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In piecing together a jigsaw puzzle, the most helpful tool is the picture on the box that tells us what the completed puzzle should look like. Seeing that larger picture, the small pieces that may not be immediately intelligible on their own can find a place, and the puzzle is more amenable to solution. The Book of Mormon is just such a historical puzzle, but the box doesn't favor us with the picture. Finding the overall picture becomes yet another piece of our puzzle.

The task for a historical understanding of the Book of Mormon is complicated in that there are a minimum of two pictures required to help us understand the historical framework in which Book of Mormon events took place. Both the Old World and the New World provide gross locations for historical context. Of the two, the most accessible is the Old World context, because we know the essentials of time, location, and contemporary culture.

In this paper, I examine the New World in an attempt to find a similar time, context, and contemporary culture with which to better see the text of the Book of Mormon. Before suggesting an answer, however, it is incumbent upon us to know when we have found a plausible big picture. How do we know when we have found something that approaches probability rather than sheer coincidence? If I suggest that such nineteenth-century-sounding elements such as tents, scalping, democracy, and infant baptism are coincidence–and I do–how may I judge such a statement objectively?

Establishing Points of Correspondence

The Book of Mormon differs from a jigsaw puzzle in that it is not a complete representation of the overall cultural picture in which it participates. Because the text does not clearly spell out the relevant location and contemporary culture, we are free to float among possible pictures, picking points of correspondence between a picture we understand, and the text before us. That method leads to a collection of coincident points, but not to a comprehensive and plausible picture of the contemporary culture behind the text. To find the correct picture, instead of only a possible picture, we must have particular types of correspondences. The best picture will not have simple points of correspondence, but rather complex ones. A simple correspondence would be tents. It is easy to say that the American plains Indians had tents, and that this provides a context for the Book of Mormon. It is also quite plausible to understand tents as temporary structures from ancient Mesoamerica. As a simple connection, the interpretive world can freely spin around the coincident point, because there are no other aspects of a complex correlation that anchor the text to a particular time and place for that tent. Ideal complex correlations create multiple connection points that all rely upon the same time and place. The work done on Lehi's trail is an excellent example of where multiple complex points of correspondence exist between text and known geography and history. As an indicator of the time, location, and cultural context of the Book of Mormon, the complex set of correspondences involved in Lehi's trail are a much more powerful indicator of the correct picture than the single point of the idea of tents.

The next requirement for the picture is that we have interconnected complex correlations. If we have a single one, that is suggestive. If we have two, that is even better–unless the two refer to completely different times and places. Having a solid complex set of correspondences for Lehi's trail gives us nothing if our New World evidences become simple, and are pulled from multiple cultures in multiple locations as was the tendency not that long ago. What we need to find are multiple interconnected complex sets of connection points between the Book of Mormon and a proposed cultural context. As a very last requirement, the best interpretive schemes are productive, that is, they teach us more about the text than we see in the text without that interpretive picture behind it.

Time, Location, and Context

The three critical components of an interpretive picture are time, location, and context. Of these three, this paper will deal only with the third, the cultural context. Time is given to us in the text. We really only have to look at two time periods for our possible picture of the Book of Mormon, the timeframe given, and Joseph Smith's day. The text will either be ancient and therefore reflect the time

period it says it does, or it will be a modern fabrication more accurately reflecting a modern time period. That is an issue that is settled by the answers to the location and cultural aspects of the examination.

For location, I am suggesting that the Limited Tehuantepec Theory, particularly in the flavor suggested by John L. Sorenson, is the most complex and interconnected set of geographical and climatic correspondences for a plausible location for the Book of Mormon's New World events. Given time and a target place, we may now turn to known culture to see if we find similar sets of complex interconnected touchstones between the cultural content of Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon for similar time periods. What we will attempt is the application of the known picture of Mesoamerican from Book of Mormon times to see how that picture may inform the historical puzzle of the text.

Cultural Influences on the Early Lehites

We necessarily begin with the origin of Lehi's people in the New World. It is indisputable that Lehi and his company landed on a coast, and the coast of Guatemala is our plausible location, according to Sorenson's reconstruction. If a ship carrying Lehi's party were to have arrived on the coast of Guatemala approximately 590 years before Christ, what might they have found? Would they have been alone or were other people already there?

The archaeological survey of the Middle Formative sites for the coast of Guatemala deals with sites dated some two hundred years earlier than Lehi's landing, so we need to make some inferences. Two hundred years prior to Lehi's arrival there were seven settlements ranging from one household to twelve households.[1] After this time, the coastal areas saw a peak of population density not seen until the Late Classic period, over a thousand years later. It is important to understand that the settlement areas were not necessarily larger, but simply more numerous.[2]

What this tells us is that Lehi's company would have found it nearly impossible to remain isolated for long, if they were ever completely isolated at all. Even with a relatively sparse settlement along the coast, the typical radius for finding food would have led to some overlap of territories among the various populations. Those settlements that had been in place for years would have known of the other settlements on the coast. Smoke from cooking fires would easily be seen on certain scouting trips, and contact with a new entrant into the area would be virtually certain. It is quite probable that the arrival of a ship with sails would have been noticed while still on the horizon, and Lehi's ship might plausibly have been met by some of these residents of coastal Guatemala.

