All That Glitters: Uncovering Fool's Gold in Book of Mormon Archaeology

Martin Raish

An LDS art historian examines amateur attempts to vindicate the Book of Mormon through archaeological discoveries in South and Central America.

Nearly twenty years ago a book appeared titled Lost Tribes and Sunken Continents. Written by Robert Wauchope, a highly respected scholar in the field of Mesoamerican studies, its aim was to examine the multitudinous theories which have been advanced to explain the origin of the American Indians. One chapter, “Lost Tribes and the Mormons,” attempted to review the position of the LDS church on the topic of ancient Israelites in America. A brief passage from this chapter reads as follows.

For nineteen years young Mormon missionaries have visited my Tulane University office, some of them en route to the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean in hope of finding concrete support of the Mormon contention. One, with an explorer's beard and a gold ring in one ear lobe, skippered a schooner to the Gulf and planned to set adrift there a little fleet of scale models of the sailing craft described in the Book of Mormon. He would trace them by means of colored stains they were to release automatically as they floated over the waters, to find which segment of the mainland the ancient seafarers from Israel were likely to have reached first as they were carried along by prevailing winds and currents. I never saw this young man again, but from a description of him, his silken beard and gold earring, which I heard a year or so later, I judge that I missed a second visit from him. I should like to hear the results of his experiment.1

I first read this passage while a graduate student and had largely forgotten about it until this past summer, when I read a newer book with a similar tone and message. This was Voyagers to the New World by Nigel Davies.2 Although this scholar did treat the LDS viewpoint with more admiration than had Wauchope, the Church position was still discussed in the same chapter with the Bermuda Triangle, and only one chapter away from Atlantis, the land of Mu, and Eric von Daniken.

Needless to say, seeing such treatment of our beliefs was a bit disconcerting, and I wondered why we had been held in such low regard. The reason soon became apparent. Both Wauchope and Davies drew their conclusions not from the Book of Mormon itself but rather from books by various LDS writers who have attempted to validate the existence of Nephites, Jaredites, and others through the use of archaeological and ethnographic data. Thus it is to these publications that I wish to direct my attention.

Certainly we cannot blame Wauchope, Davies, or others for preferring the commentaries over the scriptures. After all, the Book of Mormon is written in an archaic style and was created by an uneducated schoolboy in the early nineteenth century. What could it offer that could not be better explained by Mormon “scholars,” who are careful to inform readers of their university degrees, travel experiences, and “diligent research?” Even if the degrees are in fields unrelated to archaeology or if the writer’s affiliation with BYU is only peripheral, such credentials are mentioned on the dust jackets to catch our attention and respect.

My argument, however, is not with the dust jackets. Rather, I am discouraged by the poor research, misleading conclusions, and general lack of rigor far too often permeating the majority of the commentaries. An indiscriminate mingling of fact with fiction often results from such methodological laziness and thus tends to discredit the whole endeavor. By recognizing methodological errors and inconsistencies, we will not only increase our ability to discern what is valuable from what is not but will also hopefully encourage higher and more responsible levels of scholarship.

Poor scholarship in the majority of these volumes can generally be grouped under four kinds of errors, which I have labeled as follows: (1) scientists tell us, (2) scriptural/pictorial juxtaposition, (3) the shopping list, and (4) questionable artifacts. My examples have been taken from a few of the most popular works on the subject, all of which are currently in print and available in most LDS bookstores (some of the most problematic books are fortunately out of print and no longer widely accessible).

Scientists Tell Us

Our contemporary society depends heavily on the opinions of scientists for reliable and authoritative answers to questions. Thus Mormon writers of commentaries who do not have advanced degrees in archaeology often understandably turn to comments by various scientists to lend an air of credibility to the conclusions in their books.

For example, one author has marketed a set of color slides of ruins in Mexico and South America, which is accompanied by a book with annotations for each slide.
On another page of the same book the author discusses the objects found at the bottom of the sacred cenote at Chichen Itza. He mentions the discovery of "thin sheets of gold upon which were Egyptian Hieroglyphics, not exactly like the very ancient Egyptian, for it is a 'reformed' Egyptian, like the Book of Mormon said." The author provides a picture of the well, but none of the "thin gold sheets." Hence I am forced to assume that the gold dishes in figure 2—part of the only group of metal objects from the cenote with which I am familiar, all dating after 1000 A.D.—are the ones to which he refers. But again I disagree with the scientists, mentioned by the author simply as "they," who supposedly found the objects. I see nothing to suggest Egyptian hieroglyphs.

