The Economics of the Book of Mormon: Joseph Smith as Translator or Commentator

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From 1830 to the present those who find it difficult to accept “angelic visitations in the age of railroads” have searched Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century environment for sources of the subject matter of the Book of Mormon. For example, in 1990 Susan Curtis explains the economic subthemes of the book as Joseph Smith’s commentary on “market capitalism.” But the economic conditions of Joseph Smith’s time and place are not reflected in the Book of Mormon. Its economic descriptions are consistent with our vast knowledge of the economic conditions of the ancient Middle East and not inconsistent with the little known of the economics of Mesoamerica of the relevant time period. Those more comfortable with Joseph Smith as universal commentator on the issues of his day would be well advised to ignore economics or limit that topic to the Doctrine and Covenants. Those who accept him as translator of ancient scriptural documents can gain additional reassurance from the economics of the Book of Mormon.
The Economics of the Book of Mormon:
Joseph Smith as Translator or Commentator

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Abstract: From 1830 to the present those who find it difficult to accept “angelic visitations in the age of railroads” have searched Joseph Smith’s nineteenth-century environment for sources of the subject matter of the Book of Mormon. For example, in 1990 Susan Curtis explains the economic subthemes of the book as Joseph Smith’s commentary on “market capitalism.” But the economic conditions of Joseph Smith’s time and place are not reflected in the Book of Mormon. Its economic descriptions are consistent with our vast knowledge of the economic conditions of the ancient Middle East and not inconsistent with the little known of the economics of Mesoamerica of the relevant time period. Those more comfortable with Joseph Smith as universal commentator on the issues of his day would be well advised to ignore economics or limit that topic to the Doctrine and Covenants. Those who accept him as translator of ancient scriptural documents can gain additional reassurance from the economics of the Book of Mormon.

The mind boggles at the hypothesis that the youthful Joseph Smith was an insatiable intellectual sponge who, despite his limited education, isolated location, and lack of access to the major communications channels of his day managed to tap into, absorb, and comment in the Book of Mormon on every major issue of his times. Of that school of thought, the following may be typical:

American society in the midst of . . . vast changes produced anxiety as well as opportunities for its members. . . . Joseph Smith’s work was informed by such fears and cultural imperatives. The *Book of Mormon* addresses market capitalism, individual responsibility, and a Protestant sensibility. Alexander Campbell’s indictment [that Joseph Smith managed to
incorporate into the Book of Mormon every current issue being debated in his contemporary society] is accurate.¹

Somehow intellectual virtuosity and ubiquitous knowledge is easier to accept than prophetic status. A professional economist may have no base from which to critique the other supposedly contemporary topics attributed to the Book of Mormon but ought to be able to appraise the extent to which economic allusions in the book reflect issues being debated in 1830 rather than economic conditions of the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica. But first it will be necessary to bore the reader with a reminder of that painful intellectual excursion he or she probably once took through the pages of an Economics 101 textbook.

**The Economic Problem**

The basic fact of economics is scarcity. There are never enough economic resources to produce all of the goods and services human beings would like to have. Therefore difficult and often divisive choices have to be made. Which of all of the vast variety of goods and services that might be produced shall be produced? Which of the many alternative production techniques available shall be used to assure the most output from the available inputs? Since there will never be enough production to satisfy insatiable human wants, how shall the results of production be distributed? An economic system is a manmade power mechanism for deciding those issues: what to produce, how to produce it, and how to divide the result.

The economic resources in question are the factors that make production possible: land, labor, and capital in classic terms and natural resources, human resources, and capital resources in modern terms. The others are self-evident, but by "capital" an economist means the results of past production saved rather than consumed and then used to enhance current or future production. That could be part of last season’s crops held over for replanting or to feed this year’s plowers, planters, and reapers until this year’s harvest; a hoe or a plow made by a craftsperson while surviving on last year’s accumulation of

Those economic decisions of what and how to produce and how to distribute output can and are made within the household with no professional observer feeling obligated to comment. What makes economics into a profession is the process of specialization and exchange: when it is discovered that if each individual or group specializes in that which it has the greatest comparative advantage for producing and then exchanges its surplus with those of other specializations, total output and well-being is enhanced. But also created are the interdependencies, distortions between supply and demand, and disputes over relative exchange values which are the stuff of economic conflict. But those issues did not wait to emerge in nineteenth-century America.

