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Exploring American Ruins

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Abstract: This three-part series presents some legends and traditions of the Native Americans in association with ruins, especially of Central America. They seem to prove that the Book of Mormon is historically correct. Throughout the Americas, the Native Americans believed in a Messiah who came a long time ago and promised to return. The high priest of the Quiche wore a breastplate with seven precious stones. It was a Urim and Thummim used to decide the innocence or guilt of those accused of crimes. It would reveal both past and future events. The first part introduces the series and discusses the city of Tikal.

hundred miles across the Atlantic, what possibilities open up to the mind of man? To-day, pictures are transmitted from one end of a cable and reproduced at the other. Soon, no cable will be observed. We will talk across continents, oceans, and possibly to other planets, and see each other as if no space existed. I submit that this power is now, and has been throughout the past eternities, with God, and in a modified form with those who have put off mortality. Space is eliminated, and God sees us eye to eye, although his corporeal body is enthroned in his courts on high. It is no miracle, it is a law of the kingdom, but hitherto hidden from mortal man. There are many things our finite minds cannot understand. Let us not be impatient, but await God's own good time, when we shall know even also as we are known.—DR. FREDERIC CLIFT, in the *Improvement Era*.

EXPLORING AMERICAN RUINS.

BY ELDER WALTER M. WOLFE OF THE LONDON CONFERENCE.

THE Book of Mormon is a peculiar work. It is either one of the most ingenious literary impostures that has ever been produced, or it is a true record, translated and given to man by divine authority and inspiration. If Joseph Smith, Jr., was a divinely commissioned prophet, then the Book of Mormon is literal history and doctrine. If he was an impostor the Book of Mormon is no better than a child's fable. Conversely, if the Book of Mormon is proved to be historically correct, this very fact brings with it testimony of its divine authenticity, of the divinity of the mission of Joseph Smith and of the Latter-day work, that cannot be refuted.

The Book of Mormon purports to be a history of the inhabitants of the American continent long before its discovery by Columbus, especially a history of the descendants of a certain Lehi who left Jerusalem just prior to the capture of that city by Nebuchadnezzar. Lehi, so it is said, after many wanderings on land and on sea was guided to the American coasts, and the people who sprang from his loins were known as Nephites and Lamanites, the former taking their name from Lehi's most dutiful son and successor, the latter from a wicked and rebellious child. These people had a great civilization. They rose and fell and rose again. In this respect their history is singularly like that of the Jews and Israelites. In fulfilment of prophecies, recorded in the Book of Mormon, they were visited by the Messiah, who mingled with them, taught, healed, preached and blessed just as He did by the Sea of Galilee. In following His example and precepts they reached the zenith of their glory; then, forgetting and disobeying His instructions, they engaged in fraternal and parricidal wars that brought destruction upon them and brought them to the degraded condition in which the American Indian is found to-day. The sacred records of this people were handed down from prophet to prophet until, in the early part of the fifth century after Christ, Moroni sealed the historic plates and buried them in a hill near Palmyra, New York, U.S.A. This identical Moroni afterwards, September 22, 1823, revealed their hiding place to Joseph Smith, by whom they were translated and given to the world.

The world at large claims that this whole narrative is a fairy myth, the work of an audacious, semi-insane boy. The strictly prophetic and homiletic portions of the Book of Mormon are considered as clever imitations of the prophets and evangelists of the Bible. The historical part is a well-devised fabrication. The world is unwilling to apply the same tests—call it “higher criticism” if you please—to the Book of Mormon that it applies to the Bible. Let us, leaving the strictly prophetic and doctrinal portions of the Book of Mormon aside, carefully examine it for its historical value, and ascertain whether or no modern research substantiates as history that which it presents.

The Book of Mormon narrates the visit of the Savior to the western continent and prophesies His return. The Indians of the United States are far more degraded than are those of Mexico and Central America. They have not the ruins nor the traditions of the southern races. Yet every Indian tribe not converted to Christianity believes that the Messiah has visited it, and that He will come again. Longfellow's immortal “Legend of Hiawatha” is founded upon such a tradition. Nine out of every ten uprisings of the Indians, unless brought about by some flagrant act of injustice, are instigated by a pseudo-Messiah, who claims that he is divinely appointed to free his people from the white man's yoke. And because the red men have been taught that such a deliverer will some day come, they herald the advent of an impostor with astonishing faith and zeal. They also look upon their coppery color as a sign of degradation. They believe that they were once a white people and that they will eventually regain their lost condition, which they have lost through sin. Where did they get this idea? It is certainly contrary to the accepted theories of development. The black man of Africa has no such hope. Study the Book of Mormon and find the answer.

