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Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief

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Title  Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief

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Abstract  Archaeology has much to offer as a scientific means of gathering independent evidence of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity. But one must look in the right place. A cautionary tale is the failed Cluff expedition of 1900, which, assuming a “hemispheric model” of Book of Mormon geography, traveled from Provo as far as Colombia looking for the city Zarahemla. Yet in 1842 the Times and Seasons (under Joseph Smith’s editorship) had printed excerpts from a popular book on Mesoamerican archaeology that demonstrated a surprisingly high level of civilization, implying that Nephite lands did not extend into South America, thus supporting the theory of a “limited” geographic model. Both sides believe that archaeology is on their side. Book of Mormon critics also claim that archaeology is on their side, but decades of archaeological investigation in Mesoamerica and in the Old World has shown a pattern of increasing convergence that favors Book of Mormon authenticity. Evidences discussed include, among others, metal records in stone boxes, ancient writing, warfare, the tree of life and other metaphors, Old and New World geography, and cycles of civilization. In a sidebar article, the findings of an amateur archaeologist challenge a popular assumption that the hill was the scene of the final battles depicted in the Book of Mormon.
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. 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.

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.
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.4

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.”5 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.6 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.
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). 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. 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).

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.

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.

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.

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.
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*.\(^1\)

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.\(^1\) 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.”\(^1\) 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 cussedness. 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.\(^1\)

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...
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. 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. 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. Stone offering boxes have also been discovered in Mesoamerica, 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. 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.
yet. 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.

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.

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.

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. There are indications of wooden swords in the Book of Mormon—how else could swords become stained with blood? 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.

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. Other practices of his day were human sacrifice and cannibalism, vile behaviors well attested for Mesoamerica (see Mormon 4:14; Moroni 9:8, 10).

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. 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.31

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.32

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.33
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. How did Joseph Smith get this detail right?

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 Prophesying

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. 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). 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, 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.

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. The Book of Mormon account is remarkably consistent throughout.
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.46 Most Olmec cities were abandoned about 400 BC, probably under duress.41 In eastern Mesoamerica, Olmec 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 200.42 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,43 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.
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.

Fluctuations in population for the Jaredites and Olmecs are striking.

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. 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.45
of 2 Nephi 12:16 (no “pleasant pictures”), nor does it follow the preserved Hebrew or Greek texts of Isaiah 2:16. Such a representation implies that these authors think their rendition represents the original form of Isaiah 2:16, but they provide no discussion of this point, a serious omission. This same configuration of Isaiah 2:16 is repeated, again without explanation, in Donald W. Parry, Harmonizing Isaiah (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2001), 45. See somewhat similarly David J. Ridges, Isaiah in the Bible Made Easier (Springville, UT: Bonneville, 2002), 140, who explains 2 Nephi 12:16c (“Upon all pleasant pictures”) as meaning “pleasure ships upon which the wealthy traveled,” without further comment. This, again, suggests three poetic lines about ships in 2 Nephi 12:16, for which there is no available textual support. Ridges provides the same explanation for the second line of Isaiah 2:16, altering the “pleasant pictures” in the KJV text (p. 4). This results in a synonymous couplet in Isaiah 2:16 (which we accept), but there is no comment on how this form of Isaiah 2:16 relates to 2 Nephi 12:16 or what has become of the phrase “pleasant pictures.”

62. The quotation is from Huggins, “‘Without a Cause’ and ‘Ships of Tarshish,’” 171. His discussion of Clarke’s commentary is on pages 172–74. The research 2:16, but Huggins’s claim relates to Joseph Smith’s stay in Harmony, Pennsylvania, and he cites a claim that the Rev. Nathaniel Lewis, one of Emma Smith’s uncles, had a copy of Clarke’s commentary and supposedly mentioned it to Joseph Smith (p. 173).

63. We thank our wives and other reviewers for their suggestions for improving this study. We extend an extra note of thanks to John A. Tvedtne for his careful reading and comments. As always, all deficiencies are our responsibility alone.

God in History? Nephi’s Answer
Roy A. Prete


2. For a recent collection of articles on aspects of the subject, see Out of Obscurity: The LDS Church in the Twentieth Century: The 29th Annual Sidney R. Sperry Symposium (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2000).

3. God’s role in history is a vast topic, well beyond the scope of this brief essay. For a fuller discussion, see Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History, ed. Roy A. Prete et al. (Provo, UT: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2005).


