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Indirect External Evidences - American Antiquities, Preliminary Considerations

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CHAPTER XXIV.

INDIRECT EXTERNAL EVIDENCES—AMERICAN ANTIQUITIES. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS.

In dealing with the indirect external evidences to the truth of the Book of Mormon supplied by American antiquities, embracing in that term archæology, mythology, traditions, ethnology, languages, etc., it should be observed that the Book of Mormon is not a specific work upon any of these subjects. Nor is it a work on physical geography; nor even a history, in the modern sense of that term. Furthermore, while the purpose of the book is mainly religious, it is not a formal treatise even upon religion. But while the Book of Mormon has limitations in all the directions noted, it is a fact that American antiquities, mythologies, traditions, etc., may be of great importance in sustaining its truth. I therefore begin the consideration of this branch of evidence by inquiring what conditions respecting the location and nature of American monuments of civilization the Book of Mormon demands.

I.

What the Book of Mormon Requires as to the Location and Character of the Jaredite Civilization.

It has been shown in a preceding chapter^a that the first people who inhabited North America after the flood were a colony that came from the Euphrates Valley, about the time of the confusion of languages at Babel, under the leader-

^aSee chapter x.

ship of a prophet of the name of Moriancumr, and his brother Jared; that this colony made their first settlement somewhere in the region of country known in modern times as Central America; that they called their first city Moron, which from the time of its establishment, with brief, intermittent periods, remained the seat of government and the chief center of the civilization of the great Jaredite nation, up to the time of the latter's destruction, in the early part of the sixth century B. C.—a period of sixteen hundred years.

From the City of Moron the Jaredites extended their colonization schemes southward along the isthmus to South America, and northward to the great lakes. Their greatest activities, however, and the centers of their civilization were in Central America; and it is there we must look for the most extensive and enduring monuments of civilization in the western world; and expect the monuments to have some of the characteristics of the monuments of the ancient civilization of the Euphrates Valley.^b

II.

What the Book of Mormon Requires as to the Location, Extent and Nature of the Nephite Civilization.

In considering this subject I shall take no account of the colony of Mulek beyond noting the fact that previous to the union of their descendants with the Nephites under Mosiah I., about two hundred years B. C., they did not affect to any considerable extent the civilization of the country, and hence I shall consider them under the same head as the Nephites.

Concerning the Nephites and their civilization, the Book

^bSee chapter x.

of Mormon requires the proof that a colony of Israelites left Jerusalem about six hundred years B. C., carrying with them the Hebrew Scriptures; that they made a voyage from thence to the west coast of the south continent of America, landing about thirty degrees south latitude; that there were four brothers in the colony, among whom there was a contention about leadership; that the younger brother had the greater weight of influence with the colony, and became practically its leader; that they were directed in their journey by miraculous means—an instrument consisting of a ball of brass with spindles in it which indicated the direction of their travels, receiving upon its burnished surface from time to time instructions for their guidance—called by them *Liahona*; that because of jealousies among the four brothers the colony was divided,^c the younger brother leading away northward the more righteous part of the colony from which separation arose two people, one civilized, the other, in comparison with the first, barbarous; that the civilized people, those following the younger brother, removed gradually northward because of the repeated depredations of their relentless enemies, the Lamanites; that during the period of some four hundred years they removed from the place of their first landing to a region of country in the west part of South America, between the tenth degree south latitude, and the equator; that in this land about two hundred B. C. the more righteous part of the people again separated from the rest and made their way still further northward to the great valley of what they called the Sidon river, and there united with the descendants of Mulek's colony and formed the Nephite-Zarahemla nation, but they were called Nephites; that this people extended their cities and provisions throughout the northern part of South America, colonizing even a por-

^cII. Nephi v: 1-13.

