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## Reading *Mormon's Codex*

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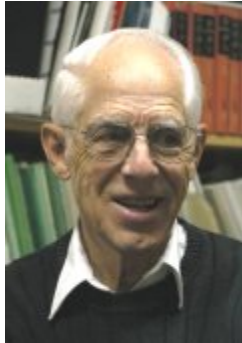
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# Reading *Mormon's Codex*



**John L. Sorenson**

Beginning as early as 1955 I undertook to synthesize what I was learning about ancient Mesoamerica (that is, southern Mexico and northern Central America) into a form intended to answer the question, how did the Book of Mormon account relate to the civilization that once occupied that area?

Now I have completed what will no doubt be my last major work intended to convey what I have learned over my more than 60 years of professional study of this matter. The book is entitled *Mormon's Codex*, and this presentation offers a preview of its essentials.

This is demanding information. It is not easy to communicate briefly. The work is presented in language that speaks to both the informed general reader and to archaeologists, although I have striven to avoid the professional jargon of that genre as much as possible. The full argument provides necessary explanations, extensive footnotes, over 1300 bibliographical references, three appendices, and a dozen detailed maps.

This volume will be published by the Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at BYU and perhaps also by Deseret Book. After some interval it will also be issued as an e-book. The very demanding editing process for the print edition is now nearing an end. It is hoped it will be issued around the beginning of 2013.

A great deal of preparatory research lies behind the book that may not be apparent on reading it. I have always worked out in great detail crucial aspects of the data I use, especially when the results contradict the position of conventional scholars. As a single example, note that I (with Martin Raish, an art history specialist) addressed the question of whether voyagers to or from the New World in

ancient times actually crossed the oceans. The result was a definitive bibliographical work on the topic, comprising two volumes of 1200 pages that abstracted relevant content from over 5,000 printed sources. This and other comprehensive and labor-intensive studies preceded and under-girded my decision six years ago to produce *Mormon's Codex*, as the capstone of my research.

I have chosen to follow a research model that had recently been used in studying the relationship between the Old Testament and archaeology, an obviously parallel case. William Dever used it in his 2003 book entitled *What Did the Biblical Writers Know & When Did They Know It?* He vigorously disputed the view held by some modern scholars that the Hebrew scripture was first written in the last few centuries BC on the basis only of oral traditions and historical conjectures that were projected back by anonymous writers on the previous several thousand years. Dever, an eminent archaeologist who was once a Christian minister but later converted to Judaism, in the last sentence in his book, insists, “these people, this Israel, must not be written out of history.” His book successfully redeems the status of the Old Testament as a broadly reliable history. He documents by reference to concrete archaeological finds that important (although not necessarily all) historical facts asserted by the scripture are correct.

He proceeds by identifying “convergences.” That is what he calls specific points of agreement between statements in the text and finds by archaeologists. When the written source is supported on a given point by this sort of external evidence, no explanation for the similarity makes sense except that the archaeological datum and the scripture refer to the same moment in time, and that the author of the written account could not have put down what he did without contemporary knowledge of the circumstances and history of that area of the world.

For example, Dever explains that “The many biblical passages that mention city gates—not as part of any deliberate propaganda but simply offhand—fit remarkably well with [what is known from] excavated gates at a number of sites of the tenth to seventh centuries, and *only* of this period. . . . No writer living [several centuries later] could have ‘invented’ [references to] city gates like [these], known only long before.” Using numerous instances of such logic, the author shows in convincing fashion that the historical skeleton whose bones, as it were, show through in the Old Testament was real. The original books of the scripture had to have been written by men who were eyewitnesses of the particular cultural features and historical events their accounts report.

I follow the same logic in identifying what I call “correspondences” between the archaeological record for Mesoamerica and the text of the Book of Mormon. While Dever identified a few score of “convergences” to support the historicity of the Old Testament, I have identified some 420

correspondences that tie the Book of Mormon to the picture of ancient Mesoamerican civilization constructed by archaeologists and other researchers.

A vital step in this procedure was to identify Book of Mormon lands. It was a simple matter for Professor Dever to specify the Syro-Palestine area in the centuries before about 400 BC as the setting where he found his Old Testament parallels. Everyone knows that Palestine is where the Israelite narrative took place. But the where of the Book of Mormon account is not obvious. First it is necessary to establish the location correctly or else any references to potential Book of Mormon comparisons to archaeology would be in error.