Secondly, we have Lehi's company entering an area dominated by small hamlets and perhaps a few villages. Such conditions would favor the acceptance of their party into those small communities. If they were seen as bringing important skills, a hamlet or two might be willing to join with them, and even willing to cede leadership to the new arrivals. Larger cities, however, might see them as threats and be less likely to desire to merge with them. The would surely not be willing to give up their sovereignty in favor of the newcomers, as the text indicates for Lehi's party. The conditions along the coast of Guatemala would therefore favor both contact with existing populations, and the possibility of merger with some of those native inhabitants.

Lehi's company had every reason to accept aid from, and a merger with, local populations. Lehi's group planted seeds from the Old World, but a rapid acquisition of information about survival skills particular to the New World would have been extremely important. They would have needed to know about the local food sources that were successful, the local sources of materials for clothing, the locations and types of clay for pottery, and any number of location-specific cultural items.

Scriptural Indications of Cultural Merger

The first indication we have that this merger took place, and took place this early, comes from the description Nephi gives us of the separation of his party from that of his brothers, Laman and Lemuel. Nephi describes the flight of his people:

> And it came to pass that the Lord did warn me, that I, Nephi, should depart from them and flee into the wilderness, and all those who would go with me. Wherefore, it came to pass that I, Nephi, did take my family, and also Zoram and his family, and Sam, mine elder brother and his family, and Jacob and Joseph, my younger brethren, and also my sisters, and all those who would go with me. And all those who would go with me were those who believed in the warnings and the revelations of God; wherefore, they did hearken unto my words.[3]

Nephi names those who leave, including "all those who would go with me." When we account for the named or mentioned individuals, there is very little room for "*all those who would go*" in the original landing party. In fact, using mentioned people and their logical progeny, the only ones clearly unaccounted for in the division are the sons of Ishmael. Regardless of whether they stayed with the Lamanites or went with Nephi, it would certainly seem that if "all those who would go" were only one or two people, we would expect that Nephi might make mention of them, at least by their head of household, as he does for the families of Zoram, Sam, Jacob, and Joseph. The best hypothesis to

explain Nephi's inclusion of "all those who would go" is that it referred to those of the hamlet (or perhaps hamlets?) that had joined with the Lehites.

With the addition of "others" into Nephi's party we have a larger core of people than we could possibly have with the segregation of only those who arrived with Lehi. Three events described for the early city of Nephi would appear to confirm the presence of more people than those who had come from the Old World. About thirty years after the departure from Jerusalem, Nephi describes some of the events of the establishment of the city of Nephi. First, Nephi describes having not only built dwellings, but also a temple.[4] Public building projects require excess labor. Even on a modest scale, a public building takes time and resources away from daily life. The very existence of a public building suggests a larger population than the pure Old World immigrants and their natural increase.

The second event that indicates the presence of a larger population is the declaration of Nephi as king.[5] Small hamlets do not have kings. To name one of a dozen men "king" is an insult, not a compliment. Finally, we have the designation of Jacob and Joseph as priests and teachers "over the land of my people."[6] Were we to assume only Old World peoples at this point, we have a king and two priests servicing perhaps ten households. The early Nephite political/religious structure is too top heavy for so few people. The only situation that sufficiently explains our text is the presence of non-Old World peoples at this early date.

The plausible presence of these "others" among the Nephites at this early point in Nephite history provides a context for a strange choice Nephi makes when recording on his personal plates. In 2 Nephi 6, Nephi records a sermon that Jacob gave. This is an odd discourse in the absence of any explanatory background. Jacob addresses a population that has recently established a city, and may still be in the throes of establishing that city and their way of life, and he preaches to them about a text from Isaiah that deals with the long distant future salvation of Israel through the Gentiles. Of all of the possible concerns for a people recently established in a new world, let alone a new city, why discourse on an event thousands of years away, and dealing with Gentiles in the Old World? To top off this mystery, we have Jacob's statement that it was Nephi, the king, who suggested this topic.[7]

When we look at the sermon again with our understanding of the likely presence of a goodly number of non-lineal Israelites in the early city of Nephi, that sermon becomes precisely the type of sermon that a king might request. We can easily imagine tensions between the two cultures arising, and a wise king noting the importance of "Gentiles," or non-lineal Israelites, as the salvation of Israel, or the literal descendants of Lehi. Nephi would be "likening" this future situation to that of his own community. The not-so-subtle message would be that these "others" in their midst would be essential

to the salvation of the Old World lineages. Rather than a discourse on a theological future, it is a strong commentary on an important social present.

