

Civilization

The general question addressed in this chapter is, what elements of civilization mentioned in Mormon's record help us clarify his picture of Nephite geography?

Of course, the account is itself a manifestation of sophisticated ancient culture. The fact that there was such a record (which clearly fits into the category of ancient American codices)¹ argues that no simple tribe could have come up with such a book. It was part of a long tradition of record keeping. Its contents also report the civilized status of the makers of the record. The book records a history of a sometimes large population that lasted nearly a thousand years. Furthermore, statement after statement in the account documents that the Nephites participated in a genuine civilization.

We saw in chapter 3 that the promised land where Nephite history ran its course was conceived by the Nephites as an integral whole, a limited territory on the order of five hundred miles long and consisting of a pair of major lands on either side of an isthmus. The fact that they thought of that territory as a whole and represented it as a setting in which trade, warfare, and other intercommunication went on over centuries indicates that a single civilization was found there.

Since the Nephites and Lamanites were so often at war with each other, it may seem odd to speak of their being united in a single civilization, but there is good evidence to conclude that. Consider especially how often the two factions were in intimate contact with each other. To begin with, they came out of the same Jerusalem background. When Nephi₁ and Laman₁ were still alive, we are safe in supposing the culture their two groups shared was far greater than the ways in which they differed. Circumstances and preferences moved them farther apart as years went on, but at later times descendants of both groups were still close to each other in important ways. For example, the people of Ammon—Lamanites by birth and background—became Nephites formally and by loyalty and action. The Nephites were joined by other Lamanite refugees from time to time (see Alma 26:13–16; 35:6–9; 62:17). The reverse was also true. Dissenters from among the Nephites united with the Lamanites “from the reign of Nephi down to the . . . time” of Amalickiah, according to Alma 47:35, and the process continued later. Mormon added the perceptive note, “Now these dissenters, [had] the same instruction and the same information [as] the Nephites” (Alma 47:36). They became rulers, commanders, and teachers among the Lamanites (for example, see Alma 24:1, 4–7; 43:6; 47:35; 48:1–6; Helaman 4:1–4). Note also how the religious “order and faith of Nehor” (Alma 14:16; see 1:15) inexplicably spread from the Nephites in the land of Zarahemla to Lamanite country in only a few years (see Alma 21:4). At certain times, too, many Lamanites resident in their homeland became believers in the Nephite religion. Some Lamanites came down among the Nephites to teach their cousins and even unite with them (see Helaman 5:50–51; 6:4–9; 3 Nephi 2:14–16; 3:14). Both Nephites and Lamanites colonized the land northward in peace (see Helaman 3:12–15), and at the end of Mormon's record the Nephites and Lamanites became equally evil and committed similarly heinous sins (see Moroni 9:8–9, 16, 19). In the final struggles and afterward, many Nephites were incorporated among the Lamanites (see Moroni 9:24). Thus we see that close relationships prevailed between Lamanite and Nephite societies despite the many conflicts, primarily between their leaders, that make it appear otherwise.

The disputes between the Nephites and Lamanites were largely over power—over which rulers would lead, and exploit, the mass of people. For instance, the bitter letters Moroni₁ and Ammoron exchanged (see Alma 54–55;

Ammoron was not even a Lamanite, but a Nephite dissenter) are not about two different civilizations in conflict. They are about who will be in charge of the unified show.

Can conflict actually be a manifestation of a kind of unity? Wars between factions are now being recognized by some historians as evidence of a close relationship between the antagonists rather than a total separation. One scholarly analysis of civilization in relation to war recently concluded, “Conflict, hostility, and even warfare, when durable (habitual, protracted, or inescapable), are *forms of association* that create a social relationship between, and a social system composed of, the contestants, antagonists, and foes.”² The author, political scientist David Wilkinson, argues that such rivals (in the case we are considering, Lamanites and Nephites) need each other as much as, say, the English and the Irish, opposing Hindu castes, or fighting spouses. Enmity actually helps the parties define their identities. In the Book of Mormon, the Nephites’ and Lamanites’ ways of life never diverged so drastically that they were wholly different entities; rather, the two groups were more like the yin and yang of a combined society.

