Truth and Method: Reflections on Dan Vogel's Approach to the Book of Mormon

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Kevin Christensen responds to Dan Vogel’s views against the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. Vogel claims that the Book of Mormon cannot be a translated text because there were numerous influences surrounding Joseph Smith that could have motivated him to write the book on his own. Christensen and Vogel have responded to each other’s claims previously; this article is a continuation of that debate.
Dan Vogel’s *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* first appeared in 1986,¹ and I reviewed it in 1990.² Vogel responded to one admittedly weak point from that 1990 response with his 1993 article titled “Anti-Universalist Rhetoric in the Book of Mormon,”³ and I further discussed these anti-Universalist arguments in an article published in 1995.⁴ A condensed version of *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* is now available on the Web,⁵ as is Vogel’s latest response to my original review.⁶

The original publication of *Indian Origins* consisted of an introduction; four chapters titled “The Coming Forth of the Book of

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Mormon," "New World Antiquities," "The Origin of the American Indians," and "Indians and Mound Builders"; a conclusion; endnotes; a bibliography; scriptural references; and an index. The Web edition tacitly excises references to items that turned out to be Mark Hofmann forgeries⁷ and dispenses with the bibliography.

In *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon*, Vogel explores the following questions:

How did [the Book of Mormon] fit into the ongoing discussion about the origin and nature of ancient American cultures? The discovery of the New World had inspired a whole series of questions and debates. At what time and from what nation did the Indians originate? How and over what route did they travel to the Americas? How did they receive their skin color? Who were the builders of the many mounds and ruined buildings which the early colonists found? These and related questions were variously answered and hotly debated for three centuries prior to the publication of the Book of Mormon.⁸

After surveying the coming forth of the Book of Mormon (with a heavy emphasis on the money-digging stories) and providing chapters with useful information about the ongoing discussion of Indian origins from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, Vogel argues against the historicity of the Book of Mormon, contending that contemporary sources provide “plentiful” and “striking” cultural and literary influences for Joseph Smith.⁹ He asserts that “some of the major features of the Book of Mormon’s history of ancient America originated centuries before in religiously motivated minds and subsequently proved inaccurate.”¹⁰ He concludes that scholars seeking to understand the Book

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8. Ibid., 7.
9. Ibid., 71.
10. Ibid., 72.
of Mormon should focus on the pre-1830 environment and make useful investigations “instead of promulgating illusory and emotional speculations concerning the unknown.”¹¹

In my original 1990 review, I presented three basic arguments that Vogel’s conclusions are weak: “First, Vogel fails to address the question of adequacy during paradigm debates as spelled out in Thomas Kuhn’s *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Second, Vogel’s approach to the Book of Mormon text rests on questionable assumptions. Third, Vogel’s prodigious research on the pre-1830 environment sharply contrasts with the superficiality of his grasp of the Book of Mormon.”¹²

Vogel’s most recent response attempts to dismiss my use of Kuhn. Yet Kuhn’s observations have implications for all perspectives in the debates about Latter-day Saint scripture, and those who neglect them do so at their peril. Most of Vogel’s current response confronts examples I have given of how his assumptions operate in contrast to other approaches to the same Book of Mormon. Vogel criticizes Kenneth Godfrey at length over the meaning of the various accounts of the Zelph incident during the Zion’s Camp march,¹³ and he skirmishes with John Sorenson on Book of Mormon geography and Mesoamerican culture.¹⁴ He responds to some of my brief arguments but ignores my lengthy ones—for example, my discussion on the issue of alleged “anachronism” in the Book of Mormon. While I freely grant a few

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¹¹. Ibid., 73. Despite this conclusion, Vogel now insists: “I was not attempting a comprehensive response to Book of Mormon apologists, nor was I trying to resolve historicity issues with finality. Recognizing that there was an incompleteness in our knowledge of the pre-1830 literature, I jumped off the apologetic treadmill to gather the necessary material essential to conduct such discussions.” However, he later asserts that “one purpose of *Indian Origins* was to remind Mormon apologists how well the Book of Mormon fits into Joseph Smith’s world.” “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.” He also reports that his still unpublished critique of John L. Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985) was originally intended to be an appendix to *Indian Origins*. In other words, while his survey does increase our knowledge of relevant pre-1830 literature, he never did jump off the apologetic treadmill.


¹⁴. See Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*. 
weak points in my arguments,¹⁵ overall, the same kinds of assumptions I observed in 1990 still underlie and undermine his approach. For example, he still assumes that Joseph’s environment plus Joseph’s imagination equals everything in the Book of Mormon,¹⁶ that Nephites are an imaginative take on the Mound Builders, and that early Latter-day Saint traditions for hemispheric geography take priority over later readings, however careful.

In analyzing my words, Vogel comments that “most of Christensen’s objections are precariously balanced on the head of one apologetic needle called the Limited Geograph[y] Theory. This theory is not a paradigm, but rather an ad hoc hypothesis designed for no other reason than to rescue the Book of Mormon from the implications of adverse ‘empirical’ evidence.”¹⁷

15. He observes that John L. Sorenson, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex,” Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology 139 (December 1976): 1–9, contains sixty-eight Mesoamerican cultural traits, rather than ninety-three as I stated. See Christensen, “Review of Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon,” 220, compared to “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen,” n. 3. I have also updated my thoughts on Universalism from my 1990 review as outlined in “Paradigms Crossed,” 201–8. With respect to the Book of Mormon translation, new information from Royal Skousen’s work on the original manuscript and Margaret Barker’s studies on preexilic Judaism would change some of my comments. Beyond this, most of his critique derives from his fundamentally different approach to the Book of Mormon. I do not concede anything to his approach. My readings are of possibilities, which is all the believing approach requires. His readings pretend to be proofs, which he cannot deliver.

16. Compare Dan Vogel, “Echoes of Anti-Masonry: A Rejoinder to Critics of the Anti-Masonic Thesis,” in American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 291: “One should not push too hard for exact parallels; . . . one should view such elements as a reflection of Joseph Smith’s imagination—his attempt to create for readers frightening images of what Masonry could become.” Also in “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen” he says, “Christensen’s expectation that the Book of Mormon exactly duplicates the Mound Builder myth is too restrictive. One must allow that the Myth was adapted to the specifics of Smith’s narrative.” Again, for Vogel, environment accounts for similarities and imagination covers any differences.

17. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.” Compare Hugh Nibley, The Ancient State: The Rulers and the Ruled (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 391: “Claiming magisterial authority, the Sophic acknowledges no possibility of defeat or rivalry. In principle it can never be wrong. Its confidence is absolute,” emphasis in original. Vogel’s comment, by the way, fundamentally misrepresents the genesis of the limited geography theory, which actually arose out of a close reading of the Book of Mormon text itself.
I will discuss and define paradigms below. I will also explore the implications that the specific guarantee on prophets in the Doctrine and Covenants has for common critical claims (D&C 18:18). I will defend the limited geography theory with some welcome aid from Brant Gardner. My response to Vogel’s essay necessarily spills into comments on the introduction to American Apocrypha, in which Vogel and Brent Metcalfe offer further objections to the limited geography theory.

**Vogel’s Response and My Reaction**

Vogel begins by reciting what he calls “two important concessions” on my part. First, “Christensen twice admits that ‘some defenders have claimed too much’ with regard to what Joseph Smith could or could not have known about ancient American civilizations.”¹⁸ Specifically, he refers to my assessment that some Latter-day Saints have claimed that no one knew anything about Mesoamerican antiquities or the possibility of writing on metal plates. However, in 1994 William Hamblin showed that the most prominent Latter-day Saint commentators on the subject of metal plates have been more careful than Vogel claims or than I assumed.¹⁹

Second, according to Vogel, “Christensen twice allows that the Mound Builder myth may have had an influence on Joseph Smith’s post-1830 descriptions of the Book of Mormon, especially in his 1842 letter to newspaper editor John Wentworth.”²⁰ Actually, I made an explicit case that the Mound Builder myth influenced the summary of the Book of Mormon given in the Wentworth letter. In stating that “Christensen is careful to avoid the implications of this last admission,”²¹ Vogel misses the point of my essay. We differ on the implications. Vogel believes that the Mound Builder myth influenced the content of the Book of Mormon; I believe that the Mound Builder

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18. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
20. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
21. Ibid.
myth influenced the interpretation of the Book of Mormon by early readers but that the content remains profoundly distinct.

Studies by John Sorenson demonstrate that until 1938 no one even tried to make a careful, systematic study of the Book of Mormon’s internal geographic statements.²² However, the view of Joseph Smith as a fraudulent author—who was able to keep over seven hundred geographic details straight²³ during the swift dictation²⁴ of the lengthy and complex narrative²⁵ (which contradicts the Mound Builder myth at several essential points),²⁶ but who nevertheless provides a misreading of the Book of Mormon in the Wentworth letter—demands coherent explanation.²⁷

Striking and Significant? Or Not?

In his response Vogel claims that

The Limited Geography Theory has not borne fruit in the scientific sense because the Book of Mormon remains a useless guide to our understanding of ancient civilizations in the New

World. Indeed, as I have already stated, apologists have found nothing in ancient Mesoamerica as striking as the similarities between the Book of Mormon and the Mound Builder myth.²⁸

As part of this response, I report the similarities between the Book of Mormon and the Mound Builder myth, as specified in Indian Origins. For comparison, I shall include a recent summary by Brant Gardner of geographic similarities between Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon.²⁹ Readers ought to be able to compare and judge for themselves which parallels are the most significant, remembering that a parallel may be striking, but not at all significant.³⁰ For example, Vogel compares the pre-1830 descriptions of Hopewell/Adena fortifications to the fortifications in the Book of Mormon.³¹ The parallels are indeed striking, but in my review I cited John Sorenson’s examples of exactly the same kinds of fortifications in Mesoamerica dating to the correct times in a plausible setting.³² Which descriptions are more significant? Taken alone, neither. But if we add to the equation other observations—for example, an oppressively hot climate at the new year (Alma 51:33–37; 52:1), active volcanoes (3 Nephi 8–9), cultural requirements, distance constraints, and so forth—the balance tilts.³³

Further, similarities may exist in one comparative context but not emerge in another. This includes the details that do not emerge as


³⁰. See, for a striking example, Jeff Lindsay’s parody comparison of Whitman’s 1855 Leaves of Grass with the 1830 Book of Mormon at www.jefflindsay.com/bomsource.shtml (accessed 1 April 2004).


striking or significant until they are seen as fitting an ancient context, such as the recent discoveries of candidates for the Valley of Lemuel, the 600 BC site for Nahom, or the details of the description of Wadi Sayq.³⁴

Vogel and Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*

Vogel claims that I use a “loose reading” of Kuhn’s *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* to characterize “debates over the Book of Mormon’s historicity as ‘paradigm debates,’ where one paradigm has yet to prevail.”³⁵ How is my reading of Kuhn “loose”? Vogel never quotes Kuhn nor confronts my quotations.³⁶ Indeed, we shall see that he uses precisely the arguments that Kuhn’s book refutes.

Vogel also does not observe that I always supplement Kuhn’s work with Ian Barbour’s *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion*.³⁷ It is Barbour who supplies the theoretical justification that I use to apply Kuhn’s model to religion, and I do so keeping in mind Barbour’s notice of the differences between applying these ideas to science and applying them to religion.³⁸ Barbour also provides modifications to Kuhn’s original notions that I accept and apply in all my discussions.

Referring to a page in my review of *Indian Origins* that barely hints about this tension,³⁹ Vogel comments that “the major paradigm

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³⁵. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
³⁷. See Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), which was nominated for a National Book Award in 1974. It is now out of print but is worth searching for. He does have other books in print that review most of the same material and carry his discussion further. Barbour’s work on science and religion won him the prestigious Templeton Prize in 1999.
debate is between naturalism and supernaturalism.”⁴⁰ He should have referred to the essay “Paradigms Crossed”⁴¹ for my extended discussion, and to Hugh Nibley’s discussions of the Sophic and Mantic in The Ancient State.⁴²

Vogel insinuates that I believe “the scientific community rejects Book of Mormon historicity because they are working from the wrong paradigm.”⁴³ Again, no. I try not to carelessly overgeneralize. Many practicing scientists are Latter-day Saints, and therefore, many members of the scientific communities in various fields do not reject the Book of Mormon. Mormon culture has a long tradition of contributing a disproportionately high number of scientists per capita to the scientific community.⁴⁴ Had Vogel read Kuhn’s descriptions of scientific communities⁴⁵ and contributed his own analysis of how they define themselves, behave, and interact, that might have been meaningful.

I agree with John Sorenson that most scientists and scholars who reject the Book of Mormon do so because their paradigms dissuade them from working with it at all—they don’t bother doing science with the Book of Mormon. It lies outside the prescribed problem field. According to Kuhn’s observation: “No part of the aim of normal science is to call forth new sorts of phenomena; indeed those that will not fit the box are often not seen at all. . . . Instead, normal-scientific research is directed to the articulation of those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.”⁴⁶ Most scientists and scholars outside the Latter-day Saint tradition have neither the will nor the motivation nor the requisite knowledge of both the appropriate

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40. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
43. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
46. Ibid., 24.
ancient contexts and the claims of the text to make valid tests of the Book of Mormon’s claims.