Two steps are required to settle Book of Mormon geography. The first is to reconstruct an internal map that accommodates all 500 passages in the Book of Mormon that state or imply geographical facts. I did this in previous books, determining that all of those statement in the scripture fit consistently into what I call “Mormon’s map.” The second step was to compare that mental map based entirely on statements in the text with the geography of the Americas to find the best fit. That task is simplified by the fact that the Nephites are said to have dwelt in many “cities” and to have had many “books” that contained their written records. There is only one area in the New World meeting those conditions: Mesoamerica.

The remaining question, then, is, in what portion of Mesoamerica do the details of “Mormon’s map” fit? Again in several published formats I have addressed that question. All the possible geographical correlations Latter-day Saints have come up with except one display fatal flaws that rule out their identification as the territory Mormon had in his mind. The one satisfactory answer toes like this: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico is the narrow neck of land of the Nephites, the highlands of southern Guatemala contained the land of Nephi, the basin of the Grijalva river and adjacent areas in extreme southern Mexico is the land of Zarahemla, and areas immediately north and west of the isthmus are the land northward. This, then, defines the area where it makes sense to look for correspondences between the Book of Mormon and the archaeological/cultural record.

## The Correspondences

Beyond an introduction *Mormon’s Codex* is arranged in two parts. The first consists of 14 chapters treating various topics—for example, writing and records, society, government, warfare, and ideology and religion. The following five chapters deal with history and archaeology. Given some unavoidable overlap in the two categories, there is a minor degree of redundancy in the list of correspondences.

Because of the large numbers of correspondences discussed in the book, it will be impossible here to present more than a sample of the total.

## Geography

Given the broad geographical placement already sketched, in the book I identify 25 pointed correspondences between map features near the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the one hand and Book of Mormon lands on the other. Here I mention only three of the 25:

1. According to the Book a “narrow pass” connected the land northward with the land southward at a strategic point within the narrow neck. A minor elevation a number of miles long occurs in the geology of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec that provides a “pass” over which ancient (and modern) communication links run northward and southward above annual flood waters.
2. The account in Alma Chapter 2 of a battle between Nephite rebels and loyalists has its beginning on a hill across the Sidon river immediately east of the capital city; from there the rebels were pursued up to the nearby land of Gideon, then they moved back down to the Sidon, where a battle ensued at a ford across the river. Precise plausible parallels are found in the upper basin of the Grijalva river for all features reported.
3. The hill Ramah of the Jaredites, which is the same as the hill Cumorah of the Nephites, was where the final extermination of both peoples took place; that hill corresponds in all relevant parameters to Cerro El Vigía in the Tuxtla mountains of south-central Veracruz.

## Writing Systems and Records

1. The Book of Mormon describes literate cultures from the third millennium BC to the end of the record early in the fifth century AD. The Book of Mormon reports multiple writing systems in use. Mesoamerican cultures used writing systems of a similar nature from at least the second millennium BC down to the Spanish conquest. Several distinct scripts were in use in that area as far back as several millennia ago, although little is known about them.
2. Many uses of written documents are known from Mesoamerica. At least 14 of those uses are represented or are referred to in the Nephite record: for example, records of contemporary events, letters of correspondence, adventures of individual heroes or villains, and genealogies.

3. In Mesoamerica as in the Book of Mormon lineage histories provided validation of a lineage's right to rule or other political claims and were displayed and read publicly on ceremonial occasions to assert that fact.

Furthermore, Mesoamerican lineage histories and the Book of Mormon also correspond in more specific ways. Four of them are:

1. The accounts were geographically selective, telling only of events and figures important for the people whose history they comprised while effectively ignoring groups deemed not significant.
2. Competition among elite factions for the right to rule meant that histories were considered political weapons; winners tried to eliminate the position of rivals by destroying their records.
3. The records included predictions about the lineage's future.
4. A lineage history also served to define relationships to neighboring peoples.

## Human Biology

1. The skin color of some native American groups in Mexico and Central America according to early Spanish observers were virtually the same as European "white" people. This corresponds to the Book of Mormon description of its Nephite population as "fair" as against the darker, more numerous Lamanites.
2. Artistic representations of individuals from ancient Mesoamerica patently show among them Mediterranean-looking folks as well as Asians, Oceanians and Africans. More specifically a minority of specifically Semitic people are seen to be one component among ancient Mesoamericans.
3. Mesoamerican art also represents men with substantial beards whose parallel in ancient times is almost exclusively with the Near East. Those representations are concentrated in the area in Mesoamerica where and at the times when Book of Mormon peoples apparently dwelt.

