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The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record

Author(s): John L. Sorenson

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CHAPTER 15

THE BOOK OF MORMON AS A MESOAMERICAN RECORD

John L. Sorenson

Introduction

Many interpreters or critics of Joseph Smith Jr. and early Mormonism suppose Joseph produced the Book of Mormon himself. Most suppose that the volume was a personal literary creation, vaguely mediated through Smith's remarkable native intelligence from the intellectual environment of Joseph's day. Others propose that Joseph revised a preexisting work that some contemporary had written. Few have said anything specific about how the scripture characterizes the Nephites or the Lamanites or their lands and cultures. At most the claim has been that Smith drew upon supposedly general notions of his day about "the Indians" or "the Moundbuilders."¹

Latter-day Saint scholars over the past fifty years have been vigorously analyzing the text of the scripture. Their work has demonstrated conclusively that the territory where

John L. Sorenson is a professor emeritus of anthropology at Brigham Young University.

the events it reports took place had to be a small area, in the book's own terms. They have also shown that this territory matches with a large number of geographical, cultural, historical, and other dimensions in the area of ancient high civilization in Mexico and northern Central America, which is called Mesoamerica. No other area in the Americas fits the book and its story.²

Where did Joseph Smith suppose the Nephites had been located on the American map? Let us allow for a moment the critics' argument that Joseph created the Book of Mormon by himself. He must then have envisioned some place as the scene, for a sizable portion of the text directly or indirectly treats physical and sociocultural environments. Furthermore, the setting represented shows remarkable consistency. The distribution of lands and cities, the "ups" and "downs" of the topography, and the directions and dimensions involved all manage to avoid anomalies. Could he have come up with a mental map of a fantasy land, like Tolkien did? Was it by sheer bluff and luck that 23-year-old Smith dictated to his scribes over seven hundred statements in the scripture that involve geographical matters, while staying consistent in them all? Yet his own and his friends' comments about the scripture make patent that they considered the people and places of the scripture literally historical. Well, then, did he rely on his personal experience with the New England and New York environment—the only region he knew firsthand—in order to characterize the "promised land" of the Nephites? Those who look to Smith's immediate environment as the prime influence upon him should emphasize this point about the book's geography, it would seem. But only one recent believer in environmental influence on Smith has claimed such a thing in print, and his flimsy proposal looks more like a spoof than a serious thesis.³ After the Book of Mormon had been printed, Joseph

Smith and those around him spoke of the Nephites and the Lamanites as having been spread over the entire Western Hemisphere. What might he have known concretely about New World geography and its ancient cultures, and where might he have learned this information in a geography-ignorant frontier milieu?⁴ Whatever explanation is chosen by those who reject Smith's assertion that the scripture came to light by divine power, they are faced with explaining how it happens that the one geographical scene where the narrative does fit turns out to be Mesoamerica.

Only a handful of statements exist that indicate Joseph Smith's specific views about the geography of the Nephite record.⁵ They are so brief that they do not tell us much of what he thought. Neither did people around him clearly explicate what they heard from him about the scriptural geography. But a tradition did originate among Smith's first followers and has endured persistently in popular Mormon thinking. There is every reason to suppose the originators of this tradition were following Smith's lead in the matter of geography, as they were in just about everything else in the new religion. The essence of this popular view of where the Nephites were located was that the entire Western Hemisphere was populated by Nephites and Lamanites, and that their wars and travels encompassed the whole of it. Their "model" conceived "the land southward" as South America and "the land northward" as North America, an obvious interpretation. This view further held that Lehi₁ and his party landed in South America, and that the final battle of the Nephites and Lamanites took place in New York, at which time Moroni₂ deposited his plates at the battle site that they considered to be the "hill Cumorah" near Joseph Smith's home. While the statements that exist from early Saints about geography fail to spell out this model transparently, all that is said is consistent with the idea that this is what they

believed. It is plausible that Smith and his associates assumed this interpretation of the geography from their first reading of the Nephite account and for years failed to imagine there could be an alternative.

Nephite geography was not a subject about which Mormons were seriously concerned in the nineteenth century. For that matter, the Book of Mormon was but a minor resource for both internal discussion and external teaching compared with the Bible.⁶ In the third generation of Mormons, a few Church members eventually got around to marking up general maps of the Americas with speculative sites for Nephite lands and cities, but none of them were equipped with enough facts about either the scriptural account or American geography to make their guesses clear, let alone convincing.⁷ The low level of interest in the geography question is shown by the fact that for over a century the Saints used the Book of Mormon without anyone systematically determining what it itself had to tell about the geography and cultures of the peoples it treats. Such ideas as were held on those topics were derived from the general tradition undisciplined by research.

