

Possible "Silk" and "Linen" in the Book of Mormon

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Alma 1:29 "They began to be exceedingly rich, having . . . abundance of silk and fine-twined linen, and all manner of good homely cloth."

The question has arisen from both believers and non-believers in the Book of Mormon, what can be meant by the reference in Alma 1:29 to "silk and fine-twined linen"? Some critics have maintained that neither silk nor linen was known in pre-Columbian America. At the other extreme, one LDS writer has maintained that the actual East Asian complex of getting silk from worms eating mulberry leaves must have been known among the Nephites.¹ The question invites us to look at the possible meanings of the Nephite terms from which these two words may have been translated. Both English words are broad enough to cover types of cloths present in the Americas during Book of Mormon times.

Linen is defined as a cloth, often quite stiffish and hard-wearing, made of fibers from flax or hemp plants prepared by soaking and pounding. Although the flax plant was apparently not known in pre-Spanish America, several fabrics were made from vegetable fabrics that look and feel much like European linen. One was made from fibers (called *henequen*) of the leaf of the ixtle (maguey or agave plant), but fibers from the yucca and other plants gave similar results. Conquistador Bernal Diaz said of *henequen* garments that they were "like linen."² Bark cloth, made by stripping bark from the fig tree and soaking and pounding it, was common in Mesoamerica and also has some of the characteristics of linen.³

Dictionaries define *silk* as a "fine, lustrous fiber produced by the larvae of certain insects." It refers especially to the fiber from which an Asian moth, *Bombyx mori*, spins its cocoon, but also to cloth more generally "something silklike." Silk from cocoons gathered from the wild in Mexico and spun into expensive cloth at the time of the Spanish conquest provides the most literal parallel to Asiatic "silk."⁴

Interestingly, problems of labeling and of variant faunal sources are encountered in interpreting references in early Greek sources to "silk." William Forbes has argued that the description of the silkworm in Aristotle and other sources actually represents a conflation of two types of silkworm native to southeastern Europe (with no direct connection to the Far East). The fibers were prepared by carding rather than by reeling them off the cocoon.⁵ Gisela Richter holds that the thin, soft, diaphanous cloth called by the classical Greeks *amorginon* was in fact silk produced by wild silk moths on only two small Greek islands.⁶ So the term *silk* may describe a number of fine, silky fabrics.

Silklike fiber (*kapok*) from the pod of the Ceiba (or "silk-cotton") tree was gathered in Yucatan and spun; this seems to be what Landa referred to as "silk."⁷ Father Clavigero said of this *kapok* that it was "as soft and delicate, and perhaps more so, than silk."⁸

Furthermore, the silky fiber of the wild pineapple plant was prized in tropical America; it yielded a fiber, "finer and perhaps more durable than agave (*henequen*), derived from the *pita floja* ('silk-grass,' *aecmea magdalенаe*)."⁹

Moreover, a silklike fabric was made by the Aztecs from fine rabbit hair.¹⁰ But even cotton cloth was sometimes woven so fine that specimens excavated at Teotihuacan and dating to the fourth century A.D. have been characterized as “of irreproachable evenness, woven . . . exceedingly fine,” and “of gossamer thinness.”¹¹ Aztec cloths “like damask” (a figured fabric of silk, linen, or wool) were inventoried by the Spaniards.¹²

Mesoamerica evidently exhibits almost an embarrassment of riches for the “silk” and “linen” of Alma 1:29. All but the most trivializing critics should be satisfied with the parallels. There is no need to look beyond the mark to seek traces in ancient America of the flax plant or mulberry trees.

Based on research by John L. Sorenson, November 1988.

Footnotes

1. Maurice W. Connell, “The Prophet Said Silk,” *Improvement Era* 65 (May 1962): 324-35.
2. See Alfred Maudslay, trans., *Bernal Diaz del Castillo, The Discovery and Conquest of Mexico* (New York: Farrer, Straus and Cudahy, 1956), 24.
3. Irmgard W. Johnson, “Basketry and Textiles,” *Handbook of Middle American Indians* 10, no. 1 (1971): 301-21.
4. Johnson, “Basketry and Textiles,” 312; Matthew Wallrath, “Excavations in the Tehuantepec Region, Mexico,” *American Philosophical Society Transactions* 57, no. 2 (Philadelphia, 1967): 12.
5. William T. M. Forbes, “The Silkworm of Aristotle,” *Classical Philology* 25 (1930): 22-26.
6. Gisela M. A. Richter, “Silk in Greece,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 33 (1929): 27-33. See also *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, Illinois: Inter-Varsity, 1982), 1112, mentioning a species of moth that feeds on cypress and oak trees on the island of Cos from which an ancient silk industry arose.
7. Alfred M. Tozzer, ed., *Landa’s Relacion de las Cosas de Yucatan*, Paper 18 (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology, 1941), 201; he used the term “silk” for that introduced by the Spaniards, 205.
8. Francesco Saverino Clavigero, *History of Mexico* 1, Charles Cullen, trans. (Philadelphia: Thomas Dobson, 1817), 41.
9. Felix W. McBryde, “Cultural and Historical Geography of Southwest Guatemala,” *Smithsonian Institute, Institute of Social Anthropology*, 4 (1947): 149; William E. Safford, “Food Plants and Textiles of Ancient America,” *Proceeding of the 19th International Congress of Americanists* (1917): 17.
10. Johnson, “Basketry and Textiles,” 312.

¹¹ Elisabeth Stromberg, in Sigvald Linné, ed., *Mexican Highland Cultures*, Stockholm Ethnographic Museum of Sweden Publications 7 (1942): 157-60.

¹² Marshall Saville, *The Goldsmith's Art in Ancient Mexico*, Heye Foundation, Indian Notes and Monographs (New York: Museum of the American Indian, 1920), 79.