

Another Note on the Three Days of Darkness

"There was thick darkness upon all the face of the land . . . and there was not any light seen." (3 Nephi 8:20, 22)

Speculation continues about the causes and consequences of the destruction in Book of Mormon lands attending the crucifixion of Jesus. Proposed causes have ranged from "some mighty upheaval of the earth's crust" to floods, earthquakes, volcanoes, and combinations of these.¹ Assessments of consequences have ranged from continents rising out of the ocean to assumptions that the locality where the Book of Mormon events took place was not unrecognizably altered at the time of the crucifixion. The extent of the darkness has also been discussed. What necessitates this note is some additional evidence from an ancient text, the relevance and significance of which is left to the reader.

In 1967, Claude Vandersleyen published the fragmentary remains of a stele erected by the Egyptian pharaoh Ahmose at Karnak.² This remarkable and unusual stele has recently been connected with the volcanic eruption on Thera (modern Santorini).³ What merits attention are the parallels to the phraseology of the Book of Mormon. The pertinent lines of the stele inscription are as follows:

The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain], with darkness in the western region and the sky being unleashed without [cessation, louder than] the cries of the masses, more powerful than [. . .], [while the rain raged] on the mountains louder than the noise of the cataract which is at Elephantine. Every house, every quarter that they reached [. . .] floating on the water like skiffs of papyrus opposite the royal residence for a period of [. . .] days, while a torch could not be lit in the Two Lands. (lines 8–12)

The Parallels

The Book of Mormon account parallels this at several points:

The Great Storm

Tempest Stele

"The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain]" (line 8).

The Book of Mormon

"And it came to pass in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm, such an one as never had been known in all the land and there was also a great and terrible tempest" (3 Nephi 8–6, punctuation altered).

The preserved portion of the Tempest Stele does not actually mention rain. References to rain are all restorations. The stele inscription is restored on the basis of a literary parallel; otherwise, given the state of the stele, one might be tempted to restore something else like *d' n ḥ[ty]* "tempest of smoke."⁴ In Egypt rain rarely occurs. On the other hand, the Book of Mormon rarely mentions rain; it occurred frequently enough that only its absence merits mention.⁵

Caused by Divine Agency

Tempest Stele

"The gods [caused] the sky to come in a tempest of r[ain]" (line 8).

The Book of Mormon

The Book of Mormon peoples are addressed by "a voice" (3 Nephi 9:1), later identifying itself as "Jesus Christ the Son of God" (3 Nephi 9:15), saying, among other things, "that great city of Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof (3 Nephi 9:3) and "that great city Moronihah have I covered with earth, and the inhabitants thereof" (3 Nephi 9:5).

In both cases the storm and its effects are directly attributed to deity. The Book of Mormon differs from the Tempest Stele in specific attribution to a particular god because Jesus Christ takes personal responsibility for it.

Loud Noises

Tempest Stele

“[louder than] the cries of the masses, more powerful than [. . .], [while the rain raged] on the mountains louder than the noise of the cataract which is at Elephantine” (lines 9–10).

The Egyptian text compares the noise of the tempest to the water plunging down the cataract at Elephantine, for the Egyptians a reference point for loud, constant noise. Modern equivalents would be to say that it was louder than the crowds at a soccer (or football) game or louder than Niagara Falls.

The Book of Mormon

“and there was terrible thunder, insomuch that it did shake the whole earth as if it was about to divide asunder” (3 Nephi 8:6). When the ordeal was over, “the dreadful groanings did cease, and all the tumultuous noised did pass away” (3 Nephi 10:9).

Inability to Light Fires

Tempest Stele

“while a torch could not be lit in the Two Lands” (line 12).

The Book of Mormon

“And it came to pass that there was thick darkness upon all the face of the land, insomuch that the inhabitants thereof who had not fallen could feel the vapor of darkness; and there could be no light, because of the darkness, neither candles, neither torches; neither could there be fire kindled with their fine and exceedingly dry wood, so that there could not be any light at all; and there was not any light seen, neither fire, nor glimmer, neither the sun, nor the moon, nor the stars, for so great were the mists of darkness which were upon the face of the land” (3 Nephi 8:20–22).

The Book of Mormon has a more detailed description of the palpable darkness, but both accounts mention the inability to light a fire.⁶ This could possibly be attributable to volcanic dust.⁷

Several Days of Darkness

Tempest Stele

“for a period of [. . .] days” (line 11).

The Book of Mormon

“And it came to pass that it did last for the space of three days that there was no light seen” (3 Nephi 8:23).

Unfortunately, the Tempest Stele breaks off at that point so we can neither determine how close the parallel is, nor compare the magnitude of the eruptions. However, the number of days in the Temple Stele must be at least two, based on sentence construction.

Accompanied by Massive Destruction

Tempest Stele

“Then His Majesty was informed that the mortuary concessions had been entered (by water), with the tomb chambers collapsed, the funerary mansions undermined, and the pyramids fallen, having been made into that which was never made. Then His Majesty commanded to restore the temples which had fallen into ruin in this entire land: to refurbish the monuments of the gods, to erect their enclosure walls, to provide the sacred objects in the noble chamber to mask the secret places, to introduce into their shrines the cult statues which were cast to the ground, to set up the braziers, to erect the offering tables, . . . to put the land into its former state” (lines 17–21).

The Book of Mormon

The extent of the destruction is detailed in 3 Nephi 8–9 and will not be repeated verbatim here, but it includes cities that were “burned” (3 Nephi 8:8, 14; 9:3, 9–10), “buried” (3 Nephi 8:10; 9:5–6, 8), and “sunk” (3 Nephi 8:9, 14; 9:4, 6–8), as well as the destruction of “highways” (3 Nephi 8:13) and geological deformation (see 3 Nephi 8:17–18).

