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Author(s): John L. Sorenson

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HOW COULD JOSEPH SMITH WRITE SO ACCURATELY ABOUT ANCIENT AMERICAN CIVILIZATION?

John L. Sorenson

Level of Civilization

Some statements in the Book of Mormon about ancient Near Eastern lands, concepts, and activities might have been incorporated into the Nephite text because a nineteenth-century writer, such as Joseph Smith Jr. or Sidney Rigdon, knew about ancient lifeways through reading the Bible or secular sources accessible before 1830. But once the Book of Mormon story claims to be taking place in an American setting, such an argument makes no sense, for nobody knew enough by 1830 to get so many facts right. At point after point the scripture accurately reflects the culture and history of ancient Mesoamerica (southern Mexico and northern Central America). Where did such information come from if not through Joseph in the manner he claimed? Literally no person in Joseph Smith's day knew or could have known enough facts about exotic Central America to depict the subtle and accurate picture of ancient life that

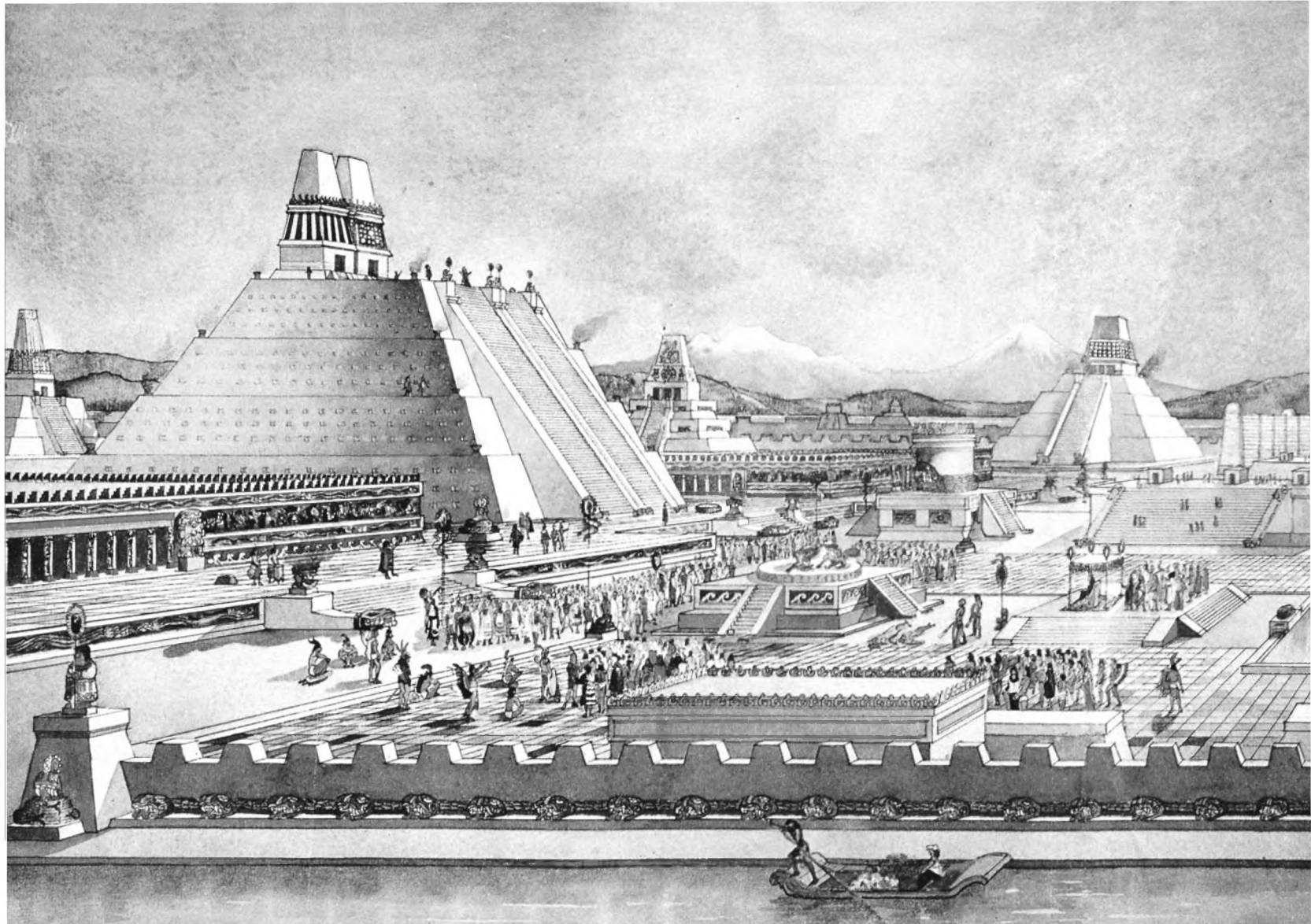
we find as background for the Book of Mormon. In this paper a look at a dozen or so characteristics of Mesoamerican civilization that are mirrored in the Book of Mormon will illustrate why this question is appropriate.

Joseph Smith could not have known in 1830 from published books or his contemporaries that an ancient civilization had existed anywhere in the Americas. To all settlers of the western New York frontier, an “Indian” was just a savage. If young Joseph took his ideas for the Book of Mormon from his neighbors and their cultural milieu, as many critics maintain, we would expect him to have rather similar notions of America’s indigenous peoples. Yet the Book of Mormon characterizes itself as a record from a real civilization (which included not only “the Nephites” but also “the Lamanites,” as shown by Mosiah 24:1–7 and Alma 21:2). New York frontier dwellers did not attribute civilization to the native American peoples they knew anything about. Joseph Smith himself was surprised to learn in 1842 from reading the sensational book by John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatán* (published in 1839), that there had once been a spectacular ancient civilization in Central America and that, at least in superficial terms, it agreed with the cultural pattern characterized in the Book of Mormon.

In the early nineteenth century, knowledge of the geography, history, and cultures of most of the world, and particularly of the Western Hemisphere, was very limited on the U.S. frontier and only somewhat better in the cities along the eastern seaboard.¹ Orson Pratt, an early leader in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, is accurate in his recollection in 1849 that “no one will dispute the fact that the existence of antique remains in different



LEVEL OF
CIVILIZATION



I. Marquina. Arquitectura prehispánica, 1951.

The sacred precinct of the urban core of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan. This reconstruction, based on Spanish eyewitness accounts and archaeological findings, depicts the impressive scale of the Aztec civilization.

parts of America was known long before Mr. Smith was born. But every well-informed person knows that . . . most of the discoveries made by Catherwood and Stephens were original—that most of the forty-four cities described by [Stephens’s book] had not been described by previous travelers.”² Stephens’s biographer makes the same point: “The acceptance of an ‘Indian civilization’ demanded, to an American living in 1839, an entire reorientation, for to him, an Indian was one of those barbaric, tepee dwellers against whom wars were constantly waged. . . . Nor did one ever think of calling the other indigenous inhabitants of the continent [e.g., of Central America] ‘civilized.’ In the universally accepted opinion [of that day], they were like their North American counterparts—savages.”³ So Joseph Smith was surprised when, in 1842 in Nauvoo, he and his associates read Stephens’s book. A comment in the *Times and Seasons*, the newspaper that Smith edited, clearly reflects that fact: “Mr. Stephens’ great developments of antiquities are made bare to the eyes of all . . . by reading the history of the Nephites in the Book of Mormon. . . . Who could have dreamed that twelve years could have developed such incontrovertible testimony to the Book of Mormon?”⁴

What evidence does the Book of Mormon give that what it records for early America took place within the context of an actual ancient civilization?⁵ First we need to ask what constitutes a civilization. Definitions differ, but most historians and archaeologists would agree on the following essential features of a civilization: (1) multiple cities (implying well-developed agriculture) with a population of corresponding scale, (2) complex social structure (numerous specialists and at least three levels of social rank), (3) major public structures of high symbolic significance

to those who use them, (4) state-level government (that is, a ruling apparatus in which coercive power is centralized), (5) mass warfare, and (6) writing.⁶ The Book of Mormon reports all of these key features for the peoples who kept that record.

Of course, in the pioneering stages of settlement Book of Mormon societies operated at a less-than-civilized level, while later periods covered in the record reflect more advanced levels of civilization. By far the larger proportion of information in the Book of Mormon concerns full-blown Nephite and Lamanite societies. Much less is recorded about the Jaredites.

