NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

Title Behind the Mask, Behind the Curtain: Uncovering the Illusion

Author(s) Brant A. Gardner

Reference *FARMS Review* 17/2 (2005): 145–195.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* (2005), by Joel P. Kramer and Scott R. Johnson.

Behind the Mask, Behind the Curtain: Uncovering the Illusion

Brant A. Gardner

Magicians are illusionists who entertain with wonderful things that appear real. Of course their craft is not real magic any more than the Wizard of Oz was more than a man behind a curtain. It is masterful illusion, the art of misdirection, a play upon our credulity. A magician lures us into believing we have seen something that is not really there.

Living Hope Ministries has produced a film entitled *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon* that performs magic tricks with ideas. It slickly demonstrates its points with the classic techniques of misdirection, unexamined assumptions, and hidden information. In technique and effect, the film is the analog of a magic show. One can watch it and actually believe that one has seen something, although that is not in reality what happened.

Not that long ago a few television specials took a different tack on magic shows. Rather than celebrate the illusion, they showed the reality behind the curtains. It seems appropriate to use that model as I examine *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon.* When we see how the magician performed the trick, it does not seem nearly so impressive. In this case,

Review of Joel P. Kramer and Scott R. Johnson. *The Bible vs. the Book of Mormon.* Brigham City, UT: Living Hope Ministries, 2005. $20.00.

the illusion is that the film is based on scholarship. Unmasked, the film is far from scholarly—it is empty propaganda.

The film is separated into several segments. To help those who might like to follow along, I will divide this review into the film's segments and discuss them in order. For each segment I will present Living Hope's illusion, and then I will unmask it.

Introduction

The Illusion: The main question of the introduction echoes throughout the film: "Is the Book of Mormon comparable to the Bible?" The film carefully creates a contrast between a believable Bible and an unbelievable Book of Mormon.

The Unmasking: The film clearly intends to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon and the Bible are not comparable by taking a very critical view of the Book of Mormon while presenting the Bible as though it generated no controversy at all. This approach is a fundamental misrepresentation of the scholarly climate for both the Bible and the Book of Mormon.

William G. Dever, a professor of Near Eastern archaeology and anthropology at the University of Arizona, believes that the Bible is historical. Nevertheless, he notes:

> The "archaeological revolution" in biblical studies confidently predicted by [George E.] Wright and his teacher, the legendary William Foxwell Albright, had come about by the 1980s, but not entirely in the positive way that they had expected. Many of the "central events" as narrated in the Hebrew Bible turn out not to be historically verifiable (i.e., not "true") at all.[1]

Despite the above quotation, the "truth" of the Bible is obtained by faith and revelation, whether it is historically verifiable or not. By ignoring the questions that are currently asked of the Bible, the film creates the illusion that the Bible is unassaulted and unassailable but

1. William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 21.

that the Book of Mormon suffers from questions on every front. The reality is that the Bible must also stand before modern scholarship and answer serious questions. In that respect, the Bible and the Book of Mormon are quite comparable. Hard questions may be asked of each, and in the end, the answers, not the questions, are important. In this film, the viewer never even sees the questions directed at the Bible. For the Book of Mormon, they never see the answers.

The Story of the Bible; The Story of the Book of Mormon

The Illusion: The film provides an outline of the stories found in the Bible and declares these stories to be historical. The Book of Mormon is presented as a work that merely claims to be history.

The Unmasking: The illusion of these two segments is subtle. While ostensibly simply setting the stage, the film portrays a Bible that can be easily confirmed as historical and a Book of Mormon for which no authentication can be found.

For the Book of Mormon, the misdirection comes in the way the story is presented. Viewers are told that the Bible is a historical account of the Old World and that the Book of Mormon is a historical account of the Americas. This subtle illusion depends upon viewer predispositions. Viewers who are familiar with the Bible know it took place in a specific location in the Old World. Hearing that the book is a historical account of the Old World, they immediately think of a small area between the ancient cultures of Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon and do not conclude that the Bible is a history of the entire Old World.

This contrasts with the illusion created when the Book of Mormon is mentioned. The film portrays it as a "historical account of the Americas." Lacking any similar limiting preknowledge of the Book of Mormon, a viewer may easily suppose that this means the entire Western Hemisphere. Indeed, many (probably most) Latter-day Saints may have supposed that for a number of years. The film plays upon existing assumptions without calling attention to what the producers do not want the viewer to see, creating a powerful illusion. In this case, the illusionists do not want to deal with the best Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon.

That body of scholarship, which has been growing in volume and sophistication of method and detail for at least the last forty years (and presaged for perhaps one hundred years before that),[2] is completely ignored in the film. In exactly those places in which a scholarly presentation would discuss the best contrary evidence, this film opts for the propaganda technique of ignoring anything that does not support its thesis.

There are only two possible explanations for interpreting this remarkable lack of scholarly honesty. Either every person appearing in the film is unaware of that body of scholarship, or withholding that information is intentional. While the first could well be true for some of the experts in the film (particularly the archaeologists in Israel), it is extremely doubtful for others. Thomas W. Murphy (who has a PhD in anthropology), for example, appears as one of the primary experts in the film. He recently published an article in which he addresses some of the issues he so carefully ignores in this film.[3] Murphy is obviously aware of Latter-day Saint scholarship that presents a different side to the issues he discusses, yet he gives no indication of that awareness at any point in this film. The film's producers and editors should have had access to relevant information from Murphy that should have been presented. One must conclude that this magician knows more than he wants the audience to see.

Geography

The Illusion: The film shows a number of modern signs bearing the names of ancient locations. In addition to the names, the narration tells us that various mountains and rivers correspond to descrip-

2. Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–75.

3. Thomas W. Murphy, "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon,* ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 61–63. Much of the best work on the Book of Mormon is published or sponsored by FARMS. In these pages Murphy speaks directly of the work of FARMS and specifically of the limited geography of the Book of Mormon that alters the way Latter-day Saint scholars perceive Book of Mormon history in the real world. Murphy certainly knows of FARMS even though in the film he studiously avoids engaging any of the findings and arguments the organization has published.

tions in the Bible. At this point, the film cuts to an expert witness. William E. Wilson,[4] an erstwhile archaeologist who is described inaccurately as a Latter-day Saint,[5] says: "There is no map showing Book of Mormon lands because they can't place it on earth. They don't know where it is." Following this comment, the film cuts to pictures of maps of Book of Mormon lands, clearly none of which is a real-world map.

The Unmasking: The most favorable reading of this section has the makers of the film concentrating on the lack of an official declaration of the location of Book of Mormon lands. While the church clearly has no official position, that does not mean that "they don't know where it is." John E. Clark, who is both a Latter-day Saint and a frequently cited Mesoamerican archaeologist, notes in his article on geography for the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism:* "Many scholars currently see northern Central America and southern Mexico (Mesoamerica) as the most likely location of the Book of Mormon lands. However, such views are private and do not represent an official position of the Church."[6] A statement of location that appears in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* may not be an official position (as Clark notes), but it certainly indicates at least a favorable consideration of the position. The statement is strong enough that the film should have addressed it explicitly.

Wilson and others imply that Latter-day Saint scholars "don't know where it is." Unless Wilson is oblivious of LDS scholarship (which would make him a poor "expert"), it is an intentional misstatement. Wilson's statement is even more interesting because he performs a mind-reading trick, announcing a reason for the church's lack of an official statement (when no explanation has been given). Since direct evidence contradicts Wilson's assertion about the identification of a probable location

4. Writing at www.lhvm.org/wilson.htm (accessed 4 January 2006), Living Hope Ministries admitted: "The first duplication run of the video incorrectly named the LDS anthropologist from Northern Arizona University (NAU) as 'Wil West.' The name Wil West is a nickname of sorts that we mistakenly used instead of his legal name, which is William E. Wilson." They then offer to replace older copies of the video having the titling error with copies having the corrected title.

5. Late in the film Wilson discusses losing faith in the Book of Mormon. He presents himself in evangelical terms at the end of the film and not as a Latter-day Saint.

6. John E. Clark, "Book of Mormon Geography," in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism,* 1:178.

for Book of Mormon events, we simply cannot believe his mind-reading trick either.

Nevertheless, in spite of the lack of explicit interaction with Latter-day Saint scholarship, the film's editors appear to be aware of at least its general outlines, for they spend a good deal of time filming in Mesoamerica. The only reason for selecting that area of the world, the very area that Clark identified as the place where many Latter-day Saint scholars locate the Book of Mormon, would be to respond to the scholarship they pretend does not exist. The illusionists attempt to combat a position that they do not admit actually exists. The illusion is stronger because they make it appear that there is no contradictory information, even when they know there is.

Murphy also claims that "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints takes no official position on the geography of the Book of Mormon. One of the reasons for this is obvious. It is that the events never took place anywhere!" Half of the statement is true. When Murphy notes that there is no official geography, he is on firm ground. But when he gives a reason, he is attempting the same mind-reading technique Wilson used earlier. How good is this inventive answer?

The most generous reading is that it is Murphy's version of sleight of hand. Stating that the church does not know where the Book of Mormon took place may be a way to read the fact of official neutrality on the topic, but it distorts the scholarly picture by suggesting that there is no known location. Latter-day Saint scholars have been homing in on Mesoamerica for over one hundred and fifty years. Certainly the last thirty to forty years have seen a significant refinement of this position. As noted earlier, Murphy certainly knows this, though throughout the film he avoids the relevant scholarship.

John L. Sorenson has presented the best arguments for placing the Book of Mormon in the real world. He was circulating a correlation of the Book of Mormon to a specific geography in the 1970s.[7] For various reasons, this information was first published by David Palmer in

7. In 1975, John Sorenson gave me a copy of his manuscript that later became *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. He had circulated it to others earlier than that.

1981.[8] In 1984, Sorenson published information in the *Ensign* about his correlation of the Book of Mormon to real-world geography, along with some of the implications of setting the text in that area of the world.[9] Sorenson published his book-length correlation of the Book of Mormon to a specific geography in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* in 1985.[10]

Sorenson's geography identifies the spatial relationships according to the text of the Book of Mormon and then compares them to specific features of Mesoamerica. He locates valleys, lakes, rivers, and hills, just as the film indicates has been done for the Bible.[11] The only reason that the Book of Mormon appears incomparable to the Bible in geography is that the producers have not shared Sorenson's information with their viewers. As with any illusion, the important thing is not what you see but what you are not allowed to see.

Is it possible that the authors of the film were simply unaware of the major focus of Latter-day Saint scholarly work on Book of Mormon geography for the last thirty years? Believing that stretches one's credulity, particularly since the film spends so much time discussing Mesoamerica and uses Murphy (who has written about this geographic position) as an expert witness and since the cover of Sorenson's book is actually displayed in one of the film's collages. Ignorance did not keep this information from the viewers but rather a choice made by the film's producers, who decided to keep the best information from the audience. One would suspect that if the producers had had a good answer

8. David Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient America* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981), now being reissued in a new paperback format as *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Springville, UT: Cedar Fort, 2005).