So what were some of the features of their civilization that relate to geography? We shall consider aspects of urbanism, emblematic public constructions, government, warfare, literacy, religion, and systems of advanced knowledge, all of which influenced Mormon’s formulation of the where, as much as the what, of his people’s history.

Today, the presence of cities is crucial in how we rate the civilizational status of an area. What evidence does the Book of Mormon give for cities, and what was their geographical significance?

The Nephite record tells of a population that probably reached into the millions and was spread over hundreds of miles. Many cities are mentioned, and by all definitions a civilization constructs cities.³ What did the Nephite cities signify about the centers of their population and the moving forces of their history?

The characteristics Nephite writers had in mind in defining a city are nowhere systematically discussed, but we can pick up allusions. When Mormon tells of the settlement of Helam by Alma₁ and his people, he reports that the little colony of only 450 souls (see Mosiah 18:35) started out planting crops, then built buildings, and followed by choosing Alma₁ as their formal leader. Shortly, when they began to prosper, “they built a city” that they called the city of Helam (Alma 23:20). A few years later when the Lamanite army entered the land, they surprised the men who were “in the city of Helam . . . tilling the land round about” (Alma 23:25). A city as defined by the Nephites thus did not have to involve a population beyond a few hundred. Furthermore, part of the territory constituting the city could still be cultivated. At a far extreme, however, a city could have a large population: Moroni₁’s charge of neglect by the central government headed by Pahoran₁ speaks of the leaders in the city of Zarahemla living among “thousands” and even “tens of thousands” of people who “sit in idleness,” either in the capital city or in the land immediately about it (Alma 60:22).

Several types, or levels, of Nephite cities are identified. A type of city that was sometimes small was the military garrison city that was established quickly. Antiparah, Zeezrom, and Cumeni, which all lay between Manti and the west sea, were of this sort (see Alma 50:10–11; 56:9–10, 13–16). More of these “instant cities” were installed near the east sea coast (see Alma 50:13–15). (They are reminiscent of the small fortified settlements, or even isolated fortresses, that existed in Old Testament times in the land of Israel but were labeled cities in the Bible because they were surrounded by defensive walls.)⁴ Another type of city was isolated and had little or no surrounding land under its control (for example, Lemuel and Shimnilom in Alma 23:12 and perhaps Boaz, Shem,

Jashon, and Jordan in Mormon 2–5). Still another kind of city served as an administrative and probably commercial and ritual center that governed smaller places and surrounding land (for example, note the phrase “who were in all the regions round about” [Alma 22:27]; the city of Lehi administered the city of Morianton, according to Alma 50:36). The crowning class of urban settlement was the “great city.” Six Nephite cities and one Jaredite city are named, and others existed but are not named in the record (see Helaman 7:22; 8:5–6; 3 Nephi 8:14; 10:2; Ether 10:20). As to the size of Nephite cities, note that the city of Jerusalem in Israel was called a “great city,”⁵ and Nazareth in Galilee was considered a “city” (1 Nephi 11:13) even though its population was only in the hundreds, according to archaeological data.⁶

By the time Mormon was a youth, after A.D. 300, the Nephites had built or rebuilt so many cities and towns that “the whole . . . land had become covered with buildings” (Mormon 1:7). That was more or less true along the corridor through which the young man traveled from the land northward to Zarahemla, although obviously, other ecological areas would have had little or no such buildup.

The text’s characterization of urban settlements in Nephite and Lamanite territory definitely justifies applying the label civilization. The most consequential lands were those that contained the most cities. Moreover, that the Nephite record refers to cities on this scale indicates that archaeological evidence of ancient cities ought to be apparent in whatever part of the New World was the actual scene of their lands.

Does Mormon’s book talk about the Nephites carrying out major building projects?