The book reports a population that reached at least into the hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions. At the final battle of the Nephites, some 230,000 on the Nephite side alone are said to have been killed (see Mormon 6:10–15), and the winning side must have suffered casualties of the same order while leaving safe a sizable supporting population. The societies involved were spread over an area of something like 100,000 square miles, about the same order of size as Mesopotamia and larger than the territory encompassed by the Greeks. At one point leaders in the city of Zarahemla were said to live among “thousands” and even “tens of thousands” of people in or near the capital city. Those masses were in large measure specialists, not just farmers, of whom it was charged that they “sit in idleness” (Alma 60:22). Such a socioeconomic structure could only occur in a civilized society.

By the time Mormon was a youth, after A.D. 300, the Nephites had built or rebuilt so many cities and towns that “the whole land,” he reported, “had become covered with buildings” (Mormon 1:7). The crowning class of Nephite

urban settlements was the “great city.” Five Nephite centers are so named, and other “great and notable cities” also existed, although their names are not recorded in the scriptures (see 3 Nephi 8:14). The absolute size of “great cities” is suggested by mention of the city of Jerusalem in the land of Israel, which was also called a “great city” (1 Nephi 11:13).⁷ Furthermore, shortly before the time of Christ the area inhabited by the Nephites and Lamanites was characterized as an interrelated trade zone in which “they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell” (Helaman 6:8). “There was all manner of gold . . . and of silver, and of precious ore of every kind” (v. 11). Their craftspeople also “did make all manner of cloth” (v. 13). Many books and records of all kinds were produced (see Helaman 3:15), an additional characteristic of civilized status. Thus the marks of civilization were there, although none were evident among the traditions or the material remains left by the Indians of the northeastern United States, where Joseph Smith dwelled in his formative years.

Not only was the level of civilization depicted in Mormon’s volume impressively like that which archaeologists have since found in Central America, but the chronology also agrees generally. The heyday of the Nephites and civilized Lamanites was from the first century B.C. to the fourth century A.D. (the earlier Nephites and Lamanites alike were smaller in numbers). According to the Nephite historians, not until around 100 B.C. did the growth of political, economic, and cultural elements crystallize into extensive and intensive societies.⁸ Especially in the third and fourth centuries A.D., the Nephites and Lamanites built cities and impressive public buildings (see 4 Nephi 1),

as well as engaged in extensive trade and large-scale war (see Mormon 1–6).

Archaeological and other historical research carried out over the past half century has demonstrated a striking external correspondence to this picture in southern Mexico and northern Central America. Ruins of even the Classic period of Mesoamerican civilization, from A.D. 300 to 900, were still unknown when Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon. Only within recent decades have archaeologists determined that during the centuries even before Cumorah—before the Classic period—civilized people had built and left ruins as impressive as anything ever constructed in this heartland of ancient American civilization.⁹

Geographical Consistency

The Book of Mormon contains hundreds of statements related to the geography of the Nephites’ “land of promise.” When all of them are collated, a picture of the physical setting emerges that is highly consistent. Inconsistencies that might be expected of the author of a fraudulent work (such as locating a particular named city in different spots at different points in the story) are notably absent in the Book of Mormon. Yet Joseph Smith himself later made statements by way of commentary that contradict what the text says of its geography. That is, when Smith freshly dictated the text of the scripture, the geography came out fine; but his private interpretations of the geography could err.

A prime example occurs in a statement recorded in a journal dated to 1838. A group of travelers passing through Randolph County, Indiana, was given to understand by local members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints that “the ancient site of the [Nephite] city of Manti”



COMPLEX
GEOGRAPHICAL
CONSISTENCY

was thereabouts.¹⁰ No direct attribution to Joseph Smith is made, but it is doubtful that anyone would have drawn this conclusion unless the Prophet, who had traveled the route, had said something like this. Actually, when all the statements about Manti that appear in the Nephite account are examined together, they can only be interpreted to show that the city of Manti lay south of “the narrow neck of land” and the city of Zarahemla and was near the headwaters of the northward-flowing Sidon River. A very neat fit for the relationships of the land and city of Manti as reported in the scriptural text is found in southernmost Mexico, and city ruins in the vicinity date to Book of Mormon times.¹¹ But the suggested correlation in Indiana completely fails to fit the statements in the Nephite account. It would appear that Joseph Smith and his close associates had not personally grasped the geographical scheme that the book itself consistently reveals.

To recapitulate, when Joseph Smith-as-translator dictated the text of the Book of Mormon to his scribes, he produced a seamless, plausible geography of limited scale, but when Smith-as-mere-Joseph later commented on geography, the picture he communicated is that all South and North America were involved. This inconsistency is not what the author of a work of fiction—as naysayers often suppose Joseph to have been—would show. Were Joseph the sly schemer he is accused of being, he surely would have done two things differently in this regard: (1) inevitably he would have let geographical inconsistencies slip in during his hasty dictation of the text, and (2) thereafter he would have kept his mouth shut about matters of location lest the problems he knew could be present in the book he

had created should be exposed by his offhand comments. He did neither.

There is a corollary to this point. The statements in the Book of Mormon describe a land of limited extent (a few hundred miles long) that had certain specific physical features (in configuration, topography, bodies of water, climate, and geology). Analyses of the text of the scripture in the last six decades have made this clear. Those characteristics fit remarkably well with the geography of Mesoamerica. Yet later statements by Joseph and his early associates reveal that he supposed that the entire Western Hemisphere had been occupied by Nephites and Lamanites. In other words, his personal interpretation of the book's geography differed in some respects from what the record itself stipulates. If we were to suppose, with many of Smith's critics, that he somehow wrote the Book of Mormon out of his own mind and knowledge, it is difficult to see how he would have interpreted this aspect of his "own literary work" inconsistently.

The Pattern of Culture History

The picture presented in the Book of Mormon of changes in peoples and cultures over time matches in major respects what we now know about the course of history in Mesoamerica. But this picture, which scientists and scholars have slowly built up from archaeology and related fields of expert study, was totally unknown in 1830. Not even the best-informed scholars in the world at that time, let alone Joseph Smith, had any notion of a pattern behind ancient American history that would come to light over a century later.



MESOAMERICAN
LINEAGE
HISTORY

An 1833 book by Josiah Priest, who was as much an expert on American prehistory as anyone at the time (which isn't saying much), expressed the opinion that not only "Asiatic nations" but also "Polynesians, Malays, Australasians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Israelites, Tartars, Scandinavians, Danes, Norwegians, Welch, and Scotch" groups had reached the Americas.¹² Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell, the savant to whom Martin Harris took his sample of Nephite writing before he carried it to Professor Charles Anthon in New York City, had published the opinion that at least Malay, Tartar, and Scandinavian voyagers had reached America.¹³ But neither Mitchell nor Priest had any notion of history as it related to the random finds of ancient objects in America, the only "archaeological" evidence then known. After all, no systematic method existed at that time for dating this continent's "antiquities." Archaeologists would not be able to produce even an orderly guess about the structure of Amerindian history until nearly another century had passed.¹⁴

The Book of Mormon was not hesitant to give a history of peoples in the region known to Lehi as "the promised land." This history, however, was only an account of certain events involving particular groups; nowhere does the Book of Mormon claim to give a comprehensive sketch about what happened throughout the area of its concern. What we do have in the book that Mormon edited—most of today's Book of Mormon—is instead a "lineage history" of his ancestral line, with a short version of a lineage history of the earlier Jaredites. The latter group came from Mesopotamia at the time of "the great tower," apparently sometime in the third millennium B.C. Their record came through a prophet named Ether, the final record keeper

of the traditional Jaredite ruling line. His ancestors had inhabited what the Nephites later called “the land northward.” There they competed with other would-be ruling families over many generations. Centuries after Ether and his people became extinct in civil wars culminating before about 500 B.C., the final Nephite record keeper, Moroni, prepared a skeletal version of Ether’s account, which he left to us as the book of Ether.

The Nephites, along with their rivalrous relatives, the Lamanites, inhabited the land after the Jaredites, between about 600 B.C. and A.D. 400. They traced their origin to the Near Eastern land of Judah. (Both of these “peoples” were actually sociopolitical factions composed of diverse ethnic and linguistic groups whose rulers usually traced their ancestry to one of two brothers in the original party of settlers from the Old World.)¹⁵ The Nephite record shows that it too was only a partial history; it concentrated on events of significance to the line of royalty that descended from the founder, Nephi. A third group that had also emigrated from the Near East, the people of Zarahemla (“Mulekites”), became incorporated under the Nephite rulers, but their separate history is all but ignored. The Nephite segment of the population, like its Jaredite predecessors, became extinct at the end of the story (near the end of the fourth century A.D.), but a miscellany of groups under the labels “Lamanites” and “robbers” continued the basic civilizational tradition in which the Nephites had participated.