Paradigm Choice

Vogel maintains that I believe “that paradigm choice is arbitrary, that all paradigms rest on ‘non-empirical assumptions,’ and that a supernatural paradigm is just as valid as a naturalistic one.”⁴⁷ No, no, and no. I never say that paradigm choice is arbitrary, which implies that any paradigm will do. Rather, I always insist that the questions to ask during a paradigm debate are, Which paradigm is better? Which problems are most significant to have solved? I follow Kuhn and Barbour in saying that paradigm choice is constrained by values rather than determined by rules. This is far from saying that paradigm choice is arbitrary.

Further, I never say that “all paradigms rest on ‘non-empirical assumptions.’” (What does this even mean?) Rather, I quote Kuhn: “The proponents of competing paradigms are always at least slightly at cross-purposes. Neither side will grant all the non-empirical assumptions that the other needs in order to make its case. . . . The competition between paradigms is not the sort of battle that can be resolved by proofs.”⁴⁸ For example, in the introduction to American Apocrypha, Vogel and Metcalfe assume that early Latter-day Saint traditions on Book of Mormon geography take priority, despite the fact that early Latter-day Saint readings were undeniably “pre-critical.”⁴⁹ Sorenson, however, assumes that the text has priority, particularly since he can demonstrate that no one even tried to read the text carefully for geographic information until 1938.⁵⁰ I go on in my review of Indian Origins,⁵¹ and subsequently in much

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47. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
50. Sorenson, Geography of Book of Mormon Events, 25.
more detail in “Paradigms Crossed,” to explain in pragmatic and schematic terms the nature of paradigm debate and to show how a conscious recognition of the limits of verification and falsification and the recognition of a degree of self-reference on every side should moderate the truth claims of rival claimants. I always argue that both sides should frame their arguments in conscious recognition of the implications of their own assumptions and of the values that govern paradigm debates.

And I never say that a supernatural paradigm is just as valid as a naturalistic one. In “Paradigms Crossed,” I argue (borrowing words from Ian Barbour): “Whether a person chooses to adopt a religious or irreligious view or a historicist or environmentalist view of the Book of Mormon ‘makes a difference not only in one’s attitudes and behavior but in the way one sees the world. One may notice and value features of individual and corporate life that otherwise might be overlooked.’” I consider a supernatural approach—that is, a nonnaturalistic approach—superior on those grounds.

According to Vogel’s interpretation of my conclusion, the “Book of Mormon historicity issue cannot be ‘adequately’ resolved without making a ‘paradigm shift,’” but my actual conclusion states that “studies assuming historicity seriously challenge the comprehensive validity of Vogel’s conclusion that ‘The better that one understands the pre-1830 environment of Joseph Smith, the better he or she will understand the Book of Mormon,’ as well as his dismissal of historical approaches as ‘illusory.’” I did say that Vogel’s book was timely and useful, despite my caveats about some of his conclusions.

53. Ibid., 217–18, quoting Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 56.
54. See Christensen, “Paradigms Crossed,” 208–18. For a description of some specific features of religious experience that a supernatural approach can notice and value and that a naturalistic approach overlooks and therefore inherently devalues, see a draft paper of mine, “A Model of Mormon Spiritual Experience” at www2.ida.net/graphics/shirtail/spiritua.htm (accessed 15 March 2004).
55. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
56. Christensen, review of Indian Origins, 257, citing Vogel, Indian Origins, 73.
Pseudoscience or Critical Realism?

To explain how he believes some of us misuse Kuhn’s work, Vogel writes:

In applying Kuhn’s work in this way, Christensen travels a well-worn path of the pseudo-scientist, pseudo-historian, and New Age religionists. . . . It is not uncommon for those who become frustrated when the scientific or scholarly community rejects their radical theories to draw on Kuhn’s treatise and then to offer the following argument:

the scientific community sometimes resists radical yet valid changes to its received canon of knowledge;
the scientific community strongly resists my radical theories because it represents [sic] a new paradigm shift;
therefore my radical theories are valid.⁵⁷

It is true that Kuhn observes that scientists “are often intolerant” of new theories.⁵⁸ Vogel’s second point is also true generally but is more significant when new arguments meet resistance primarily because they conflict with the received opinion. James Burke, in a PBS series on paradigm shifts in the sciences, relates how Alfred Wegner’s notion of “continental drift” was dismissed as crackpot pseudoscience until core samples from the mid-Atlantic rift and the discovery of plate tectonics proved that he was on the right track, despite his failure to describe a plausible mechanism for the drift.⁵⁹ Just because a scientist is wrong about some things and is opposed by a majority, it does not necessarily follow that he or she is wrong about everything.

Vogel’s third assertion is not true if applied to me. I have never used this argument. Instead, I have consistently argued from my use of Kuhn and Barbour that during paradigm debates the validity of all theories should be evaluated by considering which paradigm solves

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57. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
59. See the nine-part BBC series and the companion book by Burke, The Day the Universe Changed, 328–30.
the most significant problems. When the key question is, Do you preach the orthodox religion? or Do you preach the orthodox science? the authority of the paradigm is assumed and the methods, problem field, and standards of solution for that paradigm come into play to settle the question. Orthodoxy, whether in science or religion, has its value to be sure (and Kuhn and Barbour have good discussions of this), but an uncritical allegiance to a static orthodoxy can impede the search for further light and knowledge. Hence, I cite Barbour’s notion of critical realism, which I accept and endorse:

1. Theory influences observation with the result that all data are to some degree theory-laden. Although proponents of rival theories inevitably talk through each other to a degree, adherents “of rival theories can seek a common core of overlap . . . to which both can retreat.”

2. Comprehensive theories are highly resistant to falsification, but observation does exert some control over theories.

3. There are no rules for choice between paradigms but there are criteria of assessment independent of particular paradigms.

For reasons that will become clear, Vogel bypasses comment on this topic.

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60. For example, “Commitment to a paradigm (understood, again, as a tradition transmitted through historical examplars) allows its potentialities to be systematically explored.” Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 11. Also, Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 150. See also Ephesians 4:11–14 on an institutional structure designed to maintain stability against being “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine” while still retaining the institutional ability to change in light of new knowledge, as in Acts 15:7–29.

61. See Doctrine and Covenants 1 and Joseph Smith’s explanations of the problem with creeds: “creeds set up stakes” and say “hitherto shalt thou come, and no further.” See Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, sel. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 327. There may be “orthodox” notions of Latter-day Saint doctrine, but there is no “static” orthodoxy. Because we have no set creeds and accept ongoing revelation we can always be open to further light and knowledge.

Relatively Speaking

According to Vogel, “Some misunderstand Kuhn to mean that since there are some subjective elements in a paradigm, everything in a paradigm is therefore subjective, relative, and untestable.”⁶³ I, however, have never suggested any such thing. Vogel correctly observes that “Kuhn was not defending extreme relativism, nor was he proposing that all paradigms have equal validity.”⁶⁴ But unlike Vogel, I reference Kuhn’s and Barbour’s discussions of how people rationally go about deciding why one paradigm is better than another.⁶⁵

Vogel claims that “if Christensen understood Kuhn, he would not say: ‘One man’s distortion is another’s paradigm.’”⁶⁶ He surprises me here because, in Indian Origins, Vogel himself remarked that the “same statement may have different meanings when considered within dissimilar environments.”⁶⁷ I say the same thing for basically the same reason. I even have a section in “Paradigms Crossed” that gives examples of how context can change meaning.⁶⁸

The Place of Subjectivity

Vogel allows that, “while there are subjective elements in all theories or paradigms, that does not mean that they are all equally useful or probable, or even have the same validity.”⁶⁹ I have never said they did. But unlike Vogel, I do explain the limits of falsification and verification, how scientists evaluate competing paradigms, and how they decide which is better, not just in theory but in practice.

Continuing, Vogel comments that “science will always be a human endeavor, but the goal is to remove as far as possible subjective elements.

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⁶³ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
⁶⁴ Ibid.
⁶⁵ See Christensen, “Paradigms Crossed.” On the rationality of paradigm choice, see Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 110–18. For Kuhn’s defense of the rationality of paradigm choice, see Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 205–6.
⁶⁶ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
⁶⁷ Vogel, Indian Origins, 6, quoted in Christensen, review of Indian Origins, 218.
⁶⁸ Christensen, “Paradigms Crossed,” 198–208. Not coincidentally, this section includes my response to Vogel on anti-Universalism.
⁶⁹ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Scientific method is an imperfect tool, but it is the best tool we have.”⁷⁰ I agree on the value of the scientific method, as well as on its limitations. But had he understood Kuhn, he would understand that objective rules only exist within a paradigm. And even the presence of agreed-upon rules within a paradigm does not cancel the inherent human limitations of selectivity, context, subjectivity, and temporality.⁷¹ During paradigm debates, the rules themselves are in question, and Kuhn and Barbour have shown that our only rational recourse is to a value-based, tentative decision, asking which of two paradigms better describes nature in light of current knowledge. Only that kind of comparison provides a check on the self-referential rules associated with particular paradigms. What Metcalfe and Vogel want to sell is a rule-based final decision, something that exists only within their rigid, empiricist paradigm. Hence, they show reluctance to admit the subjective, the tentative, and the self-referential aspects of their own paradigms. And Barbour makes the point that the subjective elements of paradigm decisions are more in evidence in religious decisions than in the hard sciences.⁷² Had Vogel understood Kuhn, he would not talk about “removing” the subjective elements, but of confessing their inevitable contribution. Rather than adopt a corrupting pretense of objectivity, the important thing is to be perceptive, given one’s perspective.

Vogel says, “Whether or not one accepts Kuhn’s critique of science, Christensen misapplies Kuhn’s work to Book of Mormon studies in several ways.”⁷³ But Kuhn’s work is not a critique of science as a method nor of science as a generally accepted body of knowledge (definitions which Vogel has not supplied), but of positivist-empiricist views of science, whose weakness and faulty assumptions are most exposed, as the title implies, when examining “the structure of scientific revolutions.”

⁷⁰. Ibid.
⁷². Indeed, Kuhn observes that fields of study that display chronic controversies over fundamentals cannot be said to have a dominant overall paradigm, but that within various schools of thought rival paradigms can and do exist. See Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 11–13. History, archaeology, and scholarship are inherently less objective than physics. See also Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 144–45.
⁷³. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Kuhn and other philosophers of science have long since dismantled the positivism of previous theories of science, and, by implication, Vogel’s own positivism-empiricism.

Paradigms Defined

Here is how Vogel tries to explain how I misapply Kuhn to Book of Mormon studies: “First, paradigm debates in science are one thing, but in Book of Mormon studies they are entirely different.”⁷⁴ Indeed? This would be a good place for Vogel to define what a paradigm is and how paradigms become established, unless (as happens to be the case) providing a definition undercuts the argument he hopes to make. Barbour explains the essence of a paradigm:

Kuhn maintained that the thought and activity of a given scientific community are dominated by its paradigms, which he described as “standard examples of scientific work that embody a set of conceptual, methodological and metaphysical assumptions.” Newton’s work in mechanics, for instance, was the central paradigm of the community of physicists for two centuries. In the second edition (1970) of Kuhn’s book and in subsequent essays, he distinguished several features which he had previously lumped together: a research tradition, the key historical examples (“exemplars”) through which the tradition is transmitted, and the set of metaphysical assumptions implicit in its fundamental conceptual categories. Adopting these distinctions, I will use the term paradigm to refer to a tradition transmitted through historical exemplars. The concept of paradigm is thus defined sociologically and historically, and its implications for epistemology (the structure and character of knowledge) must be explored.⁷⁵

Another of Vogel’s claims is that “Book of Mormon studies have yet to reach the point where they can be called scientific let alone form

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⁷⁴. Ibid.
competing paradigms.”⁷⁶ Had he bothered to define the term paradigm, Vogel would have had to explain away the paradigmatic presence of standard examples of Book of Mormon study—Nibley’s Old World approach and Sorenson’s Mesoamerican approach—which embody a problem field, a set of methods, and standards of solution for an ongoing research tradition. Because this is the same exemplary function that Benjamin Franklin’s *Electricity* or Albert Einstein’s theories of special and general relativity have performed for scholars and students working in those fields, it should be clear that paradigm debates in Book of Mormon studies are exactly like paradigm debates in other fields.