One would expect large public buildings and other structures to be built in conjunction with cities. A complete picture of Nephite geography considers the distribution of temples, towers, palaces, fortifications, and roads as evidences of the power of the rulers.

Let us begin with the earliest Nephites, headed by founder Nephi₁. When they separated from the faction headed by Laman₁ and Lemuel, they settled in a place they called Nephi. The colonizing party proceeded to build a temple modeled after the temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (see 2 Nephi 5:16). The new structure could not have been very large (only half a dozen Nephite men were on hand to construct it),⁷ yet the people and their ruler, Nephi₁, must have considered such a building essential if their little kingdom was to have political and religious standing, even in their own eyes. Later they walled in the city (see Mosiah 9:8). Aside from its practical value, the wall also demonstrated that this first band of Nephites considered themselves a significant people.

The pattern of a people constructing its political identity through public building projects was also demonstrated by the Zeniffites, an offshoot of the Nephites. Their king, Noah, built a “spacious palace” (Mosiah 11:9) and refurbished the city’s old temple complex internally and by adding “a tower near the temple; yea, a very high tower” (Mosiah 11:12). Atop a hill near the city, Noah also built a “great tower” (Mosiah 11:13). In Book of Mormon usage, “tower” relates back to the “great tower” that was built, according to Genesis 11, in the land of Shinar, or Mesopotamia (see Ether 1:3, 5, 33), and is commonly referred to as “the tower of Babel.” This type of tower was a ziggurat, a sacred artificial mountain where heavenly beings were believed to dwell or visit.⁸ Among Nephites and Lamanites, towers like those that Noah erected were marks of an influential community, and the structures served as rallying points for local governments (see Alma 48:1). Like European cathedrals, towers asserted the renown and political power of the community. Accordingly, when Captain Moroni set out to subdue the king-men, who had defied the authority of the Nephite government (see Alma 51:7–8, 13, 17), he “did pull down their pride and their nobility” by slaying thousands of them (Alma 57:18–19). The defeated survivors of the

movement were then “compelled to hoist the title [flag] of liberty upon their towers, and in their cities” as a sign of submission (Alma 51:20). Obviously, any settlement deserving to be labeled a city would have had a tower, and larger cities might have had many. The ability of a ruler to muster manpower and organize resources to construct a tower—the bigger the better—communicated his administrative ability, power, and glory. There were also towers of ritual significance built and controlled by kin groups or families (see Helaman 7:10–14).

Towers existed throughout Nephite history. Mormon wrote to his son Moroni₂ in the final years of the Nephite wars about conditions facing their people at “the tower of Sherrizah,” presumably a landmark somewhere in the land northward that needed no further identification (Moroni 9:7; see 9:16–17). We do not know how towers related to “churches,” a later type of public building, but some sort of connection is possible. Following the Savior’s appearance to the people at the city Bountiful, the twelve disciples “formed a church of Christ in all the lands round about” (4 Nephi 1:1). After approximately a.d. 200, that unified ecclesiastical pattern was modified, “and they began to build up churches unto themselves to get gain” (4 Nephi 1:26) under “many priests and false prophets” (4 Nephi 1:34). By the middle of that century, “they did still continue to build up churches unto themselves, and adorn them with all manner of precious things” (4 Nephi 1:41). The switch in meaning of “church” from an organizational entity to a physical structure is not further clarified.

In addition to discussing temples, towers, and churches, the Nephite record mentions “palace” constructions (Mosiah 11:9; Alma 22:2) in key capital cities, although we are given no details about the nature of such buildings.

Fortifications were still another way to publicly display the power of a people and its rulers while impacting the landscape. Moroni₁ caused his men to “commence in digging up heaps of earth round about all the cities” in Zarahemla (Alma 50:1). These were topped with log palisades (see Alma 50:6). The constructions, along with other military measures that Moroni₁ initiated, gave his people “assurance of protection” (Alma 50:12). Beyond the practical benefit of providing a safe haven in case of enemy attack, the successful construction of the fortifications demonstrated to folks whose morale may have been wavering that they were led by a decisive regime that they could trust. That is part of the psychology behind all massive public works, and such public works are essential in a civilization.