## Political Economy

Both in Mesoamerica and in Book of Mormon societies an elite formally dominated in political, social and economical terms, similar to the pattern in all ancient civilizations (but completely different from early 19th century rural New York state).

Both sources further confirm that:

1. Rulers and their dependents held their positions in accordance with an ideology that considered traditional (sometimes “divine”) rulership as part of the natural social order.
2. The perquisites of the ruling elite granted them legal power and an economic mechanism through tribute assessments to amass considerable wealth. The customs associated with kingship and nobility limited their personal use of that wealth, nevertheless they exercised much power by virtue of it.
3. Priests were usually closely related to the dominant elite, their teaching of a traditional ideology providing validation for the structure of exploitation.

## Society

1. Mesoamericanist scholars have concluded that the primary social actors in ancient Mesoamerica were not individual persons so much as social groups. Analysis of Book of Mormon societies reveals the same; individuals as such did not count for as much as social elements, especially those based on some version of extended kinship. (Again this view is contrary to the norms of the early 19th century USA).
2. One of the nuclear family’s primary functions in society, both in Mesoamerica and according to the Nephite record, was to provide instruction to children and youth through frequent use of formal “moral discourse.”
3. Polygynous marriage was practiced on a limited basis in Mesoamerican as well as in some Book of Mormon societies.
4. Full-fledged social class structures prevailed in many Mesoamerican societies. The primary distinction was between nobles and commoners, according to both the scripture and native history. Moreover social classes among the Nephites were important during two periods, the first and second centuries BC and the third and fourth centuries AD, both times when Mesoamerican classes were highly visible.
5. Sociopolitical factions anxious to gain power and privilege were endemic in Book of Mormon societies. Their jostling caused most of the sociopolitical stress the scripture reports. Mesoamerican factionalism was equally pronounced and disruptive.
6. Religion was an important basis for differentiating social groups according to both secular and Book of Mormon sources. Groups usually had a dominant deity as integrator and protector.

## Material Culture (only 10 of 37 total)

1. Cultivation according to both the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican sources was entirely without the use of animal power.
2. "Wine" referred to in the Book of Mormon could have been prepared using several plants, including the same grape as in the Old World; but distilled liquors were not known. Spaniards invariably called native intoxicants "wine," and they spoke of plots containing maguey plants (the source of the intoxicant pulque) as "vineyards," a term used in the Book of Mormon for plantings that yielded "wine."
3. "Flocks and herds" played a considerable economic role in Nephite life, but it is unclear whether they were domesticated animals or were merely "kept," nor are the species involved identifiable. Studies of animal utilization in ancient Mesoamerica have shown that a variety of fowls and animals were utilized, in essential agreement with Mormon's text.
4. The one Jaredite mention of "elephants" (only in the third millennium BC) corresponds with paleontological discoveries of mastodons that are known to have survived in certain environments in North America as late as 2000 BC and maybe beyond, long past the supposed date of extinction of those animals.
5. A dearth of timber is reported by Nephite colonists of "the land northward" in the first century BC, it is said that "cement" became the preferred building material. North and west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec archaeology shows the use of cement began about the first century BC.
6. Sacred "towers" were constructed by the Nephites that were similar to Mesoamerican "towers" or pyramidal substructures, all such constructions having had a primarily religious purpose. Moreover the one instance, in the book of Helaman, when a private tower structure was used as a site for prayer and religious discourse has Mesoamerican parallels.
7. The model for Nephite "temples" was specifically the "temple of Solomon," which featured two non-structural pillars that stood at the sides of the door of the temple. Some Mesoamerican "temples" display similar structurally unnecessary pillars.
8. Metals are "not supposed to have been" in use in Pre-Classic or Classic Mesoamerica, before about AD 900, but archaeological finds and linguistic data now show that metallurgy was known in Book of Mormon times.
9. "Silk" and "linen" are mentioned in the Book of Mormon as fabrics utilized by its people. At least five fabrics specified as like silk were reported from native Mexico by the Spaniards. Henequen, a widely used Mesoamerican fiber, made a fabric that was a near equivalent of linen.



