

The Marketplace

"[Nephi's tower] was in the garden of Nephi, which was by the highway which led to the chief market, which was in the city of Zarahemla." (Helaman 7:10)

In relating the story of the prophet Nephi's praying on his tower after returning to his home in Zarahemla from the land northward, Mormon adds a seemingly immaterial description of the tower's location when he places it "in the garden of Nephi, which was by the highway which led to the chief market" (Helaman 7:10). Significantly, this is the only place in the Book of Mormon where the word *market* appears.

One hardly notices the words *chief market* in this particular chapter, and upon deeper perusal of the verse, the use of the two words at first seems unnecessary. Why add this description? If Joseph Smith were authoring the book, there would be no need to include such a description. In fact, any unusual word or description could jeopardize the integrity of the work. After all, the native Americans with whom he was familiar had no marketplaces!

We can, however, draw several conclusions from Mormon's inclusion of the phrase *chief market*. First, the description was important to include, since he was limited for space and therefore would have included only words, phrases, and events that he felt were significant.¹ Also, this description signifies that cities in this time period not only had more than one market, but that one of the markets was either larger or more significant than the others.

If we look at Mesoamerica, the area most current Latter-day Saint scholars believe is the land of the Book of Mormon, we find that reference to a market (marketplace) is not only proper but crucial to Mormon's description of Nephi's praying and its effect upon the people. Some two million Maya live in Mesoamerica today. They hold close to their old ways, practicing their traditional skills of farming and craftwork and seldom marrying outside the Maya natives. The marketplace is a continuing and important part of their culture. Most Mesoamerican scholars acknowledge the existence of marketplaces in ancient Mesoamerica. J. Eric Thompson comments, "The present-day markets of highland Guatemala are enchanting, colorful, and thought-provoking, but they are but pale shadows of the markets in pre-Columbian times."² Willey indicates that "the high development of the market as an institution and the rise of specialized merchants is distinctively Mesoamerican," and "markets were emphasized in native Mesoamerica as they are today."³

The ancient Mesoamerican markets were probably held out in the open. They were generally located in the main plaza or courtyards next to the temples, just as they are located near churches today. In most of these markets, the merchants would have little cover over their stalls other than those made of straw or wood. This material, of course, would not endure the ravages of time to tell us the precise size and placement of their markets.

Many scholars also acknowledge the existence of main or central (chief) marketplaces as well as satellite or smaller markets in large towns or cities. A decade ago John L. Sorenson cited statements supporting this concept by Richard Blanton and Stephen Kowaleski, Rene Millon, George Corogill, Paula H. and G. R. Krotser, and Edward Calnek.⁴

Other scholars have noted the same phenomenon. Nash, commenting on present-day life in middle America, states, "Around the major market are a series of market places" which "specialize in a given produce or commodity

and . . . carry a reduced selection of the goods available in the central market.”⁵ According to Morley and Brainerd, “the most important economic institution of the ancient Maya was the centralized market.”⁶ Ross Hassig’s research reveals “the possibility of a central market” near Monte Alban’s north slope.⁷ William Sanders notes at Tlatelolco, “aside from the main market there were numerous local food markets all over the city.”⁸ After a four-year study of the settlement pattern of the Maya city of Sayil comprising a site of some 4.5 square kilometers, Sabloff and Tourtellot developed a map of the site, displaying what they believe “might have been the central marketplace.”⁹

Bernal Diaz’s account of the “great market” of Tlatelolco is probably the earliest firsthand description of a Mesoamerican market. Diaz gives a very vivid account, including the size and complexity of the markets, the variety of goods found therein, and even descriptions of the judges and constables who supervised these activities. His fellow soldiers, who had been in many parts of the world, commented that “they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so full of people.” Interestingly, in this same dialogue Diaz also comments on the beauty and number of Montezuma’s gardens and describes the courts and enclosures on the road to the market.¹⁰

I have walked on market day on the rocky gravel road leading to the chief market in San Juan Chamula, Guatemala. Early in the morning the road was busy. Men and women were on their way to sell and purchase wares. Many walked barefoot, proudly carrying their goods on their heads or backs. Some had children tagging along. This experience gave me the distinct feeling of being in another time period. This market, like the one in Diaz’s account, was well organized. It also had its constables. This was not a market for the tourists, but one for the natives. This activity was important to their way of life, just as it had been in the days of Cortez, and just as it must have been in the early time period of the Book of Mormon people.

To stand on the road leading to a marketplace can be an especially moving experience when one is observing a routine that has been followed for millennia. It was easy for me to envision Nephi’s garden on the road to the chief market and the attention that a prayer offered from his prayer tower would attract. Thus Mormon, being intimately familiar with the markets of his day, surely knew that his description of Nephi’s garden and tower as being on the road to the chief market was very important in adequately conveying the impression of the large number of people who would hear Nephi praying and who would quickly assemble to hear him speak.

Again, we find the small details in the Book of Mormon consistent with modern-day findings. In addition, this easily overlooked yet very significant information lends credence to the modern-day placement of the Book of Mormon city of Zarahemla in Mesoamerica.

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Notes

1. To demonstrate the significance of his severe abridgment, Mormon stated four times that in abridging the Nephite records, he wrote less than a “hundredth part” (Words of Mormon 1:5; Helaman 3:14; 3 Nephi 5:8; 26:6).

2. J. Eric S. Thompson, *The Rise and Fall of Maya Civilization*, 2nd ed. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 222.

3. Gordon R. Willey, Gordon F. Ekholm, and Rene  F. Millon, "The Patterns of Farming Life and Civilization," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1964), 1:461–62.
4. John L. Sorenson, "Nephi's Garden and Chief Market," FARMS Update, *Insights* (April 1985): 2; reprinted in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 236–37.
5. Manning Nash, "Indian Economies," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (1969), 6:87.
6. Sylvanus G. Morley and George W. Brainerd, *The Ancient Maya*, 4th ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 249.
7. Ross Hassig, *War and Society in Ancient Mesoamerica* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 35.
8. William T. Sanders, "Settlement Patterns in Central Mexico," in *Handbook of Middle American Indians* (1973), 10:27.
9. Jeremy A. Sabloff and Gair Tourtellot, "Beyond Temples and Places: Recent Settlement Pattern Research at the Ancient Maya City of Sayil (1983–85)," in *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, ed. Elin C. Danien and Robert J. Sharer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 1992), 159.
10. Bernal Diaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1963), 231–35.