9. See John L. Sorenson, "Digging into the Book of Mormon: Our Changing Understanding of Ancient America and Its Scripture," *Ensign,* September 1984, 26–37; October 1984, 12–23.

10. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

11. It should be noted that the methodology for locating the Book of Mormon in the real world begins with the text itself. An internal geography is created from the descriptions of the text. These details are laid out in John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000). A similar examination of the geographic clues in Homer's *Iliad* led Schliemann to the location now acknowledged as the site of the legendary Troy.

to geographical issues, they would have made it part of the film. Since such an acknowledgment is entirely absent, one must suppose that they really have no answer and consequently prefer to pretend that one does not exist.

Peoples and Empires

The Illusion: This part of the film contrasts the clear evidence for civilizations mentioned in the Bible to a declared lack of evidence for Book of Mormon cultures. The Old World evidence is presented by showing impressive archaeological remains. For the Book of Mormon, the narrator begins by discussing the Jaredites: "The Jaredites are promised that they will become the greatest nation on earth." As this statement is read, the film pans to a countryside that is empty of any identifiable human influence. The film's expert, Murphy, then declares that "no traces of it" can be found.

The Unmasking: Of course the makers of the film give no indication of what the "it" is that they were looking for and did not find. Certainly they could have found something to film other than an empty countryside. I live in New Mexico, which has large tracts of empty countryside. Filming that while suggesting that Albuquerque did not exist would be an interesting visual illusion but would obviously be incorrect. What are they not telling us about the Jaredites?

They have avoided two major points. The first is that the geographic correlation in Sorenson's work suggests that the land of the Jaredites corresponds to an area within the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The Book of Mormon tells us that in this location we should find a major civilization with advanced architecture and political structures and that we should find them by at least 1200 BC. The Book of Mormon tells us where to look and what to look for.

The second important bit of information withheld from us is that the Isthmian region is the location of what has been called the mother civilization of Mesoamerica, a civilization present in that area since at least 1200 BC (and earlier). The culture has been given the name *Olmec* (what they called themselves is unknown). The Olmec undertook massive building projects and developed an artistic style that influenced

Mesoamerican art for centuries. In the Mesoamerican region, which would have been their whole world, they were clearly the greatest of nations.

While it would not be accurate to equate the Jaredites with the Olmec, it is certainly plausible that the Jaredites participated in that culture. The Book of Mormon predicted an ancient high civilization in a certain location and time. Archaeology has found one that fits the geographical, architectural, and temporal description of the Book of Mormon.

The film never mentions the Olmec. It never discusses the correlation between that culture and the geography mentioned in the Book of Mormon. The very evidence that contradicts their position is suppressed. Once again, we might generously assume that they were unaware of the best Latter-day Saint scholarship. But Murphy cannot make that excuse since he is certainly aware of it. Even though he disagrees with this literature, he intentionally oversimplifies when he says that no traces of the Jaredites can be found.[12] Once again, in the film, too much of what the viewer can see is controlled by the agenda and not by the substance of a scholarly discussion. The stage magician makes sure you see what he wants you to see. The stage magician also makes sure that you do not see what he does not want you to see. The film is more illusory than scholarly.

More Archaeological Illusion: The film attempts to demonstrate that Mesoamerica cannot have any relationship to the Book of Mormon. Two experts are interviewed. Archaeologist Steven Whittington, of the University of Maine, states: "I don't know of any evidence that the Nephites existed in the Americas," and Murphy provides even more damaging opinions: "The civilizations we find throughout Central America tended to peak, find their great climax, between 600 and 900 AD, well after the events described in the Book of Mormon."

The Unmasking: There is no way to know how much information Whittington has about the Book of Mormon. Likely he was unaware of

12. For information on the Jaredites, see parts 2 and 3 of Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert, The World of the Jaredites, There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 151–423.

Latter-day Saint scholarship on the text. Would Living Hope Ministries have informed him? One can best read Whittington's statement as an honest evaluation from someone unfamiliar with the whole picture. It is true, however, that nothing in the New World has been found with the name *Nephite* on it.

Less explicable is Murphy's statement, which is completely accurate—the civilizations of Mesoamerica did reach their climax between AD 600 and 900. As Murphy claims, this period is well after the close of the Book of Mormon. The statement is not problematic, but its context is. Murphy leads the viewers to believe that the late florescence of Mesoamerican culture precludes any early Mesoamerican cultures. Murphy must know that his statement is misleading. If he knows enough to make that cautiously correct statement, he knows enough to realize that he left out significant relevant information. While the high point of Mesoamerican culture occurs later, nevertheless, there were very impressive predecessors. Archaeology clearly demonstrates that there were impressive cities during Book of Mormon times. The ruins of Nakbé and El Mirador are massive sites with very impressive architecture that flourished during Book of Mormon times. All the aspects of Mesoamerican culture and society that peak during the Late Classic—social, religious, architectural, and artistic—were present in less elaborate forms much earlier, including in Book of Mormon times. In the regions where Sorenson suggests that the Book of Mormon took place, he has identified possible candidate sites that date to the correct period for the Book of Mormon and fit the geographic descriptions in the text.[13] The pinnacle of Mesoamerican culture came later but was built on a foundation that is known to have been in the area Sorenson suggests for Book of Mormon activities and during the correct time.

Perhaps, however, Murphy's statement was pronounced innocently and was pulled out of context by the film's editors, who are certainly not above such a trick. Later in the film they pull quotations from Gordon B. Hinckley and Daniel C. Peterson out of context. Whether Murphy himself or the editors created this particular deception, someone has seri-

13. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 141, 152, 168, and others.

ously misrepresented the situation in Mesoamerica. Either the editors or Murphy (or both) have attempted to have us see something that is not really there. With a wave of his magician's rhetorical wand, Murphy's statement has made more than a thousand years of Mesoamerican culture vanish into thin air.

Another Disappearing Civilization Illusion: Continuing the theme of missing remains, the film concentrates on the idea that a large civilization cannot vanish without a trace. First, the narrator says: "The Bible speaks of peoples who no longer exist. Are they missing?" The response comes from Dr. Gabriel Barkay, a biblical archaeologist from Bar-Ilan University, Israel. He suggests that while the Canaanites no longer exist, we know about them through Egyptian sources and archaeological sites.

Dr. Katharina Galor of Brown University, associate director of the Tiberias excavation in Israel, then tells us that the Philistines had their own material culture that can be distinguished in the archaeological remains. Finally, Dr. Yizhar Hirschfeld, an archaeologist from the Hebrew University and director of the Tiberias excavation in Israel, confirms that it simply is not possible for a civilization to vanish without a trace.

The Unmasking: Of course, all these experts are correct. Unlike Murphy's illusion of a disappearing culture, in the real world civilizations leave traces. The problem does not lie with what these experts say but with the context in which their statements have been placed. Following the sleight of hand that made it appear that nothing in the New World existed during Book of Mormon times, these experts appear to be placing a final archaeological condemnation on a culture that should have left a trace and yet seems to be completely absent.

This final condemnation, however, is what begs to be examined. If we begin with Barkay's statement, we find the first indication of an issue that appears in other parts of the film. Barkay speaks of Egyptian records and the presence of Canaanites in those records, which is important historical confirmation of a Canaanite people. Is there support for Jaredites and Nephites in the New World outside of

the Book of Mormon? No. On that we can agree. Is this because, as the film suggests, nothing existed? No.

The problem is not that no remains have survived from the right place and time but rather that no *texts* have survived! Very few texts of any kind from Book of Mormon times are in existence. Even those few that date to the right time do not originate from locations that had any known correspondence with cities in the area where the Book of Mormon likely took place. Suggesting that the case of Egyptian documents should be instructive merely indicates that Barkay is familiar with the Old World but not with the New.

The Jaredites do not appear in texts. The Olmec left no texts. The New World can only envy the text-rich Old World. In spite of the lack of texts, however, the cultures did exist. Not only did the cultures exist, but members of those civilizations wrote. Evidence of early writing survives,[14] but not texts. The problem with the New World is not that the cultures were illiterate but that they wrote on perishable materials.

The claim that different cultures leave differing types of remains is certainly true. Mesoamerican archaeologists are quite aware of this and have traced a number of different cultural complexes through time and space. The issue is not whether different peoples can be identified but whether we are able to place familiar names to the remains of these identified peoples.

Could archaeological remains distinguish between Jaredite and Nephite civilizations? They might, if we knew what belonged to each. Archaeologists can certainly distinguish between Olmec and Maya, which are cultures from periods and regions appropriate to the Book of Mormon. If the Jaredites followed Olmec culture and the Nephites followed Maya culture, then we have already distinguished between the two. Note the problem that Dever discusses in attempting to find archaeological evidence of early Israel:

14. Joyce Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 32.

> The villages that have been excavated are characterized by U-shaped courtyard houses (the so-called "four-room houses"), clustered in groups of two to four, often sharing common walls. The houses have room for animal shelter and storage of provisions on the first floor and ample space for a large extended family on the second floor. These distinctive houses have virtually no precedents in Canaan, but they would be ideal farmhouses. . . . Harvard's Lawrence Stager has demonstrated that this unique house form and overall layout of these hill-country villages correspond closely with many narratives of daily life in the period of the Judges in the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, reflecting no doubt a close-knit family and clan structure and an agrarian lifestyle. In Stager's view the single-courtyard house represents the nuclear family dwelling; and the cluster of several such houses would then be the residence of the extended, or multi-generation family equivalent to the biblical *bêt-'āb,* or "house of the father."[15]

Dever is, of course, trying to find evidence of early Israel in Canaan. He finds archaeological remains that are different. How does he determine that they are early Israelite? Nothing specifically identifies them as such. They are simply farming villages. He determines that they were Israelite because they are in the right place and seem to match descriptions in the biblical text.

Is finding Book of Mormon lands or cultures comparable to this kind of real-world archaeology? We can perform exactly the same kind of analysis that Dever and Stager did in comparing the dwellings with the text. Starting with the text, we can match the features of the text to a Mesoamerican dwelling compound just as did Dever and Stager. Mesoamerican dwellings were basically compounds for multiple family units. How well does this archaeological feature fit with the rare Book of Mormon descriptions of dwelling units? We find the following in Alma: "For behold, he hath blessed mine house, he hath blessed me, and my women, and my children, and my father and my

15. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* 111–12.

kinsfolk; yea, even all my kindred hath he blessed, and the blessing of the Lord hath rested upon us according to the words which he spake" (Alma 10:11). When Amulek describes Alma's blessing, he paints a picture of how Amulek perceives his kin connections. These descriptions fit the general picture of Mesoamerican households.