Riches, Costly Apparel, and Polygyny

So far we have examined points of correspondence that only require contact with another people. Now we turn to events that require the particular cultural content of Mesoamerica at the very time period of the Book of Mormon event. The first example is another of Jacob's sermons. In this case, we have Jacob's first recorded sermon in his own book, encompassing Jacob chapters 2 and 3. This sermon is much more problematic than Jacob's discourse on the future salvation by Gentiles. The first problem is his choice of topics. Jacob has two major problems with his people. He will decry their use of riches, and he will preach against their adoption of polygyny.

On the surface of the discourse we have the structural problem of the relationship between these two topics. Even given the presence of both problems in society, what is the linkage between the two that suggests that they be treated in the same sermon? When we examine the specifics of each of his sections, we end up with even more problems.

We begin with Jacob's sermon on riches. Our first problem with Jacob's sermon is that he is presenting what would be an impossible situation if we assume the city of Nephi is isolated in the land. He suggests that they have become wealthy because of the gold and silver that they have found, elements that he calls abundant.[8] This should be impossible. First of all, in a Mesoamerican economy, gold and silver had no intrinsic value. They continued to lack intrinsic value for Mesoamerican populations up to the time of the Conquest when the Spaniards rather forcibly imposed their own values for gold and silver. Secondly, it is hard to get rich from gold and silver ore. Third, it is difficult to get rich on anything that anyone can find in abundance.

Finally, we have the manifestation of this wealth in "costly apparel."[9] This is another situation that should not exist. In an isolated community with no department stores, clothing is made by the community. The same materials are available to all; the same dyes are available to all. Even stylistic changes tend to be widely copied. It is quite common for villages to have an almost uniform dress rather than a segregation created by dress. Under the assumptions that are commonly brought to the Book of Mormon text, that of a group of people alone in the land, it should be virtually impossible to have "costly apparel."

There is a condition, however, that explains all of Jacob's economic problems. That condition is *trade.* As will be noted, not just any trade, but trade in Mesoamerica at this particular point in time.

As noted for the coastal region of Guatemala, there were others in the land when the Lehites arrived, and archaeology tells us that there are other populations and cities in the general land when the Nephites arrive at the location of their city, presumed to have been in the Guatemalan highlands. If we assume that the gold and silver were being worked, using metalworking skills Nephi could have taught them, then these worked goods would have exchange value with other cities, and the resulting importation of goods creates a situation where those engaged in the trade accumulate more unique prestige goods than those who do not trade outside of their own city. Thus trade provides precisely the conditions Jacob is combating.

The process of trade would have brought not only esoteric goods, but also a mechanism for the very social differentiation that Jacob excoriates. This is the cultural problem behind the "costly apparel" that will become one of the hallmark themes of the competing religious ideas throughout the rest of the Book of Mormon. In Mesoamerica, the time period of the early Nephites saw developing social stratification, and an increasing pressure towards kingship in the cities of the Maya lands. This social differentiation was supported by the accumulation of esoteric goods, often displayed on the clothing of the elite. As Schele and Mathews put it, "People throughout Mesoamerica wore these currencies as jewelry and clothing to display the wealth and enterprise of their families."[10] Bringing in clothing and adornments from other locations is a way to create a differentiation in dress. When the clothing itself becomes the display mode for elite consumption goods, then the costly apparel in and of itself becomes the marker of the increasing economic and social distance between developing classes. It is important to remember that Jacob's issue is never wealth, but rather the social stratification that was based on wealth. The costly apparel was a unique Mesoamerican mode of creating and displaying that social separation. The pressures for creating social stratification that we see beginning in the city of Nephi mirror the greater trend in the entire Mesoamerican cultural area at just this point in time.

The presence of trade relations with other Mesoamerican communities therefore provides a context in which we may understand Jacob's sermon denouncing social stratification through wealth, particularly wealth manifest through costly apparel. It is that very same context that explains both why he also preaches against polygyny and some of the anomalies of that particular discourse. Before looking at the cultural background, we again must note that Jacob's denunciation of polygyny is problematic for multiple reasons, none of which have to do with the obvious difference between Jacob's denunciation and historical LDS polygamy.

First, Jacob consistently equates having more than one wife with whoredoms and unchastity. This is as impossible as valuable gold that is easily found. Note that Jacob clearly speaks of *wives*, not

of *harlots.* All societies that accept multiple wives have legal regulations that legitimize the union. A plural wife is a wife, and relations with a wife do not fall under the rubric of whoredoms in any society. Thus, Jacob is somehow in the position of having a type of union that someone recognizes as a wife, but which he (and the Lord) do not. Jacob also describes the fate of the wives and children in ways that make no sense. He speaks of the daughters of Jerusalem being led away captive[11] and their children being brought into destruction.[12] It is hard to see how the very fact of multiple wives can be equated to captivity, and cause the destruction of their children. Many factors in a marriage might be considered to yield such an end, but not the very fact of a marriage.

