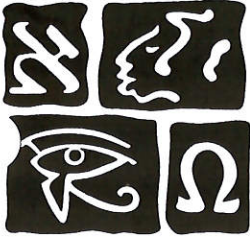




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John L. Sorenson

A New Evaluation of the Smithsonian
Institution "Statement regarding the
Book of Mormon"

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Summary:

Anti-Mormons frequently refer to a long-standing form letter sent by the Smithsonian Institution in response to inquiries about the Book of Mormon. In this paper, John Sorenson makes note of serious flaws in this Smithsonian statement, pointing out that parts of the form letter are based on unsubstantiated assumptions by the Smithsonian staff who are unqualified to make such generalizations. Also included in this paper is a more responsible letter recently issued by the Smithsonian Institution on this matter.

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Smithsonian Statement on the Book of Mormon Revised

For many years the Smithsonian Institution has given out a routine response to questions posed to them about their view of the relation between the Book of Mormon and scientific studies of ancient American civilizations. Statements in their handout pointed out what somebody at the Institution claimed were contradictions between the text of the scripture and what scientists claim about New World cultures.

In 1982 John Sorenson wrote a detailed critique of the Smithsonian piece that was published by FARMS. It pointed out errors of fact and logic in the statement. He revised that in 1995 and included the recommendation that the Smithsonian Institution completely modify their statement to bring it up to date scientifically. FARMS officers later conferred with a Smithsonian representative who indicated a willingness to make changes. More recently, members of Congress have questioned the Institution about the inappropriateness of a government agency taking a stand regarding a religious book.

In March of 1998 the Director of Communications at the Smithsonian began using the following brief response to queries about the Book of Mormon:

Your recent inquiry concerning the Smithsonian Institution's alleged use of the Book of Mormon as a scientific guide has been received in the Office of Communications. 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.

A New Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution

"Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon"

(Revision, draft 28 March 1995)

John L. Sorenson

For many years the Smithsonian Institution (SI) in Washington has received inquiries concerning the historical accuracy of the Book of Mormon, its rumored role in the Institution's scientific activities, and specific queries about the Book of Mormon story in relation to American archaeology. For several decades the SI has responded to such inquiries by distributing a form letter prepared by its Department of Anthropology. The contents of the letter have changed in detail from time to time, but overall the statement denies that there is evidence from science that supports the picture of ancient America which it supposes the book to present. This denial has been used by opponents of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which accepts the Book of Mormon as historically sound, to support their position that the volume is false. This paper evaluates the accuracy of the SI statement itself in the light of an alternative view of what archaeology has found.

The necessity for a Smithsonian statement stems from the fact that for years some Latter-day Saint missionaries and other enthusiasts for the Book of Mormon have made the claim that archaeologists at the Institution use the Book of Mormon to guide their archaeological research in the field. (As a matter of fact, SI's archaeologists conduct virtually no field research.) In the manner of all folklore, this rumor passes from person to person in such an

undocumentable manner that it is impossible to correct this foolish, naive notion. Understandably Smithsonian officials would be frustrated and irritated at having to deal with persistent inquiries on this point. Their form letter has seemed to them a reasonable way to cope with the problem. However, the content of the letter is laden with problems. In the interest of truth and the advancement of knowledge (an important part of the SI's mission), their public communication people should correct those faults. Until they do, this evaluation may assist a few people to get some relevant facts straight.

If an intelligent criticism is to be made of any position, the critic must be well prepared regarding both, or all, sides of it. Rendering a judgement on whether or how the Book of Mormon relates to the results of scientific study on ancient America is no different. It requires knowledge of both sides of the potential equation. The most erudite archaeologist who has not also mastered the cultural and geographic content of the Book of Mormon cannot sensibly compare it to archaeological findings (exactly as if the book were some other purported American Indian book, say, the *Walam Olum* or *Popol Vuh*). Conversely, LDS scriptionians ignorant of necessary details from science controlled by knowledgeable archaeologists are equally unqualified.

The Book of Mormon has never been analyzed as a record reporting ancient cultures on anything like the scale and with the intensity that it deserves. The text needs to be examined in full detail for what it says—and does not say—about customs, the rise of cities, warfare, etc., which it attributes to the peoples it treats. The only analysis even moving in that direction was published in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*,¹ but

¹ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985).

even it only begins the requisite investigation. Meanwhile most Latter-day Saints characterize the cultures of the Nephites and other peoples treated in the volume unsystematically and uncritically, on the basis of informal traditions rather than sound scholarship. Yet what non-Latter-day Saints have claimed the Book of Mormon says about ancient America is equally unreliable. Even the few non-religious scholars, like those on the SI staff, who purport to have looked at the scripture in the light of archaeology sufficiently to make a statement about it have failed to investigate this complex record more than superficially.

In studies of ancient American culture history no comparison is worth anything unless it refers to the right place and the right time. For instance, if researchers should examine the question of the origin of a particular architectural form mentioned in a central Mexican document, they would only look foolish if they wasted effort surveying buildings in Ecuador. On the same principle, talking about the precise where and when the Book of Mormon speaks of is a requirement if one wishes to be taken seriously in a discussion of that volume in relation to archaeology.