10. Hundreds of miles of roads were constructed in Mesoamerica as early as the Pre-Classic era. Near the time of Christ the Book of Mormon describes not only “roads” but “highways” that were “cast up.” Mesoamerican roads were often “cast up,” that is, constructed with raised fill that was then smooth-surfaced.

## Government

(All of the eight correspondences in this list are documented by both Mesoamerican sources and in the Book of Mormon.)

1. Central to ancient governance was the idea that kings (or at lesser levels, lords or nobles) were divinely designated (or were themselves considered divine) rulers with powers conferred on them “by right.” (This was contrary to New England where the Book of Mormon was first published.)
2. Governments were evidently fragile; factionalism in the ruling stratum was endemic.
3. Political schisms or fissions often resulted in dissident social elements fleeing in order to establish independent kingdoms or cultures.
4. Election or ratification of a new ruler by “vote” of his subjects was sometimes the custom.
5. Major rulers occupied a “palace”; residences of lesser rulers were not considered “palaces.”
6. A new (younger) king was sometimes installed before the death of the previous ruler, who then served out his lifespan as “emeritus” king.
7. The judicial function required a corps of judges who served under the nominal chief judgeship of the monarch; several levels of judicature existed, difficult cases being referred to a higher-level.
8. Imprisonment was not used as an ultimate form of punishment; prisoners were only held temporarily for further examination or trial.

## Warfare (15 of 33)

1. Warfare was of major significance in the culture history of both Mesoamerica and Book of Mormon peoples. Recognition of its significance represents a major change in archaeological thought in recent decades; that area’s war practices now align more directly with those described in Mormon’s book.

2. Wars in Mesoamerica were typically fought during the time of year when they did not interfere with agricultural activities, society's greatest priority. The same timing is reflected in Book of Mormon accounts of warfare.
3. Religion played a major role in warfare and was sometimes the primary cause of conflict, according to both sources.

For both Mesoamerican culture and the Book of Mormon all the following military features correspond:

1. Priestly/oracular guidance was sometimes sought in planning and conducting military operations.
2. The threat of internal war was the only sanction known or used to contain rebellion.
3. Feuds between peoples could last for generations.
4. Armed forces were composed of geographically based militia "armies"; there were no large standing armies. Mass hand-to-hand combat was the normal fighting mode.
5. The heads of local "armies" were called "captains," ("chief captains," etc.) who held rank according to a hierarchical pattern.
6. Companies of warriors were sometimes construed as "sons" of their captains.
7. The absolute numbers of warriors employed in Book of Mormon conflicts according to that record are equivalent to the numbers reported in Mesoamerican accounts of war.
8. Some Mesoamerican armies were composed of units of "10,000" men, as were Nephite units at the time of their final war.
9. The most widespread form of fortification was made by excavating a dry moat, throwing the soil up on the inner bank against a timber palisade and building another line of erect timbers atop it.
10. At least five types of weapons used by Book of Mormon armies agree in detail with those used in Mesoamerica.
11. Moroni carried a virtual battle standard while rallying his forces. In Mexico a standard was strapped to a commander's back as he mustered his force.
12. Mesoamerican wars sometimes continued until the victorious commander was able to "drink the blood" of the enemy leader. A Lamanite leader made that very threat against a Nephite captain.

## Ideology and Religion (15 of 34)

1. A complex of 380 cultural patterns having to do with religion and ideology were present both in the civilization of the ancient Near East in the second and first millennia BC and in Mesoamerican civilization. The large number and arbitrary nature of those features is such that they can only be explained by calling upon transoceanic voyaging, plausibly including voyages reported in the Book of Mormon.
2. At least 62 (out of the 380) features are documented or implied in the Book of Mormon.
3. Mortality was viewed, by at least some Mesoamerican thinkers, like Nephite prophets, as a test of a person's conformity to a set of moral standards, the degree ultimately to be a matter for divine judgment.
4. Some Book of Mormon people as much as certain Mesoamericans anticipated post-mortal residence in a "paradise" and ultimately a "resurrection."
5. Spiritual renewal was symbolized by the idea of a seed or plant growing in the inner organs.
6. In certain times and cultures a Mesoamerican cult of salvation appeared that promised a pleasing state of immortality to observant persons. Of course the same was true of Book of Mormon believers.
7. A Mesoamerican myth of the "fall" of the "first couple" as a result of disobedience to the creator's command compares substantially to story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden repeated in the Book of Mormon.
8. A Nephite belief in Jesus Christ, represented as an elevated (flying?) serpent whose teachings were capable of bringing about salvation, is similar in notable ways to the Quetzalcoatl or Feathered Serpent cult of Mexico that appeared near the time of Christ.
9. The practice described by Nephite historians as "priestcraft" — priestly exploitation of devotees for private economic gain — is documented in the Book of Mormon and is supposed by scholars to have been a common feature of Mesoamerican religious life.
10. Prophets, both legitimate and "false," and "seers" who sometimes gazed into sacred, oracular stones, were shared features of religious life.
11. A form of ritual washing termed "baptism" was also shared
12. Sacrifice was a rite of worship both in the Mesoamerica and Mormon's record. The commonest type of sacrifice was the shedding of the blood of an animal, although offerings of other substances were also made.
13. A form of communion was practiced both by Mesoamericana and Nephites in which food emblems representing the body of a savior deity were eaten.

