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Sheep and Goats in the Book of Mormon

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Abstract: Miller discusses the "goats" and "wild goats" of the Book of Mormon text in the context of native species present in the Americas. Human interaction with sheep and goats before European contact seems to be established by evidence from petroglyphs.

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Sheep and Goats in the Book of Mormon

As mentioned earlier, sheep and goats were listed in conjunction with Book of Mormon peoples, both Jaredites and Nephites. Neither of their records, though, specifically states whether these types of animals were brought over from the Old World. However, it does seem reasonable that they were, as both sheep and goats were valuable resources to man there. They seemingly would have been included in the “flocks and herds” cited in Ether (6:4). In the Jaredite record we are told that they, “were useful for the food of man.” (Ether 9:18).

Then, as now, the wool from sheep could also be used to make clothing. Sorenson relayed that sheep’s wool was found at a Precolumbian burial site near Puebla, Mexico (1985, p. 296-297). Assuming both sheep and goats were brought over by the Jaredites (and perhaps by Lehi and his group), is it possible that closely related types of animals were also already in Mesoamerica when they arrived?

The statement that there were both goats and wild goats that the Nephites found in the forests upon arrival in the Promised Land (1 Nephi 18:25), suggests to me that the non-wild goats encountered were a former domesticated breed. Possibly this was an Old World species that the Jaredites had earlier brought over with them. The early Nephites would have seen a difference between Old World goats with which they were familiar, and a new type unseen by them before.

There is only one living species of wild goat in North America (Figure 5). Its current geographic range, from Alaska south to the northwestern United States, would seem to keep it from consideration as the “wild goat” mentioned in 1 Nephi (18:25). However, a closely related species is known as a late Pleistocene fossil that had a more southerly distribution. In fact it

is known from Mesoamerica. Fossils of this animal are known mostly from cave deposits.



Figure 5. This photo of the living mountain goat provides a general idea of what the extinct species, *Oreamnos harringtoni*, looked like. However, the extinct form with a range into Mexico was somewhat smaller, with longer and more curved horns. This wild goat is possibly depicted in the petroglyphs shown in Figure 6 below. Both the Jaredite and Nephite records indicate the presence of goats. Wild goats are also given in the Nephite record. *Oreamnos harringtoni* is probably the wild goat that they encountered. (Photo by courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service)

As mentioned before, several Late Pleistocene animals survived into historic times. This goat could easily be one of these. Their fossils, though, are very rare. According to Kurtén and Anderson, “mountain goats are rare as fossils partly because their habitat is not conducive to fossil preservation.” (1980, p. 372).

Fossils of mountain goat have been found in San Josecito Cave in northern Mexico (Arroyo-Cabrales and Johnson, 1995, p. 223). Bones of Precolumbian domestic goat were reported from caves in the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico (Hatt, 1953, p. 29). Both the wild goat and the domestic goat could have been encountered by the Nephites as reported. It’s possible, if not probable, that the only sheep listed by the Jaredites and Nephites were a domestic breed. Only two kinds of sheep are known from the Pleistocene as well as the Recent (= Post-Pleistocene or Ice Age) from North America.

One, the Dall sheep, is only found native in Alaska, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and northern British Columbia. It would not be a good candidate for a type of sheep in Book of Mormon lands. If the sheep mentioned in the Book of Mormon was a native variety, it would be the Bighorn sheep. This animal presently has a geographic range from southwestern Canada to northern Mexico.

Before European settlement of the New World, this sheep had a more extensive range, which included foothills and meadows as well as mountains. It has been stated that, “... with the advent of white man, they [Bighorn sheep] moved into the mountains and are now found only in mountainous areas.” (Hall and Kelson, 1959, p. 1031). Before this time, when they could more readily be preserved as fossils, they left a modest record of their presence, at least in some areas. Gypsum Cave in southern Nevada has yielded

fossils of Bighorn sheep along with several types of extinct animals. Some of the bones found here show signs of charring, as well as cut marks attributed to man (Glowiak and Rowland, 2003, p. 498). Many human artifacts have also been collected in Gypsum Cave (Harrington, 1933). There are a number of localities in the American Southwest, many of which I've visited, that show petroglyphs of sheep – and possibly goats - some with human figures alongside them (Figure 6).



Figure 6. A photograph of petroglyphs from Newspaper Rock in southwestern Utah. Sheep and possibly goats are shown among the animals depicted. It appears that utilizing these animals was a practice of ancient peoples in the New World. This would certainly apply to both the Jaredites and the Nephites as well. The petroglyphs shown here date back many centuries according to archaeologists. (Photo by author)

Certainly the association of sheep and goats with man before European settlement of America is established. As previously stated, translated words might not carry the same meaning as we place on them today. Therefore, what we call sheep (or another animal in the Book of Mormon) could possibly represent something different. For example, when the Spaniards came to the Americas, they commonly called the llama-like animals, guanacos and vicuñas, “native sheep.”