Once again, the cultural context of Mesoamerica gives us a way of seeing this text and removing those difficulties. The same context of trade provides the answer. The development of social segregation in Mesoamerica has been the subject of multiple theories and studies, but one study uses the archaeological information to support the hypothesis that the development of "institutionalized social inequality and political privilege"[13] was due to the internal social pressures of personal advancement. In terms of this theory, such seekers of advantage are termed "aggrandizers."

> "Aggrandizers simply strive to become more influential. It is the successful deployment of resources and labor that ultimately ensure the social and political longevity of an aggrandizer."[14] Building renown commences in the nuclear unit of production. An aggrandizer first accumulates deployable resources by the sweat of his brow, and through the efforts of his wife (wives) and children. The more wives and children the better."[15]

The linkage between economics and multiple wives is absolutely parallel between Mesoamerica and the situation we see in the city of Nephi. The communities with which trade would have been established would certainly have had men with multiple wives among the most influential, and those would also be the ones with the most excess production to trade. Along with the trade goods, the mechanisms of achieving the excess production for trade would be carried back to the Nephites. The Nephite men who were taking wives were precisely the same as those who were seeking to exalt themselves over their neighbors, using the trade-acquired "costly apparel." These particular Nephites fit the description of the aggrandizers, and it would not be surprising that they would attempt to adopt the accumulation methods of those they saw as successful role models for trade. Their adoption of plural wives would be modeled after foreign law, not Nephite law, and therefore subject to Jacob's denunciation as a non-sanctioned union, even though it could be seen as a legitimate wife in the greater cultural context of the region.

The last piece of information that finishes elucidating the problematic aspects of Jacob's denunciation of polygyny is the probable exchange of wives with another community. The practice of the social exchange of wives to establish close bonds is well understood in human history. We may easily imagine that a daughter who was brought out of Jerusalem, as noted in Jacob 2:32-33, who was sent to another village might consider her marriage as a form of captivity because of the separation from her known community and background. The children are under threat of destruction because of the foreign ideas being brought into the community. Certainly children born of Nephite women in other communities would have little opportunity to grow up with the Nephite god, and therefore be subject to spiritual destruction. If the Book of Mormon events of the early city of Nephi took place in highland Guatemala as Sorenson's correlation suggests, this scenario is more probable than any other, and fits the text of the Book of Mormon better than any other explanation.

The Entrance to Zarahemla

While there are elements of the material from Enos to Omni that are also elucidated by this interpretive framework, the next strong connection to Mesoamerican culture comes with the flight of Mosiah I and his followers into the land of Zarahemla. The history of Zarahemla involves another cultural area of Mesoamerica. In the ethnohistory of Mesoamerica, the Olmec were the dominant politico-cultural influence prior to the rise of the Maya city-states. As with all generalizations, however, the transition from Olmec to Maya was not abrupt in either time or space. The land that lay between the homeland of the Olmec and Maya created a political and cultural buffer zone between the two major cultural groups. This buffer zone is precisely the area where the Limited Tehuantepec theory places the land of Zarahemla. The land of Zarahemla is a meeting place for two Book of Mormon peoples, both apparently fleeing their homelands. For the Nephites, Mosiah I and his group arrive from the land of Nephi. For the Mulekites, they have apparently recently arrived, traveling away from their more ancestral homeland.[16]

From the approximate time of the Mulekite landing to the founding of Zarahemla we have on the order of three hundred years[17] during which the ancestors of the Zarahemlaites were somewhere in between their landing area and the location of Zarahemla. The land through which they passed matches well with the Olmec homelands in the Gulf of Mexico. These are the same lands that match well with the homeland of the Book of Mormon Jaredites. The sojourn of the people of Zarahemla in the Olmec/Jaredite lands provides ample explanation for the corruption of their language and the loss of their God reported in Omni.[18] The probable cultural and historical ties between the people of Zarahemla and the Jaredites (who appear to have been in the Olmec area) comes from both the

presence of Jaredite names in Zarahemla and the presence of at least one important Jaredite, Coriantumr.[19]

Linguistic Evidences

The proposed location of Zarahemla in the Limited Tehuantepec theory of the Book of Mormon places Zarahemla directly in the borderlands between the Maya and Olmec. The new research on the linguistics of this area may have interesting implications for the Book of Mormon. The best candidate for the language of the Olmecs is Mixe-Zoque, a reconstructed language that fits the geographical distribution of Olmec culture, and the glottal-chronological time depth.[20] This was first proposed in the 1970s, and has since been widely accepted. After the time of the Olmecs, the proto-language split into two branches, the Mixe and the Zoque, each of which still occupies the greater geographic area of the Olmec homeland.

In the excitement concerning the translation of the Maya glyphs, there has been much less attention paid to other glyphic scripts. There are possible attestations of two to three separate glyphic writing systems in Mesoamerica, but none have the large number of texts that the Maya glyphs enjoy. One of the systems, however, is represented on a stela recently made public which contains over 540 glyphs. It is the largest single text of a non-Mayan writing system, and it has been termed Epi-Olmec; "Olmec" because of the geographical location of the texts, and "epi" because the texts post-date the archaeological Olmec.[21] The stela dates to approximately 160 A.D., and it reads in Zoquean.