14. Legends in Mesoamerica tell of the disappearance of special persons said to have been taken away without suffering death; some persons are characterized in the same manner in the Book of Mormon.
15. A pattern of ritual and belief (that is, elements of the cult that had arrived anciently from the Near East) was abruptly terminated in the first century AD, at least in southern Mesoamerica. This change corresponds in time, place, and in part in nature to that reported in the Book of Mormon at the time of Christ's appearance to the Nephites when he commanded that the observances of the law of Moses cease.

## **Archaeology and History: Before 600 BC (four of 13)**

1. The book of Ether's picture of early Jaredite demography makes clear inferentially that an indigenous population already occupied the land where they arrived. That fact agrees with the scientific picture of Mexico in the third millennium BC.
2. A decline of the society in which the Jaredites lived took place over a period of several centuries before their extinction around 600 BC. The Olmec cultural tradition declined and disappeared from the culture history of Mexico on the same time scale.
3. The large archaeological site at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a preeminent Olmec city, coincided in time and nature with the "great city" built by Jaredite king Lib at a spot "by the narrow neck of land."
4. The Jaredites used at least one writing system which their founders had brought from Mesopotamia. From three to perhaps five systems of writing were employed in Mesoamerica by the end of the Jaredite era.

## **Archaeology and History: 600 BC to about 1 BC, Part 1 (11 of 33)**

1. Evidence is slight for direct transmission of Olmec cultural elements to later societies. The bearers of Olmec culture largely disappeared. Mormon's record presents a reasonable inferential picture of how later cultures received limited influences from the Jaredite era.
2. Soon after their arrival in their promised land (presumably in Guatemala), the Nephites moved to nearby highlands where they became farmers. Lamanites remained in the lowlands where they lived by hunting and took on darker skins. Pacific lowlanders at the time of the Spanish conquest had notably darker skins than highlanders, for whatever reason.
3. Faces on small clay figurines from the Valley of Guatemala dated to about 300 BC have (skin) surfaces shaded white; figurines from Old World Jerusalem dated to 600 BC when Lehi's party left there were all white. Some of those from Guatemala are also darker hued. These

correspond to differences between “fair” Nephites and “dark” Lamanites. But about 200 BC the light-complexioned figurines ceased being made, about when Mosiah<sub>1</sub> led the Nephites away to Zarahemla.

4. Near the time when Mosiah<sub>1</sub>'s party left, some evidence of warfare is found in the archaeology of the valley of Guatemala along with a decrease in population that mirrors the Mosiah<sub>1</sub> group's departure.

5. A “Great Wall,” so named by archaeologists, 22-feet high, protected the ancient ruined city (now called Kaminaljuyu, near Guatemala City) during the sixth to third centuries BC. In concept, timing, and scale it was apparently similar to the wall built by the Nephites around the city of Nephi.

6. At Kaminaljuyu, the oldest “great city” in southern Mesoamerica, rapid urbanization from about 600 to 200 BC compares with what the Book of Mormon pictures for the city of Nephi. The scale of public works erected strikes a common chord.

7. Writing (only on scattered moments) was in use at Kaminaljuyu from 500 to 200 BC and even later confirming the early status of “civilization” at that metropolis. The Book of Mormon reports literacy at the city of Nephi between ca. 575 and 200 BC as well as among the later Zeniffites.

8. The Nephite record pictures multiple social and ideological systems or near the city of Nephi in the first and second centuries BC, and so does the data from archaeology and art at Kaminaljuyu, which suggest an equally complex cultural history.

