in archeological research and any information that you have received to the contrary is incorrect.” The letter goes on to list eight points of divergence from known archeological data by the Book of Mormon. This form letter may be obtained either directly from the Smithsonian or a photocopy from Watchman Fellowship.

Others in the field of archeology have said the following;

“As for the Native Americans, their ancestors came from eastern Asia (Siberia) and for this there is

ample evidence. They crossed the Bering Strait some 15 – 20,000 years ago." Stanton W. Green, Ph.D, Associate Professor, University of South Carolina.

"It is safe to say that few, if any, professional archaeologists, except those who are practicing Mormons themselves, view the Book of the Mormon as a document with any archaeological value." Paul E. Minnis, Assistant Professor, The University of Oklahoma.

"There is no evidence of the presence of 'Lost Tribes' in the New World from an archaeologist's perspective…. So where did the Indians come from? We have a good amount of evidence that they came from Asia across a land bridge that joined Siberia and America up to about twelve thousand years ago." Thomas J. Riley, Head, Department of Anthropology, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

"I have numbered my answers to fit the numbers of your questions above. 1. [tell me if there is archaeological proof for the Book of Mormon.] None whatsoever! 2. [tell me what you think of the idea that the American Indians are descendants of Israelites who came over to America as in the Book of Mormon.] B.S. (to put it bluntly!) Sincerely, James O. Bellis" Dept. of Anthropology, University of Notre Dame.

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