First we have a structural division in the sentence that separates a list of kin from the generic "all my kindred." The sentence progresses from named sets to a generalized set of kindred, with "all my kindred" being the largest and most inclusive category. Among the Aztecs, there were certain penalties that could be applied to all of one's relatives.[16] For a penalty to be assessed upon all of one's relatives, there had to be a definition of what "all" meant—either to the fifth or the fourth generation, depending on the source.[17] Although the Aztecs represent a different language and time, the same necessities of defining a maximum kin group most likely would also have dictated Amulek's concepts of what "all my kindred" might mean.

The first set of kin is more interesting. The first term Amulek uses is "my house." For kin-based societies, this typically is as real as it is symbolic of the family. Kin-based societies frequently live in compounds. Excellent documents allow anthropologists to visualize some Aztec households close to the time of the Conquest. For the Aztecs, the "family" was termed *techan tlaca* or "the people of one's house." One account from 1580 indicates that houses typically contained six or seven married couples besides unmarried youth.[18]

The archaeological discovery of living areas that clearly contain multiple buildings led archaeologists to the conclusion that such an area was a family compound, which is a very common feature of the archaeo-

16. Bartolomé de las Casas, *Apologética Historia Sumaria,* ed. Edmundo O'Gorman (Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1967), 2:401.

17. See Diego Muñoz Camargo, *Historia de Tlaxcala* (Mexico: Atenéo Nacional de Ciencias y Artes, 1947), 95; and Edward E. Calneck, "The Sahagún Texts as a Source of Sociological Information," in *Sixteenth-Century Mexico: The Work of Sahagún,* ed. Munro S. Edmonson (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974), 200.

18. Francisco de Castañeda, "Official Reports on the Towns of Tequizistlan, Tepechpan, Acolman, and San Juan Teotihuacan," trans. and ed. Zelia Nuttall, *Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University* 11/2 (1926): 55.

logical sites of the Maya area dating to the Book of Mormon time period. A simple example is the site of Salinas La Blanca (which predates the Nephites), which has examples of two household mounds with multiple thatched houses, one with three houses and one with four.[19] Therefore, Amulek may plausibly have lived in a typical Mesoamerican household compound. When Amulek speaks first of Alma blessing his "house" and then lists specific groups, we are justified in assuming that these are people who are living in the same "house," which would mean the entire dwelling area, not a single structure.

In the case of Dever and Stager, they began with an accepted text against which they matched discovered remains. In the case of the Book of Mormon we know the remains and must then match them to the text. In both cases we have text and dwellings, but for each a different piece of data becomes the measuring device. Nevertheless, the comparison is the same. We have to match actual dates, geography, and features with the dates, geography, and features noted in the text. Same problem, same solution: compare the archaeology and the text.

The Machine Illusion: Murphy notes that the Nephites built machines. The film displays the following verse from the Book of Mormon:

> And we multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold, and in silver, and in precious things, and in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war—yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war. (Jarom 1:8)

The Unmasking: Murphy allows a viewer's modern perceptions to color the way the word *machinery* is read. Our modern world is so full of machines that we automatically equate that word with the kinds of machines with which we are familiar. Nevertheless, the fundamental

19. Kent V. Flannery, "The Early Formative Household Cluster on the Guatemalan Pacific Coast," in *The Early Mesoamerican Village,* ed. Kent V. Flannery (New York: Academic Press, 1976), 32.

definition of *machinery* (from Webster's 1828 dictionary) is "a complicated work, or combination of mechanical powers in a work, designed to increase, regulate or apply motion and force."[20] A lever is a machine. It cannot be known exactly what machinery is meant in the Nephite record, but it need not be the modern equipment that Murphy seems to imply.

Cities

The Illusion: The film spends a lot of time focusing on how the evidence for biblical cities is linked to the perseverance in the use of biblical names. This persistence of biblical names is contrasted with the absence of Book of Mormon names at Mesoamerican sites. To enforce the idea that those names should be present, the film presents expert Hector Escobedo, identified as a New World archaeologist from Guatemala. He states that "because of the advances in epigraphy, we are now able to read the ancient names of most of the sites."

This discussion is followed by the opinions of William Wilson and Thomas Murphy. Wilson tells us that "there is no evidence as far as where Zarahemla is, which is one of the big cities mentioned in the Book of Mormon." Murphy, filmed against the background of the archaeological site of Palenque, explains: "Here we are standing at Palenque today. The buildings that we see in front of us were, in fact, constructed several centuries after the events described in the Book of Mormon. So this could not possibly have been a Nephite city." The impression is that since no sites bear Book of Mormon names, they cannot be Book of Mormon sites. This impression is bolstered by the idea that sites like Palenque postdate the Book of Mormon.

The Unmasking. Most of Escobedo's statement is accurate. The advances in epigraphy have yielded the ancient names of *some* of the sites. The difference is that he uses the word *most,* which is certainly an exaggeration. I do not impute any deception to Escobedo. I do not know the context in which he said *most* or whether he would will-

20. Noah Webster, *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828; repr. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

ingly alter that word if he had the opportunity. The fact is that names have been identified for *some* sites. The first problem with Escobedo's unfortunate choice of the word *most* is that the original name can only be determined when texts are extant, and texts in stone tend to relate only to the Classic period, which covers the time from AD 250 to 800. For the greatest part of Book of Mormon history, we cannot identify the original names of sites because no texts remain to tell us the names. Unlike the Old World, in which the persistence of place-names has been recently demonstrated, such a continuation of place-names did not happen in the New World. The name *Zarahemla* may not have survived for the same reason that all but a handful of ancient names have not survived. Original names were lost and in most cases were replaced by the names the Aztecs used to refer to the locations, not what the natives of the area used earlier.

The second problem with the use of *most* is that there are really a fairly limited number of known city names. The names of cities are read from a glyph called an "emblem glyph," which has long been recognized as the identifier of a particular city. Peter Mathews wrote the seminal article on the analysis of these emblem glyphs. He lists thirty-five emblem glyphs for known sites and three more that refer to sites that have not yet been identified.[21] Of the thousands of archaeological sites in Guatemala alone, thirty-eight can hardly be called *most,* even if every one of those could be read for the ancient name. Undoubtedly, more have been discovered since Mathews's article, but those fortunate advances will still not yield the effect that the editors have intended, which is to suggest that we know all the city names and that Book of Mormon names are not found among them. The facts are that few names are known and that those are for the latest part of the Book of Mormon at best and from areas that are not generally considered to be part of Nephite territory. The film's comments about Mesoamerican place-names are pure illusion. The facts contradict them.

What of Wilson's assertion that "There is no evidence as far as where Zarahemla is"? This statement can only be made by avoiding

21. Peter Mathews, "Classic Maya Emblem Glyphs," in *Classic Maya Political History,* ed. T. Patrick Culbert (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 20–21.

John L. Sorenson's correlation of Book of Mormon geography to the Mesoamerican area. Sorenson describes the site of Santa Rosa as a plausible candidate for Zarahemla, noting that it is on the correct side of the nearby river, dates to the time at which the Book of Mormon indicates there should be a city in this location, and contains an interesting archaeological feature that might be related to the reign of King Benjamin.[22] Perhaps Wilson is unaware of Sorenson's work. However, how expert is a person who is unfamiliar with the recent scholarship on the subject on which he is expressing an opinion?

It is more likely that Wilson is familiar with Sorenson's work (he alludes to one of Sorenson's arguments later when he discusses horses). Probably he is simply indicating that Santa Rosa cannot be *proven* to be Zarahemla. That is certainly true. However, Wilson's comment does not hint at the serious scholarship he is dismissing. The illusion continues that such scholarship does not exist.

Earlier in the film, Murphy made a similar statement about Palenque's late date. The same editing problem occurs again. Whether or not Murphy was a willing accomplice to the deception cannot be known, but certainly this statement is used to imply that no sites relate to the Book of Mormon. Palenque is a beautiful site, and, because of this, it has appeared in books that discuss the Book of Mormon. However, no serious Latter-day Saint scholar of the Book of Mormon correlates Palenque with the Book of Mormon for the very reason that Murphy suggests. It is too late. Murphy's statement is correct for Palenque but deceptive for its implications about the actual time periods of the Book of Mormon.

Murphy concludes this section with a personal note: "What I found in my anthropology classes was that my Christian friend was right [who said that you could walk in places mentioned in the Bible]. The Book of Mormon was wrong." I counter with a personal note of my own. I took anthropology classes as well and, unlike Murphy, specialized in Mesoamerican ethnohistory (though I did not ultimately receive a PhD). That is precisely the kind of class that Murphy suggests told him that the Book of Mormon was wrong. I found no such thing. We were

22. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 152–57.

certainly in different classes in different institutions (he in Washington State and I in the State University of New York at Albany), but I cannot imagine that the class itself made the difference. What I found was that the tools of ethnohistory were directly applicable to understanding the Book of Mormon against a real-world background.

Flora and Fauna

The Illusion: The film explains that the Bible discusses a number of animals and plants. It shows pictures of these animals and plants and notes that what was described in the Bible is usually still present in the Old World today. It then contrasts the abundance of biblical flora and fauna with the absence of significant Book of Mormon animals or plants in the New World. The film spends a lot of time talking about horses and emphasizing that, while the Book of Mormon mentions horses, none were present prior to the time they were introduced by the Spanish.

The Unmasking: The technique used in this section is the emphasis of existing assumptions contrasted by the absence of any contradictory information. Is the Bible really as different from the Book of Mormon as is suggested? Not according to archaeologist Donald B. Redford. He notes that camels are integral to the story of Gideon and appear throughout the early period of the Bible. Nevertheless, camels "do not appear in the Near East as domesticated beasts of burden until the ninth century B.C."[23] The Bible and the Book of Mormon both must answer questions. As noted earlier, it is the answers that are important. The film continues to avoid questions about the Bible and answers for the Book of Mormon.

In discussing the Book of Mormon we have the second "optical illusion" in this section when the film zooms to a verse in the Book of Mormon (the first was panning an empty landscape while speaking of Jaredite cities): "Their land also is full of silver and gold, neither is there any end of their treasures; their land is also full of horses, neither

23. Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 277.

is there any end of their chariots" (2 Nephi 12:7), suggesting that Book of Mormon culture includes vast numbers of horses and chariots.

What the editors do not tell the viewer is that the verse is a direct quotation of Isaiah 2:7. It may be in the Book of Mormon, but it refers to the Old World. Since the heading of the chapter clearly indicates that it comes from Isaiah, I cannot imagine how the editors could have made the mistake of assuming that this referred to the New World. If they were close enough to take the picture they used, they were close enough to see that this verse was a quotation from Isaiah. The only reasonable conclusion is that they intended to deceive. Ironically, then, the most damning passage about horses they could find in the Book of Mormon is from Isaiah.

