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## New Light

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BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY • PROVO, UTAH

**Title** New Light: Volcanic and Ice Dating in the New World

**Author(s)**

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**Abstract** Richardson Benedict Gill's book *The Great Maya Droughts: Water, Life, and Death* provides substantial evidence of the natural physical events that occurred in Mesoamerica. These events are comparable to events recorded in the Book of Mormon.



## NEW LIGHT

### Volcanic and Ice Dating in the New World

One of the key concerns in interpreting history is accurate correlation of natural physical events with those recorded in documents or traditions. A remarkable new book contains a wide array of data on natural events that affected ancient prosperity and population in what are usually considered the central Book of Mormon lands. The volume is Richardson Benedict Gill's *The Great Maya Droughts: Water, Life, and Death* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). Any attempt by a reader of the Book of Mormon to relate its historical happenings in the New World to the course of nature should from now on depend considerably on this crucial source.

While the reading in the book is not easy, generally educated people can still gain valuable ideas and data from it. In fact, the scope of the information it taps would make it difficult even for most scientists to appreciate all it contains (the technical bibliography alone occupies 55 pages), yet, again, there is much to be gained by the attempt.

Earth scientists and climatologists in recent decades have vastly increased what is known about changes in climate over the course of human history. Their facts and theories provide Gill with tools for trying to understand how certain natural events seem to have been key turning points in the archaeological history of not only Mesoamerica but also other parts of the earth. Volcanic eruptions were central to most crisis events. The extensive body of data collected by drilling through the miles-thick ice in Greenland is especially significant. Even more clearly than tree rings, layered ice cores give us a year-by-year count of climatic events recorded in each year's snowfall. This record goes back tens of thousands of years. Volcanic eruptions are thus datable to the year if they can be detected in the ice record, although it can be difficult identifying which specific volcano may have been the cause. Gill does a commendable job in pointing out the cautions to be observed in using this information, including problems in fitting ice, tree-ring, and history data together.

In general the author (who is, of course, dependent on the huge

store of data provided by thousands of scientists) is able to demonstrate persuasively that periods of cultural growth, economic prosperity, and population peaks in Mesoamerica coincided with favorable climatic conditions for agriculture. By the use of sophisticated models that relate all the variables, a sort of prosperity-and-disaster scheme is being worked out. Peaks and troughs in the history of the Maya, the Mexicans, and other populations prove to correlate in very instructive ways with extreme climate changes. Would not the same be true of the Nephites and Lamanites? (see relevant information in "Last-Ditch Warfare in Ancient Mesoamerica Recalls the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 [2000]: 44–53, especially p. 50).

One more value of the Gill book is the author's demonstration that dating the crucial natural events still may be subject to some uncertainty. So if any archaeologist claims that "we already know" all the dates of major events in Mesoamerican history, as we work to correlate the archaeological and Book of Mormon historical sequences, we do well to doubt that the dates are yet definitely cut-and-dried.<sup>1</sup> ❏

building of temples to reveal the ordinances of the temple for both the living and the dead (see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 224, 307–8, 323).

