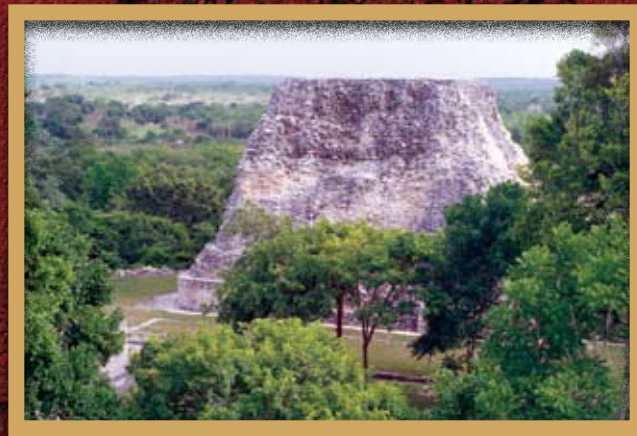


# ARCHAEOLOGY, RELICS,



# AND BOOK OF MORMON BELIEF

BY JOHN E. CLARK

The wee hours of 22 September 1827 found Joseph Smith climbing the western slope of a prominent hill near his home to keep his annual appointment with the angel Moroni.<sup>1</sup> After four years of probation, the 21-year-old prophet was finally entrusted with the golden plates and the sacred stones needed to translate them. The consequences of this event have been earthshaking. The Book of Mormon, translated from this ancient record, is now available in 105 languages, and close to 130 million copies have been printed.<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Mormon challenges the world to take it seriously as an account of God's dealings with ancient New World peoples. Nothing less than salvation is at stake. The world has not taken this challenge lying down; it pushes back by denying the book's miraculous delivery and authenticity. While billions of people in fact remain indifferent to the book, as they do to the Bible, a vociferous cadre of critics clamor that the Book of Mormon is a fabrication, an ignorable fiction, but one they can't seem to leave alone.<sup>3</sup>

Since 1829 critics have attempted to discredit the Book of Mormon by claiming that it was written by Joseph Smith—not translated—and that its history has no grounding in the real world. They believe they are winning the day, but 175 years of falsehoods and weak arguments has not scratched the book’s credibility. Because of what is at stake, let us agree that charges against the book are serious and require response. The critical question concerns Book of Mormon authorship. Did Joseph Smith Jr. write the book, or was it revealed through divine means? This is where archaeology steps in as the only scientific means of gathering independent evidence of authenticity, and hence authorship. The Book of Mormon is unique in world scripture because its claimed divine origins can be evaluated by checking for concrete evidence in the real world. Prove the existence of Zarahemla, for example, and the validity of the rest follows. The logic is simple and compelling for both sides.<sup>4</sup>

Let us consider the anti-Mormon position first. If Joseph Smith made the book up, then its peoples did not exist, its events did not happen, and there should be no trace of them anywhere. If, after a reasonable period of diligent searching, material evidence is not found, then the Book of Mormon would be shown to be imaginary, and by implication Joseph Smith would be exposed as a liar and the church he founded unveiled as a hoax.

The Latter-day Saint position is the near opposite. Confirmation of historic details of the Book of Mormon would substantiate Joseph Smith’s account of how it came to be and thus validate his seership and the divine origin of both the book and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. This brings us to the astonishing possibility of being able to test Joseph Smith’s claims through science, a possibility that critics have long tried to exploit. The Book of Mormon is the keystone of Mormonism; destroy this stone and all that it supports will come



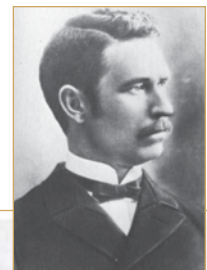
crashing down. Given the stakes involved, the very possibility of testing the book’s historicity and authenticity becomes a moral obligation to do so.

Space precludes a review of full Latter-day Saint involvement with these issues; one example will have to do. Let’s revisit Provo’s Academy Square the morning of 17 April 1900. The assembled student body of Brigham Young Academy bade farewell to their president, 15 fellow students, and others as they rode off for South America. Academy president Benjamin Cluff Jr. hoped “to discover the ancient Nephite capital of Zarahemla . . . [and] in this way . . . to establish the authenticity of the Book of

Mormon.”<sup>5</sup> The expedition began with the blessing of the Church but not its financial backing, and its blessing was withdrawn before the group even made it out of the United States. Of the original 24 men, 9 crossed into Mexico and 6 made it to Colombia. After the group had boated 630 miles up the Magdalena River, a point that was 632 days’ journey from Academy Square, Colombian officials halted the anxious explorers’ progress just days short of their destination.<sup>6</sup> Cluff and his students

Opposite page: The Maya site of Becán, in Campeche, Mexico. Photo courtesy of John E. Clark. Background: Maya monument sketch by Frederick Catherwood.