Wherever the Nephites dwelt, they would have constructed public works projects, small or great. The record we have makes clear that it was part of their civilizational pattern to do so. Mormon’s thinking about the geography of his people would have been punctuated by images in his mind of some notable structures they had built. Again, in the area where they lived we should find archaeological remains of what the Book of Mormon calls temples, towers, churches, palaces, and fortifications.

Trade and large-scale war are other features considered essential aspects of a civilization. What does the Book of Mormon say about those?

Little is reported about merchants and their activities over much of Nephite history, but at a few points in the Book of Mormon account we read of extensive commerce. It is impossible that a civilization that included widespread trade and related components—record keeping, craft production, knowledge of routes, and so on—would have arisen suddenly at just those moments. The pattern must have been going on for a long time, becoming particularly visible when it reached a climax level. Helaman 6:7–8 reports at about the time of Christ, “The Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would, whether among the Nephites or the Lamanites. And . . . the Lamanites did also go whithersoever they would . . . ; and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain.” (Third Nephi 6:8, 12 imply the same thing.) Around a.d. 300, “gold and silver did they lay up in

store in abundance, and did traffic in all manner of traffic” (4 Nephi 1:46). So the civilization in which the Nephites and Lamanites participated engaged in substantial trade by which some people became “exceedingly rich” (Alma 50:18; 4 Nephi 1:23). Mormon, as one of the elite class among the Nephite people in his day, may well have learned a great deal about areas that he had not personally visited through merchants who had traveled about more widely.

As for warfare as a characteristic of civilization, the Nephite record is so detailed about their highly developed patterns of fighting that there is no need to spell out particulars. Armies of tens of thousands and even hundreds of thousands are reported.⁹ This reflects the large-scale population of Book of Mormon peoples, and the targets of aggression and defense signal to us, as to Mormon, the critical spots vital to the maintenance of the Nephites’ national being and territory. A civilization involves large-scale wars, big armies, and terrible destruction; thus the society we see in Mormon’s record indeed qualifies as “civilized,” paradoxical as that may seem.

Because religion was of great importance to the Nephites, would not Mormon’s sense of the boundaries of his own territory have been influenced by what he perceived to be the area within which religious beliefs and practices familiar to him, or closely related to his, prevailed?

This is a reasonable proposition. The Book of Mormon characterizes the peoples whose history it treats (Nephites, Lamanites, Mulekites, and Jaredites) as for the most part sharing, or at least being familiar with, features that we consider elements of religion: a supreme god or gods, the use of sacred books, prophecies and their fulfillment according to a calendar, priests, temples, sacrifices, altars, prayers, oaths, sacred festivals, inspiration via the Spirit, belief in resurrection, and so on. The Book of Mormon prophets and writers assumed these elements to be givens in religion. To be sure, those elite record keepers had their own version of the general pattern that differed in significant details from what others accepted; nevertheless, all the Nephites, and no doubt many of the Mulekites and Lamanites, were familiar with the basic scheme of belief and practices. (In the same way, Catholics, Protestants, Mormons, and Jews know the broad elements of their shared religious tradition—enough to criticize each other—but they are not able to compare themselves in the same way with, say, Buddhists.) Many Lamanites were familiar enough with the Nephite religious tradition that they could adopt it (see, for example, Alma 18).

In short, those living in and around the promised land were broadly united by the cultural patterns behind a shared religious life. This seems to indicate that the Book of Mormon peoples participated in one civilization, in contrast to differently configured patterns of religion evident in other civilizational areas.

Wouldn’t Nephite country also show evidence of writing and books?

Indeed so. Mormon was aware that his predecessors kept “many books and many records of every kind” (Helaman 3:15), and large numbers of those records were in his people’s archive, which he controlled. But how might records have influenced Mormon’s geographic vision?

