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A Mesoamerican System of Weights and Measures? Did the ancient peoples of Mesoamerica use a system of weights and scales in measuring goods and their values?

Ancient Mesoamericans used some systems of weights and measures; items in the market, though, were usually sold by volume. The Mesoamerican weights and measures may coincide with the weights and measures described in Alma 11 of the Book of Mormon, but more research is necessary in order to make conclusive claims.


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Alma’s experience with the antagonist Zeezrom in the city of Ammonihah as reported in Alma 11 describes a system of standard weights and volumes in use among the Nephites in their commerce. We would expect that in Mesoamerica, quite certainly the area where the history of the Nephites was played out, there might be evidence of standards. Such would include measures of volume for grains plus weights of precious metals of values equivalent to the amounts of grain.

When the Spanish invaders arrived, they reported that in the markets everything was sold by volume.1 For example, the Aztecs used a wooden box, called quauhchia-quihuitl, to measure corn and other dry goods; this box was divided until the smallest unit was a twelfth part of the whole. Graded sizes of jars served to measure liquid. They also had special cups to measure out gold tribute payments to the Spanish in units roughly equivalent to our ounces. Maya groups in southern Mesoamerica also relied primarily on volume measures (for example, the “armload” and “the fistful”).2 From the area around Kaminaljuyu on the outskirts of Guatemala City (the “land of Nephi” to some) archaeologists have, in fact, found bowls manufactured to a standard pattern and of gradually reducing sizes; these may represent socially established measures of volume belonging to the time period—the first and second centuries B.C.—when the Lamanites are reported by the Book of Mormon to be living in Nephi.3

Further, there is all but conclusive evidence that weights were not used anywhere in Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish conquest, nor were scales known.4 The archaeological and ethnological literature has credited Andean peoples and other South Americans with the possession of scales.5 Fragmentary information hints at the possibility—no more—that scales were known at some points in Mesoamerica in an earlier era even though they apparently were not continued in use for Spanish eyewitnesses to observe.6 (Many other cultural ideas and objects are known to have been lost since ancient times.)7

It has been suggested by some Latter-day Saints that sets of small metal objects used currently in weighing goods for sale in Guatemalan marketplaces are descended culturally from a system of weighing assumed to have been used in pre-Spanish, and indeed in Book of Mormon, times.8 Objective evidence for this claim is lacking. Indeed, historically the use of scales and weights in Guatemala appears to have been brought in by Europeans perhaps no more than 90 years ago.9 All the materials and terminology involved in these devices are of Spanish origin.

Yet the studies of Mesoamerican standards for measurement that have been done so far have been extremely limited. The topic deserves in-depth research whereupon greater clarity may be attained.
13. The writings of several prophets are not preserved on the brass plates, but are found in the Old Testament Zenos, Zenock, Neum, and Eiaz (see 1 Nephi 19:10, Helaman 8:19–20). The collapse of the rule of law undercut the Book of Mormon. 

Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon

15. Although the biblical text implies that Moses died, the Book of Mormon makes it clear that he was actually translated (see Alma 45:19).


Pondering the Word

Dennis and Sandra Packard

* This article has been adapted by the authors from Dennis J. and Sandra Packard, “Pondering the Scriptures,” in Pondering upon the Word (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1981).


4. TDJS, 276.

5. JD, 7185.


Weighing and Measuring in the Worlds of the Book of Mormon

John W. Welch

1. I express appreciation to Kent Brown, Claire Foley, and the FARMS editorial staff for their contributions to this article. This article is part of the “A New Look at the Printer’s Manuscript” series, the result of the editors to report and develop past and current research by several people on this subject, mentioned in the notes below.

2. The collapse of the rule of law undercut the divinely established base of Nephi civilization. About the First Editions, Zephas Zeplin prophesied the Lord’s threat to “utterly destroy” the Nephi because “they have hardened their hearts against [the Lord’s] words,” have repented not of their evil doings; therefore, I will visit them . . . in my fierce anger” (Moshiach 1:1, compare Mormon 1:19). See also the similar lawlessness in Helaman chapters 4, 5, and 7, and in Mormon chapters 1 and 2. The Old Testament prophets also condemned the misuse of weights and balances in the marketplace (Mosea 12:7; Amos 8:5) just prior to the destruction of the Northern Kingdom.


4. See Ruth 4:1–2; Harold B. Clark, Biblical Law (Portland, Ore.: Binford & Mort, 1943), 260 n.19, “Ordinarily the judges were not paid.” Haim H. Cohen, “Rebeytor,” Encyclopaedia Iudaica (Jerusalem: Keter, 1943), 4:1357. “[Judges] are urged to be impartial, and not susceptible to bribes” (2 Chronicles 19:7) and reminded that judicial services should be given free (Bek. 29a).