But it is especially with the ruins and with the traditions of Central America that this article is to deal. Journeying southward from the Rio Grande, the boundary between Mexico and the United States, the traveler finds ruins, insignificant at first but gradually increasing in magnitude until the latitude of Yucatan is reached. Not only do these ruins increase in size, but there is a wonderful advance in architecture and sculpture. Classic hieroglyphics take the place of crude picture-writing, and statues that might have adorned Memphis, friezes that would have honored the Parthenon are to be found. Evidences of a high and powerful civilization are everywhere apparent.

When the Prophet Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon, Central America was less known than is Central Africa to-day. The priest-ridden country had just thrown off Spanish rule and was in the throes of revolution. Travel was impossible. Stephens and Catherwood's fascinating narrative had not yet been conceived. Joseph Smith could not have obtained his knowledge from books, still less from direct narration. Yet cities, such as those that have been recently discovered, are described in the Book of Mormon. One of these cities, in Yucatan, I remember especially well, as I believe that I am the first white man that ever visited it.

Amid the denseness of the tropical vegetation, the forest-buried cities are not easily found. With a guide in front to cut the way the traveler is surprised to find that he is ascending above the level of the jungle. Gradually the fact dawns upon him that the hill is square rather than round, that under

the vegetation, and mould, and debris of centuries is a pyramid of hewn stones, and that these pyramids are arranged in regular order along an ancient highway. Each is about forty metres square and twenty-five metres in altitude. The top is level, save for the crumbling ruins of some ancient altar or sacrificial rock. Apparently there is no entrance to the pyramid or any means of penetrating its secret. Such were the outskirts of the ruins of Tikal.

While making my measurements, I sent the guide into the bush to see if he could find anything else worthy of note, especially to locate two pillars that I had been told by the Indians were to be found here. He took me a mile further and bade me look upward. We were in the middle of a level plaza, having an area of perhaps twenty acres. Surrounding this were seven pyramids, each much higher than those we had at first visited, and each capped with a house or tower of snowy whiteness. To these buildings the ascent was difficult, a hand-over-hand climb by means of branches and creepers, with here and there a snake to vary the monotony. At length the narrow platform was reached, and we could lay our hands upon the buildings of a forgotten race. The outside walls were stuccoed—hard and smooth as polished marble, but where the elements had destroyed this coat we found that the edifice was constructed of kiln-burnt brick. The portal faced the plaza. It was eight feet square, filled with earth and rubbish, but with an aperture sufficiently large to admit reptiles, bats, and other inhabitants of the nether gloom. An hour's work enlarged the hole so that we could crawl in. There were two chambers eight feet wide and fifteen feet in length. Between these was a corridor six feet in length. The division wall was made of a cement as hard as Portland cement, and the whole interior wall was covered with a white, hard finish. The two main rooms ran up twelve feet to the square, and then the walls narrowed to an apex eight feet higher. The corridor was ceiled with hewn chicle logs, ten inches wide and eight inches in thickness, beautifully fitted together and most delicately carved. There were no paintings nor images to be found, though the walls of one of the other buildings, as we afterwards found, were beautifully decorated in blue, red and yellow.

We afterwards found in the plaza thirteen monuments. Eight of these were square and were probably of Quiché origin, but five evidently belonged to a much more ancient period. These monuments were flat, eight feet high, four feet two inches wide, and nine inches thick. Each was covered with hieroglyphics or symbols similar to those found at Palenque.

It would take a long time to describe Tikal in detail. It is one of eight ruined cities that extend in a straight line from the Bay of Campeche to the Gulf of Amatique. Their history is lost in the dim past. One strange fact is that the hieroglyphics here and at other places in Central America so much resemble those of Egypt. It will be remembered that the Book of Mormon plates were inscribed with Reformed Egyptian characters.

All archæologists ascribe a foreign origin to these ancient ruins. Le Plongeon would connect them with Egypt. Others believe that they were built while yet America was joined to Europe by the lost Atlantis. Even the Buddhists claim that their missionaries (about 400 B.C.) are their architects. Only the Book of Mormon solves the problem.

[TO BE CONTINUED].