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## Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness

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Three Days of Darkness

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**Abstract** The fragmentary text on a stele erected at Karnak seems to be connected with the volcanic eruption on Thera. The phraseology in many instances bears uncanny resemblance to the Book of Mormon account of the destruction in the Americas at the time of the crucifixion.

## NOTES AND COMMUNICATIONS

### Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness

John Gee

Speculation continues about the causes and consequences of the destruction in Book of Mormon lands attending the crucifixion of Jesus. Causes have ranged from "some mighty upheaval of the earth's crust"<sup>1</sup> to floods,<sup>2</sup> earthquakes,<sup>3</sup> volcanoes,<sup>4</sup> and combinations of these.<sup>5</sup> Assessments of consequences have ranged

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<sup>1</sup> E. F. Parry, "The Book of Mormon Corroborated," *Millennial Star* 58 (31 December 1896): 838.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle Smith, "Diving for Underwater Ruins," *Witness* 80 (Spring 1993): 8.

<sup>3</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 231–38; James L. Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster: A Geological View," *Dialogue* 19/2 (1986): 129–32 (though volcanoes are also considered, earthquakes are the primary focus).

<sup>4</sup> Evan A. Fry, "The Book of Mormon and the Crucifixion," *Saints' Herald* 92 (31 March 1945): 294–96; M. Wells Jakeman, "Volcanoes in the Book of Mormon," *University Archaeological Society Newsletter* 8 (25 November 1952); Russell H. Ball, "An Hypothesis concerning the Three Days of Darkness among the Nephites," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 107–23 (Ball's hypothesis is more fully developed but was essentially all available in Fry, including the reference to Pliny); John E. Clark, "Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography: A Review," *FARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 22.

<sup>5</sup> James H. Anderson, "The Book of III Nephi," *Improvement Era* (January 1924): 193–99 (storm, earthquake, volcanoes, tidal waves, fire, and lightning); John A. Tvedtnes, "Historical Parallels to the Destruction at the Time of the Crucifixion," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 3/1 (1994): 170–86.

from continents rising out of the ocean<sup>6</sup> to assumptions that “the locality where the Book of Mormon events took place was not unrecognizably altered at the time of the crucifixion.”<sup>7</sup> The extent of the darkness has also been discussed.<sup>8</sup> What necessitates this note is some additional evidence from an ancient text, the relevance and significance of which is left to the reader.

In 1967, Claude Vandersleyen published the fragmentary remains of a stele erected by the Egyptian pharaoh Ahmose at Karnak.<sup>9</sup> This remarkable and unusual stele has recently been connected with the volcanic eruption on Thera (modern Santorini).<sup>10</sup> What merits attention are the parallels to the phraseology of the Book of Mormon. The pertinent lines of the stele inscription are as follows:

The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain], with darkness in the western region and the sky being unleashed without [cessation, louder than] the cries of the masses, more powerful than [. . .], [while the rain raged(?)] on the mountains louder than the noise of the cataract which is at Elephantine. Every house, every quarter that they reached [. . .] floating on the water like skiffs of papyrus opposite the royal residence for a period of [. . .] days, while a torch could not be lit in the Two Lands.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> These theories have been conveniently gathered in John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 48–53, 62–63, 66–70, 77–81, 84–86, 101, 107–9, 132–34, 141–46, 152–53, 163–68, 191–93, 201–3.

<sup>7</sup> John Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 22.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Fielding Smith, *Answers to Gospel Questions* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1979), 3:44–45.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Vandersleyen, “Une tempête sous le règne d’Amosis,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 19 (1967): 123–59.

<sup>10</sup> Karen P. Foster and Robert K. Ritner, “Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 55/1 (1996): 1–14. I have seen a draft of a forthcoming article by James Allen disputing this thesis, but I am not convinced by the arguments.

<sup>11</sup> From the translation of Ritner, in *ibid.*, 11.