Clockwise from top: *Moroni Delivering the Golden Plates*, by Gary Kapp; portrait of Benjamin Cluff Jr.; embarkation of Cluff expedition.



The Expedition, as it left Utah Valley April 17, 1900. Fifteen members left Provo, while nine others joined the group as it traveled through Utah. The members of the Expedition are listed below, with as many of the men in the picture above identified as possible.





The ill-fated Cluff expedition began in Provo, Utah, and ended prematurely in Colombia.

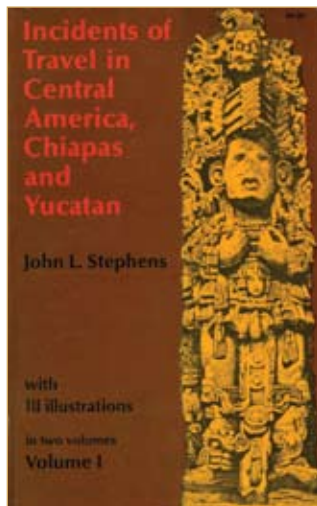
never reached Zarahemla. Latter-day Saint scholars and tourists have been trying to get there ever since, but it is not clear where they should look, how they should look, or how they will know Zarahemla when they find it.

Cluff returned to become the first president of Brigham Young

University (the new name of the academy).<sup>7</sup> His proposal for the location of Zarahemla was apparently a popular one among Mormons at the time. He presumed that Book of Mormon lands included both North and South America, a theory known as the hemispheric model.<sup>8</sup> That it took nearly two years to meander to Colombia should have given him pause. The longest trip specified in the Book of Mormon took 40 days, and that group was lost and on foot (see Mosiah 7:4).<sup>9</sup>

An argument against the hemispheric model was provided by Joseph Smith. The year 1842 in Nauvoo had been hectic as the Prophet moved the work along on the Book of Abraham and the temple, all the while dodging false arrest. He even assumed editorial responsibility for the *Times and Seasons*, the Nauvoo newspaper.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1840s Stephens's book (cover from 1969 edition by Dover) provided compelling evidence for the Book of Mormon. Far right: Map from the book.



Months earlier he received a copy of the recent best-seller by John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, the first popular English book to describe and illustrate Maya ruins.<sup>11</sup>

This book amazed the English-speaking world with evidence of an advanced civilization that no one imagined existed—no one, that is, except Latter-day Saints. The Prophet was thrilled, and excerpts from the book were reprinted in the *Times and Seasons* with unsigned commentary, presumably his. What Joseph recorded is significant for the issues at hand:

Since our "Extract" [from Stephens's book] was published . . . we have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon. Central America . . . is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south. The city of Zarahemla . . . stood upon this land. . . . It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens' ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon.<sup>12</sup>





# TIMES AND SEASONS.

“Truth will prevail.”

Vol. III. No. 23.] CITY OF NAUVOO, ILL. OCT. 1, 1842. [Whole No. 59

## ZARAHEMLA.

Since our ‘Extract’ was published from Mr. Stephens’ ‘Incidents of Travel,’ &c., we have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon. Central America, or Guatemala, is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south.—The city of Zarahemla, burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon this land as will be seen from the following words in the book of Alma:—‘And now it was only the distance of a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful, and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea; and thus the land of Nephi, and the land of Zarahemla was nearly surrounded by water: there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward.’ [See Book of Mormon 3d edition, page 209–31.]

It is certainly a good thing for the excellency and veracity, of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, that the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them: and that a large stone with engravings upon it, as Mosiah said; and a ‘large round stone, with the sides sculptured in hieroglyphics,’ as Mr. Stephens has published, is also among the left remembrances of the, (to him,) *lost and unknown*. We are not agoing to declare positively that the ruins of Quirigua are those of Zarahemla, but when the land and the stones, and the books tell the story so plain, we are of opinion, that it would require more proof than the Jews could bring to prove the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb, to prove that the ruins of the city in question, are not one of those referred to in the Book of Mormon.

It may seem hard for unbelievers in the mighty works of God, to give credit to such a miraculous preservation of the remains, ruins, records and reminiscences of a branch of the house of Israel: but the elements are eternal, and intelligence is eternal, and God is eternal, so that the very hairs of our heads are all numbered. It may be said of man he was and is, and is not; and of his works the same, but the Lord was and is, and is to come and his works never end; and he will bring every thing into judgment whether it be good, or whether it be evil; yea, every secret thing, and they shall be revealed upon the house tops. It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens’ ruined cities with

those in the Book of Mormon: light cleaves to light, and facts are supported by facts. The truth injures no one, and so we make another