9. A “ceramic sphere” of shared artifacts has been defined by archaeologists in southern Guatemala and western El Salvador in the time range 500-100 BC that matches the area plausibly occupied by the early Lamanites in the south extremity of Book of Mormon lands.

10. A pyramid at Kaminaljuyu suggested by archaeologists to have functioned as a military watch tower agrees in general in time, place, and function with a Book of Mormon description of the use of such a structure in the second century BC.

11. A major source for obsidian to make weapons and tools is located near Guatemala City; it meets in essential respects the requirements for “the place of arms” spoken of in Alma Chapter 47.

## **Archaeology and History: 600 to 1 BC, Part 2 (seven of 46)**

1. After the general collapse of Olmec society around 600 BC, a modified version of it continued around the site of La Venta in the Isthmus. Art representations there are interpreted by some archaeologists as showing local leadership being taken over by immigrants who look like Jews. This site with its hybrid culture came to an end by 450 BC. In Book of Mormon terms

the end of Jaredite society near 600 BC was followed by a period when some survivors of the earlier people must have combined with Mulekite colonists from the Mediterranean. That mixed population lived and warred in or around the Nephite “city of Mulek,” identified with La Venta.

2. A conflict zone has been detected by scholars cutting across southern Mesoamerica, with speakers of Mixe-Zoquean tongues near the isthmus confronting northward-expanding populations of Maya-language speakers. Correspondingly the combined Nephites and Mulekites in the narrow neck zone were under constant pressure by from Lamanite inhabitants of the land of Nephi on the south.

3. The archaeological ruin of Santa Rosa was a city positioned on the upper Grijalva river where its topographic isolation, together with nearness to a rugged mountain chain to the southeast, qualifies it as the city of Zarahemla, considered by Nephites to be a secure spot in “the heart of the land” but near a “narrow strip of wilderness” to its south.

4. Ceramic studies and linguistics indicate that people from highland Guatemala may have arrived in central Chiapas on the order of 200 BC, approximately when Mosiah<sub>1</sub> led his Nephite party from the land of Nephi to Zarahemla.

5. A dual population is indicated at Santa Rosa by construction of a major ceremonial structure in two distinct halves by different segments of population. That social duality is confirmed by the presence of two distinct residential zones. Plausibly the Nephite portion of the population lived in one of these segments while the people of Zarahemla occupied the other.

6. Attention to omens was an important part of the Mesoamerican culture of warfare. The new year’s eve assassination of Amalickiah by Nephite commander Teancum exploited that omen pattern for psychological advantage. The response fit a definitely Mesoamerican pattern.

7. Book of Mormon statements dating to the middle of the first century BC tell of the migration of colonists from the land southward to the land northward. Significant populations moved from south of the isthmus to the north around that time as documented by archaeology in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.

## **Archaeology and History: about AD 1 to 200**

1. The transition into the Classic era near AD 200 is often represented as a shift from a condition without civilization to one where civilization appeared rather abruptly. Now, however, we know that in the so-called Pre-Classic full-fledged civilization was already present in Mesoamerica. That agrees with the Book of Mormon.

2. Several areas within Mesoamerica suffered nearly simultaneous natural disasters—at least from volcanic eruptions and earthquakes—in the first half of the first century AD. These phenomena were the proximate causes of population declines, cultural disruptions, and other elements of collapse and discontinuity. Natural disasters that occurred between AD 25 and 30 are reported in the Book of Mormon throughout the isthmian area inhabited by its peoples.
3. As part of that event Mormon’s record reports the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the land of Nephi resulting from its being “covered with water.” Submerged ruins dating to about the time of Christ have been discovered beneath Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, where our geographical correlation places the city of Jerusalem.
4. No later than the second century AD archaeological evidence suggests the presence of the developed cult of the Feathered Serpent or Quetzalcoatl. Some scholars consider this cult to have been based on the teachings of a “man/god” as reported in Mexican traditions. Versions of the cult influenced many parts of Mesoamerica for the rest of the pre-hispanic period, despite considerable syncretism with other beliefs over time. The Book of Mormon reports the appearance of the resurrected Jesus Christ among the Nephites in the narrow neck of land area (very near Coatzacoalcos, a key location in the later Quetzalcoatl cult).
5. The new pattern of society that resulted from acceptance of Christ’s teachings was characterized by a localized, communalist economy and a classless social structure. In some parts of Mesoamerica at this time archaeologists have used adjectives to describe social conditions that are broadly congruent with these features. For example, burial customs shown at some excavated sites reveal that tombs were no longer used, nor were any rich burial offerings made, indicating an unranked society.