The implication for Book of Mormon studies is the geography and cultural associations of this separate glyphic system. A shard with the Epi-Olmec writing system was found in Chiapa de Corzo,[22] a candidate for Sidom in Sorenson's correlation. This suggests that it is also likely that Zarahemla (Santa Rosa in Sorenson's correlation) would also fall on the Epi-Olmec fringe. Of course that fits with Zarahemla as a site with Olmec/Jaredite influences. This suggests that the land of Zarahemla should have cultural associations with the Olmec area, that they would have had a writing system, and that the common spoken language by 160 A.D. would have been Zoque. The presence of widespread Zoquen in 160 A.D. also suggests that it would have been present earlier, and we may presume with reasonable probability that Zoque was the language of the people of Zarahemla when the Nephites arrived, and that it remained the dominant language thereafter. Even if we presume that Old World Hebrew survived as the language of the Nephites to the point of contact with Zarahemla around 200 years before Christ (a point that is certainly debatable) the available evidence suggests that the common language of the area after that point in time would have been a Mesoamerican

language. The retention of Hebrew would have been relegated to formal situations, rather analogous to the fate of Latin.

Mesoamerican Religious Evidences

In addition to language and writing systems, the cultural heritage of Zarahemla would have included the religion of the Olmec region. We may see some of the religious clash between the Nephite gospel and the Mesoamerican religion of the Zarahemlaites in the contentions to which Mormon refers for Benjamin's political struggles.[23] One of the passages that may receive a greater explication from the Mesoamerican context is found in Words of Mormon 1:15. Mormon indicates that there had been false Christs among the people.

While we cannot be certain of the meaning of this phrase, the presence of multiple "false Christs" in a culture undergoing a conflict between a new and an old religious system at least suggests that the false Christs may be related to this religious conflict. The Nephites considered Christ as their God, and a false Christ would be a man impersonating that deity. This is the precise definition of the Mesoamerican concept of god-impersonators. We find both Olmec and Maya depicted in the garb of various deities. Among the later Aztecs, these god-impersonators were known as the *ixiptla*. It is not difficult to imagine the internal contentions revolving around the retention or rejection of the old religion. Whether the god-impersonators were attempting to continue the old gods, or attempting to merge the religious form of the old religion with the new, the god-impersonators of that old religion are direct conceptual matches for the false Christs Mormon describes. This particular interpretation of the false Christs as god-impersonators explains why there are multiple false Christs, why they become an issue at precisely this time (early in the merger between the Zarahemlaites and the Nephites), and why we should have false Christs appearing in a community where only the smaller number of people had a tradition of a belief in Christ at all.

This same conceptual background of the attempt to establish a new Nephite religion in a people steeped in an ancient Mesoamerican tradition also provides a richer context for the preamble to Benjamin's famous speech. One of Benjamin's first statements to his people is that: "I have not commanded you to come up hither that ye should fear me, or that ye should think that I of myself am more than a mortal man. But I am like as yourselves, subject to all manner of infirmities in body and mind…"[24] In the context of a people who would have believed in a king who was the embodiment of a god, as was common in Mesoamerican religions, this opening contrast to their past experience is remarkably appropriate.

Mesoamerican Political Evidences

King Benjamin's next set of remarks also fits this view of a people in conflict over the nature of religion and kings when he begins his catalog of the kind of king he has not been.[25] Why does Benjamin emphasize the negative side of the positive things he has done? The common context for a listing of what one has *not* done implies the possibility that they *could* have been done. The easiest suggestion is that Benjamin is continuing to differentiate himself from the other kings they may have known, either in their own past, or in the cultures with which they had contact. Above and beyond these points the cultural and archaeological confluence surrounding Benjamin's speech is impressive, including such aspects as timing, the building of the tower, and the emphasis on the evils of social segregation.

The end of the reign of Mosiah II is the conclusion of the reign of the kings among the Nephites. The transition from kings to judges had several parallels in Mesoamerican political systems. It is important to understand that the roots of the shift from a monarchic to a more communal government structure were already in place in the Book of Mormon prior to Mosiah's abolition of the monarchy. The "voice of the people" was a communal mechanism that even acted to confirm kingship.[26]

The change from a king to a more communal system of judges was clearly seen in Chichen Itza near the end of the classic period.[27] While not as conclusive as the Chichen Itza case, the argument for an oligarchic political structure at Teotihuac·n is very strong.[28] Just as with the Book of Mormon case, the structures that allowed this power shift away from single kings to a more communal rule were already in place and functioning in the monarchies. Ethnohistorical sources tell us that Maya communities had a *popol nah*, or a "mat house."