In both these examples my complaint goes beyond a simple disagreement with the scientists. I am more disturbed that the author did not provide any footnotes which would allow me to locate the source of the scientists' opinions or pictures of the gold sheets. Such lack of follow-through is a mark of poor academic procedure and is much too prevalent among some LDS writers.

When the writers of the commentaries do provide footnotes, two problems seem to arise frequently. The first is that the ultimate source of the quotation or idea may be of debatable reliability. For example, one LDS writer believes that "the Mayas... Incas... Pueblos... and... Moundbuilders were all one and the same people." As support for this statement, he marshals a series of quotes, including one which reads, "the Abbe Brasseur de Bourbourg, after the ablest and most extensive researches, declares that the pre-Aztec Mexicans or Toltecs were a people identical with the Moundbuilders." For someone who has never heard of Brasseur de Bourbourg this does indeed seem to lend strong support to the author's contention. But Ignacio Bernal, one of the most respected twentieth century Mexican archaeologists, does not share such enthusiasm for the work of Brasseur. He says "all Brasseur's work is a weird potpourri of sound sense, great learning, absurd theories, groundless fantasies, and proof that is no proof, the whole in a spirit as remote as possible from the scientific." Certainly all LDS authors should be more aware of the qualifications and academic esteem of those to whom they turn for support.

The second problem to arise when references are provided is that in checking the original source it is not uncommon to discover that the context of the quote has been completely ignored by the LDS writer. For example, the Temple of the Seven Dolls at the site of Dzibilchaltun is described in one LDS publication as a "prominent building" in the ancient city. The author also refers to E. Wylys Andrews, a well known Maya specialist, to substantiate a date of "near 2000 B.C." for the early levels of habitation at the site. With both of these facts I agree. However, the text does not make clear that the building itself actually dates from approximately 500 A.D. Thus the casual reader is given the distinct impression that an eminent scientist has discovered impressive architectural remains dating from an early (that is, Jaredite) period. Such is certainly not the case and was not even implied by Dr. Andrews.

The last quote I will discuss in connection with the "scientists tell us" school combines all the flaws mentioned thus far. Writer "A" quotes the words of great sci-
Sloppy practices can only raise false hopes among naive LDS readers and looks of scorn from non-LDS scholars. Entists as assembled in a volume by writer "B." Writer "B" in turn provides footnotes and bibliography which are neither complete nor accurate. The original quote, it turns out, comes from an extremely unreliable source and is greatly removed from its original context.

Writer "A" says "for quick and easy reference at this time, we are going to use just one reference volume for our quotations" (that is, the volume by writer "B"), one which has "dozens of quotations from some of the greatest scientists having to do with the study of the ancient people of this continent." Writer "B" in turn cites a gentleman named Lowry, who claims that "the first settlement (of America) was made shortly after the confusion of tongues at the building of the Tower of Babel." This, of course, provides a good link between the Old World and the arrival of the Jaredites. However, some simple checking destroys the credibility of the quotation.

Writer "B" notes that his quote can be found in Schoolcraft's Ethnological Researches, Vol. 3, 1853, but does not give the page. After a little while in the rare book library, I was able to determine that the correct citation for the reference is Henry R. Schoolcraft, Information Respecting the History, Condition, and Prospects of the Indian Tribes of the United States, Part III, and that the quote is on page 476. Since the name Schoolcraft (a basic source for the nineteenth century) tends to give any quote an air of reliability, it is disappointing to learn of the actual circumstances of this particular one.

In the 1840s Mr. Schoolcraft had sent to hundreds of people throughout the United States a questionnaire regarding the beliefs and customs of the Indians. One to reply was the Reverend D. Lowry, a minister who had been living among a small tribe of Indians in Iowa. To the question of the origins of the American Indians, his reply, which he says was "thrown together as fragments of time would permit," reads as follows: "In view of the best light and information which I have been able to collect on this subject, my opinion is that the earliest inhabitants of America were the descendants of Ham, the youngest son of Noah; and that the first settlement was made shortly after the confusion of tongues, at the building of the tower of Babel." In support of this opinion he refers to Genesis 11:8-9 and adds that "Moses tells us that from the plains of Shinar the people were dispersed over the whole earth. I do not doubt either his integrity or accuracy." It is disheartening to see the opinion of a minister living in Iowa in 1840, based on his personal interpretation of the scriptures, being used in the 1970s as evidence for the validity of the Book of Mormon.