Summarized, the scriptural record portrays the following basic sequence:

- First, the long-lasting Jaredite ruling line participated in a cultural tradition that, after a pioneering

struggle (see Ether 1–9), came to a level of precocious advancement in arts and technology but not in statecraft or religious organization. The civilization was located primarily in the land northward in the centuries preceding about 500 B.C.

- Later, Nephites (including “Mulekites”) and Lamanites, who constituted adjacent rival but interdependent factions with much in common culturally,¹⁶ inhabited the land southward from soon after 600 B.C. to about A.D. 400 (colonizing portions of the land northward starting in the first century B.C.).

Within this twofold pattern the text discusses or alludes to additional subgroups, major events, and societal trends. Especially notable are the overall growth of population and participation in a class-structured civilization that emphasized ritual activities.

The last half century of concentrated historical and archaeological research on ancient Mesoamerican societies has produced a picture that, while far more complex than the abbreviated lineage histories that constitute the Book of Mormon, plausibly accommodates the histories of the Nephite and Lamanite ruling lines. The culture sequence reconstructed by scholars can be summarized as follows:

- First, there was an early cultural tradition that is increasingly recognized as deserving to be called a civilization. Its best-known component is sometimes called the Olmec culture. This, however, was only the best-known manifestation of a wider tradition dating from perhaps 1400 B.C. to about 500 B.C.,¹⁷ when it quite abruptly lost its identity. Its climax was located in Mexico in the vicinity of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

- Some elements of the tradition that followed derived from the Olmec and related predecessor cultures but had a different ethos and emphasis. It featured elaborate religious monuments, ceremonies, and myths. While this second tradition grew from roots in several regions, a core of its concepts originated in southern Mesoamerica, that is, Guatemala and southernmost Mexico, during the period from about 500 B.C. to near A.D. 300. This tradition spread quite widely throughout Mesoamerica in that period and provided primary ideas and energy behind the spectacular cultures of the Classic period (after A.D. 200), such as the Maya, Zapotec, and Teotihuacán manifestations.¹⁸

If we identify Book of Mormon lands with the isthmian part of Mesoamerica (the land southward comprising mainly Guatemala and the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, the narrow neck of land being the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the land northward being that portion of Mexico near the isthmus to the north and west),¹⁹ as many now do, then substantial agreement between the scriptural and scholarly pictures of culture history is evident. Moreover, evidence has been brought forward that certain key beliefs, symbols, and other cultural elements that appear in this second Mesoamerican tradition (and are referred to in the Book of Mormon text) relate closely to the ancient Near East.²⁰

A book-length discussion would be required to document the literally hundreds of points upon which the historical dimension in the Book of Mormon agrees with the known culture history of Mesoamerica. (The most serious attempt at such a publication so far is the book *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life*.)²¹ Only

the broadest agreement could be communicated in the summary discussion above, but many comparisons at a detailed level could be presented if time and space allowed.²²

Even the general sequence, which shows an early and precocious Mexican civilization, epitomized as Olmec (although that label is oversimplified), followed by a religiously oriented second tradition that culminated in the great Classic era cultures and sites so well known to tourists, was not recognized by most scholars until forty or fifty years ago. That Joseph Smith's translation of what may be termed the Book of Mormon "codex" already contained parallel historical facts in 1830 is remarkable.

The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record

The Nephite account is a record that resembles in form, nature, and functions—in scores of characteristics, in fact—what we would expect in an ancient Mesoamerican codex, a type of document that was utterly unknown to Joseph Smith.

At the time Smith lived, the only Mesoamerican object anything like a codex that had been described in an English-language source was the Aztec "calendar stone." It was pictured in a book by Humboldt published in 1814 in London,²³ although nobody at that time could make much sense of it. Nothing suggested by Humboldt sheds any real light on native American written documents nor relates to the Book of Mormon. Besides, the chance is vanishingly small that the learned German's esoteric work would have been accessible anywhere in America except at a handful of the best libraries on the Atlantic seaboard, to which Joseph had no access before the Book of Mormon was published.

The very idea that large numbers of books were written and preserved in any ancient American culture was



MESOAMERICAN
CODEX

also contrary to the notion universally held by literate and rustic citizens of the United States that the “Indians” were only “savages.” The writer in Helaman 3:15 tells of “many books and many records of every kind” among his people in the first century B.C., some kept by the Lamanites but a majority by Nephites. They had been “handed down from one generation to another” (v. 16). Spaniards noted (but only in documents that Joseph Smith could not have known about) that numerous native books—many held in great reverence as sacred records—were in use when they arrived in Mexico in the early sixteenth century. Archaeologist Michael Coe believes “there must have been thousands of such books in Classic times” (generally A.D. 300–900).²⁴ Only four have been preserved from the Maya zone. But in the 1820s not even the experts knew about these Mesoamerican books.

Our information about the form of the Book of Mormon originally comes from statements in two letters that Professor Charles Anthon wrote years after Martin Harris came to him with a sample of the exotic writing that Joseph Smith had copied off the “gold plates.” What he was shown, Anthon said, was “singular characters . . . arranged and placed in perpendicular columns, and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle, divided into various compartments, arched with various strange marks.”²⁵ Anthon compared this form in general terms to an Aztec manuscript, the only type of native book he knew about. But such Aztec books, dating from near the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, were not shaped as “books.” The records most like those kept by Mormon and his predecessors were from the Maya language area, and none of those were made public until later in the nineteenth century. The “Anthon transcript” (the sample of characters

copied from the plates) confirms their “singular” nature. The marks do not resemble writing familiar to any scholars in the 1830s. In fact, the clearest parallels to them are signs on a Mexican artifact that was not discovered until the 1960s.²⁶

Interestingly, the Nephite records on metal plates were used anciently to record the same *kinds* of sources and information as were found in native Mesoamerican records. Little or no such content would have appeared in any book written by a New York farm boy: key events affecting the fate of ruling lineages, diplomatic communications, annals of events recorded at the end of each year, letters from correspondents, political history, detailed accounts of battles and wars, descriptions and history of sacred practices, calendar data, prophecies, the adventures of heroes, genealogies, and tribute lists, among others.²⁷ Moreover, those varied materials are ordered in an intricate manner unlike what is found in any other volume written in the nineteenth century, yet the very disparate parts of the Nephite record prove to be remarkably consistent in how they flow and interconnect.²⁸

Scores of statements reflecting strange religious and mythic beliefs and exotic symbols are also found in the Book of Mormon text. Many of these are parallel to beliefs and meanings that we find in ancient Mesoamerican sacred books but that moderns do not recognize, such as notions of a subterranean ocean, sacred artificial mountains, a holy tree at the center of the earth, and ceremonial cannibalism.²⁹

The Book of Mormon turns out to be a type of book that no New York farm boy in the nineteenth century (or today) would dream of writing or could have produced if

he had. The information that would be required for even the most sophisticated scholar or writer anywhere to come close to the book we have in our hands was just not available to anybody in the 1820s. The Mesoamerican elements that we now know about would not come to light until the middle of the twentieth century or later.

Language

Statements in the Book of Mormon about the language in which it was written and the nature of the record from which it was translated went far beyond anything Joseph Smith could have known about ancient tongues and writing. Yet those statements agree with the picture of ancient scripts that modern scholarship now recognizes.

References to the writing system employed by the Nephite scribes present a picture of a script very different from alphabetic English, which was all that Joseph Smith knew. Mormon lamented that “there are many things which, according to our language, we are not able to write” (3 Nephi 5:18). His son Moroni₂ echoed the point in the book of Ether: “Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; . . . thou hast not made us mighty in writing. . . . Thou hast made us that we could write but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. . . . Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words” (Ether 12:23–25). Jacob₂, son of the original Lehi, felt the same limitation: “I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates” (Jacob 4:1). What could these writers have meant by their complaint?



