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Linen and Silk in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: Miller discusses the claims made by Book of Mormon critics that the appearance of linen and silk in the record is anachronistic, and that these didn't exist in the Americas prior to Columbus. He summarizes several proposals to address this, such as the importation of flax by the Lehites or Jaredites or the use of materials native to the Americas to produce a similar result.

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Linen and Silk in the Book of Mormon

Some critics have objected to the fact that linen, especially fine-twined linen, is mentioned in the Book of Mormon and have stated that it was not “supposed to be” in the Americas before the Spaniards came. Examples of this material in Book of Mormon times are given in Alma (1:29), and Ether (10:24). But the key question is, what qualifies as linen? When linen is mentioned today – at least in the United States – most people think of sheets and pillow cases. The majority of these are made from cotton. Hemp and other plant fibers when woven tightly enough are sometimes called linen. What is considered true linen is made of fibers from the flax plant. Fine paper is also produced from linen.

Usage shows that the term “linen” can be used both in a specific sense and a general one. So, even without a language translation involved, different interpretations of linen are possible. So-called true linen (i.e., linen made from flax fibers) is known from ancient times, even before the Jaredite history begins. Egyptian mummies are wrapped in one type of linen going back more than 3000 B.C., centuries before the start of the Jaredite history.

The question now arises, did the Jaredite and Nephite linen come from flax? The Book of Mormon tells us that each group brought seeds with them from the Old World. Other plant fibers, too, those found in the New World, could produce a cloth that might be similar enough to Old World linen to give it the same name. Flax is an Old World plant. It was much prized in ancient times as a durable fabric. Jared, his brother, and the others that came to America with them were probably aware of this material, and the plant from which it was made. Knowing the value of linen to people in the Old World, it is reasonable to assume that flax

seeds would have been brought to America by the Jaredites. The same would hold true for Lehi and his family.

According to Brigham Young University professors, Terry B. Ball and Wilford M. Hess, both the Jaredites and Nephites, "...in all probability brought flax seeds with them on their trek to the promised land." (2004, p. 174). They also indicated that since flax does well without cultivation, that it might have been present by the time the Nephites arrived. And, according to Hess, flax could still be in the Americas as a result of this introduction millennia ago (2008, Pers. Comm.)

Whether the "fine-twined" linen of the Book of Mormon was manufactured from flax is unknown. However, as implied above, they could call other finely woven fabric, linen. Then as now, cotton might have been used. Cotton is native to both the Old and New Worlds, and would probably have been available to Jaredites as well as Nephites.

Silk is another item that Book of Mormon critics say was not present in America before Europeans settled here. But, like linen, there is more than one possible source. Historically, people have generally regarded silk as a fine fabric obtained from the cocoons of the mulberry silkworm larvae. However, cocoons of other kinds of caterpillar larvae are also used to make silk. The product looks the same even though the quality differs.

Silks have been produced in many different parts of the world. It should not be surprising, then, that silk is mentioned as a fabric in the Book of Mormon (e.g., Alma 4:6; Ether 10:24). In fact in the Ether account it is reported that, "And they (the Jaredites) did have silks..." The implication here is that they may have had more than one type. If so, the different types could have been produced from the cocoons of different kinds of caterpillar larvae.

Other possibilities for different types of silk exist as well. John L. Sorenson commented, “Moreover, fine hair from the belly of rabbits of central Mexico was woven into a cloth which the Spanish considered equal in finish and texture to silk.” (1995, p. 10). Both Sorenson and Hess considered that fiber from the ceiba (kapok) tree of Mesoamerica has been spun to form a silk-like material (Hess, 2008, Pers. Comm.). This substance also would have been available to both the Jaredites and Nephites.