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The Submergence of the City of Jerusalem in the Land of Nephi

John L. Sorenson

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Submerged just off the southern coast of Guatemala's scenic Lake Atitlán is an ancient settlement of stone buildings that suggests an intriguing possible linkage with the Book of Mormon city of Jerusalem, an apostate Lamanite city destroyed by sudden flooding. Photograph by Douglas Kasteler.

The Submergence of the City of Jerusalem in the Land of Nephi

In touring southern Guatemala, many FARMS patrons traveled west of the capital city to visit Lake Atitlán, one of the most photogenic spots in Central America. Tour guides have told thousands that the beautiful “waters of Mormon” beloved by Alma and his people (see Mosiah 18:30) might well be Lake Atitlán. The Nephite record also tells us that a city called Jerusalem, which was constructed by Lamanites led by Nephite dissenters, was located “away joining the borders of Mormon” (Alma 21:1–2).

Twenty-five years ago John Sorenson suggested that the city

of Jerusalem most plausibly fits into Mesoamerican geography if it is considered to have been located on the south shore of Lake Atitlán.¹ A scientific paper published in Guatemala in 2000 by two Guatemalans experienced in underwater archaeology, Henry Benítez and Robert Samayoa, supports that idea with dramatic new evidence.²

Third Nephi 9:7 reports that immediately after the great series of physical catastrophes that accompanied the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, the Lord's voice out of the heavens told the Nephites that “the city of Jerusalem and the inhabitants thereof” had

been covered by water (“waters have I caused to come up in the stead thereof”), an event that took place within a matter of hours.

Part of the data Sorenson used to frame his proposal was a report from geologists of “long-term periodic fluctuations in [Lake Atitlán's] level which seem to be due to shiftings of deep-seated fissures, variously opening and closing outlets.”³ The lake owes its existence to the growth of the three volcanoes on its south shore that block normal stream drainage, leaving only subterranean outlets through the lava “dam.” Changes in the level of the lake of up to 15 feet per year were reported in historical documents in Spanish, but no evidence of a sudden rise or fall was known until recently.

Benítez and Samayoa report a submerged site, which they call Samabaj, just off the lake's south coast, not far from Santiago Atitlán. House foundations of hewn stone are located at a depth of 17 meters (about 55 feet) below the present lake level. The building remains are situated atop what was once a steep-sided island about 300 meters across and a couple hundred meters offshore. Obviously, when the place was settled and the houses constructed, the lake level had to have been at least 17 meters lower than it is now. The submerged island drops off


sharply on either side to a depth of 80 meters or more beneath today's lake level. Exploration by the divers has also demonstrated that at times in the past the surface of the lake was even lower—as much as 60 meters beneath the present surface (as shown, for example, by remnant beach terraces).

Scuba divers have mapped the underwater ruined settlement, giving careful attention to the orientation of the buildings, and have found that it includes at least three groups of buildings with walls marked by well-hewn stones. The area called Group III features a large building (about 9 by 26 meters, or 30 by 77 feet) that appears to have once had a stairway up one side of it. A smoothed basalt stela, or standing monument, had been erected in front of the stairway. The archaeologists consider this large building to have been the political-administrative center of the ancient settlement.

The divers also concluded that the submergence of Samabaj beneath the lake waters had been comparatively sudden, for they could observe little damage to the structures from wave action (much damage would be expected if the submergence process had been prolonged).

Until further work is done (the human and material resources at the disposal of these men, working without any institutional funding, have limited their ability to explore further) the archaeologists refrain from trying to date this ruin. However, some finds in the Atitlán area indicate that settlers lived in the vicinity since before the time of Christ,⁴ and the smoothed stela at Samabaj points to a date possibly earlier.

At the least we can say that if the apostate New World city of Jerusalem did sit adjacent to Lake Atitlán, we now can understand how it could have been covered up by rising water in a

matter of a few hours, as 3 Nephi indicates. 

Notes

1. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 223–25. The position was first put in writing in a manuscript widely distributed in photocopy form between 1977 and 1984.
2. Henry Benítez and Roberto Samayoa, “Samabaj y la arqueología subacuática en el Lago de Atitlán,” in *XIII Simposio de Investigaciones Arqueológicas en Guatemala, 1999* (Guatemala: Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología, 2000), 2:849–54.
3. Felix Webster McBryde, *Cultural and Historical Geography of Southwest Guatemala*, Smithsonian Institution, Institute of Social Anthropology Publication 4 (Washington D.C.: 1945), 132–33.
4. Samuel K. Lothrop, *Atitlán*, Carnegie Institution of Washington Publication 444 (Washington, D.C.: 1933).

By John L. Sorenson

Helpful Resources for Scripture Study

Three manuals prepared by the Church Education System for use in seminary, institute, and university classes are excellent resources for students of the Old Testament at any level: *Old Testament, Genesis–2 Samuel*; *Old Testament, 1 Kings–Malachi*; and *The Pearl of Great Price*.

“These very inexpensive student manuals provide good overviews, helpful notes and commentaries, important quotations, and useful points to ponder,” says FARMS founder John W. Welch. “Budding scholars as well as even the best gospel scholars should be aware of everything covered therein. Because so many people in the church have read them, these manuals

have become a de facto coin of the realm. To avoid plowing old ground or reinventing the wheel, gospel scholars need to know what has been written in the past and then move on from there. And when speaking to informed audiences, they ought to be able to assume that most people in the audience are familiar with these basic materials.”

The manuals can be purchased at distribution outlets of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (online at www.ldscatalog.com) and from many LDS bookstores. For a list of more specialized readings on the Old Testament, see the “Recommended Readings” section of the FARMS Web site.