## EXTRACT

*From Stephens’ ‘Incidents of Travel in Central America.’*

“On a fine morning, after a heavy rain, they set off for the ruins. After a ride of about half an hour, over an execrable road, they again reached the Amates. The village was pleasantly situated on the bank of the river, and elevated about thirty feet. The river was here about two hundred feet wide, and fordable in every part except a few deep holes. Generally it did not exceed three feet in depth, and in many places was not so deep; but below it was said to be navigable to the sea for boats not drawing more than three feet water. They embarked in two canoes dug out of cedar-trees, and proceeded down the river for a couple of miles, where they took on board a negro man named Juan Lima, and his two wives. This black scoundrel, as Mr. C. marks him down in his notebook, was to be their guide. They then proceeded two or three miles farther, and stopped at a rancho on the left side of the river, and passing through two cornfields, entered a forest of large cedar and mahogany trees. The path was exceedingly soft and wet, and covered with decayed leaves, and the heat very great. Continuing through the forest toward the northeast, in three quarters of an hour they reached the foot of a pyramidal structure like those at Copan, with the steps in some places perfect. They ascended to the top, about twenty-five feet, and descending by steps on the other side, at a short distance beyond came to a colossal head two yards in diameter, almost buried by an enormous tree, and covered with moss. Near it was a large altar, so covered with moss that it was impossible to make anything out of it. The two are within an enclosure.

Retracing their steps across the pyramidal structure, and proceeding to the north about three or four hundred yards, they reached a collection of monuments of the same general character with those

The Stephens book created a stir in Nauvoo, prompting this editorial coverage in *Times and Seasons*.

As is evident in his comments, Joseph Smith believed Maya archaeology vindicated the Book of Mormon. His placement of Zarahemla in eastern Guatemala implied that the Land Southward described in the Book of Mormon was north of Darien, as Panama was then called; thus his commentary presupposed a smallish geography that excluded South America. The Prophet regarded the location of Book of Mormon lands as an open question, and one subject to archaeological confirmation. In the past 50 years, friends and foes have adopted Joseph’s “plan” of comparing “ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon.” Both sides believe archaeology is on their side.

## Archaeology and Book of Mormon Arguments

Consider the argument against the Book of Mormon circulated recently by an evangelical group in a pamphlet:

The Bible . . . is supported in its truth claims by the corroborating evidence of geography and





archaeology. That assertion cannot be said for *The Book of Mormon*. Several decades of archaeological research, funded by LDS institutions, concentrating in Central America and Mexico, have yielded nothing that corroborates the historic events described in *The Book of Mormon*.<sup>13</sup>

The only things wrong with this clever argument are that its claims are false and its logic faulty. Archaeology and geography support the Book of Mormon to the same degree, and for the same reasons, that they support the Bible.<sup>14</sup> Both books present the same challenges for empirical confirmation, and both are in good shape. Many things have been verified for each, but many have not. Critical arguments specialize in listing things mentioned in the Book of Mormon that archaeology has not found. Rather than cry over missing evidence, I consider evidence that has been found.

The pamphlet lists eight deficiencies: first, that “no *Book of Mormon* cities have been located,” and last, that “no artifact of any kind that demonstrates *The Book of Mormon* is true has been found.”<sup>15</sup> This last assertion is overly optimistic in suggesting that such material proof is even possible.

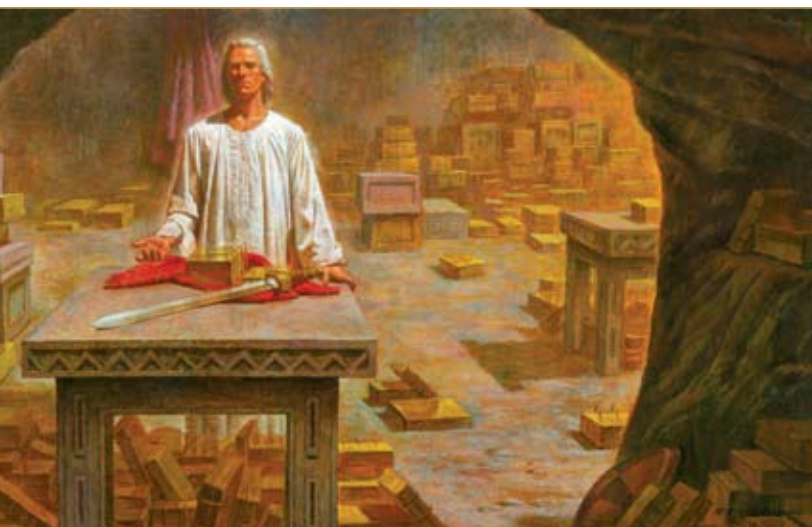
No artifact imaginable, or even a roomful, could ever convince dedicated critics that the Book of Mormon is true. The implied claim that the right relic could prove the book’s truth beyond all doubt

is too strong and underestimates human cunning. Moroni could appear tomorrow with the golden plates, the sword of Laban, and the Liahona in hand and this would not satisfy public demands for more proofs.<sup>16</sup>