Economics among the Nephites and Jaredites

Susan Curtis identifies four examples of what she considers to be nineteenth-century market capitalism in the Book of Mormon (Jarom 1:8; Helaman 3:7–11; 3 Nephi 6:7–8; Ether 10:22). Had she added 2 Nephi 5:15–17 and Enos 1:20–21, she would have covered the most explicit references to production and exchange. Let us consider them chronologically. In a brief period of Jaredite righteousness, a certain “Morianton built up many cities, and the people became exceedingly rich under his reign, both in buildings, and in gold and silver, and in raising grain, and in flocks and herds” (Ether 10:12). Then occur five generations of internecine warfare before:

They built a great city, . . . and they were exceedingly industrious and they did buy and sell and traffic one with another, that they might get gain. And they did work in all manner of ore. . . . And they did all manner of fine work. And they did have silks and fine-twined linen. . . . And they did make all manner of tools to till the earth. . . . And never could be a people . . . more prospered by the hand of the Lord.

(Ether 10:20–28)

\[ \text{Ibid., 87–88.} \]
Later, on the same hemisphere, but among a different people, Nephi led his subjects into the wilderness to escape the depredations of the followers of his brothers after the death of their father:

We did prosper exceedingly; for we did sow seed, and we did reap again in abundance. And we began to raise flocks. . . . And I did teach my people to build buildings, and to work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel. . . . [And] I, Nephi, did cause my people to be industrious, and to labor with their hands. (2 Nephi 5:11–17)

With warfare continuing, Nephi’s nephew Enos later describes the differing economies as well as the alternative lifestyles:

The Lamanites . . . [fed] upon beasts of prey; dwelling in tents. . . . And many of them did eat nothing but raw meat [whereas] the people of Nephi did till the land, and raise all manner of grain, and of fruit, and flocks of herds . . . and also many horses. (Enos 1:20–21).

But a few generations later it was again necessary to cleanse the land of Lamanites, after which:

We multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land, and became exceedingly rich in gold and in silver, and in precious things, and . . . in fine workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war. (Jarom 1:8)

Another 250 years pass, and a group of Nephites and converted Lamanites leave the now-contentious Nephite majority, move into the former Jaredite lands northward, and use cement as a building material, supplemented by timber which they have shipped to them from the south (Helaman 3:3–10), the latter transaction apparently being Curtis’s justification for including the incident among her illustrations of “market capitalism.” However, the situation was more reflective of the advantages of free trade in an economy limited to agriculture, mining, and handicraft:
There was peace in the land, insomuch that the Nephites did go into whatsoever part of the land they would. . . . The Lamanites did also go wherever they would, . . . and thus they did have free intercourse one with another, to buy and to sell, and to get gain. . . . [And] they became exceedingly rich, both the Lamanites and the Nephites; and they did have an exceeding plenty of gold and of silver, and all manner of precious metals. . . . And there were also curious workmen, who did work all kinds of ore and did refine it; and thus they became rich. They did raise grain in abundance . . . and they did flourish exceedingly, both in the north and in the south. (Helaman 6:8–13)

The need for economic infrastructure is cited a few years later when, after successfully resisting siege by Gadianton bands, the still-united Nephites and Lamanites prosper, such that “there were many cities built anew, and there were many old cities repaired. And there were many highways cast up, and many roads made, which led from city to city, and from land to land, and from place to place” (3 Nephi 6:7–8).

Then, of course, there is the economics of the “Golden Age of the Nephites” from A.D. 34–201 of which we are told only that “they had all things common among them” (4 Nephi 1:3), with no description of structure or process.