The Rules According to Vogel and to Kuhn

Vogel explains the rules as he sees them:

Before questioning my methodology, Christensen should keep in mind that no matter how many correlations one perceives in a text, one negative evidence cancels them all. In other words, it is the apologists who are obliged to answer every negative evidence, while those who doubt only need present evidence for rejecting Book of Mormon historicity.⁷⁷

As a statement of his own attitudes about the Book of Mormon, this is no doubt accurate, but as a guide to a working philosophy of science and scholarship in general, he couldn’t be more wrong. Kuhn’s observations include:

There are, I think, only two alternatives: either no scientific theory ever confronts a counterinstance, or all such theories confront counterinstances at all times.⁷⁸

To be accepted as a paradigm, a theory must seem better than its competitors, but it need not, and in fact never does, explain all the facts with which it can be confronted.⁷⁹

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⁷⁶. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
⁷⁷. Ibid.
⁷⁹. Ibid., 17–18, quoted in “Paradigms Crossed,” 208.
If any and every failure to fit were ground for theory rejection, all theories ought to be rejected at all times.⁸⁰

Most anomalies are resolved by normal means; most proposals for new theories do prove to be wrong. If all members of a community responded to each anomaly as a source of crisis or embraced each new theory advanced by a colleague, science would cease. If, on the other hand, no one reacted to anomalies or to brand-new theories in high-risk ways, there would be few or no revolutions. In matters like these the resort to shared values rather than shared rules governing individual choice may be the community’s way of distributing risk and assuring the long-term success of its enterprise.⁸¹

During periods of normal science, the object is to “solve a puzzle for whose very existence the validity of the paradigm must be assumed. Failure to achieve a solution discredits only the scientist and not the theory.”⁸²

Since the business of science is to solve puzzles that have not yet been solved and all science and scholarship confront problems that have not yet been solved, a general application of Vogel’s attitude that “one negative evidence” suffices would demand the rejection of all science and scholarship. Vogel’s empiricism overlooks the following points:

1. Theory influences observation. “The procedures for making observations, and the language in which data are reported” are “theory-laden.”⁸³ For example, when Vogel offers up nineteenth-century descriptions of Native American fortifications, he sees them as direct evidence of his position rather than as data that any theory should acknowledge and explain. He ignores the issue of whether such descriptions would be present in an authentic text because of a combination of a common stimulus (similar fortifications being present in Book of Mormon times) and translator vocabulary. His theories permeate

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⁸¹. Ibid., 186; compare Ephesians 4:11–12 and Acts 15.
the language in which he reports his data. For example, Vogel claims that “Lehi’s blessing on his sons speaks of preserving America for his posterity and that the land would not be ‘overrun’ by other nations until after his seed should ‘dwindle in unbelief’ (2 Ne. 1[:10]).”⁸⁴ The word America does not appear in the Book of Mormon, but Vogel’s interpretive language remedies the lack.

2. Theories are assessed and replaced by alternatives rather than falsified. “The empiricists,” Barbour explains, “had claimed that even though a theory cannot be verified by its agreement with data, it can be falsified by disagreement with data. [Note that this is Vogel’s express position!] But critics showed that discordant data alone have seldom been taken to falsify an accepted theory in the absence of an alternative theory; instead, auxiliary assumptions have been modified, or the discrepancies have been set aside as anomalies.”⁸⁵ Barbour demonstrates that in practice, theories are neither verified, nor falsified, but assessed by a variety of criteria. “Comprehensive theories are indeed resistant to falsification, but that observation does exert some control over theory; an accumulation of anomalies cannot be ignored indefinitely.”⁸⁶

So, how much control do we grant to any particular observation and interpretation? In practice, this relates both to how an investigator chooses to value that particular observation and to how it rests within a network of theories and observations.⁸⁷

Counterinstances and Puzzles

Kuhn offers insights on how what seems a puzzle from one perspective (for example, where to place Book of Mormon geography) can change into a counterinstance (e.g., what about steel?). What makes

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⁸⁴. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
⁸⁶. Ibid.
an anomaly “that normal science [or faith] sees as a puzzle” into what “can be seen, from another viewpoint, as a counterinstance and thus as a source of crisis”?⁸⁸ There is no comprehensive answer. But Kuhn does highlight three issues upon which Vogel opts for a discreet silence:

1. Issues for fundamental generalizations. “Sometimes an anomaly will clearly call into question explicit and fundamental generalizations of the paradigm.”⁸⁹ In American Apocrypha, the point of Vogel and Metcalfe’s introduction is to establish a set of generalizations about Book of Mormon geography (hemispheric) and populations (exclusive) that are particularly easy to call into question.

2. Anomaly related to specific practical applications. “An anomaly without apparent fundamental import may evoke crisis if the applications that it inhibits have a particular practical importance.”⁹⁰ For example, David Wright’s study of Isaiah in American Apocrypha fusses over “the appearance of ‘yea’ and the twice-occurring ‘for,’”⁹¹ neither of which is fundamental, but both of which relate to practical understandings of the translation.

3. Research puzzles that currently resist solution. “The development of normal science may transform an anomaly that had previously been only a vexation into a source of crisis.”⁹² The shift from the hemispheric model to the limited model flowed from an awareness of anomalies that the former model created, both with respect to the view of developing science and to the internal demands of the Book of Mormon text.⁹³

Kuhn points out that a paradigm crisis closes in three ways.⁹⁴ First, normal science handles the crisis. Hence, we have things like Nibley’s

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⁸⁸. Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 79.
⁸⁹. Ibid., 82.
⁹⁰. Ibid.
⁹². Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 82.
⁹⁴. Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 84.
“Howlers in the Book of Mormon” and Matthew Roper’s “Right on Target: Boomerang Hits and the Book of Mormon,” showing how things that had formerly been put forth as evidence against the Book of Mormon have been transformed into evidence in its favor.⁹⁵

Second, the problem is labeled and set aside for a future generation. This was the official response to the B. H. Roberts study in 1921.⁹⁶ And surprisingly, it was the correct response because his questions were premature in terms of working out a consistent internal geography of the Book of Mormon, relating it to a specific external site (the work had not been done), and correlating it to relevant information on ancient Mesoamerica (it was not available).

Third, a new paradigm emerges with the ensuing battle for acceptance. Kuhn remarks, “Since no paradigm ever solves all the problems it defines and since no two paradigms leave all the same problems unsolved, paradigm debates always involve the question: Which problems is it more significant to have solved?”⁹⁷ Our Book of Mormon critics always tell us exactly which problems they think are more significant to have solved. That is their privilege, but we don’t have to agree with their valuations.

Ideology and the Process of Valuing Evidence

“The process that a scientist goes through in formulating theory,” Vogel claims, “is vastly different than what an apologist does. The scientist seeks a theory that explains most of the evidence, whereas the apologist formulates one that explains most of it away.”⁹⁸

Let’s see how scientists work in physics, the most objective of the hard sciences:

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⁹⁷ Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 110.
⁹⁸ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
A classic instance was the beta-decay of the nucleus, in which experimental data seemed clearly to violate the law of conservation of energy. Rather than abandon this law, physicists postulated an unobservable particle, the neutrino, to account for the discrepancy. Only at a considerably later point was there any independent evidence for the existence of the neutrino.⁹⁹

Until the existence of neutrinos was confirmed, Vogel would have to claim, in order to maintain the consistency of his own concept of science, that these scientists were “explaining away evidence” and resorting to an ad hoc hypothesis in the manner of New Age Religion. The evidence for neutrinos was eventually confirmed by scientists who were looking for them. As the technology and tools became available, they designed experiments and apparatus specifically to find them, and the effort was based on faith in the eventual successful outcome.

When he does confront evidence put forth by apologists in favor of the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Vogel’s own primary concern involves explaining it away. For example, he claims that “even Welch and others at FARMS are beginning to admit that most of the evidence for chiasmus is contrived and ultimately does not prove a Hebrew origin for the Book of Mormon.”¹⁰⁰ Though understandably enthusiastic, Welch has always been careful in his claims for the significance of chiasmus. He knows the difference between proof and evidence.¹⁰¹ However, far from even beginning to admit that the evidence is “contrived,” Welch affirms that, in his opinion, “the multiple phenomena of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon amount to a very strong complex of interlocking evidences that the book is an ancient record that originated just as its authors and its translator said it did.”¹⁰²

⁹⁹. Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 100.
Science and the Book of Mormon

“Because the Book of Mormon has yet to connect with ancient American history in any meaningful way,” Vogel claims, Book of Mormon studies “are pre-scientific.”¹⁰³ Meaningful to whom? And called scientific by whom? Again, Vogel’s positivist ideology, never a well-kept secret, emerges with greater clarity the further we go.

Brant Gardner on the Proper Mesoamerican Approach

With respect to a meaningful Mesoamerican approach to the Book of Mormon, Brant Gardner’s remarks (made in the course of an e-mail exchange with me) strike me as profoundly insightful on just how the Book of Mormon connects to Ancient America:

Would I ever reconstruct Mesoamerican society in a way that appeared to represent Christianized Old World peoples? No. I wouldn’t. I don’t.

The rather interesting discovery made just a few years back was that I, and many other Mesoamericanists, had simply made some incorrect assumptions about the [Book of Mormon] text. The attempts of LDS archaeological apologetics was for years focused on finding the Christian or the Hebrew—or who knows what—in Mesoamerican archaeology.

The difference came when I started looking for Mesoamerica in the Book of Mormon instead of the Book of Mormon in Mesoamerica. Oddly enough, there is a huge difference, and the nature and the quality of the correlations has changed with that single shift in perspective.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
One might read the Bible and assume that Hebrew culture was reasonably important or powerful at times and that the monotheistic religion kept all others at bay. Of course archaeology tells us otherwise. So does the text, when we know how to correlate the remarks about groves and high places to the surrounding religions. When one realizes that we get so much of the religion of Yahweh in the Old Testament because it is combating other religions, we can understand that the text took place in a context. Knowing the context helps explain the text.

The same is holding true for the Book of Mormon. It is the context that is interesting. Would I ever suggest that this means I think the Nephites were influential in the great flow of Mesoamerican religion? Heavens no—no more so than the Hebrews [were in the Old World]. Perhaps even less.¹⁰⁵

[Christensen] What evidence do you expect to find (or to be found) regarding the Book of Mormon civilization?

[Gardner] A very fair question. I’ll answer by telling you where I started on my current examination and the conclusions I have made. I began with an examination of my assumptions and what can and cannot be done with ethnohistorical data. I base my current work on previous work with Mesoamerican history, trying to sort out the development of religious ideas in later Mesoamerica (quite apart from anything that has to do with Mormons).

Here are my assumptions:

1. The Book of Mormon, if it is an ancient text, should behave like one.

¹⁰⁵ Contrast “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen”: “The limited theory, as we will see, is maintained by a series of other ad hoc hypotheses and specialized interpretations. The only fruit this theory produces is how well it functions to maintain the faith, not how well it explains ancient American history.” Vogel’s interpretive framework calls for refuting Sorenson by calling for the Book of Mormon to explain all ancient American history, whereas Sorenson and Gardner explain how the Book of Mormon people fit into ancient American history.
2. The writers of the Book of Mormon should have an agenda that is their own, not one modeled after a modern concern.

3. The text should demonstrate typical concerns for ancient societies—kin groups, out-group prejudice, etc.

4. The text should reflect the major cultural trends and pressures of the time and place in which it took place. Even if it doesn’t directly participate in the mainstream of history, it should not be ignorant of it.

5. The text should be internally consistent.

6. The text should describe some aspects of culture that are unexpected in the modern world but are compatible with its own time. As for the idea that a forgery can and should be falsifiable, I would expect a forger to be accurate according to knowledge available at the time the forgery was created. I would expect, however, that not only would better information call into question the important elements of the story, but that the forgery would completely fall apart upon investigation of the smaller nooks and crannies where a nonspecialist would not even know to pay attention. Really good forgeries tend to be caught in these small details, even when the large details conform to expectations.

When I started my examination, I had no expectation of what I would find. Some of the correlation I have found came not from attempting to find some specific thing, but in realizing that the text did not say what I had thought it said—and that it really didn’t make any sense until I saw it in the context of Mesoamerican culture.

When people ask me about the most important correlation I have found, I have a hard time narrowing it to just one. The most important correlation isn’t a singular finding; rather, it can be seen in the many facets of the discovery that the entire text of the Book of Mormon works better in a Mesoamerican context. Speeches suddenly have a context that makes them
relevant instead of just preachy.\textsuperscript{106} The pressures leading to wars are understandable. The wars themselves have an explanation for their peculiar features.\textsuperscript{107} All of these things happen within a single interpretive framework that puts them in the right place at the right time.\textsuperscript{108}

Science in Summary

Notice that Gardner’s arguments do not fit the pattern Vogel ascribes to apologists. Nor do they confirm Vogel’s claim that “despite Christensen’s discussion on shifting paradigms and scientific revolutions, the limited geography theory has not borne fruit in the scientific sense because the Book of Mormon remains a useless guide to our understanding of ancient civilizations in the New World.”\textsuperscript{109} Rather, Vogel’s approach inherently blinds him to the relationship between the Book of Mormon and the ancient world.

Science and Religion, Sophic and Mantic

According to Vogel’s definition, “The primary paradigm debate in Book of Mormon studies is not between scientific theories, but rather between naturalism and supernaturalism, science and pseudoscience, history and pseudo-history.”\textsuperscript{110} Here, ideology spills out in the rhetoric, showing that for Vogel, supernaturalism implies pseudoscience and pseudohistory. On the relationship between science and supernaturalism, remember the study that Nibley cites in The World and the Prophets:

\textsuperscript{106} For example, Gardner’s explanation of the reasons for Jacob’s discourse, including the specific quotations from Isaiah, strikes me as classic. See his “Interactions with Non-Israelite Populations in the Book of Mormon” at frontpage2000.nmia.com/~nahualli/LDStopics/Interact.htm (accessed 15 March 2004).