5. For a nuanced treatment of the historiography of providential history and the issues it faces, see Brian Q. Cannon, “Provisional History: The Need for Continuing Revelation,” in Window of Faith, 143–60.


8. For a discussion of methodology in the Latter-day Saint context, see Roy A. Prete, “Merging the SECULAR AND the Spiritual,” in Window of Faith, 125–42.


10. For an introduction to the subject of God in history that focuses on relevant principles from a Latter-day Saint perspective, see Alexander B. Morrison, “God in History,” in Window of Faith, 1–12.


14. See Millet, “Influence of the Brass Plates,” 210–11, which presents evidence to suggest that these were prophets of the tribe of Joseph.

15. According to Terry B. Ball, Isaiah “is the most quoted prophet in the Book of Mormon, having approximately 35 percent of his Old Testament writings either quoted directly or paraphrased by Nephitic prophets.” “Isaiah, life and ministry,” in Book of Mormon Reference Companion, ed. Dennis L. Largely et al. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2003), 340. Nephi quotes 18 chapters of Isaiah completely: Isaiah 48–51 (1 Nephi 20–21; 2 Nephi 7–8); Isaiah 2–14 (2 Nephi 7–24); and the greater part of Isaiah 29 (2 Nephi 27); plus additional portions, either quoted (such as 2 Nephi 6:5–7; 30:9, 11–15) or paraphrased (e.g., 1 Nephi 22:6). So powerfully impressed was Nephi with the prophecies of Isaiah that of the 55 chapters in 1 and 2 Nephi, approximately one-third are drawn from Isaiah.


18. Nephi must have been personally gratified to receive the Lord’s promise that his writings on the small plates would be preserved “as long as the earth shall stand,” a point he apparently had not appreciated when he was commanded to prepare them (see 2 Nephi 25:21–23; 1 Nephi 19:3).


20. While the precise titles of such books have not been given in revelation, there is some indication from a 1978 First Presidency letter that Moham med, among others, was inspired to bring forth truths of God, suggesting that the Qur’an and other sacred texts could be among these. For this interpretation and a discussion of world religions with references to their sacred texts, see Roger R. Keller, “Why Study World Religions?” in Window of Faith, 213–30.

Archaeology and the Book of Mormon
John E. Clark

This article was originally a forum address delivered at Brigham Young University, 24 May 2004.

2. Figures current as of February 2006. Curriculum Department, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.


4. The most thorough discussion of these points can be found in Terryl L. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).


6. See Wilkinson and Skousen, Brigham Young University, 160.

7. See Wilkinson and Skousen, Brigham Young University, 179–80.

8. Copies of the Book of Mormon available at the turn of the century would have had the changes added to the 1879 edition by Orson Pratt, and these included footnotes containing geographical information based on a hemispheric geography. These specific identifications were removed for the 1920 edition and have been excluded ever since.


12. Times and Seasons 3 (1 October 1842): 927.


14. Judging supposed deficiencies of Book of Mormon archaeology from the vantage of biblical archaeology is akin to gauging the speed of an oncoming car on the freeway. Neither driver is in a position to make the call. The compelling argument from archaeology requires the reader’s faith and indulgence in the soundness of biblical archaeology as an entry fee to evaluate Book of Mormon claims. In truth, biblical archaeology is riven with pitfalls and difficulties. Archaeology has not confirmed the Bible in any nontrivial sense. For a frank assessment of some of the challenges of biblical archaeology, see William G. Dever, What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Randall Price, The Stones Cry Out: What Archaeology Reveals about the Truth of the Bible (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1997).

15. The list of archaeological objections to the Book of Mormon was taken from an earlier pamphlet by Hal Hougey, Archaeology and The Book of Mormon (Concord, CA: Pacific Publishing, 1983). The full list of objections, as they appear in Davis, A Closer Look at The Book of Mormon (see n. 13), is as follows: 1. No Book of Mormon cities have been located. 2. No Book of Mormon names have been found in New World inscriptions. 3. No genuine inscriptions have been found in Hebrew. 4. No genuine inscriptions have been found in Egyptian on anything similar to Egyptian, which could correspond to Joseph Smith’s “Reformed Egyptian.” 5. No ancient copies of Book of Mormon scriptures have been found. 6. No ancient inscriptions of any kind that indicate that the ancient inhabitants held Hebrew or Christian beliefs—all are pagan. 7. No mention of Book of Mormon people, nations, or places has been found. 8. No artifact of any kind that demonstrates The Book of Mormon is true has been found.