In the first place, the brass plates—approximately equivalent to our Old Testament—had been brought from old Jerusalem. They provided background for Mormon to understand what Nephi₁ had prophesied in 1 Nephi 11–14 about world history, so to speak. That is, from the Nephite records, Mormon gained an intercontinental perspective on the history and geography of his people. From the brass plates, plus the accounts of earlier Nephite and Jaredite prophets and the words of the Savior to the Nephites, Mormon also understood certain key events and influences in the ancient Near East, the ministry and death of the Savior there, the historical past and prophetic future of the Jewish Jerusalem as well as the New Jerusalem to come, and the gospel restoration that

would come a millennium and half after his day. Thus his view was not simply of the tribal territory of his Nephite ancestors, but of the worldwide scene.

A second point about the presence of books among Book of Mormon peoples is that they point us, as do the archaeological remains of cities mentioned earlier, toward a particular area in the New World where the lands of the Nephites must have been located.

Does that mean that what we might call advanced knowledge about the natural world, or science, was limited to the same area?

Not entirely. The most advanced knowledge of astronomy and the calendar in the Americas occurred in Mesoamerica (Mexico and Guatemala), yet in Peru and Bolivia the ancient cultures knew considerable about those subjects. In fact, some of the peoples in the New World whose cultural level was not generally as high as that of those in the Mesoamerican and Andean areas still had significant knowledge of the heavenly bodies. The knowledge possessed by South American peoples was not as elaborate as what the northerners knew, and the apparent lack of written records anywhere on the southern continent prevented the peoples there from accumulating as many detailed observations and calculations as did those in Mexico and Guatemala.

According to the Book of Mormon, the Nephites knew that the planets circled the sun (see Helaman 12:15). They also used multiple interlocking calendars (see, for example, 3 Nephi 1:1; 2:8).¹⁰ While he was still a youth, Mormon began “to be learned somewhat after the manner of the learning” of his people (Mormon 1:2), so it would not be surprising if then or later he controlled some of his group’s “higher knowledge,” such as their calendars and astronomy. In any case, he was no doubt aware that such expertise existed among men in his civilization.

The particulars of that advanced knowledge would have set apart the civilization in which Mormon was involved from any others he may have known about. A man as influential and extensively traveled as Mormon was—he was chief military commander over upwards of a million people for much of his adult life—might have encountered a number of representatives of other cultures, such as merchants. He also knew of other cultures from the records in his hands (see Mormon 9:32–33). His son Moroni² observed that “none other people knoweth our language” (Mormon 9:34), which suggests that he was aware of other tongues.

With these perspectives, it seems plausible that Mormon understood the uniqueness of his civilization, not only its literacy, books, literature, calendars, astronomical knowledge, and so on, but also its unique geographical setting. If that is true, it may help explain why he was not interested in cultures outside the Nephite/Lamanite area, even though he was aware that they existed. (This willful ignorance may be similar to that of the Chinese, who considered their ways so superior that they were contemptuous of all surrounding cultures or civilizations.)

Notes

1. See my article, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997), 391–521.

2. David Wilkinson, “Central Civilization,” in *Civilizations and World Systems: Studying World-Historical Change*, ed. Stephen K. Sanderson (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1995), 47–48; see 46–74.

3. The best treatments of the concept of civilization are conveniently found in Sanderson, *Civilizations and World Systems*.
4. See Ze'ev Herzog, "Cities: Cities in the Levant," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:1031–43.
5. The Jerusalem of Lehi¹'s day has been hypothesized to have had a population on the order of twenty-five thousand. See Magen Broshi, "Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 4/2 (June 1978): 10–15.
6. See James F. Strange, "Nazareth," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:1050–51.
7. See John L. Sorenson, "The Composition of Lehi's Family," in *By Study and also by Faith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:174–96.
8. See E. B. Banning, "Towers," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:622–24; Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 171–74.
9. See A. Brent Merrill, "Nephite Captains and Armies," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 268–71.
10. See *ibid.*, 165–66.