\textsuperscript{108} Quoted with permission from Brant Gardner, e-mail exchange.


\textsuperscript{110} “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Disturbed by the lack of real creativity in science, the British government recently sponsored an ambitious study of scientific creativity in the past. The result was a shocker, showing that the great original scientists have had a disturbing way of combining in their persons remarkable scientific skepticism with an equally remarkable religious gullibility. The creative scientist is a scientific heretic who “must refuse to acquiesce in certain previously accepted conclusions. This argues a kind of imperviousness to the opinions of others, notably of authorities”; the true scientist throws that sacred cow, Scientific Authority, out of the window, and this “sets him free to speculate and investigate.” On the other hand he tends to display what our report calls “a curious credulity” in unscientific areas and to favor ideas which have “that touch of offending common sense which is the hallmark of every truly scientific discovery.” Newton, the greatest genius of them all, is the classic example. . . . It does not seem to occur to anyone that Newton might have been the great scientist he was just because of his constant concern with the gospel, and not in spite of it, which is all the more likely, since many other great creative geniuses display the same peculiar and regrettable tendency to believe in the Other World.¹¹¹

Nibley continues this theme in his “Paths That Stray: Notes on the Sophic and Mantic,” observing that “those whom the Sophic claims for its greatest representatives lean strongly towards the Mantic, though the Sophic proposition condemns any such concessions.”¹¹² Vogel asserts that “despite one’s views on the naturalism vs. supernaturalism debate, drawing on Kuhn’s work to justify a paradigm shift that would include supernaturalism is to misunderstand Kuhn’s intent.”¹¹³ But my theoretical justification for permitting supernaturalism in the discussion comes from Barbour, not Kuhn. I not only understand

¹¹² Nibley, “Paths That Stray,” 409, emphasis in original.
¹¹³ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Kuhn’s intent, I also understand Kuhn’s wide applicability and how that circumstance leads directly to his wide influence.

Vogel continues to fire away: “One is therefore not surprised to find Christensen referencing Kuhn in a manner not unlike supporters of New Age religion: ‘Gospel-related questions occasionally lead to what Kuhn calls a paradigm shift. . . . One [should do] science in a way that includes a spiritual dimension.”¹¹⁴ May I have some examples? And not examples that merely toss in the concept of a “paradigm shift” and drop Kuhn’s name, but that show me some New Age advocates who explain the limits of verification and falsification, who adopt Barbour’s “critical realism,” and who explain the values used in paradigm choice with anywhere near the schematic precision that I use in “Paradigms Crossed”?

And what is unscientific about including a spiritual dimension? Responding to Freud’s demonstrably bogus “scientific” speculations about the origins of religion, Ninian Smart observes that “it is not scientific simply to begin with assumptions that would make a rival theory false before the evidence is properly examined.”¹¹⁵ Science defined as a method can be applied to any subject. Why not religion? (See Alma 32.) Science defined as a generally accepted body of knowledge does run into difficulty in developing an overall consensus on particular religious traditions because “between competing religious traditions there seem to be few common assumptions and less clear-cut common data than there are between competing scientific traditions. . . . In particular, religion lacks the lower-level laws which are characteristic of science. The terms of such laws are relatively close to observations, their theoretical components are not in dispute, and they are relatively vulnerable to falsification by counter-instances.”¹¹⁶

In summary, Barbour explains:

¹¹⁴. Ibid.
¹¹⁵. Ninian Smart, Worldviews: Crosscultural Explorations of Human Beliefs (New York: Scribner’s, 1983), 75.
¹¹⁶. Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 144, emphasis in original.
Each of the “subjective” features of science . . . is more evident in the case of religion: (1) the influence of interpretation on data, (2) the resistance of comprehensive theories to falsification, and (3) the absence of rules for choice among paradigms. Each of the corresponding “objective” features of science is less evident in the case of religion: (1) the presence of common data on which disputants can agree, (2) the cumulative effect of evidence for or against a theory, and (3) the existence of criteria which are not paradigm-dependent. It is clear that in all three respects religion is a more “subjective” enterprise than science. But in each case there is a difference of degree—not an absolute contrast between an “objective” science and a “subjective” religion.¹¹⁷

Vogel continues, “Neither is one surprised when Christensen attacks the naturalistic assumptions (i.e., positivism-empiricism) of Book of Mormon critics.”¹¹⁸ I compliment Vogel for not denying his positivism-empiricism and his dependence on naturalistic assumptions. But one would have expected Vogel to actually describe my attack, to therefore have a target in mind, and to show where I err.¹¹⁹ However, Vogel does not do so, and the reason appears clear. To refute my criticism, Vogel should demonstrate that his view is not comparable to the positivist mind-set and is not limited temporally or by selectivity, subjectivity, or the contexts for his comparisons. Not surprisingly, he makes no attempt to do so. Massimo Introvigne, himself an outside observer, describes a surprising inversion of the Bible wars:

At this stage, an outside observer expecting conservative Latter-day Saints to adopt a fundamentalist view of truth, and liberal Latter-day Saints to adopt a postmodernist one, may easily claim that something should be wrong. The attitudes

¹¹⁷. Ibid, 144–45. For suggestions for “common data” upon which differing religions ought to be able to agree, see Barbour, Myths, Models and Paradigms, 53–56, emphasis in original.
¹¹⁸. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹¹⁹. Christensen, review of Indian Origins, 217.
are in fact almost reversed. Historical truth is regarded as a mere social product by Latter-day Saint conservatives, while a rather naive sociology of knowledge claiming that historical-critical methodologies may indeed achieve “truth” lies behind the liberals’ attitude. The “love affair with Enlightenment science” of American fundamentalists described by [George] Marsden does not find a counterpart among Latter-day Saint conservatives; conversely, Enlightenment’s claim for certainty and objectivity is still defended in the liberal camp. It is not surprising that liberals accuse “Mormon apologists” almost of cheating.¹²⁰

Vogel provides no refutation of these points. Rather, he demonstrates that my criticism of his positivist-empiricist outlook of twelve years ago remains apt and to the point when he writes:

Nevertheless, the struggle between apologists and critics is not accurately described as a paradigm debate, for the critics have long ago won their point. The traditional view of Book of Mormon history and geography collapsed with the advent of archaeology and anthropology, although most Mormons remain unaware of this event.¹²¹

According to Vogel, the game is over, based on his assumption that any compromise from the original impressions of the first readers of the Book of Mormon utterly refutes Book of Mormon historicity.¹²²

Auxiliary Assumptions

Vogel’s assumptions about the Book of Mormon and its early readers underlie his dismissive approach:

¹²¹ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹²² Vogel and Metcalfe, “Editors’ Introduction,” xiii.
Discovering the futility of forcing scientific findings into a Book of Mormon mold, twentieth-century apologists reversed the procedure by forcing and contorting the Book of Mormon into a New World form. This was not a paradigm shift, but rather an attempt to save the old paradigm from demise.¹²³

Vogel fails to grasp the concept of auxiliary assumptions. Barbour observes that paradigms resist falsification because “a network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.”¹²⁴ The assumption of Book of Mormon historicity provides a motivation for developing a geographic model, first by defining and assessing the network of details within the text, and then fitting it to an appropriate external location. No single element of a detailed correlation is more fundamental than the overall conception that a correlation can be found.

The old story of the lost keys illustrates a clear and present danger:

Walking home on a dark night, a merchant sees his friend on his hands and knees, searching frantically in the pool of light under a street lamp. “What’s wrong?” the merchant asks.

“I’ve lost my keys! Will you help me look for them?”
“Certainly, my friend. Where did you drop them?”
“Somewhere over there.”
“Why are you looking here then?”
“Because the light is better.”

Unless an investigator has done the preliminary work of determining where to look, even the best methods and authority and expertise and reputation and urgent motives count for nothing. After first determining where best to look, we still need to begin the search with realistic expectations of what we shall find. In the film *The Zero*
Effect, the Holmes-like character, Daryl Zero, explains his techniques of detection.

Now, a few words on looking for things. When you go looking for something specific, your chances of finding it are very bad. Because of all the things in the world, you're only looking for one of them. When you go looking for anything at all, your chances of finding it are very good. Because of all the things in the world, you're sure to find some of them.¹²⁵

John Sorenson reports that during a 1953 “archaeological reconnaissance of central Chiapas,” Tom Ferguson’s “concern was to ask if local people had found any figurines of ‘horses,’ rather than to document the scores of sites we discovered and put on record for the first time.”¹²⁶ Because Ferguson was looking for specific things, rather than “anything at all,” his list of “disappointments” (borrowed from Roberts, who in turn got them from Couch) continues to get passed from skeptic to skeptic like an Olympic torch, though with less and less investigation and perspective. William Hamblin’s article on methodological assumptions treats the issue nicely, and I direct interested readers there.¹²⁷

Because any exploration of the historicity of the Book of Mormon involves a network of assumptions, scholars should be explicit about the assumptions they choose and should be careful not to claim too much for the stress that any particular critical concern places on the overall network.

Checking the Guarantee on Prophets

In reviewing Sorenson’s work, Vogel asserts that he “has been unable to overcome Mormon traditions regarding Book of Mormon events outside his limited area.”¹²⁸ However, it is not the traditions that need

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¹²⁸. Vogel, Indian Origins, 85 n. 68.
overcoming, but Vogel’s assumptions about their priority. Sorenson’s 1992 *Source Book* includes an appendix that lists all the traditions in question, and his essay in the new *Echoes and Evidences of the Book of Mormon* includes additional analysis of specifics.¹²⁹ Amazingly, few critics bother to ask how much a prophet should be expected to know. The Doctrine and Covenants guarantee on prophets is very explicit: “Ask the Father in my name, in faith believing that you shall receive, and you shall have the Holy Ghost, which manifesteth all things which are expedient unto the children of men” (D&C 18:18).¹³⁰

*Expedience* provides practical and sufficient compensation for the human limitation. Consider the inverse. What if a prophet knew everything except what is expedient? (Or your surgeon, your airplane’s pilot, his air traffic controller, your general, your stockbroker, and so forth.) Clearly, the lack of expedient knowledge would be a recipe for disaster. On the other hand, even a servant with limited and faulty knowledge can accomplish exactly what God intends (which may be different from what the prophet imagines) if he knows and acts upon that which is expedient.¹³¹

**The Authority of First Readers**

The arguments of Vogel and Metcalfe are based on broad assumptions concerning the understanding and insights of the earliest readers of the Book of Mormon. Sorenson’s work, however, demonstrates just how “pre-critical” the early reading of the Book of Mormon was—until 1938, no one read the text carefully for geographic information.¹³² Vogel and Metcalfe never discuss Doctrine and Covenants 1:24–26, 28: “These commandments are of me, and were given unto

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¹³⁰. See also Doctrine and Covenants 75:10; 88:64–65, 127; and Moroni 7:33. The most expedient knowledge involves what Peter calls “great and precious promises: that by these ye may be partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

¹³¹. Ponder carefully Isaiah 55:8–12.

my servants in their weakness, after the manner of their language, that they might come to understanding. And inasmuch as they erred it might be made known; And inasmuch as they sought wisdom they might be instructed . . . and blessed from on high, and receive knowledge from time to time.”

The Doctrine and Covenants provides direct statements regarding the potential for their errors to be made known and outlining the remedy—ongoing instruction and an increase in knowledge over time, all conditioned on our seeking wisdom. Vogel describes his belief that Joseph Smith is the author of the Book of Mormon, rather than a translator: “It would be pointless for me to refer to Joseph Smith if I did not also believe his views were consistent with the Book of Mormon. They were consistent because he wrote the book. I refer to the statements of Smith and other first readers to bring perspective and context to the text.”

Note the tightly looped self-reference exhibited here. Vogel’s assumptions of authorship create his reading of the evidence to support his assumptions of authorship. But not only does Doctrine and Covenants 1 expressly declare the existence of weakness and error in the understanding of the Saints, other passages specify the ongoing remedy:

Teach ye diligently and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly [by implication, what they think then is less than perfect] in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand;

Of things both in heaven and in the earth, and under the earth; things which have been, things which are, things which must shortly come to pass; things which are at home, things which are abroad; the wars and the perplexities of the nations, and the judgments which are on the land; and a knowledge also of countries and of kingdoms—

That ye may be prepared in all things when I shall send you again to magnify the calling whereunto I have called you,

133. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
and the mission with which I have commissioned you. (D&C 88:77–80)

Here again we have an explicit statement of human weakness, human error, imperfect knowledge on the part of the Saints, and a long-term pedagogical program for dealing with those weaknesses. The scriptures require preparation and appropriate study. Sorenson shows that before 1938 no one really studied out Book of Mormon geography: “You have supposed that I would give it unto you, when you took no thought save it was to ask me. But behold, you must study it out in your mind” (D&C 9:7–8). Nibley and Sorenson demonstrate that no one had prepared their minds on the cultural issues relevant to the Book of Mormon: “I perceive that ye are weak that ye cannot understand all my words . . . go ye . . . and ponder . . . and ask of the Father in my name, that ye may understand, and prepare your minds” (3 Nephi 17:1–3). “There is none other people that understand the things which were spoken unto the Jews like unto them, save it be that they are taught after the manner of the things of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:5).