20. An early stone box is known for the late Olmec site of Tres Zapotes, Veracruz; see Christopher A. Pool, “From Olmec to Epi-Olmec at Tres Zapotes, Veracruz, Mexico,” in Olmec Art and Archaeology in Mesoamerica, ed. John E. Clark and Mary E. Pye (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 2000), 146. Many offering boxes have been found in the excavations of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan (present Mexico City) in the Templo Mayor excavations; see Leonardo López Luján, The Ofrenda: The INC Performance of Tenochtitlan (Nilow, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1994).


27. For blood-stained swords, see Alma 24:12–13, 15.


29. For towers as the last refuge in battle, see Alma 50:6; 5:20; Moroni 9:7. Compare with Fray Diego Durán, The Aztecs: The History of the Indies of New Spain, trans. Doris Heyden and Fernando Horcasitas (New York: Orion Press, 1964), 68: “The Tecapanecs, retreating toward their city, intended to use their temple as a last stronghold, but Tlacaelel [an Aztec leader] reached the temple before them and, taking possession of its entrance, ordered all of his men to set it on fire, having made prisoner all those who were within.” Durán, p. 89: “When we reach Tolotzincó the king of Texcoco will set fire to the temple and the battle will come to an end.”


32. Teotihuacan, located just north of Mexico City, was built about this time with massive amounts of cement. In citing this correspondence pointed out by others, I am not claiming that Teotihuacan was indeed the place mentioned in the Book of Mormon account; see Joseph L. Allen, Sacred Sites: Searching for Book of Mormon Lands (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003), 89–91. At the moment, no New World city mentioned in the Book of Mormon is known with certainty. Other cities in the region around Teotihuacan engaged in similar practices, so I am drawing attention here to a region, a time period, and a cultural practice, all of which are confirmatory of the Book of Mormon account if one concedes that the Land Southward was south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. For further references to cement, see John L. Sorenson, “How Could Joseph Smith Write so Accurately about Ancient American Civilization?” 261–368; and John W. Welch, “A Steady Stream of Significant Recognitions,” in Echoes and Evidences, 331–87.


37. See Michael Coe, on the fable of misplaced concreteness, quoted in Hampton Sidis, “This is Not the Place,” Doubletake 5 (Spring 1999): 46–55, quotation from p. 51: “They’re [Mormon apologists] always going after the nitty-gritty things. . . . Let’s look at this specific hill. Let’s look at that specific tree. It’s exhaust- ing to follow all these mind-numbing leads. It keeps the focus off the fact that it’s all in the service of a completely phony history. Where are the languages? Where are the cit- ies? Where are the artifacts? Look here, they’ll say. Here’s an elephant. Well, that’s fine, but elephants were wiped out in the New World around 8,000 bc by hunters. There were no elephants!” See also Coe, Mormons and Archaeology: An Outside View, Dialogue 8/2 (1973): 40–48.


39. See Sorenson, Ancient American Setting; and Sorenson, Mormon’s Map.

40. The population profile for the Lowland Olmec is based on


4. See Terry L. Givens, By the Hand of Mormon: The American Scripture That Launched a New World Religion.


6. Lehi’s Vision of the Tree of Life: Understanding the Dream as Visionary Literature Charles Swift


9. Leland Ryken, How to Read the Bible as Literature (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 165.


11. Ryken, Bible as Literature, 166.

12. Admittedly, one might argue that “mist of darkness” really means “dark mist,” the way the “rod of iron” might be called the “iron rod.” This may or may not be the case. There are several other instances in this account in which adjecives are used before nouns to modify them (e.g., “dark and dreary wilderness,” “white robe,” “dark and dreary waste,” “large and spacious field,” “strait and narrow path”), indicating, at least, that it’s reasonable to read “mist of darkness” to be something other than just a dark mist since the words “dark mist” could have been used to convey that latter meaning.


16. Ryken, Bible as Literature, 167; emphasis in original.

17. Ryken, Bible as Literature, 170; emphasis in original.


20. Ryken, Bible as Literature, 173. It is interesting that while people are concerned about the historicity of symbols, rarely do they concern themselves with the symbolism of history. Just as symbols can correspond to actual events, actual events can be understood to be symbolic. I do not refer only to ritual and ceremony, such as the sacrament or baptism, which are by definition symbolic actions. I refer to events in everyday life that normally would not be considered anything out of the ordinary but that can actually be seen as pointing to meaning beyond themselves. For example, Elder Boyd K. Packer spoke