tion of the narrow neck of land connecting the two continents; that they were in frequent conflict, and waged great wars with the barbarous people who still pressed upon them from the south; that in the year 55 B. C. they began migrating into Central America and even still further northward; that ship building was inaugurated by one Hagoth on the west side of the Isthmus of Panama; that the people moved northward in great numbers by means of these vessels as well as by land; that two of these vessels going far northward, drifted out into the great ocean and were lost, at least to the Nephites; that there were frequent wars between the civilized people and the barbarians; that the birth of Messiah was evidenced by the appearance of a new star in the heavens, and by a night which continued brilliant as day from the setting of the sun to the rising thereof; that at the crucifixion of Messiah during the three hours that he hung upon the cross at Jerusalem the western world was visited by an unparalleled series of cataclysms which convulsed the whole land, destroying many cities, some being buried by mountains that were thrown up by convulsions of the earth, and others being sunk in the depths of the sea; that these dreadful convulsions of the earth were followed by three days of total darkness; that some time after these awful cataclysms the risen Messiah appeared in person to a multitude in the region of country in South America east and south of the Isthmus of Panama and including part of that Isthmus,^d that he proclaimed his relationship to God, held himself forth as the Son of God, taught the doctrine of the atonement, instituted the Christian sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper, chose twelve disciples and authorized the organization of a church to teach the doctrine of Christ and perfect, by its watchful care, those

^dThe Nephite land of Bountiful.

who accepted it ; that this introduction of the gospel of Christ was followed by a period of universal peace and prosperity—a veritable golden age—through nearly two centuries ; that after this the people declined in moral and spiritual excellence until they were in complete apostasy ; that a series of civil wars and the rise of robber bands undermined government, and that about the close of the fourth century A. D., the government was destroyed, the people divided into small bands or tribes and anarchy prevailed.

Only two other remarks are necessary to complete the consideration of what the Book of Mormon Nephite period requires of American antiquities in order to derive from them evidence in support of its truth. The first of these is the fact that Nephite occupancy of the western world is confined to the western and extreme northern part of the south continent, up to the year 55 B. C. ; that it was only then that Nephite migrations extended into the north continent ; that while it is true that their settlements in the north became somewhat extensive, the progress of them was checked by frequent wars between Nephites and Lamanites and also by the depredations of robber bands which infested the land up to the time of the crucifixion of Messiah ; that at the crucifixion of Messiah occurred these tremendous cataclysms which convulsed the whole land and resulted in the destruction of so many of the people so that during this period of some eighty-eight years—from 55 B. C. to 33 A. D.—the period of time the Nephites occupied the north continent previous to the advent of Messiah, they could not have erected many monuments of civilization that would survive the ravages of ages. After the destruction which swept over both western continents during the crucifixion of Messiah, the people were so reduced in numbers that it would be some time before they could begin to occupy the land to any great extent, still, dur-

ing the two hundred years of righteousness and peace which followed Messiah's advent among them, the Nephites doubtless became very numerous and the arts of peace would very greatly develop. At the close of this period, however, civil wars again checked their progress, and they entered upon that period of rapid decline in all that makes for the stability of government and permanency of civilization, until at the close of the fourth century A. D., anarchy prevailed only to be followed by Lamanite barbarism, which exerted its every effort to destroy government, overthrow civilization, and destroy every monument and vestige of that religion against which chiefly the Lamanites had waged war.^e

In the second remark referred to a moment since, I would call attention to the fact that there exists evidence which leads one to believe that the Nephites constructed their buildings of perishable material; chiefly, I think, of wood, a circumstance which will go far towards accounting for the fact that there is but little evidence of the existence of a great civilized nation possessing temples, synagogues, palaces, etc., in the northern part of South America, where the Nephite civilization rose to its highest development previous to the coming of the Messiah. The reasons for this conclusion are to be found in several passages of the Book of Mormon, where the specific statement is made that the people were taught to work in all manner of wood, iron, copper, etc.; but no mention is made of their being skilled in the working of stone. For example, the first Nephi says: *f*“And I did teach my people to build buildings; and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass; and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores, which were in great abundance.”^f Again, in the book of

^eMormon viii: 1-10.

^fII. Nephi v: 15.