The "mat house" was a community location where the "lords convened, where all important community matters were discussed, and where disputes were adjudicated."[29] These communal locations for the convening of lords and judging disputes provides a direct parallel to the Nephite judge system. The shift from king to judges would have been as natural a change for the Nephites in Zarahemla as it was for the people of Chichen Itza, and probably Teotihuac·n. For the Maya, there are tantalizing hints in some of the glyphic material that this process began even during the reign of some kings,[30] with some kings being required to share power, and the glory in stone, with these lordly judges.

The unique Mesoamerican political systems provide further definitions that inform our understanding of events in the Book of Mormon. One place where there is a clear consonance with

Mesoamerican politics, and an equally clear dissonance with Joseph Smith's worldview, is found in the account of the Ammon's missionary efforts among the Lamanites. In Alma 20 we have the converted king Lamoni accompanying Ammon on a visit to the king of land of Middoni. On the way they meet Lamoni's father who is the king over all of the Lamanite lands. This first situation is foreign to the typical western European concept of kings. Kings might rule over lords, and emperors over kings, but we do not expect a king over kings. This concept is so engrained in our Western thinking that the title of King of Kings is immediately applied to Christ and to none other. Nevertheless, we have precisely this situation in Mesoamerica, most powerfully attested with the translation of the glyphs that outline the political over-lordship of such places as Tikal and Calakmul and many others.

On top of the dead-on accuracy of a king over kings in the Lamanite territory, we have another somewhat unusual set of circumstances for which there is a clear Mesoamerican precedent. Lamoni and Ammon are traveling together so that Lamoni could help persuade a king with whom he is friendly to release Ammon's brethren. It is very important to understand that we are not likely to be speaking here of friends in the modern sense of the word. They may certainly be friendly, but these are two kings, and rule over different cities. In the Mesoamerican context where we are placing the events of the Book of Mormon, such a "friend" is an ally. City-states in Mesoamerica were frequently at war with other cities. Alliances were forged and broken. Among the allied kings, however, there were frequently formal visits to allied cities that had strong political overtones.[31] Thus, when Lamoni declares Antiomno as a friend, he is more probably indicating that this is an ally with whom there are some mutual expectations. The arrival of the king from one city in another was an occasion that in later years would be sufficiently significant to commission a record in stone. This is no casual meeting of friends who went bowling together every Tuesday–this was a formal exchange of state. It is in this very formal setting that we must understand the nature of the "flattery" that Lamoni suggested that he use to free Ammon's brethren. This is very much a political negotiation, and one that was to be handled with some delicacy, as Lamoni would be asking a king to reverse a decision to imprison the Nephites.

The nature of Mesoamerican inter-site visits also explains Lamoni's father's visit to Lamoni. We are told that he comes because Lamoni did not attend a designated feast in the over-king's city. Without a cultural context in which to see this event, we simply have an irritated father coming to chastise a son. In the context of the important political balance associated with Mesoamerican inter-site visits, we have the over-king investigating a possible defection from his coalition.

The last odd circumstance of this occasion is the one-to-one battle of the over-king and Ammon. This event should not happen in the canons of Western thought. It is unthinkable for a king to travel

without an army to do his fighting for him. We do not know whether or not such an army was with Lamoni's father, but they certainly do not enter into this conflict. We have a man clearly old enough to have an enthroned son, and he is giving hand-to-hand battle with Ammon. It is in Mesoamerican canons of conflict that we find our most reasonable context for this event. In Mesoamerica, great emphasis was placed on the personal performance of the ruler in warfare, an emphasis sufficiently great that there are records of relatively aged kings presenting their captives.[32] In a system which expects military prowess of its kings, and which exalts the captives of the kings in stone as did the Classic Maya cities, this personal confrontation has a comfortable home.

The Mesoamerican Cult of War

Mesoamerican politics and religion conjoin to provide a new backdrop for yet another story from the Book of Mormon that is problematic without such a context. One of the more famous stories from the Book of Mormon is the inspiring courage of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies who lay down their lives for the gospel rather than pick up arms against their brethren, told in Alma 24. This is a great story, but it is replete with problems. The greatest problem that the story presents is the tremendous contrast between the apparent exaltation of pacifism in this story and the very clear contradiction of that principle in the rest of the Book of Mormon. How is it that pacifism should be so important for the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, but unimportant for the Nephites, who readily take up arms in self-defense? How is it that the principle should be so strong for only a single generation of Anti-Nephi-Lehies, since their sons will take up arms in defense of their new country?

The story is further complicated by the aftermath of the slaughter of the innocents, because, according to Mormon, the Amulonites and Amalekites are still bloodthirsty and desirous to kill, so they leave the land of Nephi and attack and destroy the city of Ammonihah (this story is contained in both Alma 25 and Alma 16). The story of the sacking of Ammonihah as a result of the attack on the Anti-Nephi-Lehies in the city of Nephi makes little sense as suggested. Ammonihah lies deep in the land of Zarahemla, and only a long coastal march and a surprise attack through the mountain passes into the valley would allow the attack at all. This is an attack that appears to accomplish very little, as the Lamanites make no attempt to secure the area, nor to extract any tribute. Indeed, the only things we know for certain that the Lamanites took from Ammonihah were a sating of a possible blood-thirst and some captives. That is a very long way to go for a drink, even if it is of blood-fury.

