



Type: Book Chapter

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## Joseph's Environment and the Book of Mormon

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Source: *Shaken Faith Syndrome: Strengthening One's Testimony In the Face of Criticism and Doubt*

Published: Redding, CA; FairMormon, 2013 (2nd Edition)

Pages: 135-143

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# 12

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As noted repeatedly in various sections of this book, Joseph—like all prophets—was, in part, a product of his *milieu*. His worldview, environment, and education no doubt influenced his interpretation of scripture, how it related to his surroundings, his understanding of past and future prophecies, and his interpretation of historical events. It also likely impacted his choices of verbiage and phraseology when he translated scriptures or dictated revelation.

Such an acknowledgment does not, however, suggest that LDS doctrines or scriptures were plagiarized from environmental sources. The critics, in an effort to find the real source for the Book of Mormon—because they are convinced that angels do not reveal ancient scriptural records—claim that Joseph created the Book of Mormon by borrowing from either Solomon Spalding's unpublished novel or that he sponged information from a variety of available sources. Those sources might have included Ethan Smith's (no relation) and James Adair's historical musings on the origin of the Indians, as well as newspaper articles or the speculation, rumors, and oral traditions that existed among his friends, neighbors, and other contemporaries.

### *Spalding*

Sometime between 1809 and 1812 (about twenty years before the Book of Mormon came to press) a Reverend Solomon Spalding (also spelled *Spaulding*) wrote a novel about a group of ancient Roman sailors who were blown off course and landed in America. Spalding died in 1816 and his manuscript was never published. In 1833, Dr. Philastus Hurlbut, who had recently been excommunicated from the LDS Church for unchristian-like conduct toward some young ladies, heard of this manuscript and endeavored to show that Joseph Smith had plagiarized Spalding's work by turning it into the Book of Mormon.

Originally, Hurlbut wanted to publish the manuscript in order to prove that the Book of Mormon was fraudulent, but when he read the manuscript he did not find the hoped-for parallels. Discouraged, he passed the project on to another anti-Mormon, E.D. Howe. Howe, in turn, published an anti-Mormon book claiming that the Book of Mormon plagiarized Spalding's novel. According to so-called "witnesses" who had read the manuscript, Spalding had written about Nephi, Lehi, the Lamanites, and Nephites nearly twenty years before the publication of the Book of Mormon.

The critics claimed that Sidney Rigdon, a convert to the Church, copied the manuscript and gave it to Joseph Smith who turned it into the Book of Mormon. Rigdon, however, had never heard of the Book of Mormon or its contents until he became a Mormon after 1830, and he had not even been in the vicinity of Spalding's home until after Spalding had died. Even many years later, after Rigdon had apostatized from the Church, he denied ever having seen the Book of Mormon until it was introduced to him by the Mormon missionary Parley P. Pratt.

Somehow the Spalding manuscript was lost and then resurfaced in 1884 in a pile of papers belonging to a man who had bought Howe's business. Examining Spalding's actual novel proved that the Mormons had been right all along; any similarities between the manuscript and the Book of Mormon were superficial.

Some critics, however, have not surrendered. Now they claim that Spalding must have had a second manuscript from which the Book of Mormon was taken. Contemporaries of Spalding, however, mention only one manuscript, and that manuscript has been found. The entire Spalding theory rests solely on speculation rather than evidence. Several other prolific critics, in fact, agree that the Spalding theory is untenable and full of holes.

## *Joseph the Sponge*

Early Americans were fascinated with the fact that the New World was already inhabited by indigenous people. From where did these people originate? There were many speculations. In 1775 James Adair published *A History of the American Indians*, and in 1823 Ethan Smith published *View of the Hebrews*. Both books claimed to provide evidence that the Indians were remnants of the ten lost tribes of Israel. By the time Joseph translated the Book of Mormon, some people of the day believed that the Indians were descendants of the lost tribes.

Critics note numerous parallels between phrases in the Book of Mormon and phrases in the books by Ethan Smith and James Adair. According to the critics, some of these word phrases appear in the same order and are grouped with other word phrases identical to that of the Book of Mormon. Because Ethan Smith's and James Adair's books were printed before Joseph translated the Book of Mormon, the critics claim that the similarity in phraseology proves that Joseph borrowed information from these books. Such a conclusion, however, commits the *post hoc* (or "coincidental correlation") logical fallacy. This fallacy is expressed as: "Event A occurred before

event B. Therefore, A must have caused B.” A rooster who believes that his crowing causes the sun to rise each morning is the classic illustration of this fallacy.