In recent decades LDS scholars have established three important facts about the Book of Mormon text that define how it must be compared with external, scientific information. The first point is that the Book of Mormon itself presents the events in the New World which it reports as taking place in a territory of limited extent—not more than 500 or 600 miles long and considerably less in width.² This territory is also characterized as lying on both sides of an isthmus separating the major oceans. This scale is contrary to

² For a history of the research which establishes this point, see John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book.*, rev. ed. (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992).

what many Latter-day Saints and virtually all critics of the Book of Mormon have assumed. For generations they have supposed that the entire western hemisphere was the scene for Book of Mormon events. But careful studies of hundreds of interlocking details in the text about topography, hydrographic features, climate, settlements, and cultural patterns have produced general consensus that the Book of Mormon peoples lived in all or a portion of Mesoamerica, that is, the area occupied anciently by the civilized peoples of southern and central Mexico and northern Central America.

The second point is that the book reports events and cultures confined almost totally to the "Pre-Classic" or "Formative" era, prior to about A.D. 300.

Third, it is a record kept by and about only a segment of Mesoamerican society—a particular noble "lineage" according to one frame of reference. It was written to explain and justify events that affected the descendants of a ruler (Nephi) who lived in the sixth century B.C., probably in southern Guatemala. It does not purport to be and manifestly is not the story of a whole "nation," let alone a full "culture" or "civilization." Neither does it tell us systematically about portions of Mesoamerica or beyond that were not involved with the fate of its particular descent line.

It is also important that the Book of Mormon is only incidentally and incompletely a record of culture. Its primary purpose is religious or ideological; only cryptic information is offered about such matters as technology, political structure, or social structure, even for that segment of the population about whom it speaks. The brevity means that whole centuries and substantial territories are passed over with no more than a handful of words to characterize the events or cultures involved.

On the basis of this characterization of the Book of Mormon and its peoples and lands, we can see what kind of expert is qualified to comment

usefully on how or whether the Book of Mormon account relates to the findings of scientists. Our expert ought to be as highly-informed about the archaeology, art, biological anthropology, linguistics, and history of southern and central Mesoamerica in the Pre-Classic period as possible, with emphasis on relating the results from dirt archaeology to an esoteric sacred text. At the same time, our expert needs to be conversant with the cultural content of the Book of Mormon record, concerning which a significant body of secondary literature has been developed by Latter-day Saint analysts in recent years. Needless to say few, if any, experts are qualified in these terms.

None of the handful of Smithsonian archaeologists is even a Mesoamerican specialist, let alone a Pre-Classic specialist. Nor is there a hint of any of the staff having examined the Book of Mormon in a sophisticated manner that would ensure helpful comparison with scholarly results. One wonders, then, who are the knowledgeable sources prepared to stand behind the SI statement regarding the Book of Mormon.

Realizing that people have been expecting more of the SI's Department of Anthropology than the folks there are qualified to deliver, we here offer interim help in two ways. First, we will discuss difficulties in the SI letter itself, point by point. Then we offer a draft of a new statement that is on sounder ground than the existing handout.

Analysis of Nine Points in the SI Statement

Assertions one and nine are straightforward. Their substance is that the Institution has never used the Book of Mormon as a scientific guide; their archaeologists see no direct connection between the archaeology of the New World and the subject matter of the book; and, yes, there are copies of the

Book of Mormon in the Institution's library which they could consult should they desire to do so. We could all hope that the pointless inquiries from the public on those elementary matters of fact would cease completely in the face of these statements.

Item two speaks of "the physical type of the American Indian," which is said to be "basically Mongoloid." This is a standard textbook-level characterization which avoids many significant issues connected with the subject. Certain biological characteristics of the American native populations are indeed generally, if not universally, shared throughout the hemisphere, but there are not many such features. Dr. T. Dale Stewart, long the Smithsonian's physical anthropologist, chose to emphasize what is shared, as in his short book, *The People of America*.³ Other, equally-respected experts, however, have observed significant variety among "the American Indian." For example, Dr. Juan Comas, long Mexico's most prominent physical anthropologist, asked the question in print, "Are the Amerindians a biologically homogeneous group?" He answered with a firm "no," and gave cogent reasons for his position.⁴

Research on blood groups led G. Albin Matson and associates to say, "the American Indians are not completely Mongoloid."⁵ Professor Earnest Hooton of Harvard strongly agreed and thought he saw Near Easterners as a component.⁶ My mentor at UCLA, Joseph B. Birdsell, acknowledged that "An

³ T. Dale Stewart, *The People of America* (London: Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 1973).

⁴ Juan Comas, *Cuadernos Americanos* 152 (Mayo-Junio 1967): 117-25. See also his *Antropología de los Pueblos Ibero-Americanos* (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1974), 35-42 and 52ff.

⁵ G. Albin Matson *et al.*, "Distribution of hereditary blood groups among Indians in South America. IV. In Chile," *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 27 (1967): 188.