Jarom, it is written: "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."^g After migrations into the north continent began, one of the things which seemed to be a cause of regret on the part of the Nephites was the lack of timber in that land. Referring to this, Mormon, in his abridgment of Helaman's reference to it, says: "And now no part of the land was desolate, save it were for timber. * * * And there being but little timber upon the face of the land [northward], nevertheless the people who went forth became exceedingly expert in the working of cement; therefore they did build houses of cement in the which they did dwell. * * * And the people who were in the land northward did dwell in tents and in houses of cement, and they did suffer whatsoever tree should spring up upon the face of the land that it should grow up, that in time they might have timber to build their houses, yea, their cities, and their temples, and their synagogues, and their sanctuaries, and all manner of their buildings. And it came to pass as timber was exceeding scarce in the land northward, they did send forth much by the way of shipping; and thus they did enable the people in the land northward that they might build many cities, both of wood and of cement."^h These statements, I believe, justify the conclusion that the Nephites, in the main, used timber—perishable material—for building purposes, and hence the monuments of their civilization so far as architectural remains are concerned, have very large-

^gJarom i: 8.

^hHelaman iii: 6-11.

ly perished, as well in the north as in the south, except perhaps to the extent that they may have rebuilt and reoccupied some of the old Jaredite cities in the north continent.

An Israelitish origin, then, is what is required for the second race inhabiting America; a landing in South America; a gradual movement northward until they took possession of the north as well as the south continent; their civilization of a lighter order so far as expressed in solidity of buildings or the number of cities, and spread over a more extensive area than that of the Jaredites; an intermixture of the monuments of the one, with the ruins of the other; knowledge of the Mosaic institutions and history of the ancient world, through the Hebrew scriptures; special signs at Messiah's birth, and appalling cataclysms throughout the land of his crucifixion; the appearing of Messiah to them and the establishment of a Christian church; the overthrow of the Nephite government and civilization about the opening of the fifth century A. D. These are the main facts for which we seek proofs in American antiquities so far as the Nephite period of the Book of Mormon is concerned.

Of course it may be possible that in the present state of knowledge of American antiquities evidences for all these facts may not now be obtainable; but if evidences tending to prove them can be pointed out at all, it will be so much in favor of the Book of Mormon. Meantime the reader should be cautioned not to expect too much from the character of the evidence now to be considered, nor should he be discouraged if in quantity and clearness it falls below his expectations. It must be remembered that examination of our American antiquities, especially in Central and South America, has not yet been as thoroughly made as it will be; there are many buried cities and other monuments yet to be heard

from,ⁱ as also, a better understanding of those monuments of ancient American civilization already brought to light. Moreover, it should be remembered that for many ages the Bible stood practically without the advantages of monumental testimony in its support. Not until modern times have learned men penetrated the eastern countries to return laden with exact knowledge of monumental testimony to the truth of the Bible. Not until the discovery and translation of the Rosetta stone, early in the last century, was an impetus given to explorations in Egypt, the Sinaitic Peninsula, Palestine and the Euphrates valley—Bible lands—resulting in that collection of collateral evidence for the truth of the Bible noted in a former chapter. One should not be impatient, then, if the Book of Mormon has to wait some time yet for the development of that fulness of monumental testimony to its truth which I am sure lies hidden in the, as yet, imperfectly known and still less perfectly understood, antiquities of the western hemisphere.

ⁱOn this point Mr. Baldwin says: "To understand the situation of most of the old ruins in Central America, one must know something of the wild condition of the country. Mr. Squier says: 'By far the greater proportion of the country is in its primeval state, and covered with dense, tangled, and almost impenetrable tropical forests, rendering fruitless all attempts at systematic investigation. There are vast traces untrodden by human feet, or traversed only by Indians who have a superstitious reverence for the moss-covered, and crumbling monuments hidden in the depths of the wilderness. * * For these and other reasons, it will be long before the treasures of the past, in Central America, can become fully known.' A great forest of this character covers the southern half of Yucatan, and extends far into Guatemala, which is half covered by it. It extends also into Chiapa and Tabasco, and reaches into Honduras. The ruins known as Copan and Palenque are in this forest, not far from its southern edge. Its vast depths have never been much explored. There are ruins in it which none but wandering natives have ever seen, and some, perhaps, which no human foot has approached for ages. It is believed that ruins exist in nearly every part of this vast wilderness." (Ancient America, pp. 94, 95.)