The logical challenges with the first assertion, that no “cities have been located,” are more subtle. Book of Mormon cities have been found, they are well known, and their artifacts grace the finest museums. They are merely masked by archaeological labels such as “Maya,” “Olmec,” and so on. The problem, then, is not that Book of Mormon artifacts have not been found, only that they have not been recognized for what they are. Again, if we stumbled



Above: *How They Till the Soil and Plant*, copper plate engraving by Theodore De Bry (1528–98). Below: *The Towne of Pomeiock*, by John White (1550–93). Nineteenth-century Americans familiar with Native American lifeways as depicted in these two illustrations could no longer dismiss the Book of Mormon’s claim of city-level societies once the advanced civilizations in Central America came to light.



*Cumorah’s Cave*, by Robert T. Barrett. Early accounts relate that Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery returned the Book of Mormon plates to a cave filled with such records. Preserving records on metal plates is an attested Old World practice that supports the Book of Mormon’s authenticity.





onto Zarahemla, how would we know? The difficulty is not with evidence but with epistemology.

One last point about significant evidence. The hypothesis of Joseph Smith's authorship of the Book of Mormon demands that truth claims in the book be judged by what was believed, known, or knowable in Joseph's backyard in the 1820s. The book's description of ancient peoples differs greatly from the notions of rude savages held by 19th-century Americans.<sup>17</sup> The book's claim of city societies was laughable at the time, but no one is laughing now.

As the city example shows, the lower the probability that Joseph Smith could have guessed a future fact, the stronger the likelihood he received the information from a divine source. Consequently, the

most compelling evidence for authenticity is that which verifies unguessable things recorded in the Book of Mormon, the more outlandish the better.<sup>18</sup> Confirmation of such items would eliminate any residual probability of human authorship and go a long way in demonstrating that Joseph could not have written the book. This is precisely what a century of archaeology has done.

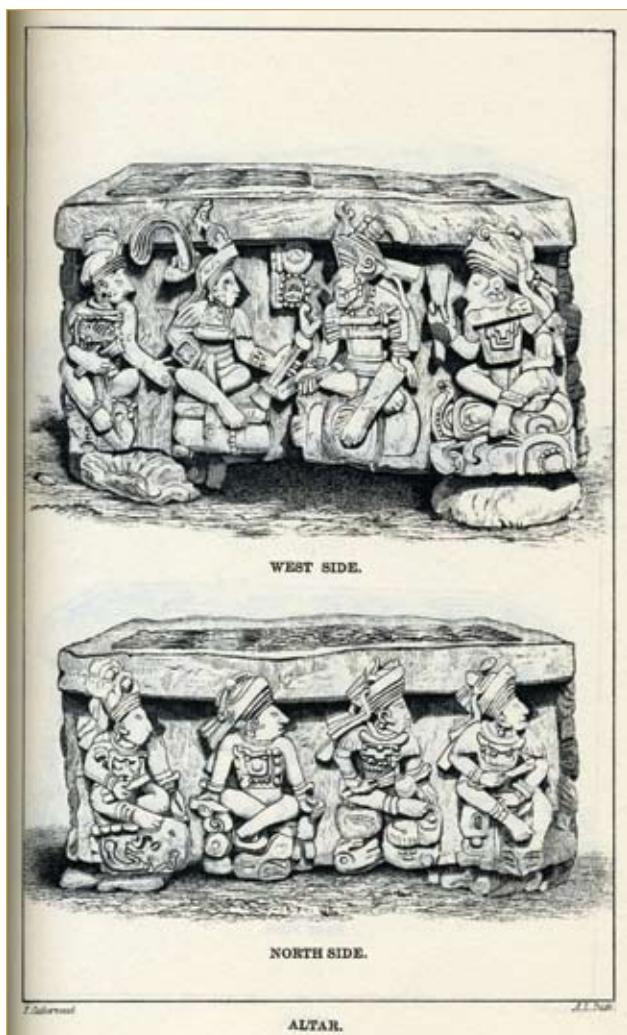
I consider only a few items. The one requirement for making comparisons between archaeology and the Book of Mormon is to be in the right place. For reasons I will explore below, Mesoamerica is the right place.

### 1. Metal Records in Stone Boxes

The first archaeological claims related to the Book of Mormon concern the purported facts of 22 September 1827: the actuality of metal plates preserved in a stone box. This used to be considered a monstrous tale, but concealing metal records in stone boxes is now a documented Old World practice.<sup>19</sup> Stone offering boxes have also been discovered in Mesoamerica,<sup>20</sup> but so far the golden plates are still at large—as we would expect them to be.

