



7-31-1993

## Comments on Nephite Chronology

John L. Sorenson  
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms>

---

### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Sorenson, John L. (1993) "Comments on Nephite Chronology," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*: Vol. 2 : No. 2 , Article 15.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol2/iss2/15>

This Notes and Communications is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Book of Mormon Studies by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).



---

NEAL A. MAXWELL INSTITUTE  
FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

---

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** Notes and Communications: Comments on Nephite Chronology

**Author(s)** John L. Sorenson

**Reference** *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/2 (1993): 207-11.

**ISSN** 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

**Abstract** Revisions of Nephite chronology in the Book of Mormon occur as scholarship on various issues improves.

## NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

### Comments on Nephite Chronology

John L. Sorenson

The publication of Randall P. Spackman's "Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates"<sup>1</sup> makes it advisable for me to clarify the record in regard to statements I have published on chronology.

In *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, I presented an expanded view of the Nephite calendar that I had briefly sketched in 1970.<sup>2</sup> I pointed out that the statement in the Book of Mormon about "600 years" intervening between the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem and the signs of the birth of Jesus Christ reported in 3 Nephi could not be reconciled with the secular calendar. Any resolution of the discrepancy required recognition that the Nephites were using a "year" of different length than the solar year used in secular history in the tradition of Western civilization. I suggested that a "Mayan" (actually, southern Mesoamerican) "year" of 360 days was probably in use among them, and that when that unit was applied to interpret the scriptural statements, the major elements of Nephite chronology appeared to fall into place, with the departure of Lehi around 597 B.C. and the birth of the Savior in 5 B.C.

Those comments by me were made simply because the question of chronology seemed important to me, while nobody competent in the calendrical materials had to that point presented a sensible picture of the matter. I claimed only tentative understanding of the issues involved and saw myself as merely suggesting some possible, partial solutions. But I did not do se-

---

<sup>1</sup> Randall P. Spackman, "Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates" F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1993.

<sup>2</sup> John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985), 270-76; "Observations on Nephite Chronology," number 8 in my series of privately circulated "Book of Mormon Working Papers."

rious research on the complex topic. After reading a prepublication draft of *An Ancient American Setting*, Jay Huber addressed the subject. I encouraged and commented on a draft of his long article which F.A.R.M.S. published as "Lehi's 600 Year Prophecy and the Birth of Christ."<sup>3</sup> It represented a great improvement in depth of scholarship over my limited efforts. Now we have Spackman's important paper, which is far superior to anything heretofore (again, I commented critically, but positively, on drafts). I find Spackman's arguments generally persuasive. They should be considered to supersede any statements on the Nephite calendar I have made.

In particular, I had assumed that Lehi left Jerusalem in the first year of Zedekiah's reign.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Spackman appears to be right that the departure took place shortly before the fall of Jerusalem, over a decade later, because assumptions I made about the timing of events reported in 1 Nephi 1-18 are less likely than those he advances. Furthermore, I supposed without adequate basis that while the "Mulekites" still used the Jewish lunar count (see the expression "moons" at Omni 1:21), Mosiah's party employed some sort of solar-based calendar which superseded that of Zarahemla's people upon their political amalgamation. Spackman soundly argues that the Jewish lunar count probably would have been used continuously by the Nephites even if they also followed a solar calendar. The less-than-600 solar years counted by Western secular history between the departure of Lehi from Jerusalem and the birth of Christ turns out to be accommodated better (in a cultural sense) by reference to a Nephite lunar calendar (with an average year length of about 354 days) than by my supposition of the adoption of a "Mayan" 360-day count.

Spackman's complex analysis still needs serious criticism by experts in the several subjects he treats, including the Jewish calendar, other Near Eastern calendars, astronomy, and Mesoamerican calendars. I comment here on one area where I can add something—the question of Mesoamerican seasons in

---

<sup>3</sup> Jay Huber, "Lehi's 600 Year Prophecy and the Birth of Christ," F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1982

<sup>4</sup> Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 270; cf. also "Transoceanic Crossings," in Monte S. Nyman and Charles D. Tate, Jr., eds., *The Book of Mormon: First Nephi, the Doctrinal Foundation* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1988), 261.

relation to the Nephite calendar, on which my published views now also need correction.<sup>5</sup>

I had supposed that the Nephite new year's day referred to in Alma 51:37 and 52:1, when captain Teancum killed king Amalickiah and so turned back the Lamanite military offensive that had reached as far as the land of Bountiful, fell near the winter solstice in December. Spackman calculates that in the year 69 B.C., the Nephites' new year's day fell on February 25.<sup>6</sup> My analysis of the Book of Mormon text found that most references to warfare placed it near the end or the beginning of the Nephite year. I reasoned that these Lamanite and Nephite military campaigns would have been constrained by the same conditions that made most Mesoamerican warfare fall between late November and early February.