Nibley, Sorenson, and those inspired by their approaches have demonstrated that there is much we have not understood when reading from our own cultural background. The Lord’s program takes no shortcuts but rather allows for further inspiration on condition that wisdom must be sought and that, in addition to revelation, extensive study “of countries and of kingdoms” is necessary. It should be implicit that the early Latter-day Saint readers could not benefit from information that was not yet available.

Metcalfe and Vogel versus Sorenson on Book of Mormon Geography

Vogel offers his explanation of Sorenson’s work: “Discovering the futility of forcing scientific findings into a Book of Mormon mold, twentieth-century apologists reversed the procedure by forcing and contorting the Book of Mormon into a New World form.”134 Forcing

134. Ibid.
and contorting? Sorenson cites some seven hundred interlocking statements from over five hundred verses that involve geographic matters in the Book of Mormon.¹³⁵ He also discusses numerous cultural and geological issues such as written language, limited distances, the use of cement, fortifications, temples, seasonal wars, volcanoes, hydrology, weather, a city being suddenly immersed in the waters of Mormon, and so forth. Vogel and Metcalfe, in their critique of Sorenson’s model, cite six verses, with most of their emphasis on a single verse, Alma 22:32.¹³⁶ Their summary of his arguments concerning that verse falls considerably short of what I find when I check Sorenson’s texts.¹³⁷ And their reading of Alma 22:32 becomes terribly inadequate when that verse is consulted in the full Book of Mormon context. Indeed, one need only look at a map of Panama in comparison to the full requirements of the text. For example, in American Apocrypha, Vogel and Metcalfe breathe not a whisper about Limhi’s party and other groups whose travel provides constraints on Book of Mormon geography models and correlations. In Vogel’s response to me, he briefly comments about the travels of Limhi’s group between Zarahemla and Nephi, but he fails to fully define, let alone solve, the problems.

Omni 1:27–30 describes how a group left Zarahemla to journey to the land of Nephi. Mosiah 8:7–8 and 21:25–27 describe how, two generations later, Limhi sent a small party from Nephi looking for Zarahemla. Alma’s group of men, women, children, and flocks traveled from the waters of Mormon, near the land of Nephi, to Zarahemla in twenty-two or twenty-three days, which must have been close to the travel time that Limhi’s group expected. Sorenson figures the beeline

¹³⁵. Sorenson, “Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” 392. See Sorenson, Geography of Book of Mormon Events, 215–328; see also Ancient American Setting, 23: “Some of the text’s scale requirements are quite specific. They are also tied together in intricate relationships. It is impossible to solve just part of the problem of locations and distances, for as in a jigsaw puzzle, all the features must interlock.”


distance as around 180 miles.¹³⁸ Mosiah also sent a party from Zarahemla toward Nephi, and they “wandered” forty days before arriving in Nephi (Mosiah 7:4).

But in Vogel’s model, just to negotiate the isthmus of Panama, a party of forty-three men must go northwest for over a hundred miles, west for about the same distance, southwest the same distance, and then northwest again. Remember also that the party must start in the land of Nephi, which Vogel would have us associate with the stories about Lehi landing in Chile (an assumption that would add another three thousand miles), or with stories of Inca ruins in Peru, or at best with some point around four hundred miles south of Darien, for the land south travel narratives to work (as if they would, even then). Just getting to Panama on foot involves a substantial journey. Vogel’s version takes the journey blindly through Panama, forced by the terrain to make several dramatic changes in direction. The distance from Panama to the Tuxtla Mountains alone, where Sorenson’s correlation places Cumorah and the Jaredite ruins, is four times as far as the Sorenson version of the total journey.

¹³⁸. Sorenson, Mormon’s Map, 56.
Sorenson’s model permits Limhi’s explorers to miss Zarahemla, probably due to a single incorrect turn in the “narrow strip of wilderness” that puts them on the wrong side of the Sidon river basin, or perhaps even following the wrong river northward. They travel in a single direction through Tehuantepec to the Tuxtla Mountains, find the Jaredite ruins, suppose them to be Zarahemla (Mosiah 21:25–26), discover the twenty-four plates of Ether, and then return.

Sorenson reasons that Limhi’s group would be unlikely to have traveled much more than twice the distance to Zarahemla, all the while traveling the same northward direction, before deciding to turn back. In Sorenson’s Mesoamerican correlation, “diligent men,” traveling somewhat faster than a mixed group with flocks, would have been able to make the trip to Cumorah and back in thirty to sixty days.

In contrast, Vogel and Metcalfe also insist on the New York location for Cumorah/Ramah rather than the narrow neck–proximate Cerro El Vigia correlation Sorenson offers. Their scenario means that Limhi’s diligent men would need to wander through Tehuantepec, around the
Gulf another five hundred miles just to get to Texas, another two thousand miles to cross the Texas flatlands, and up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers toward New York, with a detour to the Great Lakes so as to ensure justification for the description of “many waters,” changing directions from east to west to northeast, leaving tropical climates for desert, plains, and temperate climates until they find what they suppose to be the ruins of Zarahemla in the south.

Sorenson tells of a shipwrecked sailor in the mid-sixteenth century who journeyed by foot from southern Mexico to the St. John River in eleven months, a distance of twenty-five hundred miles.¹³⁹ An

Figure 3. Mexico to New York. Map by Andrew D. Livingston.

excursion from southern Mexico to a New York Cumorah and back calls for an almost two-year foot journey in North America, with an additional more than fifteen-hundred-mile journey each way across Panama and Mesoamerica, plus however long it would take to come from whichever point in the land south Vogel and Metcalfe want to start from. And Vogel and Metcalfe accuse Sorenson of doing violence to the Book of Mormon text?¹⁴⁰

In Vogel’s reply to me, he mentions Limhi’s explorers but attempts to escape the implications of the foregoing situation by referring to Helaman 3:4, though not to Helaman 3:5–11, which provides several constraints that Vogel ignores, with respect to the lack of timber and building with cement at that particular time. I’ll provide some of the context here:

And it came to pass in the forty and sixth year . . . an exceedingly great many . . . departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth unto the land northward to inherit the land.

And they did travel to an exceedingly great distance, inso-much that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers.

Yea, and even they did spread forth into all parts of the land,¹⁴¹ into whatever parts it had not been rendered desolate and without timber, because of the many inhabitants who had before inherited the land.

And now no part of the land was desolate, save it were for timber; but because of the greatness of the destruction of the people who had before inhabited the land it was called desolate.

And there being but little timber upon the face of the land, nevertheless the people who went forth became exceedingly expert in the working of cement; therefore they did build houses of cement, in the which they did dwell. (Helaman 3:3–7)


John Welch notes that “the Book of Mormon dates this significant technological advance to the year 46 B.C.” and cites research “that cement was in fact extensively used in Mesoamerica beginning largely at this time.” In addition, “It is also a significant factor in locating the Book of Mormon lands of Zarahemla and Desolation; ... one may reasonably assume that Book of Mormon lands were not far south of the sites where ancient cement is found.”¹⁴²

Here is Vogel’s reading, which he takes care not to complicate with side issues like evidence for cement existing only far south of where he wants the Great Lakes version to be:

This area became known to the Nephites as Cumorah, which Mormon describes as “a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains” (Morm. 6:4). Because the [Jaredite] record had been found by a Nephite expedition party searching for the relatively close city of Zarahemla, the new theorists postulate the Jaredite destruction occurred a short distance northwest of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Southern Mexico, perhaps near Tres Zapotes. However, Helaman 3:4 says that the migrants traveled “an exceeding great distance” into the land northward until they came to “large bodies of water and many rivers.” This creates a problem for the new geographers, for, if the Book of Mormon says Cumorah is “an exceeding great distance” into the land northward, then it must be admitted that the expedition party had missed Zarahemla by a very great distance.¹⁴³

This is as close as Vogel comes to admitting the horrendous distance problems that his own reading imposes on the text. The “problem” is not with the new limited geography but with two artifacts of Vogel’s misreading. First, we read that a foot journey from Zarahemla in the Nephite heartland northward through the narrow neck, and beyond the Cumorah area (and not, as Vogel misreads, to Cumorah) into the area of “large bodies of water and many rivers” in the highlands

¹⁴² “Concrete Evidence for the Book of Mormon,” in Reexploring the Book of Mormon, 212–13.
¹⁴³ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
toward present-day Mexico City, can be described as an “exceeding great
distance.” What does that description imply? This is the only time the
imprecise phrase appears in the text. Never does the word exceeding ap-
pear to describe the order of magnitude that Vogel’s reading demands
but rather that a circumstance exceeds normal measures or efforts.¹⁴⁴
It is not unreasonable to suppose that a foot journey of three or four
hundred miles (neglecting terrain-imposed detours) would be called
an exceeding great distance, particularly when undertaken by a mixed
group of migrants with flocks (see Helaman 3:3–4). Limhi’s explorers,
traveling without flocks or children, would be guided by oral traditions
that gave a reasonable idea of the direction they should travel and a
travel time estimate measured in days. However, I find it unreasonable
to suppose that after a one-way foot journey of four to seven thousand
miles—and the repeated changes of direction and climate that Vogel’s
reading requires—Limhi’s party would mistake the Jaredite ruins for
Zarahemla in the south (Mosiah 21:26).

Vogel sees the “many waters” description as an opportunity to
wave the ad hoc epithet:

The new theorists therefore have attempted to escape the im-
plications of Helaman 3:4 by proposing two lands of many
waters and lakes: one in the land of Cumorah—which they

¹⁴⁴. Other uses of exceeding do not exhibit either the precision or the orders of mag-
nitude that Vogel requires: “And it came to pass that I, Nephi, being exceedingly young”
(1 Nephi 2:16). “And it came to pass that when Laban saw our property [carried in by Ne-
phi, Laman, Lemuel, and Sam], and that it was exceedingly great” (1 Nephi 3:25). “They
came unto me, and loosed the bands which were upon my wrists, and behold they had
swollen exceedingly” (1 Nephi 18:15). “And upon the wings of his Spirit hath my body
been carried away upon exceedingly high mountains” (2 Nephi 4:25). “Now the number
of their dead was not numbered because of the greatness of the number; yea, the number
of their dead was exceedingly great, both on the Nephites and on the Lamanites” (Alma
44:21). Also, “They had encircled the city of Bountiful round about with a strong wall of
timbers and earth, to an exceeding height” (Alma 53:4). Compare, “And upon the top of
these ridges of earth he caused that there should be timbers, yea, works of timbers built
up to the height of a man, round about the cities” (Alma 50:2). How high must the earth
and timbers be? Also compare, “And it came to pass that the brother of Jared . . . went
forth unto the mount, which they called the mount Shelem, because of its exceeding
height” (Ether 3:1). How high must the mountain be?
say is the Papaloapan Lagoon System just west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec—and another farther west and north in the Valley of Mexico. If there were two lands of many waters, one would expect Mormon to distinguish the area of many waters in Helaman 3:4 from the more famous “land of many waters” of Cumorah. The creation of two lands of many waters is entirely ad hoc.¹⁴⁵

But notice that the Cumorah location specifies “a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains” (Mormon 6:4) and the Helaman location specifies “large bodies of water and many rivers.” Mormon’s descriptions are indeed distinct, with “large bodies of water” characteristic of only the Helaman description and fitting only Teotihuacán. Vogel creates confusion by conflating the two descriptions of waters and by neglecting the other elements specific to each location (such as deforestation and cement). He combines the two locations so that he can apply the description “exceeding great distance” to the journey to Cumorah rather than to Teotihuacán. His version requires the migrants in Helaman 3:4 to march through many locations, apparently deciding that the water they found in the form of large lakes and rivers couldn’t really be called “many waters.” But even Vogel’s report admits that the water was there.

Vogel and Metcalfe expect us to believe that there are “distance problems” in the Book of Mormon. “Long distances and rapid population growth are not the only problems the new apologists have to address.”¹⁴⁶ Yet Sorenson’s work Mormon’s Map shows an internally consistent map. All the travel, all the distances, all the geographical ups and downs, the Sidon river basin, all the city placements, and all the military

¹⁴⁵. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
situations work out plausibly. The distance problems exist only in the two-continent external correlation that Vogel and Metcalfe favor.