### 2. Ancient Writing

Another fact obvious that September morning was that ancient peoples of the Americas knew how to write, a ludicrous claim for anyone to make in 1827. We now know of at least six Mesoamerican writing systems that predate the Christian era.<sup>21</sup> This should count for something, but it is not enough for dedicated skeptics. They demand to see reformed Egyptian, preferably on gold pages, and to find traces of the Hebrew language. There are promising leads on both, but nothing conclusive



Altar from Copan, sketched on the spot by Frederick Catherwood for Stephens's book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (1841).



The impression made by a roller seal from ancient Mesoamerica (see photo on next page) displays a sophisticated writing system. Photo courtesy of John L. Sorenson.





This roller seal was found at the site of Tlatilco, just west of Mexico City. The writing appears to date between 400 and 700 BC.



yet.<sup>22</sup> New scripts are still being discovered, and many texts remain undeciphered. One example was recovered 56 years ago and qualifies as America's earliest writing sample, but so far nothing much has been made of it, and most scholars have forgotten it exists.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. The Arts of War

The golden plates and other relics ended up in New York in the final instance because the Nephites were exterminated in a cataclysmic battle. The Book of Mormon brims with warfare and nasty people. Until 20 years ago the book's claims on this matter were pooh-poohed by famous scholars. Now that Maya writing can be read, warfare appears to have been a Mesoamerican pastime.<sup>24</sup>

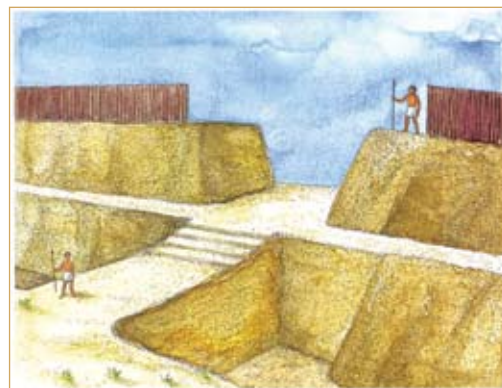
The information on warfare in the Book of Mormon is particularly rich and provides ample opportunity to check Joseph Smith's luck in getting the details right. The warfare described in the book differs from what Joseph could have known or

imagined. In the book, one reads of fortified cities with trenches, walls, and palisades. Mesoamerican cities dating to Nephite times have been found with all these features.<sup>25</sup>

The Book of Mormon mentions bows and arrows, swords, slings, scimitars, clubs, spears, shields, breastplates, helmets, and cotton armor—all items documented for Mesoamerica. Aztec swords were of wood, sometimes edged with stone knives.<sup>26</sup> There are indications of wooden swords in the Book of Mormon—how else could swords become stained with blood?<sup>27</sup> Wooden swords edged with sharp stones could sever heads and limbs and were lethal. The practice of taking detached arms as battle trophies, as in the story of Ammon, is also documented for Mesoamerica.<sup>28</sup>

Another precise correspondence is the practice of fleeing to the summits of pyramids as places of last defense and, consequently, of eventual surrender. Conquered cities were depicted in Mesoamerica by symbols for broken towers or burning pyramids. Mormon records this practice.<sup>29</sup> Other practices of his day were human sacrifice and cannibalism, vile behaviors well attested for Mesoamerica (see Mormon 4:14; Moroni 9:8, 10).

Clockwise from below: The Maya site of Becán, in Campeche, Mexico; artist's rendering of Becán, which dates to Nephite times; drawing of dry moat and fortified wall based on excavations at Becán.



The final battle at Cumorah involved staggering numbers of troops, including Nephite battle units of 10,000. Aztec documents describe armies of over 200,000 warriors divided into major divisions of 8,000 warriors plus 4,000 retainers each. One battle involved 700,000 warriors on one side.<sup>30</sup> The Aztec ciphers appear to be propagandistic exaggeration; I do not know whether this applies to Book of Mormon numbers or not.

In summary, the practices and instruments of war described in the Book of Mormon display





multiple and precise correspondences with Mesoamerican practices, and in ways unimaginable to 19th-century Yankees.