12. To have “power” to get the full account implies having the power of the Lord. Joseph Smith was given “power from on high, by the means which were before prepared, to translate the Book of Mormon” (D&C 20:8; see D&C 113:3–4). Since the 24 plates are in an unknown language, the translator must have the power of God to get the full account. Another implication, although unstated, is that the translator will be led to find the plates. Moroni definitely led Joseph Smith to “find” the Book of Mormon plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:42–54). Limhi’s people found the gold plates of the Jaredites (see Ether 1:2; Mosiah 21:27; 28:11) that Ether had hidden in a manner that they might be found (see Ether 15:33). Wasn’t the Lord involved in their finding those plates? We can expect that the Lord, in his own due time, will lead someone of his choosing to find the 24 plates.
  13. While Joseph the Prophet was translating the Bible, the information on Enoch was revealed to him (November–December 1830). Several years later, he recorded more information about Adam’s blessing his posterity three years before his death (see *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, 38–40). In March of 1835 Joseph included this information in the Doctrine and Covenants revelation now known as section 107.
  14. How all of these things can be included upon just 24 plates is a question that is not answered in the Book of Mormon. While many theories have been advanced, they are all speculative, and so the question will remain unanswered in this paper, other than to note that there may be other Jaredite records among the “wagon loads” seen by Joseph and Oliver.
  15. The Lord revealed to Oliver Cowdery that there were “engravings of old records which are ancient” that he could be privileged to translate (see D&C 8:1, 11; 9:2). While the Book of Abraham was received as a part of those ancient records, the revelations given to Oliver refer to more than one record. Furthermore, the Book of Abraham was only partially translated. Oliver said concerning this record: “When the translation of these valuable documents will be completed, I am unable to say; neither can I give you a probable idea how large volumes they will make; but judging from their size, and the comprehensiveness of the language, one might reasonably expect to see a sufficient [sic] to develop much upon the mighty acts of the ancient men of God” (*Messenger and Advocate*, Dec. 1835, 236). The Lord may have also been referring to the ancient records of the Nephites and Jaredites in his promise to Oliver.
- Many records have been kept and preserved throughout the world for the dispensation of the fulness of times, when all things in Christ will be gathered together (see Ephesians 1:9–10). This article acknowledges these many other records but has focused only on those mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

#### Lehi’s Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness

David Rolph Seely

1. Unfortunately there is very little information about the Nephite temples in the Book of Mormon. The most complete study of the Nephite temples to date is John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful,” in *Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism*, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).
2. For a brief discussion of some of the issues relating to the sacrifice of Lehi and the Nephites beyond the injunctions in Deuteronomy 12, see *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 71.
3. Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 99.
4. Hugh W. Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 245–46.
5. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 320.
6. “As a prophet, Lehi held the Melchizedek Priesthood and by that authority offered sacrifice (*Teachings*, p. 181). . . . The Book of Mormon writers made no attempt to elaborate upon the nature or types of their offerings. The Aaronic Priesthood was the province of the tribe of Levi, and thus was not taken by the Nephites to America. It would appear, therefore, that the sacrifices performed by the Lehite colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and authorities of the lesser” (Joseph Fielding McConkie and Robert L. Millet, *Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 1:31).
7. McConkie and Millet further explain: “A covenant-centered religion required a covenant sanctuary. The fact that the Nephites constructed a temple suggested that all remnants of Israel, wherever they had been scattered, if they possessed the priesthood would have done likewise” (*ibid.*, 1:223).
8. For a recent review of biblical scholarship on Deuteronomy 12, see Bernard M. Levinson, “The Innovation of Cultic Centralization in Deuteronomy 12,” in *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 23–52. An excellent discussion of the issue of the restriction of sacrifice to a single sanctuary can be found in Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 459–64.
9. The interpretation of Leviticus in terms of the so-called secular slaughter is much debated. See Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 366 n. 43; and Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 112–13.
10. Menachem Haran, *Temples and Temple Service in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), 459–64. This commentary is highly recommended as a model presentation of biblical scholarship to an educated lay audience.
11. *Ibid.*, 26–42.
12. This is the prevailing view among modern scholars. In the classic documentary hypothesis, the literary strand D—chiefly the book of Deuteronomy—is dated to the middle of the seventh century B.C. While most scholars who hold this view agree that there is older material in Deuteronomy, they believe that the book in its present form was edited in the seventh century and its laws were first applied in their entirety by King Josiah. For a balanced and readable presentation of this view, see Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, xix–xxv; and Moshe Weinfeld, “Deuteronomy, Book of,” *Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 2:168–83.
13. See, for example, Alexander Rofé, “The Strata of Law about the Centralization of Worship in Deuteronomy and the History of the Deuteronomistic Movement,” in *Congress Volume: Uppsala 1971* (Leiden: Brill, 1972), 221–26; Baruch Halpern, “The Centralization Formula in Deuteronomy,” *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 20–38; and Levinson, “Innovation of Cultic Centralization,” 24–25.
14. A. C. Welch, “The Problem of Deuteronomy,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 48 (1929): 291–306.
15. See Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 65–84.
16. See Ellis Rasmussen, “Deuteronomy,” *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, ed. Daniel H. Ludlow (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:378–79.
17. Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh (see Alma 10:3).
18. The priesthood that Alma<sub>2</sub> held is described as “the high priesthood of the holy order of God” (Alma 4:20; compare 13:1–12, which describes the priesthood of the Nephites as the Melchizedek Priesthood). Responding to the question of whether the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away when Moses died, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All Priesthood is Melchizedek, but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but that which brought the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained by God himself” (*Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976], 180). He also taught: “What was the power of Melchizedek? ’Twas not the Priesthood of Aaron which administers in outward ordinances, and the offering of sacrifices. Those holding the fulness of the Melchizedek Priesthood are kings and priests of the Most High God, holding the keys of power and blessings. In fact, that Priesthood is a perfect law of theocracy, and stands as God to give laws to the people, administering endless lives to the sons and daughters of Adam” (*ibid.*, 322).
19. Translations of the Temple Scroll from Yigael Yadin, *The Temple Scroll* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1983).
20. Yadin, *Temple Scroll* 1.315–20, 2.233–39; Lawrence H. Schiffman, “The Deuteronomistic Paraphrase of the Temple Scroll,” *Revue de Qumran* 15 (1992): 558–61; and “Sacral and Non-Sacral Slaughter,” in *Time to Prepare the Way in the Wilderness*, ed. Deborah Dimant and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 69–84.
21. Aharon Shemesh, “Three-Days’