A corollary to this geographical viewpoint was that all Indians were descended from Lamanites, savages whose ancestors had killed off the white-skinned, civilized Nephites before A.D. 400. Newspapers and magazines occasionally mentioned ruins or exotic artifacts being found. To the minds of the early Mormons, any such archaeological traces of cultures more complex than they could see among the "redskins" on the western frontier they supposed to have been produced by the Nephites before their destruction.⁸ Only in the twentieth century did a legitimate scholarly field of "archaeology" emerge even among non-Mormons to treat the American ruins. Before that, "experts" were about as

likely to speculate wildly about American antiquities as the public was.

There was one brief episode in Nauvoo when Nephite geography received new attention. A phenomenally popular book by John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (New York, 1841), came into the possession of Church leaders in Nauvoo in 1842. It constituted the first body of information of any substance from which they, together with most people in the English-speaking world, could learn about some of the most spectacular ruins in Mesoamerica.⁹ The Saints' newspaper, the *Times and Seasons*, published long excerpts from the book. Apostle Orson Pratt later recalled, "Most of the discoveries made by Catherwood and Stephens were original . . . [i.e.] had not been described by previous travelers."¹⁰ Stephens's biographer confirms Pratt's recollection: "The acceptance of an 'Indian civilization' demanded, to an American living in 1839 [when the first edition of Stephens appeared in England], an entire reorientation, for to him, an Indian was one of those barbaric, tepee dwellers against whom wars were constantly waged. . . . Nor did one ever think of calling the other [e.g., Mesoamerican] indigenous inhabitants of the continent 'civilized.' In the universally accepted opinion [of that day], they were like their North American counterparts—savages."¹¹

Enthusiastic comments published at Nauvoo showed that the Church's leaders, including Joseph Smith, were immensely stimulated by the new information. Within a few weeks of the first notice, they announced they had just discovered, by reading Stephens's book, that the Nephites' prime homeland must have been in Central, not South, America.¹² An implication was that South America might not have been involved to a major degree, or perhaps not at all. (Also implicit was the point that the old interpretation was not considered by them to have come by revelation.)

But the potential significance of this new model was never explored, in print at least. Within a short time, Joseph was martyred, and the demands of survival and practical pioneering precluded further thought about the esoteric subject of scriptural geography.

The view of common Saints seems never to have been affected by the notion of Book of Mormon geography centering around Central America that half-germinated in Nauvoo's leading circle. It was the general membership's whole-hemisphere interpretation that endured and dominated what little LDS talk there was about this topic in the post-Nauvoo years. Until well into the twentieth century, with only a few exceptions Mormons held to the simple two-continent theory with hardly a thought that an alternative might be possible.

In recent decades, closer examination of the scriptural text by LDS researchers has changed the picture. They have found that the hundreds of statements and allusions about geography demonstrate that the volume's chief author, Mormon₂, held a mental map of Nephite lands that was consistent throughout, but its scale was limited to hundreds, not thousands, of miles. The first attempt to sketch out that map from the text of the scripture was not published until 108 years after the Book of Mormon appeared in print.¹³ Even slower to develop was the concept, as Apostle John A. Widtsoe eventually put it, that "perhaps [Joseph Smith] did not know . . . where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred."¹⁴

Against the popular LDS view of their scripture's geography, the map in the head of editor Mormon₂ covered an area just a few hundred miles in length and width, bounded on two sides by oceans.¹⁵ The whole hemisphere could not possibly have qualified as the scene for the events and peoples he wrote about. Furthermore, the cultural features

attributed by the book to the ancients, even the Lamanites, are not those of what nineteenth-century folk considered “the Indians.”

Then where was this smallish territory that Mormon₂ and Moroni₂ knew firsthand? When all the options within the Americas are matched against the text, it turns out that only one place qualifies as Nephite territory—Mesoamerica, or some part of it. Only that region fits the geographical conditions specified or implied in Mormon₂'s record. It alone was the home of ancient literate cultures that agree at many points with what the account says about the civilization in which Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites participated.

What may startle some about this situation is that most of what Joseph Smith said or implied about geography indicates that he did not understand or was ambiguous about the fact, as it turns out, that Mesoamerica was the particular setting for Nephite history. Until he encountered the Stephens's book, Joseph gave no hint that he was aware that such a limited area with a distinctive civilized culture even existed in the Americas. Even with Stephens's material in mind, he made no more than a passing attempt to relate the Book of Mormon's story to the newly-found ruins. And in the long run, the little blip on the Latter-day Saints' mental screen caused by the explorer's book faded as the mistaken folk view reasserted its dominance.