The Mesoamerican context can supply the meaning behind each of these perplexing issues. The particular Mesoamerican feature that provides the backdrop for the events related to the Anti-Nephi Lehies is the cult of war. The recent translations of the glyphic texts serve to highlight the degree to

which the cult of war permeated Maya society, even in the late Pre-Classic that is the time period for the Book of Mormon.

The cult of war glorified combat and capture. The function of warfare was multiple, with the expansion of influence being only one of the purposes. The glyphs tell of shifting political influence of major city-states as they gain or lose influence over other city-states. Combined with this territorial and economic purpose, however, was a religious one. The cult of war fed on captives, and particularly the sacrifice of captives. Mesoamerican religion was seldom far from human sacrifice, and the cult of war literally fed the sacrificial rites of the victors.

With this understanding of the politico-religious mindset of the Maya culture in which the Lamanites undoubtedly participated, we can understand the problem of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, who were the Lamanites converted in the mission of the sons of Mosiah. Their king, himself given the throne name of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, exclaims:

> And behold, I thank my great God that he has given us a portion of his Spirit to soften our hearts, that we have opened a correspondence with these brethren, the Nephites. And behold, I also thank my God, that by opening this correspondence we have been convinced of our sins, and of the many murders which we have committed. And I also thank my God, yea, my great God, that he hath granted unto us that we might repent of these things, and also that he hath forgiven us of those our many sins and murders which we have committed, and taken away the guilt from our hearts, through the merits of his Son.

> And now behold, my brethren, since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind) to repent of all our sins and the many murders which we have committed, and to get God to take them away from our hearts, for it was all we could do to repent sufficiently before God that he would take away our stain–Now, my best beloved brethren, since God hath taken away our stains, and our swords have become bright, then let us stain our swords no more with the blood of our brethren.[33]

Note that the particular sin is murder. It is a sin that all of the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi apparently accept, even the women and children over a certain age. When had they committed murder? In battle, the casualties are rarely termed murder, and even should we accept that these deaths in battle constituted murder, what of the women and the older children? Why were they under the same condemnation, but the younger children were not?

The answer lies in both the Mesoamerican politico-religious context of the cult of war, and the phrase "since it has been all that we could do, (as we were the most lost of all mankind)." This was a people whose conception of the world was built around the idea that human blood was required by the gods for the continuation of the world. It is hard for modern readers to understand the depth of change that it would entail for someone with that worldview to change to an acceptance of the gospel. It required not only a change of religion, but a change of science and a change of cosmology. Their very understanding of the mechanics of the universe had to change. No wonder it was so hard for them to change. Seeing the world through the eyes of the gospel, it is no wonder that they would have seen the human sacrifices of the cult of war as murders, and that their participation in that religion and worldview would have stained all, even the women and the children old enough to have been indoctrinated into this worldview. When the Anti-Nephi-Lehies lay down their arms, it is not out of any principle of pacifism, but one of fear of rescission to their old ways. Like reformed alcoholics, their best chance to maintain their new convictions was to stay far away from the feelings and attitudes of the old way.

Not only does the cult of war explain the actions of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, it also explains the attack on Ammonihah. To understand this attack, we need two more pieces of information. The first comes from the Book of Mormon. In Alma 24:20 we learn the reason for the Lamanite attack on the city of Nephi: "And it came to pass that their brethren, the Lamanites, made preparations for war, and came up to the land of Nephi for the purpose of destroying the king, and to place another in his stead, and also of destroying the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi out of the land." This is not simply a battle of hatred against the converts, but a political coup. The Lamanites are part of the coalition of the over-king in the city of Nephi, and they have rebelled against their over-lord. They are now coming to overthrow that king, and to establish their own king over the conquered land and re-established hegemony.

The attempt on the city of Nephi is obviously successful, though Mormon is quite uninterested in the political ramifications of this event. With no resistance from the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, nor the king, the overthrow of the over-king was assured. Indeed, the next we see the people of Anti-Nephi-Lehi, they are seeking refuge in the land of Zarahemla. Clearly they have lost their place, and the king has been deposed. It is at this point that the story of Ammonihah becomes critical to the events. It is at this point that we need our second piece of information.

In Mesoamerica, the installation of a king was a time that specifically required the sacrifice of captives taken in battle. With the passive resistance of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies, there was no glorious battle from which to take captives, and about which to tell stories. Nevertheless, the installation of the

king absolutely required captives. The glyphs frequently note the conquest of some minor city that provided the captives for a new king's installation. Needing captives, and an easy victory, the Lamanites make a lightning raid on an unsuspecting Nephite city, and take back with them the captives needed for the regal seating. The particular facets of the Mesoamerican politico-religious system provide a powerful interpretive tool for all of the problematic aspects of the story of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. Even the burial of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies' weapons finds a parallel in the Mesoamerican practice of caching offerings to the gods. The motivation for the burial of the weapons is absolutely religious, and absolutely a gesture of dedication of to God.