Similarities do not prove dependence. Just because two documents have similar phrases does not mean that one is dependent on the other. Generally, all people in a given society use similar phrases to express ideas and elucidate concepts. Joseph would have used the phrases and terminology of his day to translate or convey the meaning of what was on the plates. As an analogy: makers of the 1984 hit movie, *Ghostbusters*, were sued by Harvey Publications, the creators of the *Casper the Friendly Ghost* comics, because they claimed that the ghost in the *Ghostbusters* logo looked just like Fatso—a ghost from the Casper comic. The judge, however, dismissed the suit because there are “very limited ways to draw the figure of a cartoon ghost.”<sup>1</sup>

LDS apologist Jeff Lindsay takes a humorous look at the critics’ methodology. By comparing similar word phrases and phrase orders, it is possible to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon was plagiarized from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>2</sup> Whitman’s first edition, however, was published twenty-five years after the Book of Mormon. Because it would have been impossible for Joseph to plagiarize Whitman, should we use the logic of the critics and claim that Whitman plagiarized the Book of Mormon?

The alleged similarities between *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon, however, go beyond phraseology. Among the critics’ list of similarities are the discovery of a lost Hebrew book among the Indians, Indians who had contact with Egyptian hieroglyphics, a barbarous people who overthrew a civilized people, the destruction of Jerusalem, large civilizations in America, lengthy quotes from Isaiah, that the American Gentile nation would become the savior of Israel in America, polygamy, and Quetzalcoatl—a white, bearded prophet who visited the early Americans.<sup>3</sup>

At first blush, some of these parallels sound intriguing. The problem is, however, that if Joseph was familiar with Ethan Smith’s historical speculations and his attempts to prove that the Indians were descendants of the ten lost tribes, then Joseph would not have blatantly contradicted some of the “evidences” proposed by Ethan’s book.

Ethan’s book, for instance, begins with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans (which occurred after Christ’s ascension). The Book of Mormon, of course, begins with the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylonians, 600 years before Christ. The two similarities are not similar at all and must be counted as the coincidental mention of the city, Jerusalem. *View of the Hebrews* lists many Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel including those contained in Isaiah 11. While these scriptures are essential to Ethan’s argument, none of them—with the sole exception of those in Isaiah 11—are found in the Book of Mormon.

The longest chapter in Ethan’s book lists numerous proofs for the Hebrew lineage among the Indians, but virtually none of these proofs are found in the Book of Mormon. Ethan claims that all experts believe that the Hebrew-Indians came across the Bering Strait, yet the Book of Mormon claims that Book of Mormon peoples

came by boat. One of Ethan's favorite proofs that the Indians were Israelites is their use of the word "Hallelujah," yet this word is never found in the Book of Mormon. Other words listed by Ethan that supposedly imply proof of Israelite dependency find not even the remotest equivalency to any of the names in the Book of Mormon.

According to Ethan, one of the surest signs that the Indians are Israelites is his claim that the Indians would carry small boxes into battle to protect them from injury—just like the Israelites and the Ark of the Covenant. How could Joseph have missed this wonderful evidence? If Joseph had read Ethan's book or if he was at least familiar enough with its contents to plagiarize or sponge the ideas proposed in Ethan's book, it would make sense that Joseph would have utilized this fabulous story of Indian battle boxes. Keep in mind that Ethan was not writing fiction; he was claiming that, according to his research and the opinions of other experts, his proofs supported the belief that the Indians were Israelites. Why would Joseph miss an opportunity to bolster the Book of Mormon's claim to be an authentic ancient text? With Ethan's book Joseph had some of the best and brightest propositions of his day to support his interpretation of the Book of Mormon's general thesis (that the Indians were descended from Israelites). Why did he not use them? Other missed opportunities include Ethan's claim that the Israelite Indians would offer a daily sacrifice by passing venison through a fire and cutting it into twelve pieces. Once again, this is not found in the Book of Mormon.