⁶ Quoted in Harold Gladwin, *Men out of Asia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 63-65.

important number of anthropologists have specifically included the Mediterranean branch of the White race as having contributed genetically to the American aborigines," and, "Phenotypically many American Indians show morphological characteristics plausibly attributed to a Mediterranean ancestry."⁷ Polish anthropologist Andrzej Wierçinski analyzed a large series of skulls excavated at major sites in Mesoamerica and found much variety. He considered there to be three "primary Amerindian stocks" which came out of Asia (thus agreeing generally with Stewart), but he also found evidence for features "introduced by . . . migrants from the Western Mediterranean area."⁸ It is true, of course, that such views are considered heretical by many U.S. physical anthropologists, but that may be a matter of intellectual fashion or taste rather than a measure of their accuracy.

Item number two of the SI statement also maintains that "the ancestors of the present Indians came into the New World—probably over a land bridge . . . [at] Bering Strait . . .—in a continuing series of small migrations beginning from about 25,000 to 30,000 years ago." Nowadays American archaeologists are quarreling vehemently over almost every word and phrase in that statement. This somewhat simplistic interpretation is quite plausible as far as it goes, yet it is backed up by only equivocal "archeological evidence," not the definitive sort which the SI's statement on the Book of Mormon

⁷ "The problem of the early peopling of the Americas as viewed from Asia," in *Papers on the Physical Anthropology of the American Indian*, ed. W. S. Laughlin (New York: Viking Fund, 1951), 14; he himself thought that this "White" genetic component, while valid, probably originated from an early non-Mongoloid population located in the Far East which had arrived in America via Bering Strait. That is not the only possibility, of course.

⁸ "Inter- and intrapopulational racial differentiation of Tlatilco, Cerro de las Mesas, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban and Yucatan Maya," *Actas, Documentos y Memorias de la 36a. Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Lima, 1970* (Lima, 1970), 1:1, 231-48. Or see his "Afinidades raciales de algunas poblaciones antiguas de México," *Anales del Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia* (México, 1972-73), 123-44.

suggests. That is why controversy about "the origin of the American Indians" continues.

A look at a recent discussion of that controversy is instructive in regard to the Book of Mormon issue. E. James Dixon has noted certain anomalous archaeological sites, such as Monte Verde in Chile, Pedra Furada rock shelter in Brazil and Meadowcroft rock shelter in the eastern U.S. which do not fit with the SI statement. He thinks they are perhaps "not to be understood as part of a monolithic model of the peopling of the Americas but are . . . the tangible remains of sporadic early colonization events that were not connected to subsequent developments in New World prehistory." Instead, they may stand as "silent testimony to early but unsuccessful colonizations that failed, as did that of the Vikings thousands of years later." It remains to be seen whether the bearers of those cultures were "Mongoloid" and whether their genes continued to later times.

"The Norse phenomenon" mentioned is helpful in understanding that definitive denials about the possible presence of Book of Mormon peoples are on boggy theoretical and methodological ground. To Dixon, the Norse settlement in "Vinland" "demonstrates that various groups of humans could have attempted colonization of the American continents . . . only to subsequently disappear" while "evidence of their passing would be extremely difficult to detect in the archeological record." But he finds the Norse settlement in Greenland to be even more instructive than the North American mainland case. In Greenland archaeologists have found ruins of at least 330 farms and 17 churches, thousands of artifacts, including European-style clothing made of Greenland wool, as well as the skeletons of the Vikings themselves. The colony persisted for about 500 years (half as long as "the Nephites" of the Book of Mormon). The case provides "clear documentation

of a major and long-lived transoceanic colonization of the Americas that ultimately failed." Furthermore, genes which descendants of the Norse could have left behind would have been mixed among native Greenlandic Inuit ["Eskimo"] populations so that they cannot now be identified as distinctly European in origin. Consequently, "the original Norse colonization of Greenland cannot be demonstrated ever to have happened based on genetic analysis of living people."⁹

May it not be premature for archaeologists to say with the assurance manifested in the SI statement on the Book of Mormon that no other cases like the Norse wait to be found? In fact, other finds in recent years confirm the need for an open mind. An entirely unsuspected settlement of Basque whalers has been found on the coast of Labrador after being "forgotten for almost 400 years." Their extensive settlement remains were not even suspected by archaeologists until documents chanced upon in archives in northern Spain revealed the existence of the outpost all the way across the Atlantic from Basque country. Only when the story was made evident by these historical records could archaeologists know where to look for and find the settlement's material remains.¹⁰ Alison T. Stenger has reprised a series of studies which suggest the arrival, and survival for a time, of what may have been a group from Japan or Northeast Asia who reached the territory of present Washington state.¹¹ Meanwhile Otto J. Sadovszky has presented extensive, convincing evidence from comparative linguistics and ethnology

⁹ E. James Dixon, *Quest for the Origins of the First Americans* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 130-32.

¹⁰ Brian Fagan, "Basques of Red Bay," *Archaeology* (Sept./Oct. 1993): 44-51.

¹¹ "Japanese-influenced ceramics in precontact Washington state: a view of the wares and their possible origin," in *The New World Figurine Project*, ed. Terry Stocker (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1991), 1:111-22.