Summary

To this point we have examined multiple instances in the Book of Mormon that may be illuminated by an understanding of the Mesoamerican culture that is the plausible time and place for these events. What do these incidents mean? They surely do not constitute a proof that the Book of Mormon took place in this plausible location. It is just possible that the correlations are the result of "seeing the Book of Mormon behind every corner." The precaution against such a conclusion is that each of the correlations depends upon a very specific set of controls for time, place, and complexity. These are not single instances compared to a vague cultural content. They are multiple specific instances that correlate to a complete picture of a culture that is known for that time and space.

Regardless of the plausible apologetic explanations, the presence of horses, chariots, goats and other apparent anachronisms give fine fodder to those who would declare the book to be a product of Joseph Smith's times. However, a good interpretive scheme must handle a large amount of the evidence of the text. Weak interpretive schemes will pull data at random from time and space. Weak interpretive schemes will account for one or two aspects of the text, but will be incapable of accounting for others. In the Mesoamerican cultural background, we have evidence of a productive interpretive scheme where large amounts of complex and interrelated material may be explained with a single framework.

If we take the competing interpretive frameworks for the Book of Mormon, the environmentalist and the historicist interpretations, we must admit that each has points where that scheme works. The issue is not whether or not there are *some* points where an interpretive framework actually work, but the quantity and quality of the explanations that framework supplies for the text. Without attempting a polemic with the environmentalist position at this point, I submit that the incidences noted in this discussion fit the category of complex and interrelated. These are not simple instances of parallels, but sets of parallels that require interlocking conditions. They are parallels that do not rely upon gross

features, but upon fine details, and the parallels between socio-cultural pressures reveal similar problems in the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican society during the same time frames.

Examples such as these suggest to me that the most powerful interpretive framework for the Book of Mormon is that it is an ancient text which took place in the area of the world we know as Mesoamerica, during the same time periods as the book itself suggests.

Notes

[1] Joyce Marcus, "The Size of the Early Mesoamerican Village," *The Early Mesoamerican Village,* edited by Kent V. Flannery (San Diego, California: Academic Press, 1976), 85.

[2] Muriel Porter Weaver, *The Aztecs, Maya, and their Predecessors* (New York: Seminar Press, 1972), 44.

[3] 2 Nephi 5:5-6.

[4] For the building of the temple, see 2 Nephi 5:15-16. These events precede Nephi's marking of the thirty years from the time of departure in 2 Nephi 5:28.

[5] 2 Nephi 5:18.

[6] 2 Nephi 5:26.

[7] 2 Nephi 6:4.

[8] Jacob 2:12.

[9] Jacob 2:13.

[10] Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *The Code of Kings* (New York: Scribner, 1998), 19.

[11] Jacob 2:33.

[12] Jacob 3:10.

[13] John E. Clark and Michael Blake, "The Power of Prestige: Comptetiive Generosity and the Emergence of Rank Societies in Lowland Mesoamerica," *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica* (Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 252.

[14] *Ibid.,* 253.

[15] *Ibid.,* 255.

[16] Omni 1:14 tells us that Zarahemla, probably the man for whom the city was named, was still alive when Mosiah I arrives.

[17] Based on the arrival of the Nephites in Zarahemla after the events in Omni 1:5.

[18] Omni 1:17.

[19] Omni 1:21.

[20] Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman, "A Lintuistic Look at the Olmecs," *American Antiquity* 41 (1976): 80-88.

[21] The seminal article on the translation of this **stela** is: John Justeson and Terrence Kaufman, "Un desciframiento de la escritura jeroglifica epi-oilmeca: metodos y resultados," *Antiquity* 8 (1992): 15-25.

[22] John Robertson, personal communication.

[23] See Words of Mormon 1:13-18. Note that the religious problems appear after the expulsion of the Lamanites.

[24] Mosiah 2:10-11.

[25] Mosiah 2:12-13.

[26] Mosiah 7:9, Mosiah 2:11, Mosiah 29:1.

[27] David Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings,* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1999), 356.

[28] George L. Cowgill, "State and Society at Teotihuacan, Mexico," *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica,* (Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 315.

[29] William L. Fash and David S. Stuart, "Dynastic History and Cultural Evolution at Copan," *Classic Maya Political History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 171. See also Schele and Mathews, *The Code of Kings,* 269.

[30] Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens,* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 99. See the comments on K'an III.

[31] See Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, "Royal Visits and other Intersite Relationships," *Classic Maya Political History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

[32] Arthur A. Demarest, "Ideology in Ancient Maya Cultural Evolution: The Dynamics of Galactic Polities," *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica,* (Boston: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 289.

[33] Alma 24:9-12.