But, beyond these explicit economic citations, on an implicit level the Book of Mormon is replete with economic references, as any history of human life must be. A wealthy Manassehite resident of Jerusalem is immediately introduced. We are told he is possessed of a house liberally supplied with gold, silver, other precious things, and “all manner of riches” in such great abundance as to cause another wealthy ruler in the city to “lust after it” and pursue murder to obtain it (1 Nephi 2:4; 3:16, 22–25). We are never told how Lehi obtained his wealth, but Nibley concludes from Lehi’s lifestyle, his knowledge of Egyptian, and contemporary conditions that he was a typical merchant of the time, organizing caravans and moving goods among major areas of the ancient Near East.3 Neither are we told the economic base of Jerusalem, though that is a matter of his-

tory, but the very existence of a city is an economic phenomenon based on some combination of specialization and exchange; buying, selling, and profit-making; and political and military adventure and subjugation. Nibley has also explored, with at least implied economic analysis, Laban with his armor and armaments, his personal treasury, military and household subordinates, and social and political position as typical of his status and time (2 Nephi 4:9, 20, 27). Laban’s sword and Nephi’s bow of fine steel (1 Nephi 16:18) are evidence of an armaments industry and skill in artisanry, which is no surprise for the Jerusalem of 600 B.C., but which may also explain technological transfer into the Western Hemisphere promised land, if indeed it was not already here, at least among the Jaredites.

We have in the transport of tents and provisions into the wilderness without mention of flocks and herds a differentiation between the economic base of the nomad and that of a traveling merchant. We also have evidence of skill with the weaponry of the hunt but dependence upon an apparently advanced technological means of pursuing it—a steel bow; only prayer and humility make it possible to obtain food with more primitive weapons (1 Nephi 16:15, 18, 21, 23–32). We also find skill at mining, smelting, and tool-making, though divine instruction is necessary for ship-building (1 Nephi 17:8–14, 16, 19:1).

In the new land, there appears to be no period of isolated pioneering with subsistence living off the land but an almost immediate establishment of cities with construction of buildings including temples, an assumption by Nephi of the role of overseer and a specialization of labor including working with wood, iron, copper, brass, steel, gold, silver and “precious ores” (2 Nephi 5:15–18). The descendants of luxury-loving Laman and Lemuel, paradoxically, soon retrogress into a more primitive hunting and pillaging status, apparently obtaining manufactured goods throughout most of their history only by robbing their more industrious Nephite cousins. However, a city-building society, such as that of the Nephites, requires specialization and exchange. The countryside provides the food which the city can and must obtain either by exchange or expropriation. A people governed in any way other than harsh dictatorship can develop a

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5 Nibley, Lehi in the Desert, 94–104.
substantial urban sector only by providing in exchange for foodstuffs either handicrafts or manufactured products, desired services, or a marketing function which facilitates exchange with other areas, rural or urban. Buildings greater than what those engaged in primary extraction—hunting, fishing, herding, or farming—can build for their own shelter require specialization in obtaining and preparing building materials, site preparation, and performing the various construction tasks. Any specialization requires exchange. Exchange requires transportation, communication, and some approach to marketing. Any exchange beyond immediate and equal barter requires some medium of exchange along with accounting and storage.

Though not an explicit economic history, the Book of Mormon is replete with the specialized crafts of lawyers, merchants, priests, military professionals, civil servants, and politicians. By implication all of the farmers, fishermen, herdsmen, building tradesmen, blacksmiths, and armormen of an agrarian, handicraft, trading society must have been present. Prophets supported themselves by their own labors to avoid a professional clergy, though none of them ever reveals his secular occupation (Mosiah 2:14–16). Taxes were a familiar part of governing. It was the corrupt use of the revenues rather than taxing for public purposes that was King Noah’s civic sin (Mosiah 11:3–10). Certainly producing foodstuffs and armaments for the military was assumed as a civic obligation (Alma 60:9).