(much more remains unpublished) for direct migrations from the Ob-Ugrian (Vogul and Ostyak) speaking area of *western* Siberia to central California in the first millennium B.C. Archaeological testing of his proposition has not been attempted.¹²

Getting paradigm-comfortable experts of the anthropological establishment to pay attention to such finds is, however, as Dixon warns us, difficult: "Advances will . . . require courage on the part of researchers who discover information that does not fit accepted scientific paradigms. These researchers must risk criticism and rejection from other scientists as they challenge accepted models and present alternative interpretations."¹³ If we were to accept the SI statement on the origin of native Americans as a dictum that rules out all non-Mongoloid alternatives, we would be contradicting the very exploratory nature of science as well as overlooking great amounts of data which just happen to be unfashionable in its implications.

The third item in the SI statement concerns transoceanic voyagers to America. It singles out the Norse (Vikings) as the first to make such a passage. This hidebound view can be held nowadays only by those who have failed to consider the massive evidence to the contrary. Thirty years ago, when the SI statement may have originated, an excuse existed for such a conservative position—the published materials relating to the question were inconveniently scattered. By 1971, however, a standard anthropological volume, *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*,¹⁴ had

¹² See, among other publications, "The new genetic relationship and the paleolinguistics of the Central California Indian ceremonial houses," *Tenth LACUS Forum, Quebec City, 1983* (Columbia, South Carolina: Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, 1984), 516-30; and, "The discovery of California: breaking the silence of the Siberian-to-America migrator," *The Californians* 2/6 (1984): 9-20.

¹³ Dixon, 132.

¹⁴ Carroll L. Riley, J. Charles Kelley, Campbell W. Pennington, and Robert L. Rands, eds., *Man*

been published which put forward a substantial body of data and argument in favor of (and also against) the idea that voyagers had the technical means to cross the oceans and indeed had reached the Americas before the Norse. The articles in that volume against the diffusionist position by no means justified the SI in so totally dismissing the idea. But recently a far larger body of literature was made accessible in *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*.¹⁵ Of this work Professor David H. Kelley of the University of Calgary said, "Nobody can afford to offer an opinion on this subject from now on without having carefully considered this essential volume." Dr. Betty J. Meggers, one of the Smithsonian's own archaeologists, called it an "impressive bibliography and monumental effort." In 1993 it is time the SI statement regarding the Book of Mormon took into account the substantive nature of many of the 5600 entries in this bibliography (both pro and con) before peremptorily ruling out all non-Viking voyages. In the Introduction, the bibliographers said under the heading "interim conclusion" that, "It is likely that the technological capacity for transoceanic voyaging has been available . . . in the Old World fairly often in the past. [After surveying this huge literature] it seems to us both plausible and probable that numerous voyages did cross the oceans and in several places. Furthermore, available evidence from cultural, natural scientific, physical anthropological, linguistic and other studies can be plausibly mustered to support this view."¹⁶ Since these authors now know this

across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971).

¹⁵ John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1990).

¹⁶ Sorenson and Raish, x.

literature better than anybody else, their verdict of "plausible" deserves to be entertained seriously, and the SI statement ought to be cautioned by it.

Mesoamerican peoples reported to the Spanish explorers traditions that their ancestors had come from across the ocean. For example, Fray Bernardino de Sahagun recorded in 16th century Mexico that "Concerning the origin of this people the account which the old people give is that they came by sea . . . in some vessels of wood. . . ."17 Other traditional accounts are to the same effect.18

Again, Dr. Meggers and the late Clifford Evans discovered evidence while working under Smithsonian auspices that led them to conclude that Asiatics had indeed completed at least one epic voyage from Japan to Ecuador. Meggers continues to argue that position strongly.19

The least that must be said about item three in the SI statement is that it tries to stonewall the issue of transoceanic voyaging by speaking as if there were no issue. This is unsupportable for a responsible scholarly institution today (individual diehard scholars continue to dodge the problem in just that way, it is true).

Item four continues the line of thinking in the previous paragraph by making over-simplified pronouncements about the nature of the evidence for inter-hemispheric contacts. It says that none of the principal Old World domesticated food plants or animals were in the Americas before the arrival of the Spaniards. But when we examine the distribution of food plants and

17 *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (México: Editorial Nueva España, 1946), 1:13.

18 See John L. Sorenson, "Some Mesoamerican traditions of immigration by sea," *El México Antiguo* 8 (1955): 425-38.

19 See, most recently, "El origen transpacífico de la cerámica Valdivia; una revaluación," *Boletín del Museo Chileno de Arte Precolombino* 2 (1987): 9-31.

animals within the eastern hemisphere, we observe that, for example, the Romans lacked rice. So are we to conclude that they have had no contact with, say, India? They did, of course. They also lacked camels, so was the Middle East beyond their reach? Obviously not. This is misleading, methodologically sloppy argumentation. Cultural items do not spread automatically or inevitably even when people are aware of those items in the hands of others. In the Old World, areas quite close to each other often failed to share what we might ethnocentrically consider "principal" techniques or objects. Why this is so was discussed at length in the first three articles in *Man across the Sea* (cited above). What is important as evidence is what is shared, and the lists of features which support an early connection between the hemispheres is extensive, including a substantial number of crops.²⁰ This item four is a red herring drawing attention away from the serious methodological issues involved in responsibly addressing this topic. It is difficult to believe that serious anthropologists at the Smithsonian would have drafted such a naive paragraph as this.²¹