## **Archaeology and History: AD 200 to 400 (nine of 17)**

1. In this period the cult of the Feathered Serpent (specifically at Teotihuacan and presumably elsewhere in Mesoamerica) was syncretized with variant cults. The Book of Mormon reports that in the third century “the church” of Jesus Christ lost its dominance among the Nephites as rival belief arose.
2. Wealth expanded dramatically in step with a rise in trade and population in this period, both in Mesoamerica and according to the Nephite record.
3. The rise of factions, perhaps based on ethnic and cult differences, complicated governance and distinguished localities and regions from each other in much of Mesoamerica during the third and fourth centuries. Ethnic/tribal rivalries were renewed among Book of Mormon groups around the same time; no unified, widespread government existed.

4. Militaristic imagery became common in art, and fortifications indicate that warfare now became a feature of some cultures in Mesoamerica. In the third century mass warfare became general between the Nephites and Lamanites across the (old) border between their traditional territories.
5. Around AD 350 the Central Depression of Chiapas was depopulated almost totally due to war instigated by foes from Guatemala. The basin of the Sidon river or land of Zarahemla and isthmian possessions of the Nephites (identified as mainly the Central Depression of Chiapas) were largely emptied of their population at the around AD 350 when the Nephites retreated northward from Lamanite aggression.
6. Nephites and Lamanites made a calendrical appointment in setting up their climactic battle in the land of Cumorah. Mesoamerican commanders made such appointments for battle on an astrological basis.
7. Human sacrifice appears in the archaeological record by the fifth century AD; the Nephite historian reports its appearance among Lamanites in the fourth century.
8. Secret organizations were instrumental in the social chaos and warfare reported in the Nephite account for this period. Although their exact nature is unclear, they were engaged in the final fighting under the label "robbers." Several kinds of clandestine or semi-clandestine societal units known in Mesoamerica may fit in that category.
9. Genocidal war, as in the case of the Lamanites who exterminated Nephite society near AD 400, is the ultimate end of conflict according to the Book of Mormon. The Mesoamerican record of the Terminal Classic era, a few centuries later, shows a similar historical result.

## Conclusion

In the first chapter of *Mormon's Codex* I said the intent of the book is to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon exhibits what one could expect of an historical document produced in the context of ancient Mesoamerican civilization. The intervening chapters have shown that what scholars have discovered about that civilization and what the Nephite record says are plainly related. At no less than 420 points the text corresponds to characteristic Mesoamerican situations, statements or allusions, and history.

It is not rational to suppose that mere coincidence can account for similarities of this magnitude. The parallels are too striking and too sweeping to allow that casual explanation.

The question of who wrote the book has been answered by some commentators by supposing that young Joseph Smith manifested unique authorial creativity in bringing forth the volume. Literary



critic Harold Bloom in 1992 considered Smith a “religious genius,” as though that label explained how he was able to dictate this intricately plotted book of 270,000 words in less than 75 days without revising what he had dictated. Others have supposed that Smith melded together romantic notions about American Indians that were being bruited about on the New York frontier in the 1820s along with language borrowed from the Bible to come up with his book. Another explanation has been that someone more literate than he created the manuscript of the Book of Mormon which Smith then pirated or adapted.

The correspondences put forward in *Mormon’s Codex* also show time after time (although pointed out only occasionally) that any New York environmental explanation for its origin is unbelievable. For instance, would anyone writing a book from the area on the leeward side of Lake Ontario and fail to mention snow, ice or cold even a single time, or to tell about military action carried out in exhausting heat at new year’s?

No such facile interpretations can account for the abundance of Mesoamerican culture and history that my book points out. Even the greatest savant of the early 19th century, let alone a marginally literate frontier farm boy, could not possibly have produced a volume this rich in Mesoamericana. In fact even the best-informed scholar now in the 21st century would probably find it impossible to hew so close and so subtly to the Mesoamerican line. And any idea that Smith—“genius” or not—could have been acquainted with some abstruse body of scholarly knowledge about antiquity is absurd. One of his close collaborators, David Whitmer, said of him, “Joseph Smith was a man of limited education and could hardly write legibly.” His wife, Emma Hale Smith, said after her husband’s death, “Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”

Only one explanation for the Mesoamerican content is plausible, that the text was written by a native Mesoamerican person who lived in about the fourth century AD. Furthermore, the historian/editor who produced the record had to have been an eyewitness of some of the events recorded and was intimately familiar with the geographical setting where the actions recounted in the book took place. In addition he must have had access to an extensive collection of written documents on Mesoamerican culture history up to the Early Classic.