The deception continues in the narration: "The Book of Mormon describes the use of horse-drawn chariots during massive battles involving tens of thousands of warriors." This might seem plausible to one who has never read the Book of Mormon and has seen only the Isaiah passage. The statement is absolutely incorrect. Nothing like it appears in the text of the Book of Mormon. Horses are never ridden. Horses are never described as pulling chariots (though we do see the phrase *horses and chariots* in the text). No battle scene includes either horses or chariots.[24]

One would think that the film's "Latter-day Saint experts" would have corrected such an error of fact. Unfortunately, the expert quoted makes the very same factual error. "So the stories of riding horses into battle," Wilson claims, "could not have occurred in the Americas." Stories of riding horses into battle do not occur in the Book of Mormon. Wilson's conclusion demonstrates that he has not read the Book of Mormon carefully or that he is simply willing to invent statements about it.

Metallurgy and Writing

The Metallurgy Illusion: This section begins with witness Wilson noting that "The Book of Mormon specifically stated that there was

24. The following list includes all the passages mentioning horses in the Book of Mormon: 1 Nephi 18:25; Enos 1:21; Alma 18:9–12; 20:6; 3 Nephi 3:22; 4:4; 6:1; 21:14 (quoting Micah 5:10); and Ether 9:19.

steel in the New World." The narrator notes that no smelting sites have been discovered and suggests: "It is the lack of specific types of metal in the Americas that poses a serious problem for the Book of Mormon account—an account that claims that both the Jaredites and the Nephites used metal armor in their warfare, metal coins for their currency, and are even described as using metal plates to write on."

The Unmasking: Wilson's understanding of Book of Mormon issues appears to be superficial. In addition to his error in recalling what the text says about horses, he specifically worries about the mention of steel. His statement is problematic because the Book of Mormon clearly follows the King James Version of the Bible, which also uses the word *steel*. What Wilson misses is that the KJV's use of *steel* is the translation of a word that really could be better translated as "brass" or "copper" (see 2 Samuel 22:35; Job 20:24; Psalm 18:34; Jeremiah 15:12). Wilson assumes that a translation must accurately represent the words in the original text, even though we know from the KJV (and other translations) that this is not always the case.[25]

Why does it matter that the Bible's translators used the "wrong" English word? It matters because the King James Version is a translation of another language into English and the Book of Mormon claims to be a translation of another language into English. Suggesting that *steel* must mean what a modern reader understands as steel demonstrates a rather simplistic understanding of the complex issues involved in translation, for both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Precisely at yet another place where the Bible and the Book of Mormon can be shown to be very comparable, the film's witness shows no signs of understanding the issue.

Next we have the narrator's claim that the Nephites used metal armor, metal coins, and metal plates to write on. The plates were of metal, certainly. The issue of coins will be discussed below. Some texts appear to indicate that there were metal implements of war. Most Latter-day Saint scholars concede that the evidence for metallurgy in Mesoamerica does not currently support what appears in the English text of the Book

25. Robert Young, *Young's Analytical Concordance to the Bible,* 22nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 933, s.v. "steel."

of Mormon. Although direct archaeological evidence of metallurgy has not been found for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon period, linguistic reconstructions indicate that a word for metal existed in proto-Zoque, which is the time of the Book of Mormon Nephites.[26] Some knowledge of metals is very ancient. If the film finds anything that may be problematic for the Book of Mormon, the lack of metallurgy might be it. However, basing an entire argument on the absence of something is a curious enterprise.

Language and Literacy

The Writing Illusion: Because the Book of Mormon absolutely requires literacy, the editors of this film want to paint a picture of a New World with a general absence of writing, or at least an absence of anything that Nephites might have written. Two expert witnesses are brought in to confirm this idea. First, Dr. Peter Williams, from the University of Aberdeen, suggests: "One of the things that is said about the Nephites is that they were a culture with writing. Now a culture with writing leaves records. And if that number of people did not leave a record, well I don't think they existed." The next expert, Dr. Simon Gathercole, professor of Old Testament at the University of Aberdeen, agrees: "The idea that there could have been an empire that lasted for a thousand years, that claimed to be literate and for there to be no historical trace at all, is extremely far-fetched."

The long textual tradition of the Bible is contrasted with the absence of a textual tradition for the Book of Mormon. Murphy opines that the lack of a documentary tradition suggests that the Book of Mormon was written in 1830.

The Unmasking: It is forgivable to hear scholars of the Old World speak with such ease about textual traditions. The Old World is rich in texts. Unfortunately, being an expert in Old World history does not transfer to being one in New World history. In contrast to the document-rich Old World, the New World is text-poor. With precious

26. See Søren Wichmann, *The Relationship among the Mixe-Zoquean Languages of Mexico* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1995), 564, s.v. "fiero."

exceptions, the texts of the New World have perished either through nature or through Spanish zealotry. The best sources of texts are those literally written in stone. These come from the Maya region and date to the Classic period. Very few texts exist for Book of Mormon times.

However, no Mesoamerican scholar believes that writing was invented at the same time the Maya began carving glyphs in stone. The writing on stone came late, but the writing system must have developed earlier. Yet the evidence is lost because the materials the Mesoamericans wrote on have disappeared. John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman have recently proposed a translation of an epi-Olmec stela that appears to have glyph forms that pre-date the Maya glyphs.[27] Joyce Marcus, professor of anthropology and curator of Latin American Archaeology at the University of Michigan, declares: "It is now clear that writing began in Mesoamerica among pre-state societies. Those societies [date] to the period 700–400 B.C."[28]

The film's experts now have a problem. Secular Mesoamericanists declare that writing did exist in the time period of the Book of Mormon and that evidence of writing exists even though texts have not been preserved. The real experts of the New World have demonstrated that the film's Old World experts do not have accurate information with regard to the New World, though doubtless all but Murphy were unaware of this.

What then of Murphy's suggestion that the lack of a textual tradition suggests that the Book of Mormon was written in 1830? Murphy is either ignorant of important texts on Mesoamerican history or is intentionally misrepresenting the effect of a lack of textual history. As one who is presented as an expert on Mesoamerica, we may expect him to be familiar with the important texts for Mesoamerican history.

An important source of information on Aztec history and religion is the *Histoire du Mechique,* a manuscript from the sixteenth century. Ángel María Garibay describes the manuscript: "the language is from

27. John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman, "Un desciframiento de la escritura jeroglífica epi-olmeca: métodos y resultados," *Arqueologia* (July–December 1992): 15–25, for information on the translation. The information on the relationship of the epi-Olmec glyphs to the Maya forms is from John Justeson, personal communication.

28. Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems,* 32.

the same century with its archaic writing forms and construction. The redactor or translator placed, apart from the aforementioned title, the note 'traduite del Spagnol' [translated from Spanish]."[29] The manuscript is signed in two places by Andrés Thevet, who is the presumed translator. This document does not have a textual history. It is in the wrong language, was found in the wrong country, and was found later than it purports to have been written. Nevertheless, scholars accept it as a valuable source of information. Murphy's statement would have us discard the *Histoire du Mechique* and claim that Thevet wrote it rather than translated it. But Murphy would be alone in his claim, should he be so bold as to hold the *Histoire du Mechique* to the same standard as he does the Book of Mormon. He is either wrong or ignorant of the way texts are used and evaluated.

Another Language Illusion: The film next emphasizes the Book of Mormon's claim to having been written in "reformed Egyptian." The narrator questions Simon Gathercole: "Would a Hebrew of around about 600 BC know how to write in the ancient reformed Egyptian?" He responds: "What's ancient reformed Egyptian?" Wilson makes sure that we understand the implication: "Linguists and others will state that they've never heard of reformed Egyptian, unless they're Mormon. . . . The reason why the mainstream linguists don't have a thing to say about it is that it is a fictional language."

The Unmasking: Mormon does say that he redacted the Book of Mormon in reformed Egyptian. But rather than relying on the Living Hope Ministries to correctly depict his words, I will quote them here directly:

> And now, behold, we have written this record according to our knowledge, in the characters which are called *among us* the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech.
>
> And if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by

29. Ángel María Garibay Kintana, ed. *Teogonía e Historia de los Mexicanos* (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1973), 14, my translation.

> us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record.
>
> But the Lord knoweth the things which we have written, and also that none other people knoweth our language; and because that none other people knoweth our language, therefore he hath prepared means for the interpretation thereof. (Mormon 9:32–34)

This "reformed Egyptian" comes one thousand years after the Book of Mormon's declared textual tradition began. When Nephi begins, he indicates only that "I make a record in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2). He does not mention "reformed" here. What happened between Nephi and Mormon? The text says that things have changed. Whatever they called Egyptian had been changed and hence was called "reformed." Even the Hebrew of their ancestors had been changed. The final result was that the Nephites had a script that was unlike any other that they knew—including that of the small plates, which were in Nephi's original "learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians."

Why have the experts not heard of reformed Egyptian? Because they are scholars of the Old World and reformed Egyptian was never an Old World language. Why do we not clearly find it in the New World? First, we have no idea how the script was changed, so we do not know what to look for.[30] Second, we run into the problem of the absence of texts in Mesoamerica. Mesoamericanists certainly do not assume that the lack of texts indicates that writing did not exist. Wilson oversimplifies again and continues to present his misunderstanding as demonstrated fact.

Coins

The Illusion: The film provides an entire section on coins, obviously believing that this is an important argument against the Book

30. The document known as the Anthon transcript shows some characters from the plates. That gives us some model to check against, but there are so few texts that the transcript is currently of no assistance. The Anthon transcript does tell us, however, that the "reformed" part is sufficient that the text is no longer obviously related to Egyptian as we understand it.

of Mormon. Experts discuss the coins found in biblical sites and indicate that, if there were metal coins, we should find them. We do not find them anywhere in the Americas; therefore, the film concludes, the Book of Mormon must be incorrect.

The Unmasking: As with the fauna, the film's authorities fail to give an accurate picture of the Bible. While maintaining that coins are an anachronism in the Book of Mormon, they fail to mention that they are also anachronistically present in the Bible. Redford lists the use of coined money in 1 Samuel as one of the "blatant anachronisms."[31] The Bible and the Book of Mormon continue to be comparable at least in that those who wish to find issues with them have fodder for their search.

More particularly, however, we have the disingenuous way in which the film presents the "fact" that there were coins in the Book of Mormon. They show an excerpt of the Book of Mormon, but they display a header that was added in 1981 rather than the actual text!