Further investigation has persuaded me, however, that I generalized too much. In fact, the length and timing of the "dry season" and "wet season" vary substantially from region to region, depending upon specific local meteorological and topographic conditions. Generalizing for the entire area can introduce errors when comparison is made with Book of Mormon events. Particularly, in the region I recognize as the probable location of Bountiful, southernmost Veracruz and extreme western Tabasco states in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, rains during the North American winter months are caused by massive incursions into Mesoamerica of cold air masses from higher latitudes. These result from the polar air masses that sweep southward through the Mississippi River valley, then out across the Gulf of Mexico where additional moisture is picked up. When this air reaches southern Mexico, it is funnelled by mountains on either side of the saddle-shaped isthmus so that it pours across that pass and adjacent territories—the "bottom" of the Gulf of Mexico—out over the Pacific Ocean. On its way south up the Gulf Coast side, this air is orographically lifted by the mountains, causing it to drop much of its moisture on southern Veracruz, Tabasco, Campeche, and northern Chiapas.

---

<sup>5</sup> See John L. Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," in Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin, eds., *Warfare in the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1990), 445–77; and, "Seasons of War, Seasons of Peace in the Book of Mormon," in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1991), 249–55.

<sup>6</sup> Spackman, *Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology*, 30.

(Then, as it descends down the Pacific slope, the consequent warming effect produces strong, dry winds along the Pacific coast, which means that agriculture along that strip is always a doubtful business.) The rains produced by these “northers” in December through February mean that on the Gulf side of the isthmus “the so-called dry season is not very dry.”<sup>7</sup> Only March, April, and early May have low rainfall. For instance, at Santa Maria Chimalapa, up in the mountainous spine of the isthmus, rain due to northers recurs with some frequency through early February and irregularly up to another month after that.<sup>8</sup> However, along the band of sand dunes “down by the seashore” (Alma 51:25) adjacent to the Gulf Coast (“the beach” of Alma 51:32), travel is usually feasible by February.<sup>9</sup>

Western highland Guatemala, which I consider part of the land of Nephi from which Lamanite soldiers would have been drawn, differs. Most of the northers are blocked by intervening high elevations; consequently, dry conditions develop months earlier than in the isthmus zone. The dry season in Guatemala begins in November; in late December the harvest begins and continues through the middle of February.<sup>10</sup> But again, local factors make a big difference; the dry season lasts substantially longer along the very coast, and also back in the highlands, than in the intermediate zone—the foothills facing the Pacific Ocean.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> Michael D. Coe, “Photogrammetry and the Ecology of Olmec Civilization,” paper read at Working Conference on Aerial Photography and Anthropology, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 10–12 May 1969, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Carlos Muñoz Muñoz, *Crónica de Santa Maria Chimalapa: en las selvas del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (San Luis Potosí: Ediciones Molina, 1977), 30–46, 59–74.

<sup>9</sup> Robert C. West and John P. Augelli, *Middle America: Its Lands and Peoples*, 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 43, fig. 2.18. Jorge A. Vivó Escoto, “Weather and Climate of Mexico and Central America,” in R. C. West, ed., *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, vol. 1. *Natural Environment and Early Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), fig. 3, 193, 201–3, fig. 14, 213. This was confirmed by my personal experience with travel in the area between January and April.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Wagley, “The Social and Religious Life of a Guatemalan Village,” *American Anthropological Association Memoir* 41 (1949): 110–11, 118.

<sup>11</sup> Gareth W. Lowe et al., “Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments,” *BYU New World Archaeological Foundation Papers* 31 (1982): 55, 61.



Amalickiah's armies were recruited from "the land of Nephi," and he would have had to adapt his plans to the agricultural schedule of the Lamanite peasants who formed the "wonderfully great army" that he dispatched to attack the city of Moroni on the east sea (Alma 51:9, 11–12, 22–28). A plausible schedule would have been: (1) much of the harvest already gathered before the men departed from their home areas in the highlands (January?); (2) weeks of movement to a staging area (Antionum?) near Moroni on the east sea;<sup>12</sup> (3) one or two weeks to conquer the settlements near the seacoast, from Moroni to near Bountiful (see Alma 51:23–28). Given the dates for the harvest on the one hand and the dry period when military operations in the field could be reliably scheduled on the other hand, for both my land of Nephi (highland Guatemala) and the Moroni-Bountiful area (Gulf Coast), I believe that logistics, weather, trail conditions, etc., would not permit an attack on Moroni to be launched before mid-February.<sup>13</sup> Spackman's date of February 25 for the new year's day reported in Alma 52:1 is reasonable, as I now understand natural conditions in both contemporary Middle America and Book of Mormon lands. On the contrary, my earlier proposal for a date around the winter solstice now seems too early. The correlation between the Nephite months and our current months which I proposed in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* thus needs to be revised by about two months.

---

<sup>12</sup> On how we know this from the Book of Mormon text, see my *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, rev. ed., (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 266.

<sup>13</sup> I may, of course, be reasoning circularly between the two sets of data, but, being aware of that danger, I still believe that the conclusion seems right.