Their claim that Panama is a good solution for the distance across the narrow neck complicates matters when the overall demands of the narrative are considered. They criticize Sorenson’s reading of the “day and a half’s journey for a Nephite” in Alma 22:32 in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. But they do so not only without reference to the Limhi story, as we have seen, but also without reference to Sorenson’s recent acknowledgment that “several researchers have observed that the phrase in Alma 22:32, ‘from the east to the west sea,’ allows the interpretation that the journey was measured some point short of the actual east sea shore.”¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, this placement confuses the military situation in terms of distances and causes utter chaos for directions.¹⁴⁸ Much of the South American coast that is east of and within reasonable distance of Panama, the “land south” is north of the narrow neck, and the Caribbean becomes a “sea west” in relation to much of what they must suppose for the Nephite east coast. For example, Sorenson discusses marches during military operations along the east coast in Alma 51–52 and 62.¹⁴⁹ “Adding the numbers together we conclude that the southward limit of Nephite possessions along the east sea was only about eighty miles from the land northward.”¹⁵⁰ To even have an east coast south of Panama raises problems of all kinds. Sorenson’s analysis in *Mormon’s Map* calls for “the southward limit of Nephite possessions along the east sea” to be “only about eight miles from the land northward.”¹⁵¹ This raises many directional problems in having the land south extending to the north, with a coast being east of the east sea. Not only does this require a much more bizarre directional scheme than Sorenson’s, but it leads to

¹⁴⁸. Sorenson’s directions are internally consistent, and, I think, not unreasonable given the prevalence of “northward” in the text, and the “northward” orientation of the Grijalva/Sidon basin. We should place ourselves in that river basin on the ground with Mormon rather than gazing down at contemporary maps of Mesoamerica.
¹⁵⁰. Ibid., 68.
¹⁵¹. Ibid.
another problem. Sorenson next explores the question “How wide was the land southward?”¹⁵² By considering the positions of four lands—Moroni, Nephiah, Aaron, and Ammoniah—“the total width from coast to coast across the land southward comes out to be on the order of two hundred miles.”¹⁵³ But the South American coastline around Panama widens much too abruptly for this to work at all.

Vogel and Metcalfe claim that their suggested geography bottles up the Lamanites in the south in a more satisfactory fashion. However, they do not presume to show how the details of Amalickiah’s campaign might play out in Colombia according to the text descriptions of the “borders by the east sea” (Alma 52:13)¹⁵⁴—in particular, the effect that the horseshoe shape of the Golfo de Uraba ought to have on the tactical situation. They conclude, “It is hard to imagine why the ridge would be strategic enough to head off the Lamanites in view of the wider, more accessible route frequented by traders along the southern coast.”¹⁵⁵ Vogel and Metcalfe provide some information but are not completely forthcoming on the ridge and its importance. Sorenson, however, explained that:

An irregular sandstone and gravel formation appears as a ridge averaging a couple of miles wide and rising 150 to 200 feet above the surrounding country running west from the lower Coatzacoalcos River. It provides the only reliable year-round route from the isthmian/east coast area “northward” into central Veracruz. A great deal of the land on either side of this ridge is flooded periodically, as much as 12 feet deep in the rainy season. At times during that season the ridge would indeed lead “by the sea, on the west and on the east” (Alma 50:34) . . . and would have barred travel as effectively as the sea, with which the floodwaters were continuous.¹⁵⁶

152. Ibid.
153. Ibid., 69.
155. Vogel and Metcalfe, “Editors’ Introduction,” x–xi. In making this conclusion, they ignore the practical military problems of highlands and lowlands, which the Book of Mormon describes, Sorenson illustrates, and Mesoamerica fits.
156. Sorenson, Ancient American Setting, 43.
Even if Amalickiah had taken the southern route, he would still have had to go through the pass in the mountains at the narrowest point of the isthmus. If geographic factors are considered, the point at which the adjoining mountains and highlands descend to a relatively low 750-foot elevation is the only plausible location for crossing the isthmus. He must then have followed the Coatzacoalcos River (Sorenson’s “line” dividing the lands north and south) until he made it to the narrow pass leading into the north. Sorenson offers this help to those who have a hard time with the military implications:

Adding the numbers together we conclude that the southward limit of Nephite possessions along the east sea was only about eighty miles from the land northward. No wonder Amalickiah, in his plan to capture the narrow neck (see Alma 51:30), chose this east shore as his prime point of attack (the distance he would have to drive along the west coast was over 250 miles).¹⁵⁷

This fits Mesoamerica but not at all with the Panama correlation. So, Vogel and Metcalfe assert that the “hemispheric geography” of early readers of the Book of Mormon is “astute—albeit pre-critical.” By contrast, it seems to me that “astute—albeit pre-critical” is an oxymoron. Of course “the hemispheric reach . . . made perfect sense to those steeped in the mound builder myth,”¹⁵⁸ but that is because they were both “steeped in the mound builder myth” and “pre-critical.”

Some Thoughts on What Is and Is Not Ad Hoc

Vogel and Metcalfe claim that Latter-day Saint apologists have had to shore up a collapsing structure of argument by means of ad hoc hypotheses. For example, recall Vogel’s statement quoted earlier:

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¹⁵⁷. Sorenson, Mormon’s Map, 68. Compare Nathan B. Forest’s dictum, “Get there first with the most.” It is difficult to get there first with the most if you have to go three times as far on foot. Moreover, trebling the distance trebles the logistics problems.

Most of Christensen’s objections are precariously balanced on the head of one apologetic needle called the Limited Geographic Theory. This theory is not a paradigm, but rather an *ad hoc hypothesis* designed for no other reason than to rescue the Book of Mormon from the implications of adverse “empirical” evidence. The limited theory, as we will see, is maintained by a series of other ad hoc hypotheses and specialized interpretations.¹⁵⁹

In their introduction to *American Apocrypha*, Metcalfe and Vogel flourish the ad hoc label like a magic bullet. But I discussed the difference between an ad hoc hypothesis and a general hypothesis in “Paradigms Crossed.”

In practice, as Ian Barbour observes, paradigms resist falsification because “a network of theories and observations is always tested together. Any particular hypothesis can be maintained by rejecting or adjusting other auxiliary hypotheses.” Some adjustments to such auxiliary hypotheses strengthen the overall paradigm. For example, Kepler adjusted the assumptions of the Copernican theory of planetary motion by arguing for elliptical orbits rather than circular orbits. The rival Ptolemaic theory explained otherwise anomalous planetary motions by surmising epicycles. While the assumption of epicycles preserved the usefulness of the Ptolemaic theory for several generations, comparison with Kepler’s assumptions makes it plain that not all adjustments are created equal. Whereas Kepler’s adjustments led to his generally applicable laws of motion, the *ad hoc* notion of epicycles applied only to particular problems and had little justification other than necessity. The course of the Copernican Revolution shows that the “accumulation of anomalies” or of “ad hoc modifications having no independent theoretical basis cannot be tolerated

¹⁵⁹. "Vogel’s Reply to Christensen."
indefinitely. An accepted theory is overthrown not primarily by discordant data but by an alternative theory.”¹⁶⁰

The question is, do the kinds of adjustments we make to auxiliary hypotheses about geography and direction labels, the nature and extent of Joseph’s knowledge, and the various names for things, have general implications and a valid theoretical basis, or are they only for particular problems? Vogel and Metcalfe see any deviation from what they describe as “the plain meaning of the words” as ad hoc:

Historical anachronisms are plentiful. For instance, such things as steel, horses, and wheat were first imported to the Americas by the Spaniards. Apologists counter with *ad hoc* hypotheses: steel is actually iron; horses are deer; wheat is amaranth; goats are brockets; cows are deer, brockets, camelidae, or bison; and tents are makeshift huts. In short, things are not what they appear. . . . Only with increasing difficulty do apologists accept the Book of Mormon at face value.¹⁶¹

It happens that translation by inspiration and interpretation of scripture necessarily involve a higher degree of subjective interpretation than does physics. But can we honestly say that the kinds of adjustments that apologists like Sorenson make have general implications? Yes. The Book of Mormon emphasizes that we can understand the writings of the Jews as they understand them only if we learn their culture (see 2 Nephi 25:1–5). By implication, the same is true of the Mesoamerican context.

Is it possible to tie the meaning of words, particularly translated words, to a single cultural background? Frankly, no. When I went to England in 1973, I quickly learned that while many things are what they appear to be, the words for those things were sometimes not what I first thought. The roads looked the same, but I had to look a different direction when crossing them. Cars were much smaller and not only had the steering wheel on the opposite

¹⁶¹ Vogel and Metcalfe, “Editors’ Introduction,” xiii.
side but had boots and bonnets instead of trunks and hoods. There were no trucks, but there were lorries, no elevators but lifts. There were no french fries, but there were chips (which were also similar to fried potatoes). They had something like potato chips, but only if I asked for crisps. There were no cookies; what they called biscuits resembled cookies but were different from what I thought of as biscuits. And what was it to be cheeky? That sticks in my mind because I had to learn the concept of cheeky from within the culture because it could not be translated precisely from their English to mine.

The point is that what Vogel and Metcalfe call “ad hoc,” Sorenson and Gardner base on a general principle that cultural contexts can make a difference in meaning.¹⁶² Some concepts travel across cultures more easily than others, but cultural context raises issues that apply to all translations across all cultures. Their insistence that a nineteenth-century context suffices, and that an appeal to the “plain meaning” is all that is necessary to understand the text, is itself an ad hoc defense because it cannot be generally applied to critical study of any translation of any purported ancient document or, for that matter, to the study of any culture by any outsider.

Vogel as an Authority on Nephite Temples

In the final section of my 1990 essay, I challenged Vogel’s claim that the Book of Mormon contains nothing about temple ceremonies. Since I wrote, several other essays have appeared that further illuminate temple themes and ideas in the Book of Mormon.¹⁶³ Rather than explain the evidence, Vogel merely explains it away:

¹⁶². Smart, Worldviews, 22, notes that the modern study of religion “treats worldviews both historically and systematically and attempts to enter, through structured empathy, into the viewpoint of the believers.”

Christensen is particularly bothered by my comment: “The Book of Mormon actually gives few details of the observance of the law. It mentions temples but not the ceremonies, priests but not their robes or temple duties.” Despite Christensen’s reference to the works of various apologists, there is no explicit mention of specific points in the Mosaic law.¹⁶⁴

For the record, the apologists in question describe passages that show implicit awareness of specific elements of Mosaic law and a particular affinity for Deuteronomy. Cyrus Gordon and Gary Rendsburg note that, “throughout the ancient Near East, law codes were disregarded in actual life. . . . The judges regularly omit any reference to codes in their court decisions in Mesopotamia. They are instead guided by tradition, public opinions, and common sense.”¹⁶⁵ Hence, from the perspective of these scholars, the dearth of references to the law before the exile reflects the tendencies of the culture. Further, they argue that, “aside from cultic matters, the actual enforcement of the Law came as a result of the Exile, and we find it in effect only after the Exile when it becomes an integral part of Judaism down to modern times.”¹⁶⁶ The Book of Mormon emphasizes the exodus and cultic matters rather than the details of the law, which means, contrary to Vogel’s assertion, that things are as they should be in a text rooted in preexilic understandings, yet influenced by Josiah’s rediscovery of the law.

¹⁶⁴. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹⁶⁶. Ibid., 272.
Identifying the Great and Abominable: A Case for Method and Context

Vogel disputes my use of Stephen E. Robinson’s excellent article “Early Christianity and 1 Nephi 13–14,” which shows that the “great and abominable church,” or the “whore of all the earth,” in 1 Nephi 13–14 cannot be the Catholic Church.¹⁶⁷ According to Vogel, “Nephi’s description is based on Revelation 17–18, which many Protestants in Smith’s day interpreted as a reference to the Latin or Roman church and its successor the Roman Catholic Church.”¹⁶⁸ But where did the image in Revelation come from? If we look at the preexilic temple traditions, which John knew, we find the “people as harlot” image conveniently available to Nephi.¹⁶⁹

Lamanites in the Book of Mormon

Vogel says I am completely wrong about his treatment of Lamanites:

Regarding my reference to Enos’s description of the Lamanites as half-naked savages (1:20), Christensen accuses me of implying that “all Lamanites of all periods and lineages and political affiliations fit that description.” This is completely false. I limited my comments to that specific passage, introducing it as follows: “The Book of Mormon’s description of the Lamanites sometimes sounds like an exaggerated

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¹⁶⁸. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹⁶⁹. For example, Jeremiah 2:20; 3:1, 6; 13:27; Proverbs 2:16–19; 6:24–26; Ezekiel 16:15, 22–36. Compare Margaret Barker, The Revelation of Jesus Christ: Which God Gave to Him to Show to His Servants What Soon Must Take Place (Revelation 1.1) (Edinburgh: Clark, 2000), 67, explaining that Ezekiel and Revelation both come from temple priests standing in the same tradition.
version of contemporary stereotypes about North American Indians.” Christensen’s reference to Sorenson’s opinion that Nephite epithets “sound like Near Eastern epithets and ‘probably should be considered a literary formula rather than an objective description’” is irrelevant.¹⁷⁰

If Vogel wants to rely on “sometimes,” he is welcome. I concede. However, my point was and remains that the Book of Mormon contradicts such stereotypes in the narratives of the sons of Mosiah—who provide the only extended look at Lamanite culture from the inside—and in the accounts of the righteous Lamanite cultures in Helaman, in the Samuel and Gadianton narratives, and in 3 Nephi and 4 Nephi. Vogel neglects to mention these, and that neglect is relevant.