The film at this point does not tell the viewer a number of things. It does not tell the viewer that this visual does not represent the actual text of the Book of Mormon. It does not tell the viewer that Latter-day Saint scholars believe the text refers to weights and measures (not coins). It does not tell the viewer that the Nephite system of weights and measures is similar in a number of ways to the Egyptian system.[32]

---

31. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times,* 305. Note the difference between biblical and Book of Mormon anachronisms. Those that Redford lists for the Bible exist in the original language. Those of the Book of Mormon exist (necessarily) in the translation. Anachronisms in the original are considered serious, where a translator's anachronism can simply reflect the word choice of the translator.

32. John W. Welch, "Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 41–42. A possible textual indication of coins might be Alma 11:4, which says "Now these are the names of the different pieces of their gold." Of this Welch notes: "It should be clear from all of the foregoing that we are talking here about weights and measures, not coins. When the Book of Mormon speaks of 'the different pieces of their gold, and of their silver,' as well as naming them 'according to their value' (Alma 11:4), we should probably not think that it is referring to minted coins. Rather, the term *pieces* most likely refers to metallic weights of some sort." Welch, "Weighing and Measuring," 43.

Royal Skousen says: "In the text proper, the gold and silver units are referred to as *pieces,* not *coins*: 'now these are the names of the different **pieces** of their gold and of their silver according to their value' (Alma 11:4). Here in Alma 11, there is no specific evidence

This section absolutely depends on playing on the viewers' assumptions and reinforcing those while avoiding all facts to the contrary, which thus creates an illusion by misdirection.

Warfare

The Illusion: War plays an important part in both the Bible and the Book of Mormon. Old World archaeology has found remnants of battles at certain cities where vast numbers of arrowheads have been found. In contrast, the New World does not have similar evidence. The narrator tells us: "The footnotes in the Book of Mormon suggest that the Lamanite extermination of the Nephites took place around 400 AD. Yet, it left no archaeological evidence. By contrast, a much smaller battle that happened centuries earlier in the first century AD in Palestine demonstrates what one can expect to find if a battle like the one described in the Book of Mormon had really occurred."

The Unmasking: When one is looking for evidence of a battle, it is essential to dig at the location where the battle took place. A known

---

for a coin system (that is, minted pieces of precious metal, with possibly images or writing, perhaps the stipulated weight, on the pieces). The noncanonical chapter summary for Alma 11 has traditionally referred to these monetary units as coins or coinage:

1920 summary	Nephite coins and measures
1981 summary	Nephite coinage set forth

The use of the word *coin* was also used in the primitive tables of contents (referred to as "reference(s)" or "index") that were added to copies of some of the early Book of Mormon editions (which had no versification system and thus needed some kind of help in finding passages):

1830 edition	Names of money
1837 and 1840 editions	Names of Nephite coin
1840 edition	Coins named
1841 edition	Coins named

The word *coin,* of course, claims more than what the text actually says. Interestingly, the 1981 chapter summary has been changed in the recently published Doubleday edition of the Book of Mormon (2004) to read 'The Nephite **monetary system** set forth' (the text for this edition was provided by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints)." This discussion will appear in 2006 in Royal Skousen, *Analysis of Textual Variants of the Book of Mormon: Part 3, Mosiah 17–Alma 20.*

historical siege took place at Masada (the first-century site mentioned in the film). Digging at that location is digging at a battle site.

What about the Book of Mormon battles? Most of the Book of Mormon battles take place on open fields, not in cities. Since the archaeological excavations concentrate on the cities, it is not very surprising that the remnants of large battles are not found there, where they did not happen. That does not mean, however, that the battles did not happen. The Aztecs fought tremendous battles, but archaeologists have not yet located great battlefields littered with bodies or artifacts. Yet the Aztecs lived much later than Book of Mormon times. Once again, the authors of the film use a general problem from all of Mesoamerica and presume that it has specific meaning for the Book of Mormon. The lack of remnants of a battle for the Nephites no more means that there were no Nephites than the lack of evidence for Aztec battles means that there were no Aztecs. This argument is another demonstration that the film's experts are not expert in the issues of Mesoamerican archaeology.

The Cumorah Illusion: The film attempts to make it appear that Latter-day Saints are afraid to do archaeological excavations at the New York Hill Cumorah because they know that they will not find the evidence of battles there. Murphy attempts to strengthen this problem: "Growing up Mormon, I was always taught that the Hill Cumorah was the location of the culminating events of the Book of Mormon."

The Unmasking: I do not doubt that Murphy might have been taught at some age by someone that the Hill Cumorah was the hill of the Book of Mormon. I was taught the same thing. However, since at least the 1950s Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon has argued that the text's Cumorah is in Mesoamerica. The New York hill is merely a namesake.[33] Why do we not find evidence of the final

33. On Cumorah, see Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 347. David Palmer used the geographic data from the Book of Mormon to make a tentative identification of the Book of Mormon's Cumorah. See Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah,* 89–123. For early studies, see Jesse A. Washburn and Jesse N. Washburn, *From Babel to Cumorah* (Provo, UT: New Era Publishing, 1937); Thomas S. Ferguson, *Cumorah—Where?* (Independence, MO: Zion's, 1947); and Sidney B. Sperry, "Were There Two Cumorahs?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 260–68 (a previously unpublished handout used in a Religion 622 class on 31 March 1964).

battles at the New York hill? Because those battles happened thousands of miles away. It is not surprising to find nothing when you look for something in the wrong place.

Temples

The Illusion: The film suggests that the Book of Mormon's mention of a Nephite temple in 2 Nephi 5:16 contradicts Jewish law. Their expert is Rabbi Chaim Richman, director of the Temple Institute in Jerusalem: "Any person who studies the Bible understands the centrality of worship here in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount. The very idea of a temple anywhere other than Mount Moriah is a total impossibility. The Jews are literally not allowed to erect a temple anywhere in the world except for right here."

The Unmasking: Rabbi Richman is certainly earnest in his opinion. His opinion, however, does not reflect historical reality. Dever discusses a temple that has been excavated at Arad (not far east of Beersheba). This temple existed in the ninth to eighth centuries BC. One of the ostraca (potsherds with writing) from the site bears the inscription "house/temple of Yahweh."[34] The discovery of the Elephantine documents shows a group of Israelites leaving Israel and moving to a home on the Nile, where they build a replica of Solomon's temple.[35]

Richman knows his modern traditions better than his archaeology. The evidence of archaeology in the Old World tells us that, when Nephi built a replica of Solomon's temple, he was simply doing what others had done and would yet do.

Priesthood

The Priesthood Illusion: The narrator attempts to create yet another issue for Book of Mormon temples when he asserts that "The Book of

34. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* 181.

35. Hugh W. Nibley, "Two Shots in the Dark," in *Book of Mormon Authorship: New Light on Ancient Origins,* ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1982), 108.

Mormon claim poses a problem because appointing priests who are not Aaronic Levites was expressly forbidden in the Old Testament."

The Unmasking: Scholars do not know if the temples at Elephantine and Arad were staffed by descendants of Aaron, but recent research indicates that there were important temple officials who were not descendants of Aaron. Margaret Barker, a biblical scholar, notes that an important distinction between the Melchizedek and Aaronic Priesthoods was in the nature of its transmission. The Melchizedek Priesthood had no priestly descent (Hebrews 7), while the Aaronic Priesthood was characterized by lineal descent.[36] Barker argues that early evidence suggests a Melchizedek Priesthood presence in the temple prior to the Aaronic presence. She notes that "the Yeb texts, which describe a community who worshipped the Lord in southern Egypt in the fifth century BCE, often mention priests, but never mention the familiar biblical names of Aaron or Levi. The 'surface' picture of the Aaronite high priesthood in the Old Testament, therefore, must be treated with caution."[37] Barker's citation of the Yeb texts places a possible reference to non-Aaronic priests in the temple closer to the time of Nephi. Contrary to the assumptions advanced by the narrator, the evidence suggests Nephite temple worship contained no surprises. In fact, it represents an older form of Israelite worship—precisely what the text *should* do.

Historical Figures

The Illusion: The Bible uses the names of specific people. Some of these names have been verified in the archaeological or textual records. Inscriptions mentioning David have been found. Jesus Christ is referenced in early non-Christian texts. Asserting the confirmation of many biblical figures, Philip Lindholm (listed as a scholar from Oxford University) claims for Book of Mormon figures: "We have no evidence that they ever existed."

The Unmasking: As with the previous discussion of textual traditions, the experts do not appear to understand the issues of Meso-

36. Margaret Barker, *The Great High Priest: The Temple Roots of Christian Liturgy* (London: Clark, 2003), 113.

37. Barker, *Great High Priest,* 122.

american textual tradition. For the great majority of Mesoamerica, no adequate texts have survived to tell us about anything, let alone personal names. To date, the earliest name I can find is Yax Ehb' Xook, the founder of the Tikal lineage. In the absence of direct dating for his name, epigrapher Simon Martin and anthropologist Nikolai Grube deduce a time period around AD 90. This name comes from a king list, and the first contemporary data—that is, data that are not derived from delving into history—come from AD 292.[38] The only people meriting mention are the kings or queens, and there are few of those.

We do not find Book of Mormon names in Maya inscriptions for two reasons. First, few inscriptions are contemporary with the Book of Mormon. Second, they come from cities that are not considered by Latter-day Saint scholars to have been Nephite. If the vast majority of names refer to the kings and queens of a particular location and that location is not Nephite, we have little hope of finding a reference to a Nephite name there.

The Jesus Christ Illusion: The film spends a good deal of time on the historical information confirming the existence of Jesus Christ in the Old World, contrasted directly to an absence of evidence for the appearance of Christ in the New World. According to Murphy, "To claim that Jesus was a historical person here in the ancient Americas is a rather absurd proposal." The narrator asks the other Latter-day Saint "expert," Wilson: "Is it accurate to say that Jesus visited the Americas?" Wilson responds: "There is no evidence for that at all."

The Unmasking: First, I must note that, outside of the Book of Mormon's account, I would agree with Wilson: proof of Christ's visit has not been found. And, while some Latter-day Saints use the legends of Quetzalcoatl as evidence of a cultural memory of his visit, I cannot discover any connection between those legends and Christ's appearance in the New World.[39] Nevertheless, the lack of specific data

38. Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 26.

39. Brant A. Gardner, "The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl," *Sunstone* 10/11 (1986): 6–10. An updated and revised version is "Digging for Quetzalcoatl's Christian Roots," available at frontpage2k.nmia.com/~nahualli/LDStopics/DigQ/DigQ%20TOC.htm (accessed 18 January 2006).

about a particular person does not necessarily invalidate his or her existence.