LANGUAGE
SYSTEMS

Oral phrasing was not the problem. They had superior conceptual and spiritual ability to speak powerfully, for Moroni₂ recorded, “Lord thou hast made us mighty in word by faith . . . ; thou hast made all this people that they could speak much, because of the Holy Ghost which thou hast given them” (Ether 12:23). Nor was the problem merely mechanical; when Moroni₂ spoke of “the awkwardness of our hands” (v. 24) and Jacob₂ mentioned “the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates,” we can suppose that with practice they could have learned to manage their engraving tools precisely enough that they could represent such characters as they desired.

We learn the real problem from Moroni₂’s comment that “if our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; . . . and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:33). In other words, writing in a longer, fuller, alphabetic script would have solved the problem they sensed. Now Hebrew was written wholly alphabetically; the sounds of each word would be exactly and explicitly spelled out, so ambiguity would have been reduced to a minimum, but at the cost of using more space. The trouble is that the “reformed Egyptian” system that they did use, like the original hieroglyphic system in Egypt, could pack the linguistic information into fewer signs or glyphs, although that compromised clarity. Many Egyptian-style signs (of “logographic” type) signified broad concepts that lacked precision. So the lack of clarity in language that bothered Jacob₂ and Moroni₂ was inherent in the hieroglyphic-style script they felt obliged to use.

The glyphic writing of the Maya and surrounding peoples of Mesoamerica suffered ambiguity similar to that

of the Egyptians. They too knew that most of the characters they used represented whole concepts, and sometimes more than one concept, so subtle distinctions in meaning could be missed by those who read only literally. Furthermore, their frequent use of nicknames, metaphors, wordplays or code terms, and obscure allusions to history and myth meant that one had to be schooled extensively in literary forms, mythic lore, and history to “get” precisely what the original writer intended. Anciently, certain priests and sons in noble families alone had the privilege of receiving the necessary depth of schooling. The subtleties of certain Mesoamerican tongues, combined with the ambiguous type of script, means that “often a dozen or more quite disparate meanings may legitimately be proposed for a particular monosyllabic root.”³⁰ Another scholar has noted that “many Maya words . . . sometimes can be reconciled with totally different text interpretations. Intended ambiguity in meaning, enhanced by metaphorical expressions, seems to be one of the crucial features of the Maya texts . . . [that] severely restricts . . . attempts towards decipherment.”³¹ The difficulty was compounded by the fact that much of the language of the sacred texts was a form of poetry. As noted above, the solution to these problems when the cultures were still alive was for readers of the most important texts to be extensively instructed in idioms, allusions, and complex contexts. That learning involved memorizing extensive commentaries on the ancient texts passed on through “wise men” of the culture, that is, priestly text specialists.³² Fluency in plain everyday speech was never enough.

This situation recalls King Benjamin’s urgency in wanting his three sons to become “men of understanding.” For

that reason he “caused that they should be taught in *all* the language of his fathers that they might know concerning the prophecies” (Mosiah 1:2).³³ He insisted to the princes that learning “the mysteries of God” (vv. 4, 5) depended entirely upon being taught to pore over “these engravings” of their ancestors, which learning had been passed on within the nobility from generation to generation since Lehi’s day (see v. 4). The process was intricate, time-consuming, and expensive; only those wealthy enough to enjoy much leisure time, particularly royalty, could afford to master the records (compare 3 Nephi 6:12). It must have been the complications of context surrounding the texts written in “reformed Egyptian” that caused Moroni₂ to worry about how his “imperfections” (Mormon 9:31) and “weakness in writing” (Ether 12:23) might be misconstrued by his later readers. Centuries before, his ancestor Nephi₁ knew that his people could not understand in context “the things of the Jews” on the brass plates without his interpreting the text of Isaiah for them (see 2 Nephi 25:4–5). Moroni₂ hoped that what he wrote would be clear in the absence of any surviving interpreter.

The expression Moroni₂ used to label the Nephite script, “reformed Egyptian,” applies typologically to the glyphic writing used in Mesoamerica by the Maya and other peoples. (At least half a dozen distinct scripts of this kind, perhaps descended from a common ancestral form, were used at one time or another in that region.)³⁴ Scholars have shown that indeed the early Mesoamerican hieroglyphic writing shared its essential characteristics with Egyptian and other mainly logographic scripts of the Old World.³⁵

An additional note of interest concerns Moroni₂'s statements that contrast the Nephite "reformed Egyptian" system of script with that used by the Jaredites. To the Lord he observed, "Thou has not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty . . . unto the overpowering of man to read them" (Ether 12:24). What in the records led him to speak of this strong contrast? One possible basis for a difference could be the scripts that were involved. The Jaredites came from "the great tower, at the time the Lord confounded the language of the people" (Ether 1:33), so it is plausible that they used a writing system derived from what we see on the clay tablets from ancient Mesopotamia, the location of "the great tower." That system spelled out words by syllables, each character standing for one syllable. Spelling via syllables was not quite as neat a way to represent the niceties of spoken language as the alphabet (which would not be invented until over a thousand years later), but it was superior in precision to any hieroglyphic system. The power Moroni₂ attributed to the words of the brother of Jared might have been due, in part at least, to the Jaredites' use of a writing system different from—that is, a clearer device for communicating actual speech than—Mormon and Moroni₂'s hieroglyphic system.

How remarkable that the record keepers of the Book of Mormon allude again and again to their writing systems and, even more remarkable, that the Book of Mormon statements fit so well with what we know about the primary type of script in use in early Mesoamerica, the core Book of Mormon area (the only region in ancient America where writing was regularly used and books existed). Neither

Professor Anthon nor any other savant in 1830 knew such details, yet unlearned young Smith managed to get them right and avoid any number of missteps along these lines that would have revealed him to be a deceiver.

Nephite Political Economy



The picture of Nephite and Lamanite societies presented in the Book of Mormon shows numerous political and economic features that we now know were characteristic of ancient civilizations, especially those in Mesoamerica. Careful study of the text makes clear to those who have studied ancient civilizations that no poorly educated resident of nineteenth-century New York like young Smith knew even the basic facts about the exotic modes of social and economic organization that prevailed in Mesoamerican civilization. Secular sources on history available to Joseph could not have acquainted him with either the overall pattern or specific details of the system described or implied in the Book of Mormon.

The political and economic structure of Nephite society was generally similar to what prevailed among the Israelites from King David's day to that of Zedekiah and Lehi, but it has taken scholars immense research on Old Testament Israel and on other Near Eastern societies to understand these aspects (casual readers of the Bible miss most of the picture). Agriculture was, of course, the fundamental source of wealth. Practical control of the land was in the hands of descent groups or tribes and subtribes; families received allotments of cultivable land from councils of elders that headed those broader, kin-constituted groups. (Note that the law of Moses, according to Leviticus 25 and Numbers

36, required that land sold outside the lineage to whom it had been originally assigned should be returned to that unit each half century, during jubilee years.)

Superimposed on that basic structure of the “political economy” was the monarchy. In a formal sense the king was considered to own all the land. As chief decision maker on behalf of the nation, he had a legitimate claim to public support of his royal house and his administrators and their retainers. This claim was anchored in the belief that a sovereign was also properly head of the religious system or cult. According to 1 Samuel 8, when the people of Israel asked the prophet Samuel to choose a king for them so they could be like all their neighbors, he warned them that they would regret it. They would have to pay onerous taxes or tribute, he said, to support the royal family and government establishment. Indeed, within three generations they found themselves burdened with supporting hundreds of Solomon’s queens and functionaries, a military establishment, and elaborate royal building projects (see, for example, 1 Kings 10:14–27; 12:4).

The Book of Mormon presents a generally parallel picture. After kingship ended with Mosiah₂, the central government, located in Zarahemla (now headed by a chief judge who enjoyed many kinglike powers), featured rulers who “[sat] upon [their] thrones in a state of thoughtless stupor,” “surrounded with thousands of those, yea, and tens of thousands, who do also sit in idleness” at or near the capital city (Alma 60:7, 22).

Those multitudes could only have been supported by a system of taxation or tribute that funneled resources up to the dominant class. Certain statements make clear that local rulers “possessed” cities (see, for example, Alma 8:7).