The translator of the Egyptian text presumes to add that water had entered the tombs and caused water damage, which is possible, but the text has simply ‘q spεwt “the tombs were entered.” The remainder of the damage described in the Tempest Stele could be assigned to seismic causes. Assessing the damage wrought in Egypt is somewhat difficult because few if any temples survive from either the Old or Middle Kingdom; whether this is attributable to Hyksos depredations, New Kingdom renovations, or the Thera eruption becomes problematic.

Almost all the surviving temples in Egypt were built after the reign of Ahmose. Nevertheless, the massive Old Kingdom pyramids at Giza, Saqqara, and elsewhere did survive substantially intact, along with their funerary temples. Furthermore, the Nile has remained in the same general course to the present day, as evidenced by continual occupation remains at certain key sites since predynastic times. Since Egypt did not change in a drastic geological fashion, we need not consider that the Book of Mormon, when stating that “the whole face of the land was changed” (3 Nephi 8:12), must be taken to mean that continents rose out of the ocean; people after all did manage to find their way to Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 11:1).

Wider Implications

The prevailing winds leave Egypt directly in the path of the volcanic debris from Thera.⁸ The Thera eruption of c. 1530 B.C. ejected an estimated twenty to thirty cubic kilometers of material thirty to thirty-five kilometers into the air, leaving rounded pumice, shells, and snails atop the destroyed palaces of the recently sacked Hyksos capital of Avaris (Tell el-Daba‘a).⁹ The resultant cataclysm caused flooding and damage throughout the whole of Egypt at least as far south as Thebes (1,400 kilometers, or 875 miles, away from Thera).

Assuming that the mechanism of destruction in the Book of Mormon was similarly a volcano, the close parallels suggest the following implications for the geography and archaeology of the Book of Mormon: Geographically, the area covered by an eruption depends on the amount of ejecta and the prevailing winds; but the Thera case shows that a similar eruption could easily black out areas 1,400 kilometers away. A Mesoamerican location for the Book of Mormon has the requisite volcanic activity and similar prevailing wind patterns for a volcano in the north to black out a southerly location and to cause “a more great and terrible destruction in the land northward” (3 Nephi 8:12), as more of the ejecta would fall closer to the eruption and collateral earthquake damage would be greater closer to the epicenter. Archaeologically, we would expect to find pumice (in varying degrees) accompanying occasional destruction layers dating to the time of the crucifixion for particular Book of Mormon sites.

Pliny’s description of the destruction of Pompeii by Vesuvius in A.D. 79,¹⁰ an account which has been used in comparison with the Book of Mormon before, differs in some important respects from the descriptions in both the Tempest Stele and the Book of Mormon. For instance, Pliny does not describe loud noises or widespread massive destruction. Pliny’s description of the darkness at Vesuvius differs from that of the other two sources: “Elsewhere there was daylight by this time, but they were still in darkness, blacker and denser than any night that ever was, which they relieved by lighting torches and various kinds of lamp.”¹¹ Both the Book of Mormon and the Tempest Stele inform us that it was impossible to light a torch. This would imply that the volcano, if such was the mechanism of destruction in the Book of Mormon, was more powerful than Vesuvius.

Obviously, several assumptions accompany these predictions, the falsity of any of which could invalidate this hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is a specifically testable hypothesis, and it is “the possibility of overthrowing it, or its falsifiability, that constitutes the possibility of testing it, and therefore the scientific character of a theory.”¹² The testing of the hypothesis I leave to the appropriate specialists.

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Notes

1. For references to the previous literature, see the version of this article that appeared in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, and more recently, Bart J. Kowallis, “In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist’s View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi,” *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–98): 136–90; and Benjamin R. Jordan, “‘Many Great and Notable Cities Were Sunk’: Liquefaction in the Book of Mormon,” *BYU Studies* 38/3 (1999): 115–18.

2. See Claude Vandersleyen, "Une tempête sous le règne d'Amosis," *Revue d'Égyptologie* 19 (1967): 123–59.
3. See Karen P. Foster and Robert K. Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 55/1 (1996): 1–14. The text from the stele, used in this article, is taken from this source. The restorations proposed by James P. Allen are unlikely; Malcolm H. Wiener and James P. Allen, "Separate Lives: The Ahmose Tempest Stela and the Thera Eruption," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 57/1 (1998): 1–28. Wiener's conclusions are based on a misunderstanding of Foster and Ritner's thesis.
4. Normally, *d*':*n* is followed by what the storm is composed of, for example: *iw=f mi d'w taw* "he is like a storm of wind." P. Anastasi I 18/5, in Alan H. Gardiner, *Egyptian Hieratic Texts: I* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1911), 30.
5. See Helaman 11:13–17; Ether 9:30–35. The other examples are in quotations with biblical parallels: 2 Nephi 14:6; 15:6 (see Isaiah 4:6; 5:6); 3 Nephi 14:25–27 (see Matthew 7:25–27); 18:13 (see Matthew 7:25–27); but see Ether 2:24.
6. Indeed, it was this detail that initially drew my attention.
7. See James L. Baer, "The Third Nephi Disaster: A Geological View," *Dialogue* 19/1 (1986): 131.
8. See John Baines and Jaromír Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980), 68.
9. See Foster and Ritner, "Texts, Storms, and the Thera Eruption," 9–10.
10. See Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.16, in *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1969), 433.
11. Pliny, *Epistulae* 6.16.17.
12. Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, 5th ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 2:260.