Scriptural/Pictoral Juxtaposition

Another common procedure is to couple a statement from the Book of Mormon with a photograph in order to establish credibility for the scripture. For example, one writer placed an excerpt from Alma 50:10—"he...caused them to erect fortifications"—next to a photograph of some impressive looking ruins, which upon closer inspection turned out to be a temple at Kabah, Mexico, not fortifications. I am aware of such glaring discrepancies between the text and picture because of my study in Mesoamerican art, but the general public is given absolutely no information about the object in the photograph other than its location. Thus, when they see a photograph of some Indian petroglyphs of horses (fig. 3), they are certain at last that Alma's references to horses (Alma 18) have been validated. The book does not mention that the petroglyphs are located in Utah, not Mexico, or that they date from at least 1000 A.D. if not later, long after the time when Alma was writing.

In these instances the author can rightfully be accused of having little regard for the integrity of his data, of stretching it and misrepresenting it to reflect his predetermined opinions.
I feel that links suggested by simply arranging scriptures and photographs, with no explanation, only raise false hopes among naive LDS readers and looks of scorn from non-LDS scholars.

**Shopping Lists**

Many LDS writers provide what I call shopping lists to prove their points. They assemble rather impressive-looking lists of words, customs, and architectural features which are found both in the Old World and the New. The longer the list, of course, the greater the "proof." Unfortunately such an approach is rarely of any real value. A major reason for this is that the items mentioned are simply too vague. For example, one author listed the following cultural similarities as indicative of contact between the Near East and Mexico: "counting of time," "curing their sick," "mourning for [their] dead," "sun worship," and the "[use of] ceramic[s]." I can think of hardly any culture in the world that has not become involved in these practices at one time or another. To be meaningful, such a list must cite a complex system of keeping time or a unique manner of mourning the dead which is found only in the two cultures in question. Perhaps I should point out that this author did give a brief explanation of the use of ceramics by noting that "some areas of the world use skins: Why did they both use ceramics unless they had connections?" I'm not sure how to respond to such a question, but I am certain that the answer would not support his contention that the use of ceramics was a meaningful similarity.

Sometimes such comparisons appear quite startling on the surface, but they are frequently misleading. For example, figure 5 shows some spouted jugs of remarkably similar shape. The first one is from ancient Crete; the other is Aztec. But although their shapes are similar, the colors and designs are not. Figure 6 shows some vases, the first Sumerian, the second Mixtec. Again the shapes are similar, but the Sumerian example is of stone and was used in temple rites, while the Mixtec is of clay and was found in a tomb.

At times efforts to make visual comparisons may even backfire, as the series of designs in figure 7 demonstrates. All the spiral patterns are similar, but their places of origin are quite disparate. From left to right, top to bottom, we have a Mycenean gold ring, a mosaic floor from Pompeii, a gold bracelet from Monte Alban, a Sumerian plaque, a canoe from New Guinea, a wooden box from the Benin people in Africa, an Aztec design, a bone from Monte Alban, and a Louis XVI table.

Such comparisons are only meaningful if there are many similarities between complex images. Yet even in those cases, there is no guarantee of success. For example, figure 8 is a drawing of the scene on the well-known "Tree of Life" stone, Izapa Stela 5. Note that the tree has exposed roots, a gentle curvature to the trunk, a break in the middle of the trunk, and a regular arrangement of leaves. Compare it to the tree in figure 9, which also has exposed roots, a curved trunk with a break in the middle, and a regular arrangement of foliage. Despite these striking parallels, the second tree is found on the Bayeaux Tapestry, woven in France in the eleventh century A.D.

Should we, then, never attempt to create shopping lists? Not necessarily, for they can lead to many exciting and worthwhile discoveries. But they must be seen as only the first step. For each item on such a list or each vis-

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**Fig. 5.** Beaked jug from Hagios Onouphrios, Crete, ca. 2400-2500 B.C. And Aztec jar used for pulque, a fermented drink used only by priests and nobility.

**Fig. 6.** Alabaster vase from Uruk (Sumeria), ca. 3500 B.C. And Mixtec ceramic vase, ca. 1200-1500 A.D.
Many Mormons are willing to spend money for instant evidence of knowledge. The result is a consumer demand for intellectual loot.