Item five lists four materials said not to have been used in the New World before A.D. 1492: "iron," "steel," "glass," and "silk." These are words used in the Book of Mormon text. Their use in the translation of the original

²⁰ See, for example, George F. Carter, "Domesticates as artifacts," in *The Human Mirror: Material and Spatial Images of Man*, ed. Miles Richardson (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 201-30. For an array of parallels in symbols, in some ways more telling than objects, see John L. Sorenson, "The significance of an apparent relationship between the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica," 219-41, in *Man across the Sea*.

²¹ Any future version of the statement on the Book of Mormon which discusses how scholars ought to deal with evidences for transoceanic contacts should examine carefully Smithsonian scholar Betty Meggers' paper: "The significance of diffusion as a factor in evolution," in *Reprint Proceedings, Circum-Pacific Prehistory Conference, Seattle, August 1-6, 1989*, part VIII: Prehistoric Trans-Pacific Contacts (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1989). Also of value: Harold Schneider, "Prehistoric transpacific contact and the theory of culture change," *American Anthropologist* 79 (1977): 9-25.

record to English has led many to suppose that the same substances were used by the "Nephites" referred to in the book as come to our minds when we encounter the terms today. Other translated terms used in the Book of Mormon are in the same category, such as "wine," "horse," and "cattle." But English words in a translation must, of course, be dealt with in the same cautionary terms as words that translators utilize when treating any ancient text. For example, some of the Hebrew words translated as the names of certain metals in the Old Testament are problematical; several different words have been translated as a single English term, "bronze" and "steel" for instance.²² Anybody who has done translating realizes the difficulty, and sometimes the impossibility, of finding equivalent terms.²³

The problem is clear in the case of Book of Mormon "silk." It is simple-minded to suppose automatically that the Nephites reported in that account must, like east Asians, have had silkworms which fed on mulberry leaves in order to account for the use of this word. Early Spaniards in the New World encountered this very terminological difficulty. We learn, for example, that a wild silkworm in Mexico spun a fiber which Indians gathered to make a fabric.²⁴ Should the European explorers have called this fabric *seda* ("silk") or not? Classical scholars face a similar problem; Aristotle and other

²² See, for example, Lenore O. Keene Congdon, "Steel in antiquity: a problem in terminology," in *Studies Presented to George M. A. Hanfmann*, ed. David G. Mitten et al., *Harvard University Fogg Art Museum Monographs in Art and Archaeology II* (Mainz: Philipp Von Zabern, 1971), 17-27.

²³ The problems are exemplified and discussed at length in such publications of the United Bible Societies as Jan De Waard and William A. Smalley, *A Translator's Handbook on the Book of Amos* (Stuttgart: UBS, 1979); consider for example the problems with "simple" terms like "cedar" and "oak" discussed on p. 224.

²⁴ I. W. Johnson, "Basketry and textiles," in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1, Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 10:312; cf. W. H. Prescott, *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 84, citing Humboldt.

Greeks describe a silkworm, but the reference is considered by modern experts to be a conflation of information on two types of silkworm native to southeastern Europe and having no direct connection to the Far East.²⁵ Moreover, fine hair from the belly of rabbits of central Mexico was woven into a cloth which the Spanish considered "equal in finish and texture" to silk.²⁶ A silk-like fiber (kapok) from the pod of the ceiba tree was gathered in Yucatan and spun; this seems to be what Bishop Diego de Landa referred to at one point as "silk." Clavigero said of this kapok that it was "as soft and delicate, and perhaps more so, than silk."²⁷ Yet cotton, the common textile material in Mesoamerica, itself was sometimes woven so fine that Cortez claimed textiles "made of silk could not be compared."²⁸ Furthermore, fine fibers were taken from the wild pineapple plant and from "silk-grass," *Aecmea magalena*, that could qualify as "silk" for texture.²⁹ So would the Book of Mormon be in error in referring to "silk"? Not if Mesoamerica was its scene.

²⁵ William T. M. Forbes, "The silkworm of Aristotle," *Classical Philology* 25 (1930): 22-26. Meanwhile Gisela M. A. Richter holds that the thin, soft, diaphanous cloth called by the classical Greeks *amorginon* was silk produced by certain wild moths on only two small Greek islands. See "Silk in Greece," *American Journal of Archaeology* 33 (1929): 27-33.

²⁶ H. H. Bancroft, *The Native Races of the Pacific States* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), 2:484.

²⁷ Alfred M. Tozzer, ed., Landa's *Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, *Harvard University Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Papers No. 18* (1941), 201; he used the same term, "silk," for the Asiatic fabric imported by the Spaniards. Also Francesco Saverino Clavigero, *History of Mexico* 1, trans. Charles Cullen (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1817), 41.