This means they were considered to be owners of the localities they administered, which legally and morally justified their receiving support by tribute that came ultimately from the peasant farmers and craftspeople in their domain (see, for example, Mosiah 11:3; 22:15; 32:5; 35:3). The ambition of would-be rulers like Amalickiah (see Alma 46:4–6) and those who “professed the blood of nobility” (Alma 51:21) was to gain access to power and wealth by getting control of the taxation apparatus. The Nephite dissenter Giddianhi put it bluntly: “I hope that ye [Nephite rulers] will deliver up your lands and your possessions . . . that this my people [of the elite] may recover their rights and government” (3 Nephi 3:10)—“rights,” that is, to collect taxes from their subjects. Much of Nephite history is explainable in terms of the struggles of generation after generation of dissenters to control the government so they could live lavishly in the manner of the Zeniffite king Noah and his ancient model, King Solomon.³⁶ This whole scheme of “possession” and tribute payments matched in all essential ways what had been done by the kings of the Egyptians, Hittites, Assyrians, and Babylonians, among others, for many centuries before Lehi₁ and Nephi₁’s day.

As noted, a kin-group structure in Nephite society underlay the monarchy. When the central government collapsed shortly before the Savior’s visit to the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 7), the process of governing fell into the hands of “tribes and leaders of tribes. Now behold, there was no man among them save he had much family and many kindreds and friends; therefore their tribes became exceeding great” (v. 4). The tribal and kinship structure had always been in place (see Jacob 1:13); in the moment of crisis

when the regime in Zarahemla evaporated, additional functions fell on the kin-based tribal structure. What we see in 3 Nephi 7 is a default government, not centralized like that formerly headed by kings or chief judges, yet sufficiently capable to enact and administer “their laws, every one according to his tribe” (3 Nephi 7:11). A version of that dispersed political structure surely continued following the appearance of Jesus Christ, because nothing is said of any central government from then until possibly the time of Mormon (see Mormon 2:2).

This depiction of the authority structure is nowhere spelled out in Mormon’s abridgment. Rather, we have to infer it from situations and intimations scattered throughout the record. The same is true of the history of Israel in the Old Testament, whose political and economic context we understand much more fully when we supplement the Bible with information from other Near Eastern societies.³⁷ The structure of political or governmental power, and justifications for it too, was so established, so generally understood, that it would have seemed foolish for the ancient writers to waste space formally explaining details of what was obvious to people of that time.

Virtually every institution or event involving government and wealth among the Nephites and Lamanites can be matched with parallels from descriptions of the political economy of societies in Mesoamerica. For example, the following occur in Mesoamerican history: (1) a seemingly autocratic ruler like King Noah ended up being overthrown and slain by his own people, who tolerated his excesses only up to a certain point; (2) disagreements and dissensions sapped the unity of political communities so that

rivals could seize power; (3) alliances among the ruling elites in rival societies were forged, often by marriage (as in King Lamoni's offer of a bride to Ammon and Amalickiah's taking the widowed Lamanite queen as his wife), as a means to bolster local power and prestige and promote wealth-generating trade relations; and (4) when rebels made trouble, the only sure way for rulers to respond was for the upstarts to be "hewn down" with the sword (see Alma 51:19; compare Moroni₁'s dire threat in Alma 60:27–30). Practically every facet of political life (with its entwined economic, religious, and military connections)³⁸ described in the Book of Mormon account has close parallels in ancient Mesoamerican life.³⁹

Nothing Joseph Smith could have known in his day about "the Indians" or the biblical Israelites would have prepared him to dictate such a consistent picture of Nephite and Lamanite government and society as he actually did. Only in recent decades have scholars learned enough to describe these ancient Mesoamerican power mechanisms that prove to have been so much like what the Book of Mormon portrays.

Elements of Material Culture

Various features of material culture mentioned in the Book of Mormon make sense in terms of ancient Mesoamerican civilization. But if, as some claim, Joseph Smith wrote the volume from his personal environment, New York's Amerindians could not have provided him with any hint or data about cement, "sheum," wine, and silk or linen, among other items, mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Cement

Cement is specifically discussed in Helaman 3:7–11. Nephite colonists from the land of Zarahemla who settled in the land northward in the first century B.C. are credited with becoming expert “in the working of cement,” from which they constructed “houses in the which they did dwell” and built “many cities . . . of cement” (vv. 7, 9, 11). The Book of Mormon dates this significant technological advance to the year 46 B.C. Here we have several testable facts: the Book of Mormon tells us that people in ancient America became very skillful in the use of cement at a precise historical time. No one in the nineteenth century could have known that cement, in fact, was extensively used in Mesoamerica beginning at about this time, the middle of the first century B.C.⁴⁰

A lime cement was in frequent use in southern Mesoamerica, especially in the lowland Maya area in the period after A.D. 200.⁴¹ However, central and Gulf Coast Mexico was the scene of the culmination of concrete engineering. Particularly at the vast ruins of Teotihuacán, near Mexico City, large constructions of this material can still be seen.⁴² (That area lies, of course, northward from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which most LDS scholars consider to be the dividing point between the Nephite lands southward and northward.) The earliest concrete known is from the Valley of Mexico and dates to perhaps two centuries B.C. Chemically, early Mexican concrete was “much the same as present-day concrete.”⁴³ The fact that very little carbon is found in this cement “attests to the ability of these ancient peoples.”⁴⁴ These constructions date a little earlier than the reference in the book of Helaman; we may assume that the Nephites’ expertness in cement work was taught to them



CEMENT
BUILDING
MATERIALS

by people who were already living in the “land northward” and had earlier experience in that technology.

Sheum

Zeniff, ruler over an enclave of Nephites who settled among the Lamanites in the land of Nephi around the beginning of the second century B.C., reported that among the crops they cultivated, which included corn, wheat, and barley, was one called *sheum*, a term for which Joseph Smith provided no translation (see Mosiah 9:9). Just in the last forty years we have learned that the most important cereal grain among the Akkadians (Babylonians) of Mesopotamia was called *she’um*.⁴⁵ The Jaredites of the Book of Mormon, who had originally lived in Mesopotamia, could have put the name on some cultivable plant they encountered in their new land; some of their undocumented descendants may well have passed the name and whatever grain it labeled down to the Zeniffites.



AKKADIAN
“SHE’UM”

Wine

Some scholars have faulted Joseph Smith for references in the Book of Mormon to wine in the New World promised land (as in Mosiah 11:15). These scholars assure us that wine produced from grapes—which is the usual meaning of the word *wine*—was never made nor used in the Americas. However, the Book of Mormon makes no reference to grapes, although it does mention “vineyards.” Some other sort of wine could have been so labeled by the Nephites. When the Spaniards arrived in Mesoamerica, they spoke about several kinds of native “wines.” An intoxicating drink was commonly manufactured by fermenting a mixture of water, a certain tree bark, and honey. Other groups fermented juices drawn



FERMENTED
DRINKS

from the agave plant, bananas, pine-apples, or the heart of certain palm trees. To all of these the Europeans applied the term *wine*.⁴⁶ Further, the Spaniards spoke of native plantings of the agave cactus (from which the drink *balche* was made) as “vineyards.”⁴⁷ So Joseph Smith’s use of the terms *wine* and *vineyards* in the translation of the Book of Mormon has proved to be no mistake, whether some non-grape fruit was used or, as Joseph himself probably assumed, Nephite wine was made from grapes by a process like that used by European settlers in the early United States.⁴⁸

Silk and Linen

The Book of Mormon, in Alma 4:6, refers to the “fine silks” and “fine-twined linen” of the Nephites in the early first century B.C. More than a thousand years earlier the Jaredites also had “silks, and fine-twined linen” (Ether 10:24). However, when European conquerors arrived in the Americas, they found neither Old World silkworms nor flax. Critics have charged Joseph Smith with arbitrarily inserting into the Book of Mormon text the names of those two textiles, and they say that the presence of the two fibers cannot be substantiated by the cultural record for pre-Columbian America. In recent years, however, several fabrics that have been identified in ancient Mesoamerica deserve to be called “silk” and “linen.” The text of the Book of Mormon is now vindicated in this regard, although nobody in the nineteenth century, including Smith, could have known



© Justin Kerr

This fine ceramic sculpture from the Gulf Coast of Mexico at about A.D. 700 depicts a drunkard in a manner intended to condemn excessive drinking.



NATIVE
AMERICAN
FABRICS

enough from secular learning to provide any historical basis for using the two words.

Normal usage today limits the term *silk* to the fabric made of thread exuded by the Japanese silkworm (actually the larva of an Asian moth, *Bombyx mori*). However, the term embraces meanings that extend beyond the Japanese reference. For instance, Aristotle and other classical Greek writers referred to “silk” in use in their world that had no entomological connection with the Far East, and two types of silkworm native to southeastern Europe yielded cocoons from which a fine thread comparable to Asian silk was obtained.⁴⁹ Thus a legitimate sense of the term *silk* is “a cloth having characteristics like [Japanese] silk,” regardless of whether it originated from the Japanese insect.