## The Parallels

Book of Mormon account parallels this at several points:

### The Great Storm

#### Tempest Stele

"The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain]."<sup>12</sup>

#### Book of Mormon

"And it came to pass in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land and there was also a great and terrible tempest" (3 Nephi 8:5–6, punctuation altered).

The preserved portion of the Tempest Stele does not actually mention rain. References to rain are all restorations. The stele inscription is restored on the basis of a literary parallel;<sup>13</sup> otherwise, given the state of the stele,<sup>14</sup> one might be tempted to restore something else like *ḏ' n ḥ[ty]* "tempest of smoke."<sup>15</sup> In Egypt rain rarely occurs. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon rarely

<sup>12</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 11. The original Egyptian text is found in the edition of Wolfgang Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte der 2. Zwischenzeit und neue Texte der 18. Dynastie* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 106; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8–10.

<sup>13</sup> The stele is restored on the basis of the following passage: *ḥ' n rdi.n = sn iwt pt m ḏ' ḥr ḥwyt* "then they caused the sky to come in storm and rain." P. Westcar 11/14, in Adriaan de Buck, *Egyptian Readingbook* (Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1963), 86. Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," 133, explicitly identifies this as the source of the restoration.

<sup>14</sup> Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pl. 9, line 4. About three-quarters of the first character is preserved.

<sup>15</sup> Normally, *ḏ' n* is followed by what the storm is composed of, for example: *iw=f mi ḏ'w tꜣw* "he is like a storm of wind." P. Anastasi I 18/5, in Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Hieratic Texts: I* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911), 30\*.

mentions rain; it occurred frequently enough that only its absence merits mention.<sup>16</sup>

## Caused by Divine Agency

### Tempest Stele

"The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain]."<sup>17</sup>

### Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon peoples are addressed by "a voice" (3 Nephi 9:1), later identifying itself as "Jesus Christ the Son of God" (3 Nephi 9:15), saying, among other things, "that great city of Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof" (3 Nephi 9:3) and "that great city Moronihah have I covered with earth, and the inhabitants thereof" (3 Nephi 9:5).

In both cases the storm and its effects are directly attributed to deity. The Book of Mormon differs from the Tempest Stele in specific attribution to a particular god because Jesus Christ takes personal responsibility for it.

## Loud Noises

### Tempest Stele

"[louder than] the cries of the masses, more powerful than [. . .], [while the rain raged(?)]

### Book of Mormon

"And there was terrible thunder, insomuch that it did shake the whole earth as if it

<sup>16</sup> Helaman 11:13-17; Ether 9:30-35. The other examples are in quotations with biblical parallels, 2 Nephi 14:6; 15:6 (= Isaiah 4:6; 5:6); 3 Nephi 14:25-27 (= Matthew 7:25-27); 18:13 (= Matthew 7:25-27); but see Ether 2:24.

<sup>17</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 11. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte*, 106; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8-10.



on the mountains louder than the noise of the cataract which is at Elephantine."<sup>18</sup> was about to divide asunder" (3 Nephi 8:6). When the ordeal was over, "the dreadful groanings did cease, and all the tumultuous noises did pass away" (3 Nephi 10:9).

The Egyptian text compares the noise of the tempest to the water plunging down the cataract at Elephantine, for the Egyptians a reference point for loud, constant noise. Modern equivalents would be to say that it was louder than the crowds at a soccer (or football) game and louder than Niagara Falls.

## Inability to Light Fires

### Tempest Stele

"while a torch could not be lit in the Two Lands."<sup>19</sup>

### Book of Mormon

"And it came to pass that there was thick darkness upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness; and there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could there be fire kindled with their fine and exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all; and there was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness

<sup>18</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 11. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte*, 106; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8–10.

<sup>19</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 11. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte*, 107; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8–10.

which were upon the face of the land" (3 Nephi 8:20–22).

The Book of Mormon has a more detailed description of the palpable darkness, but both accounts mention the inability to light a fire.<sup>20</sup> This could possibly be attributable to volcanic dust.<sup>21</sup>

## Several Days of Darkness

### Tempest Stele

"for a period of [. . .] days."<sup>22</sup>

### Book of Mormon

"And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen" (3 Nephi 8:23).