#### 4. Cities, Temples, Towers, and Palaces

Mesoamerica is a land of decomposing cities. Their pyramids (towers), temples, and palaces are all items mentioned in the Book of Mormon but foreign to the gossip along the Erie Canal in Joseph Smith's day. Cities show up in all the right places and date to time periods compatible with Book of Mormon chronology.<sup>31</sup>

#### 5. Cement Houses and Cities

One of the more unusual and specific claims in the Book of Mormon is that houses and cities of cement were built by 49 BC in the Land Northward, a claim considered ridiculous in 1830. As it turns out, this claim receives remarkable confirmation at Teotihuacan, the largest pre-Columbian city ever built in the Americas. Teotihuacan is still covered with ancient cement that has lasted over 1,500 years.<sup>32</sup>

#### 6. Kings and Their Monuments

All Book of Mormon peoples had kings who ruled cities and territories. American prejudices against native tribes in Joseph's day had no room for kings or their tyrannies. The last Jaredite king, Coriantumr, carved his history on a stone about 400 BC, an event in line with Mesoamerican practices at that time. A particular gem in the book is that King Benjamin "labored" with his "own hands" (Mosiah 2:14), an outrageous thing for Joseph Smith to have claimed for a king. It was not until the 1960s that anthropology caught up to the idea of working kings and validated it among world cultures.<sup>33</sup>



View of Teotihuacan's Sun Pyramid from the pyramid of Quetzalcoatl. Photo courtesy of Val Brinkerhoff.



Above: Hieroglyphic text from La Mojarra Stela 1 describing a ruler's accession to power. Left: Carved throne from the Olmec site of La Venta.





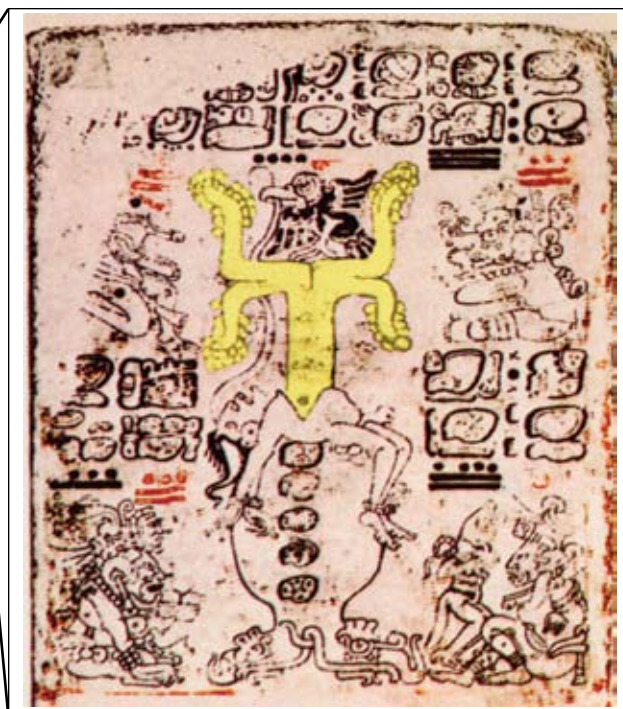
More specifically, we consider Riplakish, the 10th Jaredite king, an oppressive tyrant who forced slaves to construct buildings and produce fancy goods. Among the items he commissioned about 1200 BC was “an exceedingly beautiful throne” (Ether 10:6). The earliest civilization in Mesoamerica is known for its elaborate stone thrones.<sup>34</sup> How did Joseph Smith get this detail right?



Right: Re-created mural from Oxtotitlan Cave, in Guerrero, Mexico, depicts an Olmec ruler dressed in a bird costume and seated on a throne. Courtesy of John E. Clark.



Hieroglyphic writing graces the pages of the Dresden Codex, a Maya book from the Yucatán Peninsula dating to AD 1200–1250. The highlighted image shows a tree growing out of the heart of a sacrificial victim (note the tree's entwined roots at the bottom).



## 7. Metaphors and the Mesoamerican World

Not all evidence for the authenticity of the Book of Mormon concerns material goods. A striking correspondence is a drawing from the Dresden Codex, one of four surviving pre-Columbian Maya books. It shows a sacrificial victim with a tree growing from his heart, a literal portrayal of the metaphor preached in Alma, chapter 32. Other Mesoamerican images depict the tree of life. The Book of

Mormon’s metaphors make sense in the Mesoamerican world. We are just beginning to study these metaphors, so check the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* for future developments.

## 8. Timekeeping and Prophecy

A correspondence that has always impressed me involves prophecies in 400-year blocks. The Maya were obsessed with time, and they carved precise dates on their stone monuments that began with the count of 400 years, an interval called a *baktun*. Each





*baktun* was made up of 20 *katuns*, an extremely important 20-year interval.<sup>35</sup> If you permit me some liberties with the text, Samuel the Lamanite warned the Nephites that one *baktun* “shall not pass away before . . . they [would] be smitten” (Helaman 13:9). Nephi and Alma uttered the same *baktun* prophecy, and Moroni recorded its fulfillment. Moroni bids us farewell just after the first *katun* of this final *baktun*, or 420 years since the “sign was given of the coming of Christ” (Moroni 10:1).<sup>36</sup> What are the chances of Joseph Smith guessing correctly the vigesimal system of timekeeping and prophesying among the Maya and their neighbors over 50 years before scholars stumbled onto it?