Ethan equates the white-bearded God, Quetzalcoatl, with Moses. The Book of Mormon never mentions Quetzalcoatl or any of Ethan's details of Quetzalcoatl's Indian traditions—such as bare feet, pierced ears, fiery-flying serpents, green plumage, and more. The pinnacle event in the Book of Mormon is a visitation from Christ, Himself. Many Mormons—perhaps following the tradition of people like Ethan Smith—believe that the legends of a white-bearded prophet (sometimes called Quetzalcoatl and sometimes known by other names) refer to Christ. Some modern LDS scholars, however, believe that the Quetzalcoatl traditions (as relating to a white-bearded god/prophet who promised to return) were created by the Spaniards and have no bearing on Christ's visitation to the New World.<sup>4</sup>

If Joseph plagiarized Ethan's *View of the Hebrews* he missed many opportunities to support the Book of Mormon with the information of his day. In fact, much of the information included in the Book of Mormon was contrary to what was known in 1830 about the ancient Old and New Worlds. It does not seem likely that Joseph would write a book—a book that he hoped people would believe—that would contradict what the best information of his day suggested about the ancient worlds. The "parallels" between the *View of the Hebrews* and the Book of Mormon are actually so tenuous that in 1996 the Religious Studies Center at BYU reprinted Ethan's 1825 book, making it readily available for anyone to see the differences for themselves.

According to the critics, however, Joseph was able to sponge all kinds of things from his environment—stories of Indian origins, magic worldviews, Kabalistic traditions, apocryphal legends, archaic names, and more. Supposedly, not only was

Joseph able to mix this eclectic stew into palatable fodder, but he proved to be a culinary genius that created a theological feast.

One such example, assert the critics, is the claim that Joseph borrowed the Book of Mormon *Cumorah* and *Moroni* from two place names near Madagascar. It has recently been noted that off the southeast coast of Africa there is a group of four small islands (settled mostly by Arabs and Africans) known as the Comoros islands. The capital city is Moroni. Some critics have pointed out that an 1808 map of Africa shows the island “Comora.” The 1794 and 1819 Brooke’s gazetteers also listed “Comora.” When we examine such claims, however, it becomes doubtful that Joseph had picked up the name *Comora* from these gazetteers. The 1808 map, for instance, was printed in a gazetteer in Dublin, Ireland,<sup>5</sup> and it is extremely unlikely that it was available to Joseph Smith. None of these gazetteers are listed, for instance, in the 1812–1845 inventory of the Manchester Library (which is the most likely library to which Joseph would have had access, though we have no record that he sought out any library at all).<sup>6</sup>

According to some critics, however, Joseph may have heard these two city names from the “many whalers” in New England who probably visited the islands in the early part of the nineteenth century and spread word of these two city names throughout the northeastern United States at the time Smith had his vision. If, however, the names *Comora* (or also spelled *Comoros* or *Comoro*) and *Moroni* were so well known to New Englanders in Joseph’s day, then why was this obvious plagiarism not noticed earlier by Joseph’s contemporaries? In fact, why would Joseph even use such familiar names, knowing that his neighbors would certainly have known that he simply borrowed the names from sailors’ stories? There is absolutely no evidence that “many whalers” or anyone else in Joseph’s environment was familiar with the Comoro Islands.

Conspicuously missing from all three of the pre-Book of Mormon nineteenth-century gazetteers (or any other gazetteer of Joseph’s day) is the name of Comoro’s capital city, Moroni. Why is that? If the city names were so familiar in nineteenth-century New England, then why is Moroni not found in any of gazetteers of the day? The reason is simple—Moroni did not become the capital of Grand Comoros Island until 1876.<sup>7</sup> Until that time, it is doubtful that any frontier American in Joseph’s vicinity was familiar with any of the names from the islands off Madagascar. The similarity between the Comoros Islands, the city Moroni, and the Book of Mormon, must be chalked up to coincidence.

### *Influence by Local Vicinity*

As is discussed in Chapter 14, some Latter-day Saints believe that Book of Mormon events took place in the Great Lakes region of the United States. As far as I can tell, the first Great Lakes model was proposed in 1983 by Vernal Holley, an LDS critic. Holley did not attempt to find the location for Book of Mormon events but rather tried to show that Joseph Smith stole the theme and much of the content of the Book

of Mormon from an unpublished novel written by the Reverend Solomon Spaulding (see more about Spaulding earlier in this chapter) and then created a Book of Mormon geography, complete with city names, from the landscape of his local vicinity.