Unfortunately, the Tempest Stele breaks off at that point so we can neither determine how close the parallel is, nor compare the magnitude of the eruptions. However, the number of days in the Temple Stele must be at least two, based on sentence construction.

## Accompanied by Massive Destruction

### Tempest Stele

"Then His Majesty was informed that the mortuary concessions had been entered (by water), with the tomb chambers collapsed, the funerary mansions undermined, and the pyramids fallen, having been made into that which was never made. Then His Majesty commanded to restore the temples

### Book of Mormon

The extent of the destruction is detailed in 3 Nephi 8–9 and will not be repeated verbatim here, but it includes cities that were burned (3 Nephi 8:8, 14; 9:3, 9–10), buried (3 Nephi 8:10; 9:5–6, 8), and sunk (3 Nephi 8:9, 14; 9:4, 6–8), as well as the destruction of highways (3 Nephi 8:13) and geological

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, it was this detail that initially drew my attention.

<sup>21</sup> Compare Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster," 131.

<sup>22</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 11. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte*, 107; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8–10.



which had fallen into ruin in this entire land: to refurbish the monuments of the gods, to erect their enclosure walls, to provide the sacred objects in the noble chamber, to mask the secret places, to introduce into their shrines the cult statues which were cast to the ground, to set up the braziers, to erect the offering tables, . . . to put the land into its former state."<sup>23</sup>

The translator of the Egyptian text presumes to add that water had entered the tombs and caused water damage, which is possible, but the text has simply *ʿq spwt* "the tombs were entered." The remainder of the damage described in the Tempest Stele could be assigned to seismic causes. Assessing the damage wrought in Egypt is somewhat difficult because few if any temples survive from either the Old or Middle Kingdom;<sup>24</sup> whether this is attributable to Hyksos depredations,<sup>25</sup> New Kingdom renovations,<sup>26</sup> or the Thera eruption becomes problematic. Almost all the surviving

<sup>23</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 12. Helck, *Historisch-biographische Texte*, 108–10; compare Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," pls. 8–10.

<sup>24</sup> W. Stevenson Smith and Wm. Kelly Simpson, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 170, list "a small chapel with three statue shrines built by Amenemhat III at Medinet Madi on the southern edge of the Fayum" as the only "structure of the Middle Kingdom [that] still remains standing in nearly complete condition."

<sup>25</sup> Hatshepsut at least claimed such to have been the case; see Alan H. Gardiner, *Egypt of the Pharaohs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 187–88; for the inscription, see conveniently Kurt Sethe, *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1906), 383–91.

<sup>26</sup> Amenhotep III razed the Middle Kingdom white chapel built by Sesostri I and incorporated it into the foundation of his pylon (now the fourth pylon) at Karnak; see Donald B. Redford, *Akhenaten: The Heretic King* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 45; Smith and Simpson, *Art and Architecture*, 169–70; Dieter Arnold, *Die Tempel Ägyptens: Götterwohnungen, Kultstätten, Baudenkmäler* (Zürich: Artemis, 1992), 115–16.

temples in Egypt were built after the reign of Ahmose. Nevertheless, the massive Old Kingdom pyramids at Giza, Saqqara, and elsewhere did survive substantially intact, along with their funerary temples.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the Nile has remained in the same general course to the present day, as evidenced by continual occupation remains at certain key sites since predynastic times.<sup>28</sup> Since Egypt did not change in a drastic geological fashion, we need not consider that the Book of Mormon, when stating that "the whole face of the land was changed" (3 Nephi 8:12), must be taken to mean that continents rose out of the ocean; people after all did manage to find their way to Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1).