Blake Ostler’s Expansion Theory and Vogel’s Shrinking Plates

Back in 1987, Blake Ostler proposed a theory of Book of Mormon translation that suggested Midrashic expansion and interpretation as part of the translation.¹⁷¹ Controversial though it has been, a number of committed Saints find it helpful. Writing in 1990, I offered Ostler’s theory as a model of a comprehensive approach because it provided a serious attempt to account for comparisons to both the ancient world and the world of the nineteenth century. Yet what was a cutting-edge theory in 1987 had already begun to be dated when I wrote. Vogel responds to Ostler thusly:

Ostler admits the presence of nineteenth-century ideas and sources in the Book of Mormon but attempts to explain them away by suggesting that they are Joseph Smith’s inspired “expansion” of an ancient source. Ostler has only taken B. H. Roberts’s conceptual translation theory a step further to include non-biblical sources. However, both theories are nothing more than an ad hoc hypothesis designed to save the Book of

¹⁷⁰ “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Mormon from adverse evidence. Ostler has introduced what I call the “shrinking plates” hypothesis, meaning the more we learn about Joseph Smith’s environment, the smaller the plates have to be to contain the original source upon which Smith expanded. I am not sure how Ostler’s theory can accommodate the Mound Builder myth, however. Needless to say, neither Ostler nor Christensen broach that subject.¹⁷²

Most of Ostler’s “expansions” respond to the same kinds of anomalies that Alexander Campbell brought up in 1831. The Book of Mormon seemed too Christian before Christ, a circumstance that critically violates the Mound Builder myth. I expect that if Ostler were to update his paper in light of Royal Skousen’s work on the translation¹⁷³ and with respect to Margaret Barker’s picture of preexilic Judaism,¹⁷⁴ Vogel would find the plates expanding toward their original size. Indeed, Ostler states his current view as follows:

As new evidence surfaces indicating that primary ideas previously thought to be Christian were in fact excised from the preexilic text, the content of the plates rather than Joseph Smith’s midrashic expansion should grow. In my original article, I suggested, for example, that the phraseology of secret societies in the Book of Mormon seemed to be nineteenth century—it turns out that a lot of what I suggested was nineteenth century may well be explainable in terms of ancient counterparts. By the way, I don’t credit Vogel’s theory with any explanatory ability at all—the Book of Mormon does not discuss a Mound-Building culture, and nothing that Vogel

¹⁷². “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹⁷⁴. See, for example, Margaret Barker, “What King Josiah Reformed,” in Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem, 523–42; and Barker, The Great Angel: A Study of Israel’s Second God (London: SPCK, 1992), 12–27.
has said, even at great length and verbosity, persuades me in the least that the Book of Mormon was addressing the Mound Builders in any way—not even in the sense that they were discussed in the nineteenth century. He’s just off the mark in my view.¹⁷⁵

I wanted to comment on Vogel’s potshot that the expansion theory of the Book of Mormon is ad hoc. A theory is ad hoc if it is not indicated or supported by any evidence but is merely an explanatory device to save a theory from its own problems. However, Vogel hasn’t made any attempt to account for the evidence of an ancient source that I discussed. He hasn’t provided anything like an adequate explanation of the covenant renewal festivals that are rather clearly present in the Book of Mormon. He hasn’t even discussed the Hebrew judicial procedures that are accurately presented in Abinadi’s trial and in Samuel the Lamanite’s prophetic lawsuit against the Nephites. He has failed altogether to discuss the prophetic call form that I identified. It is easy to call a theory ad hoc if one simply ignores all the evidence that disagrees with one’s own position, as Vogel does. His own theory—that Joseph Smith drew on the nineteenth-century culture for Primitivist Christian elements and on Mound-Building theories in particular—is extremely weak and doesn’t even begin to account for the contrary evidence that others and I have discussed. His judgments are based on his own blinders. I arrived at my theory after taking a look at the evidence and asking what kind of explanation is necessary to explain what I see. In my view, that is how theories are developed. Vogel, on the other hand, started from the commitment that the Book of Mormon had to be a nineteenth-century work and simply went looking for anything that would support his prejudices (that is also a problem with eisegesis).¹⁷⁶

¹⁷⁵. Blake Ostler, e-mail correspondence to Kevin Christensen, 20 October 2002.
¹⁷⁶. Blake Ostler, second e-mail correspondence to Kevin Christensen, 20 October 2002.
Despite Vogel’s claims in *Indian Origins* and Vogel and Metcalfe’s claims in their introduction to *American Apocrypha*, those American divines who approved of the Mound Builder myth’s notion of a lost ten tribes origin for indigenous populations typically did not see remnants of Christianity among the natives. For example, *View of the Hebrews* reports an 1824 interview with an “old and venerable [Delaware] chief”:

He was asked to state what he knew of Jesus Christ¹⁷⁷ the Son of God. He replied that “he knew but little about him. For his part, he knew there was one God. He did not know about two Gods.” This evidence needs no comment to show that it appears to be Israelitish tradition, in relation to the one God, to heaven, hell, the devil, and to marriage, as taught in the Old Testament, as well as God’s estimation of the proud, rich, and the poor. These things he assures us came down from their ancestors, before ever any white man appeared in America. But the great peculiarity which white men would naturally teach them (if they taught any thing,) that Jesus Christ the Son of God is the Saviour of the world, he honestly confesses he knew not this part of the subject.¹⁷⁸

Vogel attempts to slip past the obstacle that pre-Christian knowledge in the Book of Mormon presents to the Mound Builder myth by relating some speculations about St. Thomas having taught the gospel in the New World. He also suggests that the Quetzalcoatl figure that Ethan Smith identified with Moses could become the Christ figure in 3 Nephi.¹⁷⁹ However, the reason that Ethan Smith identified Quetzalcoatl with Moses was that identifying him with Christ was unthinkable, given the parameters of the Mound Builder myth. However much Alexander Campbell saw the Book of Mormon as a reaction to the discussions of the times, on the point of Christian knowledge before Christ he

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¹⁷⁷. Notice that Smith, in “B. H. Roberts,” 139, cites a discussion of this passage as suggesting “the possibility of the Indians knowing something of the Christ.” It seems to be strange logic to use a denial by a knowledgeable source to suggest a possibility.


merely rants against it as absurd.¹⁸⁰ But in light of very recent research and discovery, Joseph Smith looks inspired.¹⁸¹

On Translation: Vogel and the Either-or Fallacy

After discussing my 1990 comments on translation issues, Vogel says:

This touches on a current problem in Book of Mormon apologetics: attempting to use the conceptual translation theory to explain the Book of Mormon’s anachronistic use of the Bible, while at the same time employing proofs that require a literal

¹⁸⁰. Alexander Campbell, *Delusions: An Analysis of the Book of Mormon* (Boston: Greene, 1832). Compare D. Michael Quinn’s remark: “Another common criticism of the Book of Mormon relates to its unusually extensive pre-Christian knowledge of Jesus Christ. . . . However, such details were consistent with previously published occult content in pseudepigraphic writings. Ten years before Smith published his translation of the Book of Mormon, Richard Laurence published his translation of the Ascent of Isaiah.” D. Michael Quinn, *Early Mormonism and the Magic World View*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1998), 210. Quinn’s endnote specifies that the text in question was published in England in 1819; it was referred to in an 1825 volume called *Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 211). Quinn claims that “various Book of Mormon details therefore were not unusual within the preexisting literature about heavenly ascent and about Enoch” (Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, 211). Quinn does not discuss the complexities of the ritual and historical context in which the details appear—that is, the Book of Mormon does not just describe the details that he lists, and many more besides, but it also accounts for those details via a specific view of history, places them in a specific historical tradition rooted in a crucial time and place, offers them within a complex ritual context, and describes both the loss and recovery of those plain and precious things in prophetic passages. See my “Paradigms Regained,” *FARMS Occasional Papers* 2 (2001): 15–25. Quinn does not specify whether or not Joseph Smith obtained or was influenced by a knowledge of the Ascension of Isaiah or by access to an American Bible commentary, being content to publicly face the remote possibility—the mark of a real scholar (see Quinn, *Early Mormonism*, xi). Quinn also gives no examples of any Book of Mormon critics or defenders in the first generations ever calling attention to such potential sources. Compared to Joseph Smith, Abner Cole the newspaper editor, John Gilbert the printer, or Alexander Campbell the second-generation religious leader seems far more likely to have encountered such materials, in terms of educational background and financial capability. Nor did any of Joseph’s neighbors, nor his family, who presumably would have had equivalent access, ever suggest such sources. The rise of the Spalding theory shows that Joseph’s critics had the will to track down any promising rumor and to expose any potential source.

translation. Christensen’s resolution is to side with the literal translation and assert that all anachronisms can be explained by a missing ancient document common to both the Book of Mormon and New Testament. This is simply ad hoc hypothesesizing at its worst.¹⁸²

Part of the problem is that translation as literal versus conceptual cannot be an either-or proposition. It is more a matter of balancing how literal and how conceptual a translation should be given the need to express the original in a different language and culture, and the need to rely upon translator vocabulary and understanding. I must also wonder where in my writing Vogel is looking when he describes my “resolution.” For the record, I do not believe that all anachronisms can be explained by reference to “a missing ancient document” common to the Book of Mormon and New Testament, although evidence of such possibilities has come forth.¹⁸³ In my 1990 response to Vogel, I refuted George D. Smith’s favorite anachronisms and one of Blake Ostler’s examples by demonstrating that they had both overlooked a number of existing (not missing) ancient documents.¹⁸⁴ More recently, I encountered the work of Margaret Barker. Unexpectedly, and independent of Mormon apologetics, she cuts a wide swath though the literature that alleges anachronism in the Book of Mormon.¹⁸⁵

More Vogel versus Sorenson

Vogel shows disfavor with Sorenson’s 1973 article “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex” by means of a most revealing display of technique. He lowers the bar for himself, while raising the bar for Sorenson. With respect to his own parallels, he claims that “the historical and literary critic seeks evidence of environmental influence, not exact replication.”¹⁸⁶ and further that “one should not push

¹⁸². “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
¹⁸³. John Tvedtnes, The Most Correct Book (Salt Lake City: Cornerstone, 1999), 328–43.
too hard for exact parallels,” and “one must allow that the Myth was adapted.”¹⁸⁷ But in looking at Sorenson’s parallels, up the bar goes, and he allows no such flexibility:

To show a belief in the “underworlds,” Sorenson refers to the Book of Mormon’s use of “depths of hell” and “down to hell,” both of which have parallel phrases in the Bible (compare 1 Ne. 12:16, 14:3 with Prov. 9:18; Job 11:8). While such Book of Mormon passages have links to the Near East through the Bible, neither the Bible nor the Book of Mormon can be linked to the Mayan religion, which is more complex than Sorenson lets on. The Maya believed the earth rests on the back of a huge alligator, that there are thirteen horizontal levels of the heavens, each one of which has a certain god residing, and nine underworlds ruled by nine lords of the night. Of course, these ideas are foreign to the Book of Mormon, which is better understood in the context of early American Protestant theology.¹⁸⁸

One wonders why Vogel would expect that the teachings of migrants from Jerusalem should not have links to the Near East through the Bible, or that they should agree with the later Mayan view on all points any more than the Jews would agree on all points with the Canaanites or the Egyptians.

However, far from ignoring such differences between nineteenth-century conceptions and ancient Mesoamerican conceptions of the underworld, Sorenson explains that “a monster (earth monster, leviathan) inhabited these [subterranean] waters. The back of the monster supported or was the earth layer.”¹⁸⁹ Sorenson finds a comparable image in this passage.

¹⁸⁷. Ibid., 291; “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.” Compare this sentence: “One should view such elements as a reflection of Joseph Smith’s imagination—his attempt to create for readers frightening images of what Masonry could become.” Ibid. Consider also, “the apologetic demand for an exact correspondence between Masonry and Gadianton bands is unnecessary and irrelevant.” Vogel, “Echoes of Anti-Masonry,” 312.
¹⁸⁸. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
O how great the goodness of our God, who prepareth a way for our escape from the grasp of this awful monster; yea, that monster, death and hell, which I call the death of the body, and also the death of the spirit.

And because of the way of deliverance of our God, the Holy One of Israel, this death, of which I have spoken, which is the temporal, shall deliver up its dead; which death is the grave.

And this death of which I have spoken, which is the spiritual death, shall deliver up its dead; which spiritual death is hell; wherefore, death and hell must deliver up their dead, and hell must deliver up its captive spirits, and the grave must deliver up its captive bodies, and the bodies and the spirits of men will be restored one to the other; and it is by the power of the resurrection of the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 9:10–12)

So we have Sorenson showing that the Book of Mormon imagery in this instance actually fits nicely, not necessarily in the later Mayan particulars, but in Mesoamerican generalities.