²⁸ Fernando Cortez, *His Five Letters of Relation to the Emperor Charles V*, ed. Francis A. MacNutt (Gorieta, New Mexico: Rio Grande, 1977), 1:254.

²⁹ Felix W. McBryde, "Cultural and historical geography of Southwest Guatemala," *Smithsonian Institution Institute of Social Anthropology Publication No. 4* (1947), 149; William E. Safford, "Food plants and textiles of ancient America," *Proceedings, 19th International Congress of Americanists, Washington, 1915* (Washington, 1917): 17.

Exactly the same situation prevails with the term "wine." Usage of this label was looser in the English of earlier days; Joseph Smith's translation of the Book of Mormon need not have used it in the narrow sense most people recognize today. Samuele Bacchiocchi's research recently found that biblical "wine" (whether from Latin "vinum," Greek "oinos", or Hebrew "yayin") could refer to the juice of grapes, and even the grapes themselves, in addition to the fermented beverage.³⁰ But grapes need not be involved for a drink to be called "wine" (although grapes were known and used in pre-Columbian America³¹). Weston LaBarre's classic anthropological survey of American beverages considered it useless to try to distinguish "wine" from "beer" in the historical literature.³² The fermented juice of the maguey plant, "pulque," was labelled "wine" by the Spaniards,³³ and plantings of the maguey cactus were termed "vineyards."³⁴ But other "wines" were made, according to Spanish writers: from bananas,³⁵ pineapples,³⁶ the trunk of the coyol palm,³⁷ and the bark of a tree.³⁸

³⁰ *Wine in the Bible: A Biblical Study on the Use of Alcoholic Beverages* (Berrien Springs, Michigan: Biblical Perspectives, 1989), 54-76.

³¹ Compare Tozzer, Landa's *Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, 198, and F. V. Scholes and D. Warren, "The Olmec region at Spanish conquest," *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 3, part 2, ed. G. R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 784.

³² "Native American beers," *American Anthropologist* 40 (1938): 224-34.

³³ For example, Bernardino de Sahagun, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (México: Editorial Pedro Robredo, 1938), 1:313.

³⁴ As in Thomas Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels in the New World*, ed. J. E. S. Thompson (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 76.

³⁵ McBryde, "Cultural and historical geography of Southwest Guatemala," 36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 144.

³⁷ Gage, *Thomas Gage's Travels*, 76.

³⁸ Widely used in the lowland Maya area as "balche"; see Tozzer, Landa's *Relacion*, 198.

This short excursion into the complexities of translating from an ancient text³⁹ is relevant to the "iron," "steel," and "glass" mentioned in the SI statement as not found in ancient America. Before that question can be addressed in terms of archaeological findings, textual issues, including translation, must be dealt with. For instance, "glass" is mentioned just twice in the Book of Mormon in English. The first use (2 Nephi 13:23) is in a quotation from the book of Isaiah in the Old Testament (Isa. 3:23) where "glasses" are mentioned as an item of decoration used by Israelite women. However, modern translations of this passage prefer "mirrors," which could anciently have been of polished metal as much as of "glass." Put another way, the "glass" of Isaiah 3:23 and thus of 1 Nephi 13:23 is an anglicism which need not refer to a vitreous substance. The other usage of "glass" in the Book of Mormon is in Ether 3:1, which reports an event which took place in the Old World. Thus the question of whether glass was or was not present in the ancient New World is irrelevant; either critique or defense of the term "glass" is pointless inasmuch as the text of the scripture makes no clear reference to the substance "glass" in a New World context.

The translation problem haunts "steel" too. We can hardly be sure of its referent substance in the Book of Mormon when "steel" in the King James Version of the Bible "should often be read 'bronze' or 'copper.'"⁴⁰ Moreover,

³⁹ On the ancient form and content of the Book of Mormon original source, see John L. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican codex," *Newsletter and Proceedings, Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 139 (1976, Provo, Utah): 1-7; and, among many other publications, articles by Tvedtnes, Szink, Goff, Welch, Seely, Ricks, and Ostler in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, eds. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1991).

⁴⁰ Robert J. Forbes, *Metallurgy in Antiquity: A Notebook for Archaeologists and Technologists* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1950), 402.

meteoric nickel-iron has been termed "a type of steel,"⁴¹ and this substance was well-known in Mesoamerica.⁴² Iron was used in Mesoamerica, although little technical testing has been done to determine how much of it was smelted and how much meteoritic. Archaeologist Sigvald Linne found a piece of smelted iron in a tomb at Mitla, Oaxaca,⁴³ while at Teotihuacan, he excavated a pottery vessel which had been used for melting a "metallic-looking" mass which contained iron and copper.⁴⁴ Iron artifacts and minerals have appeared in numerous excavations and museum collections in Mesoamerica and are mentioned in traditions. It is not out of the question that this metal was used with some consistency before the arrival of the Spaniards.⁴⁵ Caution may be recommended in phrasing any future statement from SI because of changing knowledge. Heather Lechtman has said about metallurgy in South America, "it would be foolish to attempt any generalizations or careful evaluations of . . . beginnings in Andean metallurgy when we see that within the last thirteen years . . . bits and pieces of information have slowly [been] collected to alter our previous notions. . . ."⁴⁶ The same applies to Mesoamerica. I have shown that well over a

41 Ibid.

42 Lincoln LaPaz, "Topics in meteorics. Hunting meteorites: their recovery, use, and abuse from Paleolithic to present," *University of New Mexico Publications in Meteoritics* 6 (1969): 55-67; H. H. Nininger, *Our Stone-Pelted Planet* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), chapter 13; and *Find a Falling Star* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1972), 238.