### Wider Implications

The prevailing winds leave Egypt directly in the path of the volcanic debris from Thera.<sup>29</sup> The Thera eruption of ca. 1530 B.C. ejected an estimated 20 to 30 cubic kilometers of material 30 to 35 kilometers into the air,<sup>30</sup> leaving rounded pumice, shells, and snails atop the destroyed palaces of the recently sacked Hyksos capital of Avaris (Tell el-Daba'a).<sup>31</sup> The resultant cataclysm caused flooding and damage throughout the whole of Egypt at least as far south as Thebes<sup>32</sup> (1,400 kilometers, or 875 miles, away from Thera).<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Particularly instructive in this regard are the records of the French expedition to Egypt under Napoleon, in *Description de l'Égypte* (Paris: L'Imprimerie Impériale, 1809, reprinted as one vol., Köln: Benedikt Taschen, 1994), vol. 5, pls. 6–16; see also the old stereographs published in James H. Breasted, *Egypt: A Journey through the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York: Camera/Graphic, 1978), 45–57.

<sup>28</sup> Predynastic sites include Kom el-Ahmar, el-Kab, Naqada, Abydos, Nag el-Deir, and Ma'adi. These indicate a stable course for the Nile through the last few millennia.

<sup>29</sup> John Baines and Jaromír Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), 68.

<sup>30</sup> For the dating, we follow the dating arguments in Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 10. For the ejecta measurements, see *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 9–10.

<sup>32</sup> See especially the discussion in Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 5–7.

<sup>33</sup> Taken from the map in Baines and Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, 54.



Assuming that the mechanism of destruction in the Book of Mormon was similarly a volcano, the close parallels suggest the following implications for the geography and archaeology of the Book of Mormon: Geographically, the area covered by an eruption depends on the amount of ejecta and the prevailing winds; but the Thera case shows that a similar eruption could easily black out areas 1,400 kilometers away. A Mesoamerican location for the Book of Mormon has the requisite volcanic activity<sup>34</sup> and similar prevailing wind patterns for a volcano in the north to black out a southerly location and to cause "a more great and terrible destruction in the land northward" (3 Nephi 8:12), as more of the ejecta would fall closer to the eruption<sup>35</sup> and collateral earthquake damage would be greater closer to the epicenter. Archaeologically, we would expect to find pumice (in varying degrees) accompanying occasional destruction layers dating to the time of the crucifixion for particular Book of Mormon sites.

Pliny's description of the destruction of Pompeii by Vesuvius in A.D. 79,<sup>36</sup> an account which has been used in comparison with the Book of Mormon before,<sup>37</sup> differs in some important respects from the descriptions in both the Tempest Stele and the Book of Mormon. For instance, Pliny does not describe loud noises or widespread massive destruction. Pliny's description of the darkness at Vesuvius differs from that of the other two sources, "Elsewhere it was day, but in that place, it was a night blacker than the densest night, which was lit, however, by torches and many various lights."<sup>38</sup> Both the Book of Mormon and the Tempest Stele

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<sup>34</sup> Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster," 130, considered that the only possible location in the Americas was the "west coasts of Central and South America." With Mount St. Helens this can possibly be extended up into North America. Obviously the constraints of the narrow neck of land (for a summary, see Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 245, 247-48, 264, 265-66, 269-70, 286, 288, 290-91, 300-301, 311, 312, 324, 345) eliminate this possibility; see also Clark, "Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography," 22-23 n. 13.

<sup>35</sup> For Thera, compare Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 2.

<sup>36</sup> Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.16.

<sup>37</sup> Fry, "The Book of Mormon and the Crucifixion," 294-96; Ball, "An Hypothesis," 107-23.

<sup>38</sup> Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.16.17.



inform us that it was impossible to light a torch. This would imply that the volcano, if such was the mechanism of destruction in the Book of Mormon, was more powerful than Vesuvius.

Obviously, several assumptions accompany these predictions, the falsity of any of which could invalidate this hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is a specifically testable hypothesis, and it is "the possibility of overthrowing it, or its falsifiability, that constitutes the possibility of testing it, and therefore the scientific character of a theory."<sup>39</sup> The testing of the hypothesis I leave to the appropriate specialists.

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<sup>39</sup> Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 2:260.