Journey from the Temple’: The Use of this Expression in the Temple Scroll,” *Dead Sea Discoveries* 6/2 (1999): 126–38; and *idem*, “A New Reading of Temple Scroll 52:13–16. Does this Scroll Permit Sacrifices Outside the Land of Israel?” *Proceedings of the International Congress, Fifty Years of the Discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, ed. Lawrence H. Schiffman, Emanuel Tov, and James C. Vanderkam (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2000), 400–410.

22. Shemesh, “Three-Days’ Journey,” 126–27; emphasis added.
23. *Ibid.*, 130; emphasis added.
24. *Ibid.*, 130–32. This may help to explain the fact that the Jews built temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 B.C.) and Leontopolis (shut down in A.D. 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, *Temples*, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah *Menahot* 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 109a.

#### What’s in a Word?

Cynthia L. Hallen

1. Noah Webster, *American Dictionary of the English Language* (San Francisco, Calif.: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1928).
2. Calvert Watkins, ed., appendix to *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992).
3. *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “quick” ([www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)).
4. All Hebrew transliterations are adapted from the WordCruncher scripture concordance program (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 2001).
5. *El Libro de Mormón* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1993).
6. *American Heritage Dictionary*.

#### New Light

1. For example, see the April 2001 issue of *Insights*, the FARMS newsletter, for observations about the limits of radiocarbon dating even at its best.

#### Out of the Dust

1. John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 98–100.
2. See Harry E. D. Pollock and Clayton E. Ray, “Notes on Vertebrate Animal Remains from Mayapan,” *Current Reports* 41 (August 1957): 638; this publication is from the Department of Archaeology at the Carnegie Institution of Washington. See also Clayton E. Ray, “Pre-Columbian Horses from Yucatan,” *Journal of Mammalogy* 38 (1957): 278.
3. Henry C. Mercer, *The Hill-Caves of Yucatán: A Search for Evidence of Man’s Antiquity in the Caverns of Central America* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1896), 172.
4. Robert T. Hatt, “Faunal and Archaeological Researches in Yucatán Caves,” *Cranbrook Institute of Science, Bulletin* 33, 1953. See Peter J. Schmidt, “La entrada del hombre a la península de Yucatán,” in *Orígenes del Hombre Americano*, comp. Alba González Jácome (Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1988), 250.
5. Schmidt, “La entrada,” 254.