Various fabrics in use among the inhabitants of Mexico and Central America when the Spaniards arrived were considered silk or its equivalent by the invaders. One of these fabrics was, indeed, made from cocoons that were gathered from trees in the wild in Mexico and spun into costly cloth. Although the insect involved is not the Japanese one, the procedure of gathering the fine thread is essentially the same as for Japanese silk.⁵⁰ There were also a number of other silk-like fabrics reported by the Spaniards. In Yucatán, fiber from inside the pod of the ceiba tree, called *kapok*, was gathered and spun. Bishop Diego de Landa compared the resulting cloth to imported silk,⁵¹ while Father Clavigero described it as “soft and delicate, and perhaps more so, than [Japanese] silk.”⁵² Silky fiber from the wild pineapple plant was also used to weave a fine textile.⁵³ Moreover, a silk-like fabric was woven by the Aztecs from delicate rabbit hair.⁵⁴ Even cotton cloth could be woven so fine that specimens excavated at Teotihuacán, in

central Mexico, and dating to the fourth century A.D. have been characterized as “exceedingly fine” and “of gossamer thinness.”⁵⁵ These examples provide sufficient evidence that the Book of Mormon references to “silk” are plausible, even though Joseph Smith could not have known any of these historical facts on his own.

“Fine-twined linen” is mentioned three times and “fine linen” three more in the records of the Jaredites and Nephites (e.g., Mosiah 10:5). Yet the flax plant from which our familiar linen is made did not grow in America. On this count too the Book of Mormon has been charged with error. Actually, though, the word *linen* has a broad dictionary meaning in addition to the narrow meaning of cloth made from flax. A textile may be called linen if it has the characteristics of linen. Linen is prepared by soaking and pounding fibers from the flax or hemp plant until they congeal into a strong, solid sheet. In pre-Spanish America native peoples made two kinds of cloth by a similar process. The leaves of the ixtle, maguey, or agave plant were soaked and pounded in the same manner as flax was treated in Europe. The resulting thread and fabric, known as *henequen*, was the most commonly used cloth, especially among people of the lower economic classes in central Mexico. The Spanish conquistador Bernal Diaz explicitly described this cloth as “like linen.”⁵⁶ Another cloth made of vegetable fiber is bark cloth. The bark of the fig tree was stripped off in large sheets, then soaked, pounded, and dried until the matted material was soft. (Details of the process, and even the same implements, are found in cultures all the way across the Pacific to Southeast Asia.)⁵⁷ The resulting “cloth” feels a good deal like *henequen* or linen.⁵⁸

Joseph Smith had no way of knowing about the history of silk and linen, yet the record he translated, the Book of Mormon, turns out to agree with modern evidence that textiles with these labels were used in Mesoamerica.

Warfare

The long descriptions of warfare in the Book of Mormon provide some of the most concrete data in the volume that may be compared with Mesoamerican archaeological remains. At several points in the narratives, statements are made about the aims, paraphernalia, and tactics of battle among the Nephites and Lamanites. These led critics in earlier days to claim that Joseph Smith had made repeated errors. They said that the archaeological and historical record about war, especially as it was fought in ancient Mesoamerica, failed to match statements in the Nephite record.

For many years experts claimed that wars played no major role in Mesoamerica's history.⁵⁹ They supposed that warfare did not arise there until around A.D. 1000. Before that, it was said, only docile peasants and peaceful chiefs and priests inhabited Mexico and Central America. If that had been so, this would have been the only civilized area in the world without a long military history and the Nephite record would have indeed been contrary to what archaeologists "knew." But in the last quarter century a tide of new studies has completely reversed the old image of social tranquility. It is now clear that armed conflict was as enduring and damaging in Mesoamerica as in any other part of the ancient world. The Book of Mormon record of frequent wars fits the new scholarly consensus.⁶⁰

The forms and chronology of fortification mentioned in the scripture also coincide with what is known from



WARS AND
WARFARE

Mesoamerica. The earliest Nephite defensive walls surrounded the cities of Nephi (renamed by the Lamanites Lehi-Nephi) and Shilom, in the area first settled by Nephi's faction when they fled from his brothers (see Jarom 1:7; Mosiah 7:10; 9:8). We can suppose that they modeled those walls on those known from Old World Jerusalem, of which Nephi, Sam, and Zoram had firsthand knowledge. Mesoamerican examples are numerous, though probably cruder in finish than Jerusalem's wall.⁶¹

At the beginning of the wars started by Amalickiah, about 75 B.C., the Nephites adopted a different kind of fortification—something the Lamanites had never seen before (see Alma 49:5, 8), though this does not necessarily mean the Nephites invented it. It consisted of “a ridge of earth” formed by digging a ditch completely around a city (see Alma 50:1) and throwing up the excavated dirt to form the ridge; it was “so high” that the Lamanites could not get their missiles over it (Alma 49:4). Later, at lowland Bountiful where timber was probably more abundant, the Nephites built “a breastwork of timbers upon the inner bank of the ditch,” then “cast up [more] dirt out of the ditch against the breastwork of timbers,” forming together an even more daunting “wall of timbers and earth, to an exceeding height” (Alma 53:4). Attackers thus confronted a continuous steep slope that stretched from the bottom of the ditch to the top of the timber palisade. The defenders “could cast stones from the top thereof, according to their pleasure and their strength, and slay him who should attempt to approach” (Alma 50:5).

On the inside, of course, the timber retaining wall presented a sheer vertical face. Thus at the city of Nephihah, which the Lamanites had captured, Moroni₁ and his

men at night climbed the outer earthen slope and “came upon the top of the wall” to spy out the sleeping Lamanites (Alma 62:20). Finding the enemy bedded down some distance away, Moroni and his men used “their strong cords and their ladders” to get down from the top of the wall on the inside (see vv. 21–23). Later that sheer inside face led to the death of the Nephite chief judge Pacumeni when an invading Lamanite army under one Coriantumr penetrated the city of Zarahemla; Pacumeni “did flee before Coriantumr, even to the walls of the city,” where he could flee no farther, and “Coriantumr did smite him against the wall” (Helaman 1:21).

When members of Cortez’s expedition crossed the base of the Yucatán Peninsula in the 1520s, they encountered fortifications very similar to those described in the book of Alma; other historical accounts also tell of fortified sites of the same nature.⁶² Of greater interest, however, are earlier examples revealed by archaeology. One of the best-excavated so far is at Becan, in the center of the Yucatán Peninsula, where David L. Webster worked in 1970. He dates the erection of these fortifications to about A.D. 250–300, although the general design was probably much older.⁶³ His description recalls the wording in the book of Alma: “The vertical distance from the top of the embankment to the bottom of the ditch . . . would have averaged something over 11 m. [35 ft.], not counting any . . . wooden palisade. The steep angles of the inner ditch wall and parapet slope could not have been climbed without the aid of ladders; an enemy force caught in the bottom of the ditch would have been at the mercy of the defenders, whose most effective weapons under the circumstances would have been large rocks. . . . To throw ‘uphill’ from the outside is almost

impossible. Defenders, possibly screened by a palisade, could have rained long-distance missiles on approaching enemies using spearthrowers and slings” [compare Alma 49:4]. The attackers’ approach would have been spotted by watchmen on tall towers, for which there is evidence (see Alma 50:3–4), although decay and erosion have removed any evidence of the presumed wooden palisade.⁶⁴

The Book of Mormon mentions another feature of warfare that no one in Joseph Smith’s time would have known about. We read a puzzling statement in Alma 49:4 to the effect that Lamanite warriors attempted to “cast . . . their arrows” over the Nephite fortification walls. Surely the Indians of the northeastern United States that Joseph Smith knew about shot their arrows rather than “cast them.” A primary war weapon among Mesoamerican peoples was the spear-thrower, or *atlatl* (the name of the device in Nahuatl, the language spoken by the Aztecs).⁶⁵ This implement consisted of a carved stick about eighteen inches long that was grasped at one end in the user’s right hand as he extended his throwing arm behind him. The end of a relatively long, heavy arrow was placed with its blunt end against a notch at the far end of the atlatl, while two fingers of the user’s hand held the projectile parallel to the throwing stick. When the user cast his arm and the weapon forward, the length of the atlatl served to increase the propelling power of the thrower’s arm. That gave the thrower greater leverage to increase the velocity and range of the missile.