According to Holley's geographical model—a limited geography—Lake Ontario was the Book of Mormon's East Sea and Lake Erie was the West Sea, with the Buffalo-Niagara Falls-Saint Catharine's region between the two lakes constituting the “narrow neck” of land.

One of the many problems with Holley's map are his blatant errors is the location of Book of Mormon cities. For example, Holley places the city of Morianton near the West Sea while the Book of Mormon tells us it was near the city of Lehi by the eastern seashore (Alma 50:25).

While an internal map of the Book of Mormon tells us that Alma should be north of Lehi-Nephi, Holley situates it far to the west. As FAIR (and elsewhere L. Ara Norwood) has shown, Holley places many Book of Mormon cities or landmarks in areas that are contradicted by the text.<sup>8</sup>

For some critics, the strength of Holley's argument comes from the parallels comparing Book of Mormon city names and similar names found in Joseph Smith's surrounding environment. According to Holley, there are at least 29 Book of Mormon words that have modern parallels from cities or towns in Joseph Smith's surrounding area. The strongest parallels include (modern names followed by Book of Mormon names): Alma/Alma, Angola/Angola, Boaz/Boaz, Noah Lake/Land of Noah, and Oneida/Onidah. Other similar matches include: Shiloh/Shilom, Omer/Omner, and Morin/Moron. Name-parallels that stretch credulity include: Ripple Lake/Waters of Ripliancum, Monroe/Moroni, and Jacobsburg/Jacobugath.

Some critics argue that even if Joseph did not plagiarize Spaulding, Holley's list of name parallels shows that Joseph drew upon his environment when creating the Book of Mormon. First, it must be pointed out that the wider the net, the better the chances that parallel names will be found. Holley's map includes parts of New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, as well as Ontario and Quebec Canada—almost 200,000 square miles.

Second, a large percentage of the names used in Holley's comparison are names mentioned infrequently in the Book of Mormon (sometimes only once in the book). Cities such as Zarahemla and Bountiful are conspicuously missing from Holley's map. This suggests that Holley was simply mining for any conceivable parallel.

Third, what are the chances the Joseph Smith was familiar with some of the small and obscure towns listed by Holley? Jacobsburg, Ohio, for example, does not show up in an 1822 map of Ohio, and Ripple Lake (Ontario) is so small that it is difficult to locate on modern maps.<sup>9</sup> Some of cities on the Holley map did not have the same names during Joseph Smith's day. Angola, for example, was nothing more than a post office location for Quakers sending mail from Angola Africa until 1855 (more than 30 years after the Book of Mormon was published) when the city of “Evans Station” acquired the name Angola as the city name.<sup>10</sup>

## 12: JOSEPH'S ENVIRONMENT AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Fourth, do these parallel names really suggest influence or just parallelomania? Some critics have claimed that the odds of such matches are millions to one. Using the power of the web I took a few minutes to examine this claim. I focused on the state of Virginia and border towns in North Carolina (approximately 42,000 square miles, or one fifth of the area suggested in Holley's map). In a matter of minutes I found 30 fascinating parallel names. The strongest include: Alma/Alma, Boaz/Boaz, Calno/Calno, Edom/Edom, Siddon/Sidon. Other possibilities include: Nahor/Nehor, Achash/Akish, Joshua Falls/Land of Joshua, Mt. Herman/Hermounts, Moran/Moron, and more. When I expanded the area of coverage I found even more parallels. Finding similar sounding names in Joseph Smith's environment offers no real evidence that Joseph borrowed those names in constructing the Book of Mormon.