The list of unusual items corresponding to Book of Mormon claims could be extended. The Latter-day Saint tendency to get absorbed in specifics has been characterized as a method for distracting attention from large problems by engaging critics with endless, irrelevant details,<sup>37</sup> much as a mosquito swarm distracts from the rhinoceros in the kitchen. Let’s take up the dare to consider big issues, namely, geography and cycles of civilization and population.

## 9. Old World Geography

As is clear from the Cluff expedition, if the geography is not right, one can waste years searching for Zarahemla and never reach it. Book of Mormon geography presents a serious challenge because the only city location known with certitude is Old World Jerusalem, and this does not help us with locations in the promised land. However, geographical correspondences are marvelous for the Old World portion of the narrative. As S. Kent Brown and others have shown, the geography of the Arabian Peninsula described in 1 Nephi is precise down to its place-names. The remarkable geographic fit includes numerous details unknown in Joseph Smith’s day.<sup>38</sup>

## 10. New World Geography

For the New World, dealing with geography is a two-step exercise. First an internal geography must be deduced from clues in the book, and this deduction must then become the standard for engaging the second step, matching the internal geography with a real-world setting. John Sorenson has done the best work on this matter.<sup>39</sup> The Book of Mormon account is remarkably consistent throughout.

Nephite lands included a narrow neck between two seas and lands northward and southward of this neck. The Land Southward could be traversed on foot, with children and animals in tow, in about 30 days, so it could not have been much longer than 300 miles. The 3,000 miles required for the two-hemisphere geography is off by one order of magnitude. Nephite lands were small and did not include all of the Americas or all of their peoples. The principal corollary of a limited geography is that Book of Mormon peoples were not alone on the continent. Therefore, to check for correspondences, one must find the right place and peoples. It is worth noticing that anti-Mormons lament the demise of



Map of Book of Mormon lands based solely on internal evidence from the text itself.





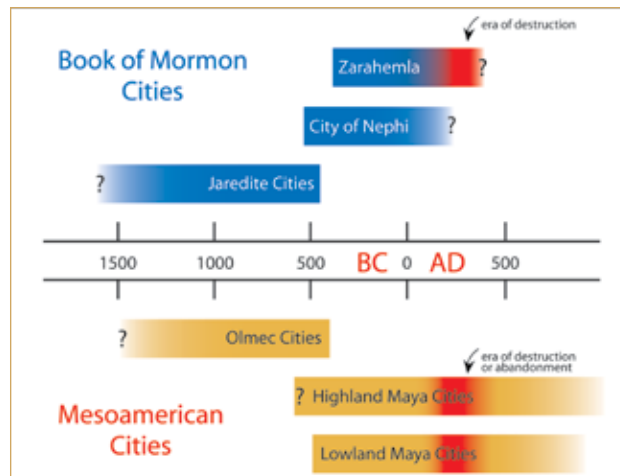
the traditional continental correlation because it was so easy to ridicule. The limited, scriptural geography is giving them fits.

Sorenson argues that Book of Mormon lands and peoples were in Central America and southern Mexico, an area known as Mesoamerica. We notice that the configuration of lands, seas, mountains, and other natural features in Mesoamerica are a tight fit with the internal requirements of the text. It is important to stress that finding any sector in the Americas that fits Book of Mormon specifications requires dealing with hundreds of mutually dependent variables. So rather than counting a credible geography as one correspondence, it actually counts for several hundred. The probability of guessing reams of details all correctly is zero. Joseph Smith did not know about Central America before reading Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, and he apparently did not know where Book of Mormon lands were, so a Book of Mormon geography correlation becomes compelling evidence that he did not write the book.

### 11. Cycles of Civilization in Mesoamerica

I mentioned that the Book of Mormon's claim of civilized peoples was verified in Joseph's lifetime. This claim is actually twofold because the book describes an earlier Jaredite civilization that overlapped a few centuries with Lehite civilization. The dates for the Nephite half of Lehite civilization are clearly bracketed in the account to 587 years before Christ to 386 years after. But those for the earlier civilization remain cloudy, beginning sometime after the Tower of Babel and ending before King Mosiah fled to Zarahemla. Jaredites were probably tilling American soil in the Land Northward at least by 2200 BC, and they may have endured their own wickedness until 400 BC.