43 "Zapotecan antiquities," *Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, Publication* 4 (n.s., 1938): 75.

44 "Mexican highland cultures," *Ethnographical Museum of Sweden, Stockholm, Publication* 7 (n.s., 1942): 132.

45 Dozens of references are given in the annotated bibliography, John L. Sorenson, *Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text* (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992).

46 "The Central Andes," in *The Coming of the Age of Iron*, ed. T. A. Wertime and J. D. Muhly

hundred specimens are reported in the literature, but quite systematically ignored by convention-minded archaeologists, which definitely or possibly show metals in use earlier and more widely than the received view allows.⁴⁷

Thus the Smithsonian statement on the Book of Mormon can be faulted in two ways in the matters it deals with in its fifth item: (1) it is uninformed about finds that contradict its establishmentarian dictum that certain materials were absent from Mesoamerica; and (2) it manifests naivete in handling the terminology in a potentially ancient text.

Item six in the statement returns to the question of transpacific voyages. It says if they were made at all, they had little or no effect and could have happened solely by accident. Negative statements of this kind are probably impossible to document by their nature, yet it is evident, as indicated above, that this offhanded dismissal is really based in ignorance, not in careful survey and evaluation of the extensive evidence bearing on the matter. This is the way of blind faith, not of science. Once more it is noteworthy that the long list of careful scholars who refuse to be bulldozed to one side by such sweeping denials includes as leaders Dr. Meggers and the late Dr. Evans. Both scholars, as well as numerous others, have been convinced that transpacific trips were made from thousands of years ago.⁴⁸ Among other major contributors to the relevant literature, whose writings are surveyed in the *Pre-Columbian Contact* bibliography cited above, we may mention as worthy of special attention José Alcina Franch, George F. Carter,

(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 285.

⁴⁷ *Metals and Metallurgy*, 58-74.

⁴⁸ See as a fundamental statement of their position Evans and Meggers, "Transpacific origin of Valdivia phase pottery of coastal Ecuador," *Actas de la 36a. Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Sevilla, 1964* (Sevilla, 1966), 1:63-7.

Robert von Heine-Geldern, Stephen Jett, David H. Kelley, Ling Shun-Shêng, Joseph Needham, and Paul Tolstoy. Any Smithsonian statement on the Book of Mormon cannot be considered to be based on sound scholarship if it dismisses out of hand such high quality work as theirs. Transoceanic voyaging, including those journeys reported in the Book of Mormon, appear within the realm of the possible according to a great deal of modern research.

The seventh item in the statement concerns whether a connection existed between Egypt and Mexico in pre-Columbian times. It is not clear why this particular statement is included, since the Book of Mormon makes no claim of direct connection with Egypt. Nevertheless, I am unaware of a single Egyptologist who has paid enough attention to the necessary information on both Egypt and Mexico to justify the negative statement, "no connection." There are, in fact, materials that point to a connection and which deserve to be carefully considered when someone qualified actually attempts a valid comparison.⁴⁹

Paragraph eight is easier to agree with, in general. Finds of "ancient Egyptian, Hebrew, and other Old World writings in the New World in pre-Columbian contexts" are, in many cases, subject to question. Few have been carefully investigated, and some of the purported investigations and translations of such inscriptions are indeed fanciful. Yet few conventional archaeologists or epigraphers, such as the Smithsonian statement apparently relies upon, have seriously studied these writings but have rejected them out of hand in an arbitrary manner. In recent years two pieces of scholarship of high critical quality have concluded that some of the inscriptions are genuine

⁴⁹ For example, see certain cultural parallels cited and documented in my article in *Man across the Sea* cited earlier, as well as the interesting if uneven materials provided in R. A. Jairazbhoy, *Ancient Egyptians in Middle and South America* (London: Ra Publications, 1981), and others of his writings abstracted in *Pre-Columbian Contact*.

and do show Old World writing systems in ancient use in America.⁵⁰ Others inscriptions remain in the realm of the possible.⁵¹ It is simply not possible at this time responsibly to rule out the possibility that some inscriptions date from pre-Columbian times and are genuine. This does not make any particular difference in terms of the Book of Mormon, however. According to that volume, the writing system used in its production was not known to any other group (see Mormon 9:34) so would not be among those scattered widely in this hemisphere and claimed by "American epigraphers" to have Old World origins. Obviously the Book of Mormon script was not "Egyptian" as such, although it was considered conceptually linked with ancient Egyptian glyphs by its users. Incidentally, Linda Miller Van Blerkom of the University of Colorado has shown that "Maya glyphs were used in the same six ways as those in Egyptian" writing.⁵²

In summation, careful consideration of the Smithsonian Institution's "Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon" and the anthropological and related literature relevant to it indicates that while it was a justified attempt to deal with a public information problem, the substance of the statement is often unreliable and unduly narrow. It consistently oversimplifies, like a busy professor speaking down to a curious and somewhat pesky child. The answers it gives reveal no serious knowledge of the actual cultural claims or

⁵⁰ David H. Kelley, "Proto-Tifinagh and Proto-Ogham in the Americas," *The Review of Archaeology* (Spring 1990): 1-9; and William R. McGlone *et al.*, *Ancient American Inscriptions: Plow Marks or History?* (Long Hill, Massachusetts: Early Sites Research Society, 1993).