LDS researcher Jeff Lindsay made a similar fictitious connection showing—using Holley's logic of comparisons—that Book of Mormon city-names could have come from Hawaii. Lindsay found an equal number of “matches” to those found in the Holley map.<sup>11</sup>

Linguistic coincidence, or *homophony*, can and does occur all the time. We contrast this coincidence with the discovery of *NHM* as a tribal and place name from ancient South Arabia (see Chapter 6 for more details on *NHM*). The parallels to the Book of Mormon “Nahom,” are interlocking with other complex Book of Mormon parallels. If the *NHM* or Nahom, had been pulled from thirteenth-century China, it (like the Comoros and Moroni of Madagascar) could be dismissed as a homophonic coincidence (two words that sound the same). *NHM*, however, was the name of an actual seventh-sixth century B.C. location that precisely fits the Lehite narrative of their South Arabian journey—including the note that they turned eastward at Nahom (1 Nephi 17:1) just as we find on the primary Arabian trails around *NHM*. All of this was unknown in frontier America. Such interlocking complex parallels add significant weight to Old World archaeological evidence for the Book of Mormon—wholly unlike the homophonic coincidence we find with the names from Madagascar.

If we take the sponge theory seriously, then it seems logical that Joseph would have relied on the latest knowledge of his day when fabricating his Book of Mormon. We find, however, that Joseph's new scripture was at odds with nineteenth-century theories about the origin of New World inhabitants as well as what the “scholars” of his day believed about the ancient Old and New Worlds.

In Joseph's day, what most people knew about the Native Americans came from discoveries in local vicinities. It was not until 1842 (a dozen years after the Book of Mormon was published) that John Lloyd Stephens first brought to light the findings of his expeditions among Mesoamerican ruins.<sup>12</sup> Also, as pointed out in Chapter 6, over 80% of items mentioned in the Book of Mormon (such as barley, cement, thrones, and more) had no New World archaeological support in 1830. That means that Joseph included things in the Book of Mormon that were contrary to what was known about the Indians during his lifetime. Today, 75% of those same items have been confirmed to at least some degree by New World archaeology.<sup>13</sup>



We find the same thing in the ancient Old World. As the late Eugene England has shown, there was a dearth of accurate information about the ancient Near East in Joseph Smith's day. Information on ancient Arabia that was available was often wrong, and almost consistently described Arabia as a barren wasteland. Some books claimed that it was so hot in Arabia that animals were roasted on the plains and birds in mid-air. The southern coastline was described as a rocky wall, so dismal and barren that there was not even a blade of grass. The Book of Mormon, however, tells a different story. Nephi, for example, tells us about a system of *wadis* (valleys of seasonal riverbeds) now known to have existed in ancient Arabia, but not mentioned in the books of Joseph's day. Very few books mentioned any fertile regions in Arabia, and those that did got the information wrong as well—describing fertile regions as producing rice, maize, and tropical fruits. So inaccurate were the experts of 1830 America, that if Joseph had sponged the information of his day, he would have produced a book full of errors. Most of what we Westerners know about ancient Arabia has come within the last few decades. This is aptly demonstrated in the comments of one twentieth-century critic (who claims a Ph.D. in biology):

First Nephi 17:5 is a interesting description of Arabia which is “called Bountiful because of its much fruit and also wild honey.” Arabia is bountiful in sunshine, certain insects, petroleum, sand, heat, clear skies, and fresh air, but certainly not in “much fruit and also wild honey,” nor has it been in over 4,000 years. . . . First Nephi 18:1 indicates that the Jews made a ship from ample timber of Arabia. The same objection above applies here. Arabia had and has no significant timber forests.<sup>14</sup>

Current research, however, demonstrates that the early chapters of the Book of Mormon relate real-world information about ancient Arabia during the seventh century B.C. (just as described by Nephi in their flight from Jerusalem). Details of the trip have a high degree of confirmation from archaeology and Old World studies. These include descriptions of terrain, difficulties, vegetation, ore, trails, and, of course Nahom (as noted in Chapter 6). In southern Arabia, east of NHM, is tiny coastal inlet known as *Khor Kharfot*. It is not only located exactly where Nephi found “Bountiful” but it matches the Book of Mormon description of Bountiful, detail for detail—including the existence (both anciently and modernly) of “much fruit and also wild honey” as well as ship-building timber. Significantly, no other place in Arabia matches all of the details of Bountiful other than *Khor Kharfot*.<sup>15</sup>

As with the growing support for the Book of Mormon from New World archaeology, the discoveries of the ancient Old World tend to confirm the book as well—all contrary to the information Joseph might have sponged from his nineteenth-century New England environment.

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