The two-civilizations requirement used to be a problem for the Book of Mormon, but it no longer is now that modern archaeology is catching up. I emphasize that I am interpreting "civilization" in the strict sense as meaning "city life." In checking correlations between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican archaeology, I focus on the rise and decline of cities. The earliest known Olmec city was up and running by 1300 BC, and it was preceded by a large community dating back to 1700 BC.<sup>40</sup> Most Olmec cities were abandoned about 400 BC, probably under duress.<sup>41</sup> In eastern Mesoamerica, Olmec



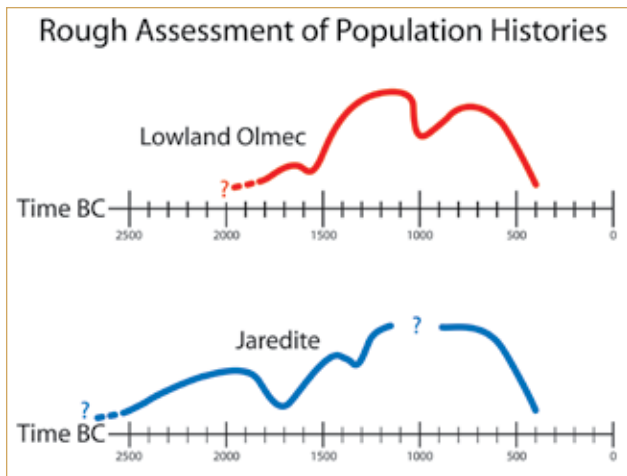
Possible correspondences between the histories of Book of Mormon peoples and the histories of Mesoamerican peoples.

civilization was replaced by the lowland Maya, who began building cities in the jungles of Guatemala about 500 to 400 BC. As with Olmec civilization, Maya civilization experienced peaks and troughs of development, with a mini-collapse about AD 200.<sup>42</sup> In short, the correspondences between the Book of Mormon and cycles of Mesoamerican civilization are striking.

### 12. Mesoamerican Demographic History

Reconstructing ancient demography requires detailed information on site sizes, locations, dates, and frequencies. It will take another 50 years of active research to compile enough information to reconstruct Mesoamerica's complete demographic history. The Nephite and Lamanite stories are too complicated to review here; I will just consider the Jaredite period. To begin, the earliest developments of Jaredites and Olmecs are hazy, but from about 1500 BC onward their histories are remarkably parallel. The alternations between city building and population declines, described for the Jaredites, correspond quite well with lowland Olmec developments. Olmec cities were abandoned by 400 BC,<sup>43</sup> and the culture disappeared—just as the Book of Mormon describes for the Jaredites (see Ether 13–15). This is a phenomenal correlation. Much more research in southern Mexico is needed to check the lands that Sorenson identifies as Nephite. The little I know of the region looks promising for future confirmations.





Fluctuations in population for the Jaredites and Olmecs are striking.

Before leaving this issue, it is important to make one observation on a global question that troubles some Latter-day Saints. Could millions of people have lived in the area proposed as Book of Mormon lands? Yes, and they did. Mesoamerica is the only area in the Americas that sustained the high population densities mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and for the times specified.

### A Trend of Convergence

To this point, I have shown that the content of the Book of Mormon fits comfortably with Mesoamerican prehistory, both in general patterns and in some extraordinary details. Many things mentioned in the book still have not been verified archaeologically, but this was true just a few years ago for some items just reviewed. The trend over the last 50 years is one of convergence between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican archaeology. Book of Mormon claims remain unaltered since 1830, so all the accommodation has been on the archaeology side. If the book were fiction, this convergence would not be happening. We can expect more evidence in coming years.

Coming back to the original question: Did Joseph Smith write the Book of Mormon? He did not. It has been obvious since 1829 to those who knew him best that Joseph Smith could not have written the Book of Mormon.<sup>44</sup> Recent findings simply make the possibility of his authorship that much more inconceivable. The accumulating evidence from archaeology and the impressive internal evidence demonstrate that the Book of Mormon is an authentic ancient book of New World origin. The only plausible explanation for the book's existence is that supernatural agencies were involved in its coming forth in our day.

The Book of Mormon still presses the world to take it seriously, and now science is lending a hand. The archaeology that has been undertaken in Mesoamerica is confirming historical, geographical, and political facts mentioned in the text. Archaeology is powerless, however, to address the book's central challenge—the promise that its doctrine leads to Christ. Although the Book of Mormon does not provide clear directions for reaching Zarahemla, its instructions for coming to Christ are unsurpassed, and this is the infinitely more important destination. If we are ever to reach this destination, we must keep the relationship between external Book of Mormon evidences and belief in proper perspective. President Gordon B. Hinckley sums up the matter in his testimony:

The evidence for [the Book of Mormon's] truth, for its validity in a world that is prone to demand evidence, lies not in archaeology or anthropology, though these may be helpful to some. It lies not in word research or historical analysis, though these may be confirmatory. The evidence for its truth and validity lies within the covers of the book itself. The test of its truth lies in reading it. It is a book of God. Reasonable people may sincerely question its origin; but those who have read it prayerfully have come to know by a power beyond their natural senses that it is true, that it contains the word of God, that it outlines saving truths of the everlasting gospel.<sup>45</sup> ■

