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## KnoWhy #87 - How Can Barley in the Book of Mormon Feed Faith?

Author(s): Book of Mormon Central Staff

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**Abstract:** Barley is included among Nephite crops and was long believed to be an Old World grain not present in the Americas before Columbus. In the late-20th century, however, barley native to the Americas was discovered as a cultivated grain at a number of archaeological sites in the Eastern and Southwestern United States, as well as Mexico. Barley was important to Book of Mormon peoples, and is now known to be an important crop in parts of the Americas during Book of Mormon times.



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Stalk of Barley via Wikimedia commons

# WHY CAN BARLEY IN THE BOOK OF MORMON FEED FAITH?

“And we began to till the ground, yea, even with all manner of seeds, with seeds of corn, and of wheat, and of **BARLEY**, and with neas, and with sheum, and with seeds of all manner of fruits.”  
Mosiah 9:9

## The Know

When Zeniff took a group of Nephites back up to the land of Nephi, seeking to reclaim “the land of [their] fathers’ first inheritance,” they “began to till the ground, yea, even with all manner of seeds” (Mosiah 9:1, 9; cf. Mosiah 7:22). Included in their list of crops are wheat and barley, two Old World grains long believed to be absent in the pre-Columbian New World. Yet, for barley at least, this assumption is mistaken.

There are actually three types of wild barley native to the Americas, something scientists have been aware of for a long time. It wasn’t until 1983, however, that archaeologists first uncovered a domesticated form of barley native to the Americas in Arizona in a pre-Columbian (ca. AD 900) context.<sup>1</sup>

“Little barley,” as scientists call it, has since been found throughout the Mississippi River valley,<sup>2</sup> where it was a major staple during the Middle (ca. 200 BC–AD 500) and Late Woodland (ca. AD 500–1000) periods,<sup>3</sup> though “likely cultivated specimens” have also been found dating to as early as 800 BC in Iowa.<sup>4</sup> According to two non-LDS scholars, “extensive archaeological evidence also points to the cultivation of little barley in the Southwest and parts of Mexico.”<sup>5</sup>

## The Why

Over time, more and more evidence for the domestication of little barley in the Americas has emerged over an increasingly wider span of both time and geography. Little barley may have diffused to other regions of the Americas, which were known to trade with the southwest and eastern United States, including the exchange of crops.<sup>6</sup> In any case, evidence demonstrates that in at least some parts of the Americas, a type of barley (“little barley”) was a highly important crop during Book of Mormon times.

This has important implications for the Book of Mormon. In the second and first centuries BC, barley played a significant role in Nephite society, not only as food, but as a measurement of exchange (Alma 11:1–19), just as it did in ancient Near Eastern economic systems.<sup>7</sup> Evidence from what is often called archaeobotany (the study of plants remains at archaeological sites) now confirms that a species of barley was highly important to some cultures in the Americas at this time.

This is another example that illustrates the benefits that come with patience in archaeology.<sup>8</sup> John L. Sorenson commented, “That such an important crop could have gone undetected for so long by archaeologists

justifies the thought that wheat might also be found in ancient [American] sites.<sup>9</sup> Questions remain about Nephite crops, animals, and material culture, but discoveries like little barley illustrate the wisdom in keeping an open mind and avoiding hasty judgments while considering and exploring what the Book of Mormon says about Nephite life.

## Further Reading

Tyler Livingston, "Barley and the Book of Mormon: New Evidence," *Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum* (2010).

John L. Sorenson and Robert F. Smith, "Barley in Ancient America," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 130–132.

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## Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson and Robert F. Smith, "Barley in Ancient America," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 130–132. Also see John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013), 303.

2. For a listing of several places it has been found in the Midwest and eastern United States, see Tyler Livingston, "Barley and the Book of Mormon: New Evidence," *Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum* (2010).

3. Michael T. Dunn and William Green, "Terminal Archaic and Early Woodland Plant Use at the Gast Spring Site (13LA152) Southeast Iowa," *Midcontinental Journal of Archaeology* 23, no. 1 (1998): 47 mention little barley as one of two "starchy-seed" crops that "dominate archaeobotanical assemblages in the area" of western Illinois and eastern Iowa during the Middle and Late Woodland periods. Some of the data supporting this is discussed on pp. 63–64.

4. Dunn and Green, "Terminal Archaic and Early Woodland Plant Use," 64, state that grains of little barley found at Gast Springs were dated to 2800 +/- 45 BP. BP stands for "before present," hence 2800 BP is approximately 800 BC.

5. Dunn and Green, "Terminal Archaic and Early Woodland Plant Use," 64.

6. See Livingston, "Barley and the Book of Mormon"; also see John L. Sorenson, "Mesoamericans in Pre-Columbian North America," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 218–219.

7. See John W. Welch, "The Law of Mosiah," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 160; John W. Welch, "The Laws of Eshnunna and Nephite Economics," in *Pressing Forward with the Book of Mormon: The FARMS Updates of the 1990s*, ed. John W. Welch and Melvin J. Thorne (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1999), 147–149; John W. Welch, "Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 2 (1999): 40–41.

8. For additional examples, see Book of Mormon Central, "Why Are Horses Mentioned in the Book of Mormon? (Enos 1:21)," *KnowWhy* 75 (April 11, 2016).

9. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, UT: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 184.