How that record reached New York state and Smith’s hands, and how he translated it, are questions nobody is able to answer objectively at this time, but they pale in comparison to the one of how the original work came to be. The book itself reports what its compiler/editor said of how he accomplished his task, and no other explanation is as plausible as his own statements.

Upwards of two-dozen people saw and/or felt the metal plates in Smith's possession. According to these witnesses he definitely had in his possession an artifact consisting of a set of thin sheets of (hammered?) metal.

The only format in which such a record could have been preserved was that of a native Mesoamerican book, called by scholars a codex. In fact some contemporary descriptions of the record he had in his hands make it sound rather like a codex.

There are very few descriptions of what the markings on the gold plates looked like. The most detailed comes to us secondhand from Charles Anthon, a professor at Columbia College in New York City. In 1828 as Smith was beginning to translate the record from the metallic plates in his possession, he made a copy of "a considerable number" of the "characters" (hieroglyphics) from the record, being careful that they were "perfectly reproduced." This copy along with Smith's translation of it was given to an associate, Martin Harris, who took the documents to Professor Anthon in New York City for confirmation of the antiquity of the characters and the accuracy of Smith's translation. It is unclear what the savant told Harris during their interview, but upon his return to his home in western New York, Harris was satisfied enough that he agreed to mortgage his farm in order to pay the \$5,000 cost of printing the book.

Years later Smith's critics asked Anthon for his version of what transpired during Harris's visit. Two letters by him contain our best description of the "copy" that Harris displayed. In an 1834 letter the professor recalled that what he was shown,

Was in fact a singular scrawl. It consisted of all kinds of crooked characters disposed in columns, and had evidently been prepared by some person who had before him at the time a book containing various alphabets. Greek and Hebrew letters, crosses and flourishes, Roman letters inverted or placed side-ways, were arranged in perpendicular columns, and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle divided into various compartments, decked with various strange marks, and evidently copied after the Mexican Calendar given (i.e., published) by Humboldt, but copied in such a way as not to betray the source.

In 1841 Anthon wrote to a different correspondent that, "The characters were arranged in columns, like the Chinese mode of writing . . . . Greek, Hebrew and all sorts of letters, more or less distorted, . . . were intermingled with sundry delineations of half moons, stars, and other natural objects, and the whole ended in a rude representation of the Mexican zodiac."

Taken together such descriptions are suggestive of what someone might say after a naïve perusal of a Mesoamerican document—perpendicular columns of “singular characters,” “natural objects,” segmented circles, a Mexican calendar, etc.

According to the record itself the text was all but completed by Mormon, an inhabitant of the Mesoamerican isthmus area in the late fourth century. He passed the record to his son Moroni<sup>2</sup> who survived him by more than 35 years and made modest additions. It appears, although there is no account of how, that Moroni<sup>2</sup> somehow moved the record to western New York state and buried it at the spot where Smith obtained the plates.

Given the content and form of the volume it may be appropriately called “Mormon’s Codex.” Supposing it is authentic, it constitutes the oldest and most extensive Mesoamerican codex known. Scholars engaged in the study of that civilization have the possibility, and even the responsibility, of studying this unique document as such a codex.

Of course there are statements—lots of them—in Mormon’s Codex that are still puzzling to Mesoamericanist scholars. The same can be said about the Old Testament in relation to current understanding of Syro-Palestinian archaeology. Yet Dever, while granting that certain details in the biblical history of Israel cannot yet be squared with the current archaeological model of that area (as though that were the final word), insisted that “this [people] Israel, must not be written out of history.” Meanwhile the findings of modern archaeology continue to reduce the apparent disjunctions.

Archaeologist John E. Clark has pointed out a similar relationship between Mesoamerican archaeology and study of the Book of Mormon text: “The trend over the last 50 years is one of convergence between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican archaeology. Book of Mormon claims [have] remain[ed] unaltered since 1830, so all the accommodation has been on the archaeology side.” We can expect that trend to continue.

*Mormon’s Codex* carries that process of convergence much further, consequently I say, in the spirit of William Dever, “these Nephites must not be written out of Mesoamerican history.”