



Type: Book Chapter

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## Elephants in the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Science and the Book of Mormon: Cures, Cumoms, Horses and More*

Published: Laguna Niguel, CA: KCT & Associates, 2009

Pages: 47–53

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**Abstract:** Miller discusses his identification of the "elephants" of the Book of Ether with the Columbian mammoth. Mammoths are generally thought to have been extinct by this period, but the exact date is still a matter of debate. The fact that they were mentioned solely in the Jaredite context, but not by the Nephites, indicates they likely became extinct at some point between these two civilizations.

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## Elephants in the Book of Mormon

When I first read the Book of Ether in the Book of Mormon, I was *very* surprised to see that elephants were listed as one of the animals the Jaredites found in America. The question that ran through my mind was: “Is that possible?” It must have been that I took it on faith that it was, as I believed the Book of Mormon to be true from my first reading of it. Even so, my mind was put more at ease a few years later when I took a geology class and saw how this could be. Little did I realize then that some years later I’d be collecting many fossils of this magnificent beast, and doing research on them.

There is only a name change that should help people get over the hurdle of elephants appearing in the Book of Mormon as native to the New World. We now know these elephants as mammoths. Originally they came to this continent from Eurasia during the Pleistocene. For many years paleontologists called mammoths, elephants, as they wrote about them.<sup>6</sup> Some still do. The Columbian mammoth of North America, based on studies of its fossils, is more closely related to the Indian (or Asian) elephant than the Indian elephant is to the African one! Often when people hear of a mammoth, the Woolly mammoth comes to their minds. That’s the one I used to think of first. However, even though this kind might be the most famous, it apparently was not nearly as abundant as the Columbian mammoth. Both, though, are elephants.

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of what are now called mammoths, earlier being referred to as elephants, can be found in the following articles or books: Arellano, 1951; Furlong, 1925; Johnson, 1952; Kalb and Mebrate, 1993; Osborn, 1942. For a complete reference of these citations see the References Cited at the back of this book.

With its long shaggy hair and thick wool undercoat, the Woolly mammoth was especially well adapted to live in cold climates. Its geographic range spread over the northern parts of the North American and Eurasia continents. Even in North America it's highly unlikely that any Book of Mormon people lived where these mammoths ranged.

If the "elephant"<sup>7</sup> recorded in the Book of Ether (9:19) really was the animal I envision, it would have been the Columbian mammoth. This animal is well represented by fossils throughout North America in the late Pleistocene. In the research I have done in Mexico, it is the most numerous of late Pleistocene fossils in some areas. It's stated in the passage in Ether above, that the elephant was especially useful to man. Although it is not mentioned as a food item (as are cattle, sheep, goats, and swine in verse 18), there is a good chance that it was utilized as such. Sites where man and mammoth are associated in North America are not uncommon. A statement was made that, "There can no longer be any reasonable doubt that man and elephant coexisted in America." (Johnson, 1952, p. 216).

Many more joint occurrences have been reported since this statement was made. At a number of such sites, spear points have been found associated with the fossils, and in some instances still embedded in bone (Martin, 2005, p. 148-149). Mammoth kill sites are known at several localities in Mesoamerica (e.g., Johnson, 1952, p. 216; MacNeish and Nelken-Terner, 1983, p. 73, 76; Pich-

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<sup>7</sup> There were two other elephant-like animals that lived in North and Central America after the Pleistocene. One was the American mastodon, and the other a distant relative called a gomphothere. Both have been found in association with man in Mesoamerica.

ardo, 2001, p. 42). I have seen petroglyphs that appear to depict the American mastodon and possibly the mammoth in Utah. One is seen in Figure 7.



**Figure 7. Petroglyph of a probable mastodon (its shape is much closer to a mastodon than a mammoth) from near Moab, Utah. Both mammoth and mastodon fossils have been found-associated with prehistoric man in North America. Each of these animals could have been encountered by Jaredite peoples. This figure is etched in sandstone, and is roughly 20 inches long. The holes seen both within and above the figure were made by gun shots. (*Photo by author*)**

As far as elephants being useful to man (Ether 9:19), that is certainly easy to accept. Even today elephants are used as beasts of burden. They are ridden as well. These practices have gone back several thousand years in Asia and the Middle East. Domestication of the Indian elephant, as based on evidence found in the Indus Valley, goes back at least to 2500 B.C. (Bist et al., 2001).

Elephants at present have primarily been used to lift and move heavy loads, such as logging in southeast Asian forests. In the past they were used even in ancient warfare (Keegan, 1993, p. 271). The type of elephant most used by man has been with the Indian elephant. African elephants have proved to be much more difficult to train. Indian elephants on the other hand can be semi-domesticated. Circus elephants are this type. With the realization that the Columbian mammoth (Figure 8) is very closely related to the Indian elephant, it should not be a surprise that Jaredites could use this animal to do work.

Before coming to America Jared and his companions possibly saw the elephant being used as a beast of burden. This is especially likely if their route to the ocean was through Asia as Hugh Nibley thought (1988, p. 181-182). If this were true, Jared and his group would have learned that elephants could be of great use. This agrees with what we are told in Ether 9:19 – that elephants were especially useful to man.

There is overwhelming evidence that man and mammoth were associated in America for a fairly extensive period of time. That elephants (mammoths) are listed as an animal known to the Jaredites, but apparently not to the Nephites, suggests that their extinction probably occurred between these times. No unequivocal dating of the mammoth puts them close to the time Nephites were in America.



**Figure 8. The Columbian mammoth (actually a true elephant) shown here was a common animal from Alaska through Central America in the Pleistocene epoch. It apparently survived beyond this time. Some individuals were larger than any known modern elephant. Like the modern elephant they would have been useful to man. It is indicated in the Book of Ether that the elephant was one of the animals that was especially useful for the Jaredites. (Figure by courtesy of the George C. Page Museum in southern California. John Dawson, artist. From Harris and Jefferson, 1985, "Treasures of the Tar Pits.")**

Until the last few decades, almost all scientists were convinced that mammoths did not survive the Pleistocene (Ice Age) epoch. This was 10,000 to 12,000 years ago (Agenbroad, 1984, p. 99). However, more and more datings on these fossils show that they lived on much longer. How long did they survive?

That question is still being debated by paleontologists. Mario Pichardo listed a last appearance date for the North American mammoth at 8,260 years ago (2001, p. 44). James Mead and David Meltzer claimed a younger date of 4,885 years ago (1984, p. 446). Recently David Yesner, Douglas Veltre, Kristine Crossen, and Russell Graham reported an age for an Alaskan mammoth of 5,720 years (2005, p. 202). S. L. Vartanyan, V. E. Garutt, and A. V. Sher dated mammoth fossils from Wrangel Island near Alaska at 3,700 years ago (1993, p. 340). An exceptionally young age was given for a site in St. Petersburg, Florida, where mammoth fossils were found. According to James Hester, this animal lived on until 2,040 years ago (1960, p. 72) It should be acknowledged, however, that most scientists do not accept this date as valid (Martin, 2005, p. 122).

What should be realized with the facts given above, is that scientific evidence does give credence to the Book of Mormon claim that elephants (mammoths) were present in America when the Jaredites first settled.