Dever explains the problem of assuming that archaeology can support a religious text. Both the Bible and the Book of Mormon share this issue, an issue on which this film is noticeably silent:

> The overwhelming archaeological evidence today of largely indigenous origins for early Israel leaves no room for an exodus from Egypt or a 40-year pilgrimage through the Sinai wilderness. A Moses-like figure may have existed somewhere in southern Transjordan in the mid-late 13th century B.C., where many scholars think the biblical traditions concerning the god Yahweh arose. But archaeology can do nothing to confirm such a figure as a historical personage, much less prove that he was the founder of later Israelite religion.[40]

Archaeologists feel fortunate when they discover evidence of *any* named person. However, dealing with historical people is not the task that archaeology performs best. Archaeology deals with the physical remains from cultures but deals with individuals only when texts are involved. Murphy is wrong when he opines: "To claim that Jesus was a historical person here in the ancient Americas is a rather absurd proposal." Without texts dating to the time of Christ, the absence of evidence is to be expected. Murphy's statement may rest on his assumption that the appearance of Christ is absurd because he does not believe in the ability of a resurrected Christ to appear to men. However, if we believe in the New Testament's descriptions of Christ appearing to various disciples after his death, nothing would prevent that same resurrected Christ from appearing to other individuals in a distant place. Clearly, Murphy was merely speaking derogatorily.

A fascinating statement comes from Lindholm of Oxford University: "I cannot understand how archaeological evidence and textual evidence can point to the historical reality of Christ in Palestine and yet be entirely lost in the New World." That statement embodies perhaps the entire vision of the film: If someone cannot understand

40. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* 99.

something, it cannot be true. Lindholm appears to be unfamiliar with Mesoamerican ethnohistory. Why should we find evidence of Christ in the Old World but not in the New? Because of the absence of contemporary texts. Lindholm's lack of understanding comes from a lack of relevant expertise.

But the appearance of the Savior must have been so spectacular that everyone would have remembered it. At least, we may think so. However, the Savior appeared only to the people gathered in one city, Bountiful, and to those who could assemble over the course of a single night. Out of the millions of people in the New World, the appearance came to a few thousand at best. Those were all believers. They certainly kept their tradition, but the Book of Mormon tells us that they were destroyed around AD 400. Their memories would have died with them, save for their record, which we have as the Book of Mormon.

What about other peoples? Should they not have retained at least a faint memory of a God who descended? Again, we might think so, but assuming that ancient peoples did what we would do is naive. The ancient world was full of descended gods. Mythology in Mesoamerica has a large class of demigods, or extra-humans who come to this earth.

Christianity in Mesoamerica

The Christian Illusion: The film argues that we should find evidences of Christianity in Mesoamerica, but we do not. Murphy claims that after Christ came "there was a massive conversion to Christianity." A Honduran archaeologist, Eliseo Fajardo Madrid, notes: "Here you do not find any evidence of Christianity."

The Unmasking: Here, again, the film plays on a couple of assumptions. The first is that when the Book of Mormon suggests, in Murphy's words, a "massive conversion to Christianity," this means a virtually universal conversion. Second, it assumes that Christianity is easy to recognize in archaeological remains. Those may be common assumptions, but they are assumptions that need to be questioned, whether related to the Book of Mormon or not.

First, what does the Book of Mormon say about the aftermath of the conversion?

> And it came to pass that there was no contention in the land, because of the love of God which did dwell in the hearts of the people.
>
> And there were no envyings, nor strifes, nor tumults, nor whoredoms, nor lyings, nor murders, nor any manner of lasciviousness; and surely there could not be a happier people among all the people who had been created by the hand of God.
>
> There were no robbers, nor murderers, neither were there Lamanites, nor any manner of -ites; but they were in one, the children of Christ, and heirs to the kingdom of God. (4 Nephi 1:15–17)

Certainly this describes a conversion and a peace in the land. The issue, as with virtually all hyperconservative readings of the Book of Mormon, is the assumption that *the land* must refer to a massive area (frequently assumed to be the entire hemisphere). The textual use of *land* in the Book of Mormon is typically limited in geographic scope and should not be construed to be a large area.[41] The Book of Mormon *land* is used in a fashion similar to biblical *lands,* which encompass the biblical nations but not the entire world of all known peoples of the time.

In this case, the text is clearly speaking of the Nephites and gives no indication that Nephite political influence has extended beyond its earlier boundaries. Among the previously divided Nephites there were now no contentions or "-ites." The text does not imply that this "massive conversion" should be seen at all outside the confines of the land associated with the Nephites.

The next problem is the question of what a conversion to Christianity might look like in the archaeological record. We have a long

41. See Brant A. Gardner, "An Exploration in Critical Methodology: Critiquing a Critique," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 199–205; see also Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–75.

history of understanding Christianity in the Old World, but does that mean that we would recognize Christianity in the New World? Archaeologists can only reconstruct religion from artifacts and preserved art. Iconography is the study of the religious art and symbols of a people. Is there an exclusive Christian iconography? Would Christian iconography in the New World resemble that found in the Old World?

The best way to understand the answer to this question is to examine the iconographic history of Israel and early Christianity. Both Israel and early Christianity were very comfortable borrowing and incorporating iconography from their neighbors, even when that iconography was part of their neighbor's religion.

Historian Ramsay MacMullen notes:

> The tangible record gives the same impression of shared territory. For example, among the grave-goods of late Roman Egypt, very much the same things are found whether the burial be Christian or not. In a Pannonian grave was placed a box ornamented with a relief of the gods, Orpheus in the center, Sol and Luna in the corners, but the Chi-Rho as well; elsewhere, in Danube burials, similar random mixtures of symbolism appear, with gods and busts of Saint Peter and Saint Paul all in the same bas-relief. The Romans who bought cheap little baked clay oil-lamps from the shop of Annius Serapiodorus in the capital apparently didn't care whether he put the Good Shepherd or Bacchus or both together on his products; and the rich patrons of mosaicists in Gaul, North Africa, and Syria were similarly casual about the very confused symbolism they commissioned for their floors.[42]

The iconography of the region was intermixed in early Christianity. Graydon F. Snyder, professor of New Testament (retired) at Chicago Theological Seminary, describes a similar mixture of symbols for Hellenistic Judaism:

---

42. Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100–400)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 78.

> A nearly complete list of symbols used by Jews through the sixth century shows ninety-seven decorations and symbols of which only the *etrog, lulab,* menorah, and shofar became consistent signs of Jewish identity. For the most part the remaining ninety-three symbols come from either the general Hellenistic culture (zodiac signs, garlands) or, occasionally, come from Jewish life (the Torah shrine).[43]

Both early Christians and at least the Hellenistic Jews accepted iconographic elements from surrounding cultures and incorporated them into their own art. Their iconography was not particularly unique; rather, it reflected the area and the time. This does not mean, however, that the use of these borrowed visual symbols was reflected in their textual descriptions of religion:

> In their synagogues Jews of the first centuries in the Christian era were quite willing to use a large number of Greco-Roman decorations and symbols. Some scholars, like Goodenough, see in such symbols signals of a more mystical Judaism. Others assume that Jewish leaders had no choice but to use ateliers who offered, as a matter of course, pagan decorations and symbols. Or, in terms of interaction, Jews were willing to utilize the decorations and symbols of their non-Jewish neighbors. By so doing they indicated their active participation in the Greco-Roman culture. But *none* of these symbols became a part of the Jewish iconic conversation. In that sense, by the first two centuries of the Christian era Judaism had developed a firm symbolic identity. It could accept and utilize pagan symbolic material, but did not incorporate it.[44]

Among the Jews, the use of pagan artistic forms did not alter their religion. The use of a pagan symbol did not necessarily bring with it the meaning of that symbol within the pagan world. As Snyder indicates, they could "accept and utilize pagan symbolic material, but did not

43. Graydon F. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition: The Impact of Jesus on Jewish and Roman Cultures* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999), 13.

44. Snyder, *Inculturation of the Jesus Tradition,* 92.

incorporate it." When physical iconography borrowed from paganism, that fact is not necessarily mentioned in the text.

Christianity applied the same methods to its iconography. Even the visual representation of Christ appears in earliest Christianity to have borrowed imagery from Apollo.[45] The early borrowing of symbols was so complete that John Dominic Crossan says of a sarcophagus from AD 150–275 that it can be "read as either pagan or Christian."[46]

If, in the Old World, early Christianity borrowed its symbol set from its surrounding Hellenistic culture and did so in ways that might make certain artifacts ambiguous, as in the sarcophagus Crossan discusses, then what ought we to expect of the New World? When we look for New World Christians, what do we look for? Do we look for representations of Apollo? Do we look for any of the Greek-inspired icons of the Old World? What we know as Christian from the Old World is dependent on the relationship of that area of the world to Greece. That condition does not exist in the New World. Based on the history of both Israel and early Christianity, we would expect the New World Israelites and Christians to do as their Old World counterparts did—adapt the iconography of the surrounding cultures.

Do we find evidence of Christianity? Who knows? The sarcophagus Crossan mentions could easily be Christian or pagan. If the same forces developed in New World Israelite/Christian art, there would be a similar ambiguity. Saying that archaeologists cannot find evidence of Christianity in the New World simply demonstrates a simplistic assumption about what ought to be found. If the earliest artistic depictions of Jesus Christ were based on Apollo, perhaps the New World artists would have borrowed the corn god (who was clearly a god who died and was resurrected). Enough correspondence between Christ and the corn god can be found as to suggest that a Nephite artist might borrow that symbol. If we therefore find a depiction of a corn god, is it pagan or Christian? Is the sarcophagus pagan or Christian?

45. "From Apollo to Jesus," at www.jesusneverexisted.com/melange.html (accessed 16 December 2005). This site clearly has its own agenda, but its visual representations of the transformations of Jesus's appearance are still instructive.

46. John Dominic Crossan, *The Essential Jesus: What Jesus Really Taught* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 30.

These questions are, at this point, unanswerable. But the apparent lack of Christian symbols in the archaeological remains is not, as the film suggests, evidence that Book of Mormon Christianity did not exist.

The Various Conclusions

From this point on, the authors are wrapping up their case. This last part of the film is divided into several segments on the DVD, and each segment provides the conclusions of the expert witnesses rather than new material. At this point, I will shift the model I am using from unmasking the illusions to examining the witness testimony to see whether or not we can or should believe it as presented.

Witness: Murphy. As part of a discussion indicating that the Bible has been used as a guide to archaeology, Murphy states: "On the other hand, the Book of Mormon has never been used by the Smithsonian as a guide to historical archaeological research."