For example, one example is found in a thoroughly unimpressive artifact which is supposed to show a "funerary or sacrificial scene." The author describes a gold plate with writing which supposedly is "Reformed Egyptian" and reads, "The husbandman will gather the pure inhabitants of the earth and embrace them." But the animals on the plate—cats and elephants—look like they were drawn by grade school children, not by educated, skilled artists. He also includes a stone carving which is supposed to show a "funerary or sacrificial scene." I have a difficult time giving it my serious attention because of the ludicrous mixture of Plains Indian headgear, pseudo-Egyptian glyphs, and cartoon faces, all rendered with an impressive lack of skill.

Questionable Artifacts

The final kind of methodological mistake can thoroughly and summarily destroy the credibility of an author—publishing artifacts which are obviously not pre-Hispanic. One example is found in a thoroughly unscholarly book, whose obvious deficiencies may make it an easy target. But it is available nationally and is being read by impressionable LDS youth and their parents and thus must be dealt with seriously. The author describes a gold plate with writing which supposedly is "Reformed Egyptian" and reads, "The husbandman will gather the pure inhabitants of the earth and embrace them." But the animals on the plate—cats and elephants—look like they were drawn by grade school children, not by educated, skilled artists. He also includes a stone carving which is supposed to show a "funerary or sacrificial scene." I have a difficult time giving it my serious attention because of the ludicrous mixture of Plains Indian headgear, pseudo-Egyptian glyphs, and cartoon faces, all rendered with an impressive lack of skill.

Often authors describe artifacts so vaguely that it is difficult to ascertain what they are. An artifact identified as a wheel made in Book of Mormon times may actually be nothing more than a Spanish mill stone, but without careful documentation it is nearly impossible to check. Any artifact used should have been authenticated by well-trained experts because frauds are not necessarily easy to identify. To the untrained eye, the object may seem perfectly reasonable, but the professional can detect subtle irregularities. For example, the discovery of inscribed lead and limestone plates in Sanpete County in the early 1960s seemed to offer faith-promoting proof of the evidence of Book of Mormon peoples in the Manti area for many Church members who widely circulated the story. But archaeological analysis showed the plates had been carved recently by a metal tool such as a pocket knife, that the ancient-looking patina was superficial, daubed-on pitch, and that one-fifth of the signs found in the inscriptions were brands used by central Utah cattle raisers. Thus, LDS authors should be more careful to provide proof for the objects they use because seemingly impressive artifacts may well be fraudulent.

Conclusion

Why is it that people purchase books such as these I have discussed? Are Latter-day Saints simply gullible? I think John Sorenson has expressed the answer quite well. He notes that "many Mormons are willing to spend money for instant evidence of knowledge rather than to labor for the knowledge themselves. The result is a consumer demand for intellectual loot." Indeed, the demand has been met time and again with books, pamphlets, slide sets, movies, and personal appearances all designed to offer "instant expertise" on the connections between the Book of Mormon and archaeological investigations. The demand is met by old books which are reprinted without being updated, as well as by new books which are of no better quality.

I have been asked by some people, "What is the harm? If such works get people excited about the Book of Mormon, why not let them read?" My reply is to quote again from Dr. Sorenson, for he so ably points out the dangers.
what it says itself.... If we are willing to settle for surface reading and shallow study, why should a non-Mormon scholar expend energy to dig seriously into the Book of Mormon?

May I conclude then with a note of caution to us all that we be more aware of the potential pitfalls, the fallacious methodologies, the pseudo-scholarly tactics which stand ready to thwart our best efforts. I sincerely hope that one day we might see the level of scholarship in Book of Mormon studies reach, then even surpass, that enjoyed in the field of biblical studies. I do not think that we will ever prove the Book of Mormon to be true through archaeological evidences any more than we can yet prove the date of the Creation through scientific means alone. But until the day that the Lord reveals all that has been, I urge us all to continue to study and to publish, keeping in mind the dangers but also the blessings of our efforts, both to ourselves and to the world around us.

Notes
4. Ibid., p. 82.
6. Ibid.
10. Farnsworth, p. 4.
12. Ibid., p. 476.
15. Ibid., p. 156.
17. Ibid., p. 231.
19. Ibid., p. 50.
22. Ibid., p. 431.

MARTIN RAISH, who teaches art history at BYU, received an MA at New York University and is a doctoral candidate in Mesoamerican studies at the University of New Mexico. He has also studied ancient Near Eastern (especially Egyptian), Native American, African, and Oceanic art. He lives with his wife Kathy and two children in Provo.