⁵¹ See many works indexed in *Pre-Columbian Contact*, vol. 2, under "writing," particularly Jacques de Mahieu, "Corpus des inscriptions runiques d'Amérique du Sud," *Kadath* 68 (Brussels, 1988): 11-42.

⁵² "A comparison of Maya and Egyptian hieroglyphs," *Katunob* 11 (August 1979): 1-8.

implications of the Book of Mormon, while its facts concerning ancient America or cultural process are seriously flawed.

Mormons and non-Mormons alike ought to leave the Smithsonian folks alone and let them get on with the technical work for which they are qualified. The myth deserves smothering that they are closet Mormons, on the one hand, or highly-informed specialists on archaeology relevant to the Book of Mormon, on the other. But inquiries are likely to continue; therefore a new handout should be prepared which is more carefully phrased. The following would be defensible:

1993 Draft "Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon"

Inquiries are directed to the Institution from time to time about the Book of Mormon. This statement provides the information most commonly requested.

1. Copies of the Book of Mormon, like other widely-published volumes, are available to our staff should they wish to consult them.
2. The Book of Mormon is not and has never been used other than incidentally in research conducted by Smithsonian scholars. Since the book is primarily religious in nature, concern with it does not normally or appropriately fall within the Institution's mission, anymore than the Bible or the Koran.
3. Statements in the volume and interpretations of its content made by those who accept it as sacred history do impinge upon matters concerning pre-Columbian American cultures which are of normal professional concern to Smithsonian and other scientists and scholars who do not accept the Book of Mormon as historical. Latter-day Saint scholars who believe in the

historical nature of the record and have also done research on its text generally maintain that it refers to events that took place in an area in the New World only a few hundred miles in dimension, not the entire hemisphere as Mormons once thought. These believing scholars further hold that all or part of Mesoamerica (central and southern Mexico and northern Central America) was this scene and that, therefore, the peoples and cultures of that area alone within the western hemisphere should be compared with statements in the Book of Mormon. If this position is correct, then only a small number of experts trained in materials of the specific place and time where the "Book of Mormon peoples" supposedly lived can answer some questions on this topic. Few of those experts have invested the effort to deal with those specifics, hence answers to some queries remain general.

In this context, the following statements reflect the position of the Department of Anthropology on issues which have been raised:

Q. The Book of Mormon reports that several parties crossed the oceans to settle in the Americas and to become culturally influential there. Do anthropologists consider this scenario sound and is there convincing evidence that such voyages succeeded and their parties colonize American territory?

A. Most anthropologists and other scholars who deal with this subject continue to maintain that convincing evidence is lacking for such voyages and colonies, other than in the case of the Norse or Vikings. A minority of scholars—many not evidently qualified by training to deal with this issue but others with substantial qualifications—point to what they consider significant parallels between Old World and New World cultures as well as early

nautical capabilities that support the idea that certain transoceanic voyages could and did take place and which resulted in local cultural impacts and perhaps more.

Q. The Book of Mormon claims that settlers from the land of Israel reached America and became ancestors of American Indians. How does this stack up against the findings of scientists about the biological history of native American groups?

A. American native peoples are generally considered descended from Mongoloid groups which reached North America via the Bering Strait then spread throughout the hemisphere. A significant minority of qualified researchers say that a Mongoloid overlay of bodily characteristics obscures the presence of some non-Mongoloids. The latter, they hold, are visible in Mesoamerican and other American art and skeletal material from ancient times and some of those may have arrived by transoceanic travel. The scientific methods available for studying this topic are not adequate at this time to establish one or the other view clearly.

Q. The Book of Mormon speaks of features that are claimed by scientists expert on ancient American cultures not to be present in the New World, such as "silk," "steel," and "horses." What is the public to believe about this?

A. There is no recognized evidence that silk of the specific type known in East Asia, steel in the normal sense of that term, and horses were known or used in ancient America. The same is true of certain other substances or features reported in the Book of Mormon. Most experts hold that such labels cannot be considered to reflect ancient American life accurately.

However, certain scholars who hold Latter-day Saint beliefs note that such terms could be used to refer to materials or objects other than those familiar to modern readers (e.g., a "horse" might have been a deer, the name not being translated with clarity to English; there is fragmentary evidence that deer may have been used, in Mesoamerica, in certain ways like horses). If the text of the Book of Mormon is construed in this manner, then the issue cannot be resolved by reference to normal scholarship.