Examination: This statement is typical of several that Murphy makes in the film. Technically, he is correct, but he allows the viewer to be misled into believing more than what was said. It is quite true that the Smithsonian has not used the Book of Mormon as a guide to archaeological research. But the Book of Mormon has been used as a guide to archaeological research by others. The investigations of the New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAF) focused on a particular area of Chiapas where the model of Book of Mormon geography predicted that sites dating to the Preclassic would be found. While the archaeological work the NWAF performed was intentionally kept separate from the Book of Mormon, the fact remains that the original decision of a location to dig was based on a prediction from the Book of Mormon text, a prediction that turned out to be correct in that the area did have Preclassic sites.[47]

Witness: Barkay. "It doesn't make sense to me. The Book of Mormon, with all due honor, I don't think it has anything to do with the culture of 600 BC, and I'm an expert on that period."

47. See Daniel C. Peterson, "On the New World Archaeological Foundation," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 221–33.

Examination: Differences of opinion are normal among scholars. While we cannot know on what basis Dr. Barkay makes his comment, we can contrast it with that of another expert on the preexilic period, Margaret Barker, a Methodist minister who has written extensively on both the Old and New Testaments. She recently presented a paper at the Worlds of Joseph Smith conference, 6 May 2005, held at the Library of Congress. She discussed the image of the tree of life in 1 Nephi:

> The tree of life made one happy, according to the Book of Proverbs (Proverbs 3:18), but for detailed descriptions of the tree we have to rely on the noncanonical texts. Enoch described it as perfumed, with fruits like grapes (1 Enoch 32:5), and a text discovered in Egypt in 1945 described the tree as beautiful, fiery, and with fruit like white grapes. I do not know of any other source that describes the fruit as *white* grapes. Imagine my surprise when I read the account of Lehi's vision of the tree whose *white fruit* made one happy, and the interpretation that the Virgin in Nazareth was the mother of the Son of God after the manner of the flesh (1 Nephi 11:14–23). This is the Heavenly Mother, represented by the tree of life, and then Mary and her Son on earth. This revelation to Joseph Smith was the ancient Wisdom symbolism, intact, and almost certainly as it was known in 600 BCE.[48]

Barkay is certainly entitled to his opinion. Viewers are entitled to know, on the other hand, that other qualified professionals have other opinions.

Witness: Wilson. "As an anthropologist, when I step back and look at the big picture, when you can't find the places that it's talking about and you can't identify the people that it's talking about and you can't

48. Margaret Barker, "Joseph Smith and Preexilic Israelite Religion," in *The Worlds of Joseph Smith* (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 2006), 76; also in *BYU Studies* 44/4 (2005): 76. See Daniel C. Peterson, "Nephi and His Asherah: A Note on 1 Nephi 11:8–23," in *Mormons, Scripture, and the Ancient World: Studies in Honor of John L. Sorenson,* ed. Davis L. Bitton (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998), 191–243, and a shorter version, "Nephi and His Asherah," in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 16–25.

find the types of material goods that it's talking about—there is a major problem."

Examination: Wilson tells us that he looked for the Book of Mormon in western New York and failed to find it. Latter-day Saint scholars are not surprised. It is difficult to find something when you look for it in the wrong place. Given other statements from Wilson in which he gets information from the Book of Mormon wrong, it appears that not only was he looking in the wrong place, but he was looking for the wrong things. Not surprisingly, and certainly to no condemnation of the Book of Mormon, he found nothing.

Witness: Murphy. "The Book of Mormon is full of mistakes, factual mistakes. Okay, it is suggesting that Jesus, for example, was born in Jerusalem rather than Bethlehem."

Examination: This statement is rather surprising. Murphy is presented as a Latter-day Saint anthropologist. As such, we have an expectation that he is acquainted with the relevant literature on the topic. But this statement suggests that he is remarkably deficient in his understanding of the relevant LDS literature. Robert Smith discusses that very issue:

> It has been alleged that the Book of Mormon commits a foolish error by predicting that Jesus would be born "at Jerusalem." But just as Rome was *urbs et orbis,* "city and world," so Jerusalem was not simply a city, not even just a city-state. It is and was a symbol of Zion. It typified all that which the exiles in Babylonia had lost (see Psalms 137:5–6), and, in our time, it is the focus of the return of other exiles from their nearly two millennia of dispersion. . . .
>
> In the same way that the "land" or district of Jerusalem was administratively distinguished from the city of Jerusalem, so, according to Kenneth Kitchen, the great city of Hazor (Tell el-Qeda) was distinguished from the state of Hazor. Thus, Abraham had dwelt or "sojourned" in the territory of Gerar, rather than in the city itself (Tell Abu Hureira; Genesis 20:1). . . .

> Thus it is quite apparent that Jerusalem "did double duty as the royal and the district capital." As early as Canaanite times, Jerusalem held royal status, and it was termed mat URU sa-lim ("land of Jerusalem") in the Amarna Letters.
>
> Where then was Jesus born? Truly, in Bethlehem of the land of Judaea (see Micah 5:2; Matthew 2:1–6; Luke 2:4)—any child could tell you that in Joseph Smith's time as well as in ours. What no one in modern times would have known for sure (before the 1887 discovery of the Tell El-Amarna Tablets) was that Bethlehem was also part of an area anciently called the land of Jerusalem.[49]

It would not have taken much research for Murphy to discover how inaccurate such a criticism is. Either he did not do the research, or he is intentionally concealing the evidence.

Witness: Wilson, speaking of Thomas Stuart Ferguson (who was one of the forces behind what became the New World Archaeological Foundation): "Ferguson was one of the prime movers and shakers in the research area in Central America, and he couldn't find anything."

Examination: This is a short enough statement that we must attempt to put some meaning behind it. No matter what happened with Ferguson, he certainly found *something.* When we look, we always find *something.* We may not find what we are looking for, but we find something. Clearly Wilson does not mean to say that Ferguson failed to find anything at all. What Wilson must mean is that Ferguson did not find what he was looking for. What Wilson never tells us is whether Ferguson was looking for the right things.[50] While the film intends that Ferguson's

49. Robert F. Smith, "The Land of Jerusalem: The Place of Jesus' Birth," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon,* ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 170–71. See Daniel C. Peterson, Matthew Roper, and William J. Hamblin, "On Alma 7:10 and the Birthplace of Jesus Christ" (1995), on the FARMS Web site at farms.byu.edu (accessed 16 January 2006).

50. See Daniel C. Peterson and Matthew Roper, "*Ein Heldenleben?* On Thomas Stuart Ferguson as an Elias for Cultural Mormons," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 184; John Gee, "The Hagiography of Doubting Thomas," *FARMS Review* 10/2 (1998): 158–83; see also John Sorenson, review of *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory,* by Stephen Williams, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 54–57.

example demonstrate the futility of comparing the Book of Mormon to archaeology, it really does more to compare Book of Mormon archaeology to biblical archaeology. Both went through more naive phases. Dever describes the earlier biblical archaeology:

> In retrospect, the demise of biblical archaeology was probably inevitable. The reasons are many. First, what may be called internal weaknesses of the movement were numerous: its reputation for amateurish fieldwork, naïve or biased scholarship, and poor publications; its parochial character, related as it was largely to the conservative (if not Fundamentalist) character of so much of American religious life; its reactionary nature, locked into dated theological issues, which left it unable to respond creatively to new developments in or outside the field; its resistance to growing trends toward specialization and professionalism, which made it extremely vulnerable; and, above all, the fact that it failed to achieve its own major objective, i.e., the demonstration of the "historicity" of the Bible (at least as it was seen at the time).[51]

Ferguson was a lawyer, not an archaeologist. His contributions should not be minimized, but they were significantly related to the beginning push to create the New World Archaeological Foundation and are not related to any archaeological expertise.[52] As with the biblical archaeology movement Dever describes, Ferguson appears to have been looking for the wrong things with the wrong models. His case is very comparable to that of certain biblical archaeologists. His experience no more proclaims the Book of Mormon ahistorical than do the parallel experiences of the practitioners of early biblical archaeology. As with so much of this film, the editors avoid telling the entire story.

While it remains true that we will never find a "Nephi slept here" sign from Mesoamerica, it is not true that we cannot find evidence

51. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know?* 58.
52. See Peterson and Roper, "*Ein Heldenleben?*" 175–77.

linking Mesoamerica to the Book of Mormon.[53] In this section of the film the shot pans to several books written about the Book of Mormon, including Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Clearly those at Living Hope Ministries have access to the book, although apparently they have done no more than film the cover.

Witnesses: Wilson and Murphy (with a special and unwitting "guest appearance" by Daniel C. Peterson). The section begins with a statement by Wilson: "And so what the apologists do is they—they work at trying to help people to keep them from losing their faith and they'll use whatever means are possible." The film cuts to a clip from a film in which Daniel C. Peterson discusses the Book of Mormon. The entire transcript of the clip is:

> The Book of Mormon makes sense as plausible history. The whole thing seems right. It makes sense. There is very little in it apart from the explicitly religious events (the miracles, the visitations, and so on) that a secular historian would find at all troublesome.

Murphy replies: "Well, Dan Peterson is lying. The problem, first and foremost, with the Book of Mormon is its secular history. It gets the history wrong. The myth has been disproved again and again by archaeologists and historians on secular grounds—not religious ones."

Examination: That Wilson would accuse Latter-day Saint apologists of "us[ing] whatever means are possible" is portentous. The sectarian anti-Mormon editors of the film could not have created a more ironic introduction to their own tactics, which really do border on "whatever means are possible."

Peterson's statement is removed from its context as it was presented in the original FARMS video:

53. Any interested scholar would quickly find Sorenson's *Ancient American Setting*. It would not take much more effort to add Palmer's *In Search of Cumorah*. The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) has a number of articles on their Web site as does the Foundation for Apologetic Information and Research (FAIR).

> Another thing about the Book of Mormon that we need to keep in mind as we consider other more specific things is simply that it makes sense as plausible history. I spend a lot of time reading ancient history, medieval history, and so on, and I find the Book of Mormon to be plausible. It's not straining for effect, it's not trying to achieve some Romanticism, or some pseudo-Oriental flavor that would impress its audience. It's a very matter-of-fact narrative of what happened, and what happened seems to be a very plausible kind of thing—people behave the way people actually do behave. We have parallels for the behavior of Nephites and Lamanites from other historical cultures. So again, the whole thing seems right. It makes sense. There is very little in it, apart from the explicitly religious events (the miracles, the visitations, and so on) that a secular historian would find at all troublesome.[54]

Placed in context, is Peterson "lying" about the specific data he is discussing? Hardly. Nevertheless, Murphy claims that he is lying because the Book of Mormon gets secular history wrong. That is a bold statement, particularly since the only evidence for Murphy's statement comes from evidence that has been carefully selected and protected from any contradictory information.