The practice of identifying a city and a surrounding land bearing the same name indicates an economic as well as a political interaction. Numerous such city-states existed among the Nephites, with travel among them enumerated for missionaries, soldiers, and rulers, but it is difficult to believe there would not have been traders as well. Though the Lamanites are generally described as wild and ferocious but idle hunters, warriors, and pillagers, Ammon, Aaron, Omner, and Himni and their fellow missionaries found an economy of competing herdsmen and a superstructure of subordinate and superior rulers residing in palaces someone had to build, with organized modes of travel and conferences among themselves (Alma 17–22). A well-ordered monetary system was clearly in existence, at least among the Nephites (Alma 11:4–19). None of the explicit descriptions of economic activity enumerated above is presented as a new innovation, but in every case as a resumption of commerce after a forced exodus or devastating wars.
Are all of these references to economic life in the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica mere concoctions of Joseph Smith as a vehicle for comment on his contemporary scene? Or do they fit better as reflections of ancient economies? To answer those questions, some exploration of the economies of the United States in 1830 and of the more exotic locations between 600 B.C. and A.D. 421 will be necessary.

The Characteristics of Market Capitalism in 1830

The essential components of "capitalism" are acquisitiveness and private ownership of the means of production and distribution. The essence of a market economy is private initiative and competition. People must be motivated to produce and to take risks in pursuit of private reward rather than social improvement. There must be both a legal structure and an ethic which allows and encourages private ownership and the use of resources for private gain, even if competitors are disadvantaged and consumers pay high prices. The faith is that profit-seekers will recognize opportunity in consumer demand, guaranteeing that what is most desired will be produced, and that excess profits will attract new producers, driving down prices. Specialization and exchange remain the basis of economic activity, but the motivation has changed. Self-interestedness is justified because the competitive pursuit of maximized incomes will require every owner of a factor of production to use it to produce that product upon which the consumer places the highest value. The private-enterprise capitalism described by Adam Smith and other economic philosophers in the last quarter of the eighteenth and the first quarter of the nineteenth centuries was a replacement of a system called "mercantilism," in which kings tightly regulated their economies and gave monopoly privileges to their supporters to trade goods for gold, enlarging the king's treasury, but not meeting the needs of the common man. Self-interest channeled by the "invisible hand of competition" was expected to make better "what and how to produce and how to distribute the results" decisions than any ruler or other central authority.

But these attributes of capitalism could have existed in 600 B.C. as well as A.D. 1830. What was different in the modern era was justification for acquisitiveness by all, not just the ruling classes, and the emergence of the factory system and industrial production. Though described by Adam Smith in 1776, this *laissez faire* philosophy had been emerging in Europe for a hun-
dred years and spreading with a time lag to the American colonies. Its roots were agrarian but by the dawning of the nineteenth century its applications in Europe were becoming industrial. It was not private enterprise which was controversial in Joseph Smith's time but the emerging European factory system with its extremes of specialization and exchange, its exploitation of child labor, its long hours, low pay and abominable working conditions, sufficiently better than the life of an agricultural peasant, however, to attract them to flock to it.

However, though such conditions might have alarmed British social reformers like Robert Owen, who came to America to establish a short-lived communal society in New Harmony, Indiana in 1826, Joseph Smith had seen none of that at the time of the Book of Mormon's publication and very little of it in his entire lifetime. There was little as yet of manufacturing and that limited largely to Massachusetts and a few coastal centers. In fact, Owen was unique in his experience with nascent capitalism. The Shakers, with whom Joseph Smith was certainly familiar (D&C 49), and the Rappites and Separatists and other communal societies to which he may have been exposed were equally unfamiliar with industrialization but were seeking only for Christian unity.

What might have been noted by an economic observer in western New York of the 1820s was a transition from subsistence agriculture to market agriculture as the new Erie Canal opened transportation for farm products to seaboard cities. Barter would have been giving way to a money economy with consequent foreclosure on the Smith farm. But, in general, economic conditions were improving throughout the young American nation between the devastating depression of 1819-21, felt primarily among city dwellers, and the 1837 money panic which penetrated into the hinterlands. Nowhere does the Book of Mormon reflect upon industrial abuses, but only upon the advantages of inter-city trade. Therefore, if the Book of Mormon were a commentary upon the American economy, it would be a paean to the advantages of trade rather than a dirge on the evils of capitalist production. But then Mesoamerican pioneers had equal reason to praise the advantages of trade. The

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economic evils the Book of Mormon decries are selfishness and materialism, but those are timeless sins.