Further, rather than seeing Jacob’s teachings as merely reflecting nineteenth-century Protestant thought, one would expect Vogel to claim that such thinking was out of place in preexilic Judaism. Alexander Campbell, writing in 1831, condemned the Book of Mormon prophets as having too much Christian knowledge before Christ. Yet Jacob’s discourse turns out to fit the picture that Margaret Barker paints of the First Temple tradition¹⁹⁰—as it should, since Jacob was a temple priest. John Tvedtnes cites a passage from Justin Martyr: “And again, from the sayings of the same Jeremiah these have been cut out [by the Jews]: ‘The Lord God remembered His dead people of Israel who lay in the graves; and He descended to preach to them His own salvation.’”¹⁹¹ Jeremiah was a contemporary of Lehi, and all this goes to show that Sorenson’s case is stronger than Vogel thinks. It would also help if Vogel acknowledged that Sorenson labors not to “prove”

¹⁹⁰. See, for example, Margaret Barker, The Great High Priest (London: Clark, 2003), 47, compared to 2 Nephi 9:5–7; and Barker, The Older Testament (London: SPCK, 1987), 119–21, compared to 2 Nephi 9 and Jacob’s use of the title “the Holy One of Israel.”
historicity, but rather to understand the Book of Mormon in its context.¹⁹² Vogel generalizes his criticisms from what he deems Sorenson’s weakest arguments without ever admitting or confronting Sorenson’s strongest arguments, both describing Sorenson’s comparisons as “a mixture of things that may be important as evidence and others that are not important” and dismissing his arguments, for “there is nothing compelling about Sorenson’s evidence.”¹⁹³ Since it would be hard to explain in terms of Protestant theology, Vogel gives no notice to Sorenson’s observation that in Mesoamerica “just seven lineages were considered primary in the origin story of the people.”¹⁹⁴ Obviously nothing in Sorenson’s work seems to compel Vogel, but Kuhn observes that “the transfer of allegiance from paradigm to paradigm is a conversion experience that cannot be forced.”¹⁹⁵

A Mesoamerican Approach for Comparison

Vogel continues to claim that “the Mound Builder myth is real and any impartial reader can see the similarity it has to the Book of Mormon’s historical premise. Moreover, there is nothing the apologists can bring forward from Mesoamerica as striking as the Mound Builder myth.”¹⁹⁶ Let’s test these claims. To assert that we have nothing “as striking” implies a comparison. Vogel does not supply one, but I will here quote some insightful comments from Brant Gardner on the Book of Mormon in its Old World and Mesoamerican settings.¹⁹⁷ I invite readers to compare these observations with Vogel’s nineteenth-century parallels and decide for themselves which are most striking. Opinions may differ since a determination of “nothing . . . as striking” must necessarily involve subjective valuation. Gardner argues:

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193. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
194. Sorenson, "Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex," 5.
195. Kuhn, Structure of Scientific Revolutions, 151.
196. “Vogel’s Reply to Christensen.”
Geography

A discussion of geography is critical because there is so much geographical description in the Book of Mormon that a failure to locate its settings anywhere in the world would be a serious problem. There are two general locations in the Book of Mormon, the Old World and the New.

The Old World description concerns the journey from Jerusalem to Bountiful, and three major geographic markers have been correlated to this part of the narration. The first is the river that continually runs to the sea. A plausible location for the river that fits both the travel distance from Jerusalem and the requirement that it continually flow to the sea has been found.¹⁹⁸

The second geographic marker, Nahom, also fits into the travel parameters of Lehi’s group. A location called NHM belongs to the correct time period, and all indications point to its being located in the right place.¹⁹⁹

The third location to be identified is Bountiful. Several characteristics are required of this location, and a plausible site has been identified. In addition, the descriptions of the travel fit. For example, S. Kent Brown sees evidence of night travel in the Book of Mormon text, which is the preferred time to travel in that area.²⁰⁰

The Old World geography places these key geographic markers in the correct locations to match the descriptions of travel given in the text. The geographical descriptions form an interrelated set of conditions that must all be met, and they are. Troy was found with such a set.

A discussion of New World geography, however, must begin with less surety because we don’t have the beginning

point, such as Jerusalem, to tie the geography to the text. However, the text provides a rather consistent internal map. I defer to John Sorenson here, as his geographic analysis is extensive, and I have never seen it seriously assailed.²⁰¹ The typical disagreement is the location of Cumorah, and that is minor in the total assessment of the geographic correlations.

The Sorenson summary discusses the following points:
1. Consistent determinable distances
2. Consistent topographical descriptions
3. Correlation to a known geography, including mountains, valleys, and rivers
4. Plausible correlation to known topographical relationships (“up” and “down” are consistent with physical directional movement and fit with the topography of the area)
5. Plausible archaeological remains for many of the named cities that C-14 tests (and sometimes Maya Long Count) date to Book of Mormon times
6. Parallels to the known distribution of cultural groups, particularly linguistic groups (and regions of interaction)

**Cultural Correlation**

Having a plausible location now requires the examination of the text of the Book of Mormon to see whether or not it fits into that cultural area. In this instance a few more operating assumptions need to be specified:

1. Based on known history of the New World and known modes of cultural interaction, it is expected that the Book of Mormon people (who entered with relatively few numbers) would have been absorbed into the material culture that already existed. What is more, they also would have absorbed the local languages as the common spoken language.
2. “Nephite” and “Lamanite” are polity designations, not lineage designations (there is ample textual evidence for this as people move from one group to the other).

²⁰¹ Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*. 
3. While the Nephites attempted to preserve a Mosaic religion, that was not the case for the surrounding cultures. It is in the conflicts with those outside cultures that we have the opportunity for the best information about the nature of the majority culture of the New World.

Beginning with that foundation, here is a set of cultural correspondences and explanations that come from the Mesoamerican cultural context in which the Book of Mormon may be plausibly placed:

1. The Lehites entered the area during the middle of the Preclassic period, a time of broad changes in the Maya civilization. City size was increasing and society was growing more complex. The general trend was toward greater social differentiation and the beginnings of kingship in Maya city-states. This trend is mirrored in the conflicts witnessed as early as the book of Jacob. The twin evils against which Jacob preaches—polygamy and acquisition of wealth (when it leads to social differentiation)—have both been identified in this time period in Mesoamerica. (Interestingly, polygamy is directly linked to one of the mechanisms of accumulation of wealth at this time, and the function of wealth is to create social differentiation.)

2. The early description of economic matters is enigmatic in the Book of Mormon unless we have the Mesoamerican background. In particular, Jacob speaks against costly apparel (Jacob 2:13). This is a situation that should not exist in a society where everyone makes their own clothing from local materials and dyes. However, it fits into the trade context of Mesoamerica, where clothing was one of the most obvious modes of displaying wealth and social differentiation. Thus this Book of Mormon emphasis on the evils of costly apparel has a direct explanation in the cultural pressures of Mesoamerica at this time.

3. In multiple instances, a Nephite describes the Lamanites as lazy and uncivilized. These negative portrayals occur...
along with descriptions of Lamanite cities that appear more powerful than Nephite cities. This pejorative catalog even gets repeated by Mormon in his abridgment, when it is obviously incorrect. However, the presence of the pejorative characterization is anthropologically accurate for time and place. Rather than attributing it to authorial error, it can be viewed as an accurate replication of typical in-group prejudices that occur in most human populations.

4. The Book of Mormon describes a political situation that fits Mesoamerica but is not universal to other areas of the world (though it is not completely unknown). Mesoamerican cities had their own governments, but they were typically grouped into spheres of influence. In particular, we have descriptions of kings ruling over kings among the Lamanites. This is precisely the relationship of Mesoamerican cities as the king-forms were developing. The various fissions and fusions of the Book of Mormon hegemonies accurately reflect the nature of Mesoamerican politics.

5. The shift from king to judges in Zarahemla reflects an institutional implementation of a political structure that already existed in those kingships that did continue. Even in the king-led polities, there were kin-group leaders who served as the judges and intermediate rulers. These appear to function as do the judges in Zarahemla and in some later cultures did replace the kings. Thus the process and presence of judges in Zarahemla is a parallel of known culture. To this it should be added that the mechanism described in the Book of Mormon reflects the more Mesoamerican mode of “judges” in that the position was hereditary. In spite of the critics’ occasional assertions of a voting democracy in the Book of Mormon, it did not exist.

6. The nature of economics in the Book of Mormon fits the Mesoamerican cultural setting. The lack of a monetary system shifted the nature of wealth accumulation. This is apparent in the constant problem in the Book of Mormon of
wealth directly leading to social hierarchies—this is because wealth was defined in terms of displayable goods, not monetary accumulation. In addition, the relationships between conquered cities fit the Mesoamerican model of the establishment of tribute payment rather than political domination. When a city is conquered, there is no real effort to acquire territory, but rather to secure the tribute. Thus the Book of Mormon emphasizes the nature of the taxation—which again is the relinquishing of material, not money.

7. Descriptions of warfare in the Book of Mormon fit the Mesoamerican model. This includes seasonality of fighting, weaponry, tactics, defensive structures, body armament, and the nature of the conclusion of the warfare.²⁰²

8. The descriptions of daily life fit a Mesoamerican context. Amulek’s description of his household (Alma 10:11) corresponds nicely with a Mesoamerican home compound. And when Nephi’s compound is described (Helaman 7:11), it fits the description of the home of a powerful person living in the city center—including a personal pyramid (“tower”), a walled court, and a location near the highway leading to a main market (multiple markets were known to exist in single cities).

9. The description of the events of Benjamin’s speech fits not only the cultural climate but explains the anomalous base of a temple built in the plausible city of Zarahemla at the time of the speech.

10. Mormon’s description of a land north of Nephite lands that is devoid of trees, has buildings of cement, and is in a land of large lakes and many rivers points directly to Teotihuacán, which fits all of those qualifications during the required time period.

11. The particular destructions described at the time of Jesus’s death fit the description of a highly explosive volcano (and no other phenomenon). Correlations include the length

²⁰² See Ricks and Hamblin, eds., Warfare in the Book of Mormon.
of time of the tremors and the thickness and duration of the darkness. Mesoamerica is along the ring of fire, one of the most volatile volcanic areas in the world, and we know of at least two major volcanic explosions at the time of Christ. Dating volcanic explosions that far back can be difficult, so there might have been more. The fact does exist, however, that the descriptions in the Book of Mormon fit volcanic activity, and volcanic activity is known for that area of the world and for that time.²⁰³

12. The incident of the Anti-Nephi-Lehies has a direct and complete explanation in a Mesoamerican context, a cultural explanation that even explains the lightning raid that destroyed Ammonihah (Alma 16:1–3)—otherwise an anomalous event in the Book of Mormon.²⁰⁴

13. The location of Zarahemla in the Grijalva River valley not only fits the geography and topography, but it links the major linguistic groups. The Nephites entered a Mayan-speaking area. The Mulekites entered a Mixe-Zoque speaking area. The movement of the Mulekites/Zarahemlaites up the Grijalva valley parallels the known movement of Zoque (a daughter language of Mixe-Zoque) up that valley. This explains why the Nephites and the Zarahemlaites spoke different languages when there was insufficient time for an unintelligible divergence from Hebrew to have occurred. (In only four hundred years some vocabulary would change, but the languages would still have been mutually intelligible.)

14. The Book of Mormon places the Jaredite civilization north of Nephite territories and earlier in time. The geography and time-depth match the geographic and time distribution


of the Olmec. The Jaredites would have participated in Olmec culture just as the Nephites participated in later culture.

15. The rapid increase in militarism noted at the end of the Book of Mormon parallels the known historical rise in militarism in all of Mesoamerica at the same time period.

As I have noted before, the important facet of all of these key points is that they all stem from a single explanatory model. Each of them is dependent on a single geographic area and a particular time period.

Against these correspondences, what do we have that might be counterindications? We have the specific descriptive problems of swords, silk, horses, chariots, etc.²⁰⁵ I find it much easier to explain these as labeling problems than to find an alternate explanation for the type of detailed correlation listed above.²⁰⁶

**Current Conclusions**

Vogel's Mound Builder approach neither predicts nor accounts for any of this. Given that knowledge of Central America and the Ancient Near East was meager in Joseph Smith’s day, why does present-day understanding offer so much? Why do aspects of the Book of Mormon that especially outraged Joseph’s educated contemporaries like Alexander Campbell turn out in light of recent research and discoveries to fit so well into the ancient world?


²⁰⁶. End of Brant Gardner quotation. My thanks for his permission to use it. Notice that Gardner deals with “puzzles” the way Kuhn and Barbour would, assessing them within a network of assumptions and evidences, and not in Vogel’s positivist-empiricist manner.
Latter-day Saint scholarship does progress by investigating and responding to criticisms, sometimes correcting the misperceptions of our critics, sometimes learning by examining our own preconceptions in light of criticisms and making adjustments. Sometimes it is healthy to be reminded that not everyone sees things the same way, that we make mistakes too, and that both parties can be surprised by new information. Do I accept my critics’ perspectives? No. My own studies over the past thirty years teach me more and more that I can trust my testimony.