Contrary to the impression given in the film, I have found several ways in which the Book of Mormon reflects secular history quite accurately.[55] Is Murphy lying? I am sure that he sees the data differently than I do. Nevertheless, the section becomes a poster child for "us[ing] whatever means are possible." Ironically, what Wilson claims for the apologists is precisely what this film's editors do in presenting their message. They remove statements from context. They suppress contrary data. They present incorrect statements as though they were

54. Transcription courtesy of Dana Repouille, e-mail to FAIR List, 28 November 2005. Copy in my possession.

55. Brant A. Gardner, "Social History of the Early Nephites," paper presented at the FAIR conference, August 2001, at www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2001GarB.html (accessed 11 January 2006); and Brant A. Gardner, "The Case for Historicity: Discerning the Book of Mormon's Production Culture," paper presented at the FAIR conference, August 2004, at www.fairlds.org/pubs/conf/2004GarB.html (accessed 11 January 2006).

fact.[56] Are the film's editors lying? They are at least using any means possible to make their case, even when those means distort the real picture.

Witness: Wilson.

> What apologists want to do is prove it. Prove that the Book of Mormon is true. So they come up with really outrageous ideas that any bona fide archaeologist or anthropologist would simply shake their head at.
>
> For example, horses. They say, well maybe, maybe they weren't horses. Maybe they were tapir or deer. Well, how do you ride something that is a little bit bigger than a dog into battle? It's an outrageous idea.
>
> So they're using these very spurious arguments to say here's how we prove that the Book of Mormon is true. And time doesn't permit to go through every single one of their arguments, but if you really look at those arguments carefully, if this argument was brought up in a scientific community, I can tell you they'd be laughed out of the building.

Examination: This statement certainly sounds authoritative. Unfortunately, Wilson is remarkably incorrect on virtually every point. I cannot, of course, respond to any of the "outrageous ideas" that he does not mention. The one he mentions, however, is more outrageous in his misrepresentation than in the actual argument.

Wilson speaks of horses, tapirs, and deer. Fortunately, this information is enough to trace the argument he claims is "outrageous." As with other information in this film, examining the actual argument rather than Wilson's crude caricature is instructive. John Sorenson discusses the problem of cross-cultural onomastica (the names we use for animals, things, or people). He introduces his discussion by giving examples from cross-cultural issues that arose when the Spanish arrived in the New World:

56. Some of the incorrect statements are innocent and due to the "experts'" lack of familiarity with the New World.

> Anthropologists tell us that the world's peoples have many different models for classifying animals or plants, as they do for labeling geographical directions or dividing up time. . . . When the Spaniards reached the Americas, they had trouble labeling the native creatures systematically. Yet the Indians had an even harder time classifying the animals the Europeans brought along.
>
> A good example of the confusion is with the coatimundi (*Nasua narica*). Landa, the padre who favored us with a detailed description of Yucatan, wrote of the beast, "There is an animal which they call *chic,* wonderfully active, as large as a small dog, with a snout like a sucking pig. The Indian women raise them, and they leave nothing which they do not root over and turn upside down; and it is an incredible thing how wonderfully fond they are of playing with the Indian women, and how they clean them from lice." The flesh of the coati was also widely eaten, and the animal remains a pet today in some rural Mexican homes. . . . What ought the coati to be called in English? One common Spanish name is *tejon*. Unfortunately, *tejon* is also the Spanish name for badger as well as raccoon. Another name, from the Aztecs, is *pisote* (Nahuatl *pezotli*), which means basically glutton. Yet *pisote* is sometimes applied also to the peccary or wild pig. In regard to the peccary, the Nahuatl terms *quauhcoyametl* and *quahpizotl* were developed after the conquest to distinguish the native species from the introduced Castilian pig, so by extension the coati was sometimes termed *quauhpezotli*, tree-glutton, to distinguish it from the peccary, the ground-glutton. Finally, the Mayan languages labeled the coati for its playful aspect, hence *chic,* clown.[57]

The introduction to the issue is based on what *anthropologists* understand about the problem of cross-cultural naming. So far there is nothing in this description that any anthropologist or archaeologist would

57. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 289–90.

shake a head at (to use Wilson's language). In fact, in cross-cultural conditions, anthropologists expect precisely what Sorenson describes. Is it possible that anthropologist Wilson is unaware of this?

What, then, is the outrageous claim for horses, tapirs, and deer? From Sorenson:

> True horses (*Equus* sp.) were present in the western hemisphere long ago, but it has been assumed that they did not survive to the time when settled peoples inhabited the New World. I recently summarized evidence suggesting that the issue is not settled. Actual horse bones have been found in a number of archaeological sites on the Yucatan Peninsula, in one case with artifacts six feet beneath the surface under circumstances that rule out their coming from Spanish horses. Still, other large animals might have functioned or looked enough like a horse that one of them was what was referred to by *horse*. A prehispanic figure modeled on the cover of an incense burner from Poptun, Guatemala, shows a man sitting on the back of a deer holding its ears or horns, and a stone monument dating to around A.D. 700 represents a woman astride the neck of a deer, grasping its horns. Then there is another figurine of a person riding an animal, this one from central Mexico. Possibly, then, the deer served as a sort of "horse" for riding. (That was a practice in Siberia until recently, so the idea is not as odd as moderns might think. Besides, in the Quiche languages of highland Guatemala we have expressions like *keh,* deer or horse, *keheh,* mount or ride, and so on.)[58]

What Sorenson says is that when Nephites encountered the same problem of cross-cultural naming as did the Spanish, they may have applied the same solution. In that condition, the word *horse* might have been used as the name for the unfamiliar animal, the deer. Sorenson is not suggesting that Nephites did not know the difference between horses and deer. He is simply suggesting that, according to known

58. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 295–96.

human practice, they might have used a common name for a known animal to refer to a previously unknown animal that they felt was somehow similar to the more familiar one. That is hardly an "outrageous" suggestion. Sorenson is doing exactly what an anthropologist would do—applying known human behavior in similar conditions to explain human behavior in a different setting.

What about the tapir? Is Sorenson's argument any more "outrageous" when tapirs are involved? Again, it is instructive to return to the original argument rather than to Wilson's far too brief summary:

> As we examine the writings about Mesoamerica's large fauna, we find the linguistic problem assails us at every turn. Natives and Spaniards shared the difficulty. The lowland Maya at first named all the big animals of the Spaniards—horse, mule, ass—with the name of the nearest native of equivalent size—the tapir. The Spaniards, however, thought the tapir looked like a pig, although it weighs up to 700 pounds. Others considered the tapir to resemble the ass; sixty years ago in southern Mexico the beast was called *anteburro* or "once-an-ass."[59]

As with the deer, Sorenson's suggestions about tapirs follow known practices, which is not outrageous, as Wilson's mockery implies.

What is outrageous, however, is Wilson's "evidence" for a "problem" in Sorenson's argument. Wilson asks: "Well, how do you ride something that is a little bit bigger than a dog into battle? It's an outrageous idea." Why, yes it is. It is outrageous that Wilson makes this statement and does not understand why he is completely incorrect. Wilson here repeats the erroneous idea that the Book of Mormon has horses that are ridden or appear in battle. Wilson's "proof" that a Latter-day Saint scholar's argument is "outrageous" is a statement that is demonstrably contrary to fact. Sadly, it appears that Wilson is aware neither of what the Book of Mormon actually says nor of how anthropologists deal with cross-cultural onomastica.

59. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting,* 293.

Ironically, Wilson suggests: "If this argument was brought up in a scientific community, I can tell you they'd be laughed out of the building." Rather, it would be anyone calling himself an anthropologist who was completely unaware of common anthropological principles and who misrepresented a primary text who would be laughed out of the building. As an illusionist, Wilson appears to be learning the trade. To use another show-business analogy, Wilson is a ventriloquist whose lips are moving. He is presented as an expert witness, but he continually demonstrates that he is far from expert in this field.

Witnesses: President Gordon B. Hinckley and Wilson. President Hinckley is quoted from his address at the close of the April 2002 general conference:

> As a church, we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say. Our faith, our knowledge is not based on ancient tradition. . . . Our faith, our knowledge comes of the witness of a prophet in this dispensation.

According to Wilson: "The prophet of the Mormon church, Gordon B. Hinckley, has stated that he does not believe in the Christian Christ."

Examination: The ellipses in the text are appropriately entered so that we might be aware that text has been removed. However, the text was removed because it did not allow the editors to shape the statement exactly as they wished. The original is:

> As a Church we have critics, many of them. They say we do not believe in the traditional Christ of Christianity. There is some substance to what they say. Our faith, our knowledge is not based on ancient tradition, the creeds which came of a finite understanding and out of the almost infinite discussions of men trying to arrive at a definition of the risen Christ. Our faith, our knowledge comes of the witness of a prophet in this dispensation who saw before him the great God of the universe and His Beloved Son, the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. They spoke to him. He spoke with Them. He testified openly, unequivocally, and unabashedly of that great vision.

> It was a vision of the Almighty and of the Redeemer of the world, glorious beyond our understanding but certain and unequivocating in the knowledge which it brought. It is out of that knowledge, rooted deep in the soil of modern revelation, that we, in the words of Nephi, "talk of Christ, we rejoice in Christ, we preach of Christ, we prophesy of Christ, and we write according to our prophecies, that [we and] our children may know to what source [we] may look for a remission of [our] sins" (2 Ne. 25:26).[60]

Certainly President Hinckley indicated that "there is some substance to what they say," but he qualified his statement; the qualification is what Living Hope Ministries edited out of the film. President Hinckley contrasted the prophetic understanding of Christ to the flawed traditions of men. That certainly does not sound like a denial of Christ or the worship of someone other than Jesus of Nazareth, except to those whose agenda is to depict the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as somehow non-Christian. Wilson's performance continues to caricature rather than to accurately represent his reference.

Witnesses: Murphy and Wilson. In their closing remarks, Murphy and Wilson both play on the theme of lies versus honesty. Wilson concludes: "If the church is based on lies, the lie of the Book of Mormon, then I can't condone it." And in his final remarks, Murphy speculates: "As a Mormon scholar, I wonder . . . why it is that we won't be honest. . . . Let the truth be told."

Examination: These are amazing statements in a film that is designed to hide contradictory evidence. Murphy is aware of contradictory positions to many of his statements but never engages them or even hints that they exist. While he is more careful than Wilson about making blatantly incorrect statements, some of Murphy's "accurate" statements are placed in such a way as to give the impression that they have said something else entirely. Given the tactics of the film, I would recast Wilson's statement: If the film is based on a lie, then I cannot condone it.

60. Gordon B. Hinckley, "We Look to Christ," *Ensign,* May 2002, 90–91.

Conclusion

If this were a magic show, we might be entertained. However, this film produced by Living Hope Ministries presents itself as much more than illusion. In this case, we cannot ignore those behind the curtain. I find myself echoing (in a very different context) one of Murphy's statements: "Let the truth be told." There is a truth to be told, but it is not found in this film.