5. Cohen, “Rebekor,” 1868. “Other talmudic jurists carried the rule against bribery to extremes by refusing to sit in judgment over any person who had shown them the slightest courtesy, such as helping them to alight from a boat (Ket. 105a).


7. See discussion below.


16. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” 6:896. The Bible also mentions stone weights. For instance, the Hebrew phrase meaning “a weight, a great and a small” (Deuteronomy 25:15) could be translated literally as “stones, a large stone and a small.”


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4. The Printer’s Manuscript has senum, and chism in Alma 11, also as chism in Mosiah 8:9. “These may well be Akkadian carrywords from the Jaredeites.


9. For other possible relationships between Nephiite weights and meaningful term known from other ancient cultures, see Smith, “Nephiite Weights and Measures.”


11. Powell, “Weights and Measures,” 6:896. The Bible also mentions stone weights. For instance, the Hebrew phrase meaning “a weight, a great and a small” (Deuteronomy 25:15) could be translated literally as “stones, a large stone and a small.”

2. This series was published later as a book, Davis Bitton and Book of Mormon Scholarship.

1. For a comparison of 1–2–4–7, 1–2–4–8, System

8. See Joseph L. Allen, Improvement Era

7. See "Lost Arts," in Broadway. See Cracroft, "Seeking 'the


25. Sperry’s published answer to the Isaiah


21. Ibid., 3:411–25; see also Roberts "The


9. See

7.

34. See B. H. Roberts,

29. See

27. See Paul Jones, Ancient Native

250 a.C. a 300 d.C

Kaminaljuyú/San Jorge: Evidencia

University Middle American Research Institute, 1971), 5–6.


Guatemala: The Ancient Native

The Nephite Monetary System, " (Salt Lake City: Brigham Young University Middle American Research Institute, 1993), 124.

B. H. Roberts and Book of Mormon Scholarship

Early Twentieth Century: Age of Transition

Davis Bitton


2. This series was published later as a book, Corruption: A Nephite Story (1902). Richard Cracroft says this work was turned into a play and performed on Broadway: See Cracroft, "Seeking the Good, the Pure, the Elevating," Ensign, June 1981, 57–62; July 1981, 56–61.

3. See Improvement Era 3, June 1900, 570–75; July 1900, 655–75; August 1900, 760–66; September 1900, 855–43.

4. Madsen, Defender of the Faith, 128.


6. The bibliographical record of this work can be confusing both as to title and volume numbers. When it appeared in 1895, the work carried the title, the singular, A New Witness for God. Treating Joseph Smith, this work in two volumes later became volume one. Between 1903 and 1906, a series of chapters appeared as manuals 7, 8, and 9 of the Young Men’s Mutual Improvement Association. At 1909 these were brought together and published as New Witnesses for God. II. The Book of Mormon, volumes 2 and 3, changing the word in its plural form. Volume 1 was published in 1911, while volumes 2 and 3 were brought together and published as a single volume in 1920, 1926, and 1927.


8. See New Witnesses, 2:246, 281.


11. See New Witnesses, 2:347.


15. Ibid., 2:370–71.


18. Ibid., 3:442–46.


20. Ibid., 3:434–39. "On Roberts adds in a footnote, "it may be that the changes occurred to the inspired mind of the Prophet when reading the English version, without referring to the Nephite plates. In this connection it is to be remembered that the Prophet, 1833–1883, was engaged in such an inspired "revision" of the Old and New Testament (p. 439)."


23. See Paul Jones, The Bible and the Book of Mormon: Some Suggestive Points from Modern Biblical Study (Logan, Utah, 191–).


27. See Josephus, Antiquities, 11.1.

28. See note 23; Abraham Gnidih, The Book of Isaiah: A New Translation with Interpretive Keys to the Book of Mormon (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988), a comprehensive treatment of the Isaiah problem may be of firstrate importance, and the assurance in the book itself that we shall receive, the co-operation of divine agencies to confirm to the souls of men the truth of the Nephite record, that as that record was written in the first instance by divine commandment, by the spirit of prophecy and revelation, and as it was preserved by angelic guardian-ship, and at last brought forth by revelation, and translated by what men regard as miraculous means, so it is provided in God’s providences . . . that its truth shall be attested to individuals by the operations of secondary importance. Especially is this the case when setting forth the Book of Mormon for the world’s acceptance; in which matter we have no right to expect, and the assurance in the book itself that