In Mesoamerican warfare and hunting both the regular bow and arrow and the atlatl were used. If we suppose that the Lamanites in the day of Moroni₁ used atlatls—and this is plausible on the basis of archaeology—the Nephite

fortification barrier would indeed pose a problem for attackers if they attempted to “cast” their “arrows” into the stronghold, just as the wording in the account in Alma neatly states.

John Tvedtnes has pointed out that this expression in Alma 49:4 could also stem from use of the Hebrew root *YRH*, which means “to throw.”⁶⁶ When that word is applied to arrows in Bible usage, the English translation is “to shoot,” even though the Hebrew literally reads “to throw” (see, for example, 1 Samuel 20:20, 36–37).

Nothing in books available to Joseph Smith in 1830, be they books about Indians in the New World or about the Hebrew language, could have furnished him with information that would justify the translation “cast . . . their arrows.” Nor could he have gleaned from any published source the details of ancient American warfare that fit so well within the Book of Mormon account and yet have only recently come to light.

Further “Hits”

Historical, geographical, and cultural statements made in the Book of Mormon hit targets both large and small. Here are three small cases—information in the scripture that matches what we now know of ancient Mesoamerica but that nobody in 1830 knew. Numerous other points of similar nature could be mentioned.

The archaeological site known forty years ago as Santa Rosa, which sat beside the Grijalva River in the Mexican state of Chiapas (the ruin now lies beneath waters impounded by a large dam), meets all the geographical requirements for the Nephite city of Zarahemla.⁶⁷ Test excavations in a limited portion of Santa Rosa were made



LOCATION FOR
ZARAHEMLA

in 1958. An exact chronology and full picture of life there could not be determined in detail, but it was concluded that a “tremendous amount of building activity” likely took place in about the first century B.C. In addition to earthen mound foundations up to more than 40 feet high, a huge platform built in the center of the place measured over 150 feet wide by 180 feet long and 22 feet high; this platform lay directly on the center line through the site. Presumably, various public buildings had once been built on top of the giant platform, although no search was made for evidence of such structures. At some point, likely in the first century B.C. (approximately when Mosiah₂ was alive), this platform was newly covered with a layer of gravel, and a plaster floor was laid over that. The gravel on either side of a line that ran exactly through the middle of this “temple” was found to be of distinct composition, half from one geological source, the other half of a different origin. The excavator suggested that the divided floor “may be taken to imply two separate groups, each working on its section” in a ceremonial context. The surrounding residential area was also divided into two sections that were separated along an extension of the line between the gravels. The archaeologist involved thought that a division of the community into two social groups had prevailed and that the gravel laying had been a ceremonial act acknowledging the social separation.⁶⁸

This dual pattern recalls the situation in the city of Zarahemla at the time of King Mosiah₂ when his subjects, who spoke two different languages, assembled to hear him—“all the people of Nephi . . . , and also all the people of Zarahemla, and they were gathered together in two bodies” (Mosiah 25:4). At the least, Santa Rosa provides an example

of the type of ethnically or linguistically divided Mesoamerican community reflected in Mosiah 25:4, whether or not it was the actual scene of the historical event reported there.



Hagoth is reported to have built ships and sent explorers northward from a spot on the coast of the west sea “by the narrow neck of land” (see Alma 63:5–6). The time was shortly before the birth of Christ. This is the only instance in Book of Mormon history when mention is made of shipbuilding and exploring by sea in the Nephites’ promised land. It so happens that on the west-sea side (Pacific) of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which qualifies on many criteria as the narrow neck of land, there are a pair of large, placid lagoons, over thirty miles long. They could have provided a sheltered place not only to construct Hagoth’s ships but also to master their use. In the mountains overlooking the lagoons, the Spaniards long afterward located timber that they found ideal for their own shipbuilding purposes. Also, it is generally agreed by Mesoamericanists that over a period of many centuries large seagoing rafts (de facto “ships”) from Ecuador actually came up the Pacific coast to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and beyond on trading expeditions.⁶⁹ No other spot north of Panama fits the Hagoth story as well as the Pacific coast “by the narrow neck of land.”



Near the end of the Nephite history, in the depths of that people’s depravity, the Book of Mormon reports ceremonial human sacrifice being carried out by the Lamanites (see Mormon 4:11–15, 21), accompanied by cannibalism among both Lamanites and Nephites (see Moroni 9:8–10). Evidence for these heinous practices at about the same period of time have been revealed by archaeological

excavations, but not until a long time after the Book of Mormon translation was published.⁷⁰

Dozens of similarly provocative correlations could be documented. In the ones just sketched, as in the many left unmentioned, we are left to marvel at how Joseph Smith managed to dictate—in a few months and without significant editing—such a book that time and again matches up with life and events in ancient Mesoamerica. Not a single scholar in young Joseph’s day knew enough to get any, let alone all, of these things right. One must ask, how then did he do it? The only choices available to answer the question seem to be (1) that he was an unbelievably creative writer, for which we have no other evidence, or (2) that he had access to an actual ancient Mesoamerican book.

NOTES

1. For example, note a comment in 1835 by W. W. Phelps to Oliver Cowdery (who represent two of the better-educated early converts to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints): “There may be a continent at the North Pole, of more than 1300 square miles [he probably meant miles square], containing thousands of millions of Israelites [thousands of millions translates to billions!].” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate*, October 1835, 194.

2. “Reply to a Pamphlet Printed in Glasgow, Entitled ‘Remarks on Mormonism,’” part 3, *Millennial Star*, 15 April 1849, 115–16.

3. Victor W. Von Hagen, *Maya Explorer: John Lloyd Stephens and the Lost Cities of Central America and Yucatán* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1947), 75.

4. *Times and Seasons*, 15 September 1842, 915.

5. A broader treatment of this question than given here

appears in John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 93–105.

6. See Matthew Melko, *The Nature of Civilization* (Boston: Porter Sargent, 1969); Stephen K. Sanderson, ed., *Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World-Historical Change* (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1995); and David Wilkinson, "Cities, Civilizations and Oikumenes," parts 1 and 2, *Comparative Civilizations Review* 27 (1992): 51–87 and 28 (1993): 41–72.

7. For a fuller discussion see John L. Sorenson, "The Settlements of Book of Mormon Peoples," in *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers*, ed. Matthew R. Sorenson (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997), 131–54.

8. On the Lamanites see Alma 22:27. On the Nephites see John L. Sorenson, "Growing Pains," chap. 5 in his *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985).

9. For example, see Ray T. Matheny, "An Early Maya Metropolis Uncovered: El Mirador," *National Geographic*, 3 September 1987, 317–39; and John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, Utah: Research Press, 1998), 103, 146–47.

10. Samuel D. Tyler Diary, 25 September 1838, Family and Church History Department Archives, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

11. See Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 35, 57; and Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 254–59.

12. See Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West . . .* (Albany: Hoffman and White, 1833), iv.

13. See John L. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 489–90 n. 9.

14. A convenient summary of developments is found in "History in the Trenches," *American Archaeology* 3/3 (1999): 26–32.

15. See John L. Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the

Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–34; and Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 50–56, 81–91.

16. See Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 93–95, 102–3.

17. John L. Sorenson, “A Mesoamerican Chronology,” 2001. Unpublished MS.

18. See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 108–37.

19. See Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon Mapped,” chap. 1 in his *Ancient American Setting*.

20. See John L. Sorenson, “The Significance of an Apparent Relationship between the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica,” in *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*, ed. C. L. Riley et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 219–41; and John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 139 (December 1976): 1–9.

21. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*.

22. Many are sketched in preliminary fashion in chapters 4 through 8 of Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*.

23. Alexander von Humboldt, *Researches concerning the Institutions and Monuments of the Ancient Inhabitants of America . . .* (London: Longmans, 1814).

24. Michael D. Coe, “Early Steps in the Evolution of Maya Writing,” in *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, ed. Henry B. Nicholson (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 1976), 110.

25. Quoted in B. H. Roberts, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1930), 100–107; also in FARMS staff, “Martin Harris’ Visit with Charles Anthon: Collected Documents on ‘Shorthand Egyptian’” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1990), 16–18.