The Economics of Antiquity

Mesopotamia had roads as early as 3000 B.C. and Egypt not long after. "Ancient Oriental foreign trade formed the whole region from Africa and Crete as far as India, Iran and Turkestan, after 3000 B.C. or so, into one closely-knit bloc for the purpose of the economic exchange of certain goods." From 2000 B.C. onward ivory from Central Africa, salt from the Dead Sea, ebony from Nubia, cedar from Lebanon, cypress and other woods from Babylonia, as well as asphalt, teak from India, Akkadian jewelry, Mesopotamian tools, drugs, essences, and perfumes from Arabia, oil, honey, spices, nuts, and almonds from Palestine, and a seemingly endless list of other products travelled by land and by sea from Africa to the Orient and to Southern Europe and the Caucasus across the land bridge which would later be the beginning point of the Book of Mormon. Great building projects date at least as far back as the pyramid of Cheops, circa 2650 B.C., coins to at least 630 B.C., and buying and selling through markets at least back to the Greeks of the fifth century B.C. Abraham had silver shekels to buy land to bury Sarah (Genesis 23:16), and the Midianite merchantmen who carried Joseph to Egypt (Genesis 37:28) were organized to trade goods, not to transport slaves. Nor was there anything strange about nomads from the land of Canaan traveling to the Egyptian breadbasket to buy grain (Genesis 42:2). Caravans had already been making that trip for centuries. The Phoenicians traded, as well as pillaged, as far away as the British Isles as early as the tenth century B.C. Greek mining engineers opened up iron mines in Egypt to supply armament workshops before 600 B.C. Grain from the Ukraine was reaching Athens by at

10 Ibid., 118–19.
12 Ibid., 107.
least the fifth century B.C. Usher, in his classic history of mechanical invention, identifies cranes, windlasses, winepresses, water-lifting devices, and other machines going back to 1500 B.C.

The archaeological and anthropological record of the Americas is much less complete and dating more difficult. Whatever may have been the Mesoamerican case in Nephite and Jaredite times, there was unquestionably an intense trade over the 500 miles between the Aztecs of the now Mexico City area and the Mayas of the Yucatan peninsula in the pre-Spanish era. Despite mountain and forest, both luxury wares and raw materials seem to have moved in abundance. Sorenson notes Aztec trade representatives operating as far away as Panama at the time of the Spanish conquest. Since that is the case and no new technology was involved, there is no reason to think city-to-city trade of more limited distance could not have been frequent in the previous millennium. Certainly, there is no economic comment nor condition described in the Book of Mormon which would not have been typical of its claimed chronology and geography, either in the ancient Near East of Lehi’s time or in the Mesoamerica of his descendants.

Is the Book of Mormon a Modern Economic Commentary?

As usual, where one stands depends upon where one sits. If one insists on rejecting the possibility of an ancient date for the Book of Mormon, one must look for some other source of its economic descriptions. But there is nothing in it that is descriptive of the economy familiar to Joseph Smith in the 1820s with subsistence agriculture just beginning to give way to transport of rural farm produce to a faraway city market. Had Joseph Smith been a Philadelphia or New York City resident, he might have seen more of the city to city or immediate hinterland to

14 Ibid., 48.
15 Abbot Payson Usher, A History of Mechanical Invention (Boston: Beacon, 1929), 122–34.
central city trade more typical of the Book of Mormon. In no sense does that book comment upon the emerging American capitalism which Joseph Smith was not destined to experience. Nor is there anything in the book not reflective of known Middle Eastern conditions or probable Mesoamerican conditions of the designated historical time periods. Note, for instance, the repetition of the ancient practices of bondage and tribute (Mosiah 19:15; 23:8–17) but the total absence of any discussion of colonialism and Manifest Destiny and the limited comments on slavery (Mosiah 2:13 and Alma 27:8–9) which one might have expected to loom large in an 1830 work.

If one wants to make of Joseph Smith a universal social commentator on the issues of his day, one would do well to ignore the economics of the Book of Mormon and concentrate on that of the Doctrine and Covenants, which at least provides economic policy prescriptions which its predecessor scripture pointedly avoids (D&C 42:30–35).