26. See David H. Kelley, “A Cylinder Seal from Tlatilco,” *American Antiquity* 31/5 (1966): 744–45; and Carl Hugh Jones, “The ‘Anthon Transcript’ and Two Mesoamerican Cylinder

Seals,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* 122 (September 1970): 1–8.

27. See Sorenson, “Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” 391–522.

28. See, for example, Melvin J. Thorne, “Complexity, Consistency, Ignorance, and Probabilities,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Reynolds, 179–94; and John W. Welch, “Textual Consistency,” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 21–23.

29. See Sorenson, “Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex,” 1–9.

30. Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala*, Middle American Research Institute, no. 35 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1971), xii.

31. Dieter Dütting, “‘Bats’ in the Usumacinta Valley. Remarks on the Inscriptions of Bonampak and Neighboring Sites in Chiapas, Mexico,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 103 (1978): 53.

32. The Aztec schools are best known. See Miguel León-Portilla, “Pre-Hispanic Literature,” in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, ed. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal, vol. 10 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 453. See also Clemency Coggins, “The Manikin Scepter: Emblem of Lineage,” *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 17 (1988): 124–25, regarding the intentional and unintentional ambiguity in Maya sacred writings.

33. See fuller discussion in Sorenson, “Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” 435–62.

34. See *ibid.*, 508–9 n. 135.

35. See Linda Miller Van Blerkom, “A Comparison of Maya and Egyptian Hieroglyphics,” *Katunob* 11/3 (1979): 1–7; and C. F. and F. M. Voegelin, “Typological Classification of Systems with Included, Excluded and Self-Sufficient Alphabets,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 3 (1961): 68–80.

36. This subject is treated in detail in John L. Sorenson, “The Political Economy of the Nephites,” in *Nephite Culture and Society*, ed. Sorenson, 195–236.

37. For example, see Tomoo Ishida, "Solomon," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:105–13.

38. For a military example, see John A. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 296–326.

39. See Sorenson, "Political Economy of the Nephites," in comparison with, for example, Eva Hunt, "Irrigation and the Socio-Political Organization of Cuicatec Cacicazgos," in *Chronology and Irrigation*, ed. Frederick Johnson, vol. 4 of *The Prehistory of the Tehuacan Valley*, ed. Douglas S. Byers (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 162–259, especially pp. 200–230. See also Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*, especially pp. 102–23.

40. See Matthew G. Wells and John W. Welch, "Concrete Evidence for the Book of Mormon," in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. Welch, 212–14.

41. See H. E. D. Pollock, "Architecture of the Maya Lowlands," in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica*, ed. G. R. Willey, vol. 2 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Robert Wauchope (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 378–44, especially p. 396.

42. See Carlos R. Margain, "Pre-Columbian Architecture of Central Mexico," *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, ed. Ekholm and Bernal, 45–91, especially p. 54.

43. David S. Hyman, *Precolonian Cements: A Study of the Calcareous Cements in Prehispanic Mesoamerican Building Construction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Department of Geography and Environmental Engineering, 1970), sec. 2, p. 3; Maurice Daumas, ed., *Histoire Générale des Techniques* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1962), 1:403, as cited by Hyman.

44. Hyman, *Precolonian Cements*, sec. 6, p. 5.

45. See R. F. Smith, "Some 'Neologisms' from the Mormon Canon," in *1973 Conference on the Language of the Mormons* (Provo, Utah: BYU Language Research Center, 1973), 66. In

Akkadian the word meant “barley”; in Old Assyrian, a neighbor tongue, the term signified “wheat.” Since both wheat and barley are separately listed in Mosiah 9:9, *she’um* did not mean either of those two grains, but it could have been transferred to another seed or even a non-seed plant. Regarding seven little-known grain crops from Mesoamerica to which the name *she’um* might have been applied, see John L. Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6 / 1 (1994): 338–39.

46. See documentation in Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 186–87.

47. See J. E. S. Thompson, ed., *Thomas Gage’s Travels in the New World* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 76.

48. The grape plant has now been identified from an archaeological site in the Mexican state of Chiapas that dates to the Nephite period. The archaeologist making the discovery presumed that the ancient people made wine from the fruit. See Alejandro Claudio Martínez Muriel, “Don Martín, Chiapas: inferencias económico-sociales de una comunidad arqueológica” (master’s thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia, and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1978), 105, 120, 125.

49. See W. T. M. Forbes, “The Silkworm of Aristotle,” *Classical Philology* 25 (1930): 22–26; and Gisela M. A. Richter, “Silk in Greece,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 33 (1929): 27–33.

50. See Irmgard W. Johnson, “Basketry and Textiles,” in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica*, ed. Ekholm and Bernal, 312; and Matthew Wallrath, *Excavations in the Tehuantepec Region, Mexico*, Transactions of the American Philosophical Society, vol. 57, pt. 2 (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1967), 12.

51. Alfred M. Tozzer, ed., *Landa’s Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán: A Translation*, Papers of the Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, vol. 18 (Cambridge, Mass.: Peabody Museum, 1941), 201, 205.

52. Francesco Saverino Clavigero, *History of Mexico 1*, trans. Charles Cullen (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1817), 41.

53. See William E. Safford, "Food Plants and Textiles of Ancient America," in *Proceedings of the 19th International Congress of Americanists* (Washington, 1917), 17.

54. Johnson, "Basketry and Textiles," 312.

55. Elisabeth Stromberg, quoted in *Mexican Highland Cultures: Archaeological Researches at Teotihuacán, Calpulalpan, and Chalchicomula*, ed. Sigvald Linné (Stockholm: H. Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1942), 157–60.

56. Bernal Diaz del Castillo, *The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Farrer, Straus, and Cudahy, 1956), 24.

57. Paul Tolstoy, "Cultural Parallels between Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica in the Manufacture of Bark Cloth," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences*, no. 25 (1963): 646–62.

58. See Johnson, "Basketry and Textiles," 312.

59. See David L. Webster, *Defensive Earthworks at Becan, Campeche, Mexico: Implications for Maya Warfare*, Middle American Research Institute, no. 41 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1976), 1, 3.

60. This history of thought is treated at greater length in John L. Sorenson, "Fortifications in the Book of Mormon Account Compared with Mesoamerican Fortifications," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Ricks and Hamblin, 445–77.

61. For Yucatán, an example dating to late Nephite times is reported by Prudence M. Rice and Don S. Rice, "Topoxte, Macanche, and the Central Peten Post-Classic," in *The Lowland Maya Postclassic*, ed. A. F. Chase and Prudence M. Rice (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1985), 166–83, especially p. 176. Millions of tourists have seen similar walls at the site of Tulum near Cancún, Mexico.

62. See Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, trans. A. R. Pagden (New York: Grossman, 1971), 371–72; compare in other areas Maurice Keatinge, *The True History of the Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1922), 426–27, 51–52.

63. See Webster, "Defensive Earthworks," 85. Webster suspects that this type of "defensive system is of great antiquity in the lowlands," 108.

64. Ibid., 95–96; compare Alma 49:18–20. For artists’ reconstructions, see p. 91 of Webster’s study and p. 133 of Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*.

65. See illustrations and discussion in Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America*, 131–32. See also William J. Hamblin, “The Bow and Arrow in the Book of Mormon,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Ricks and Hamblin, 365–99, especially 388–89.

66. Personal communication, February 2001.

67. See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 46–47, 153–57.

68. See Donald L. Brockington, *The Ceramic History of Santa Rosa, Chiapas, Mexico*, Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, BYU, no. 23 (1967), especially pp. 1, 2, 60, and 61. The archaeologists who produced these results were not Latter-day Saints.

69. See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 268–69; Robert C. West, “Aboriginal Sea Navigation between Middle and South America,” *American Anthropologist* 63 (1961): 133–35; and Jorge G. Marcos, “Breve prehistoria del Ecuador,” in *Arqueología de la costa ecuatoriana: Nuevos enfoques*, ed. Jorge G. Marcos (Guayaquil: ESPOL y Corporación Editora Nacional, 1986).

70. See, for example, Sergio Gómez Chávez, “La función social del sacrificio humano en Teotihuacán: Un intento para formalizar su estudio e interpretación,” in *La época clásica: Nuevos hallazgos, nuevas ideas*, ed. Amalia Cardós de Méndez (Mexico: Museo Nacional de Antropología, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990), 147–62. On Olmec practices see Michael D. Coe, “San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán,” *Archaeology*, ed. J. A. Sabloff, vol. 1 of *Supplement to the Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Victoria R. Bricker (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 117–46, especially 144. See also Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 346.