This leaves a paradoxical situation for those who claim that Joseph Smith authored the Book of Mormon. Note the anomalies they face: (1) The map and cultures told of in the scripture fit in only one limited area, yet it seems that Smith thought the book was set throughout the 11,000-mile long Western Hemisphere; (2) in 1830 Smith was not aware that Mesoamerica had ever existed as a distinctive geographical and cultural area, yet it is the one place where Mormon₂'s map and his picture of Nephite culture fit; (3) least of all

could Smith have known any significant facts about the cultural tradition of that area, which has only been grasped and appreciated since the scholarly research of the past century.

That Joseph could have composed the intricate, detailed, internally consistent volume that the Book of Mormon actually is while failing to be aware of so much about both the scripture and New World geography is hard to explain for those who see him as the volume's author. Had he been the creator of the book, would or could he have written about a limited territory and specific cultures and events while still indicating to his disciples that the whole hemisphere was the scene? For that matter, could *anyone* in 1829—say, a John Lloyd Stephens or a Professor Charles Anthon—have written a lengthy book that was congruent at a fundamental level with historical, geographical, and cultural aspects of ancient Mesoamerica? Absolutely not. No one in the world knew enough about those cultures and that area to have produced such a book.

Joseph Smith's feat in creating the Book of Mormon, had he done so, would be comparable to an archer's shooting at the broad side of a barn and thinking he had hit it, while referees later discovered that his arrow had hit the center of a small target that he did not even know existed!

This paper demonstrates that point in relation to one cultural category. It follows a format in which what is known by scholars about Mesoamerican records is first presented, under several rubrics. That is followed by what the Book of Mormon tells us about Nephite, Lamanite, and Jaredite records, both through the example of Mormon₂'s book in the form we have it and through what it describes or connotes about records and books in the cultures it describes. We shall look at the forms of records, their functions, the scripts they utilized, features of style, and many other aspects. On all basic points and on many specific ones, the

two bodies of information will be found to agree or at least be congruent. The degree of congruence is so overwhelming that only one conclusion can be reached—Mormon₂'s record must be viewed as having originated as part of the Mesoamerican tradition of documents. The whole question of whether Joseph Smith creatively authored the volume, which has been raised by those skeptical of his own account of its origin, becomes moot because of the Mesoamerican form and content it displays. In 1830 it would have been impossible for him or any other author in his day to be informed about such matters on the basis of either the publicly accessible or archival sources in America or Europe.

Literacy and the Tradition of Books: Mesoamerica

In only one part of the New World has genuine ancient writing been shown to have been in use on a regular, culturally significant basis. That was Mesoamerica. Nowhere in North America, South America, the West Indies, or lower Central America do we have consistent evidence for writing or written records.¹⁶ In a few of those places, there is fragmentary evidence for one script or another, but the evidence is equivocal, or if some system were present, it was of only marginal significance.¹⁷ But in the sixteenth century, the European invaders found in Mesoamerica large numbers of books in use that the natives held in great respect. Michael D. Coe supposes that "there must have been thousands of such books in Classic times" (generally A.D. 300–900).¹⁸ For nearly 2500 years before the Spaniards arrived we find direct evidence for writing in the form of actual remains of records themselves (mainly on stone) and indirect evidence through representation in art depicting records or scribes. Furthermore, the earliest writing is already sophisticated,

not in any sense primitive.¹⁹ That implies that still earlier specimens await discovery. At least fifteen different scripts or writing systems are known from this area, and they are stretched over millennia.²⁰

Our modern experience may mislead us in judging the impact of books on ancient societies. As will be explained below, the nature of the writing systems in use in most early civilizations demanded much instruction and practice in their use. The number of people who were seriously literate was restricted. Only with the rise of the alphabet, which made learning to write and read relatively easy, was anything like widespread literacy possible. The usual case was that only members of the elite—most often priests—had the resources available to permit their acquiring a mastery of writing. As a consequence, the whole idea of a script and records had a connotation of sacredness, if not magic, about it.²¹

Any society in which literacy was limited depended upon oral transmission of most information between the generations. The written sources therefore reflected many forms and features of the dominant, oral communication pattern.²²

Literacy and the Tradition of Books: Book of Mormon Peoples

The Book of Mormon reports that books were used by the Jaredites, Nephites, and Lamanites from near the third millennium B.C. until at least A.D. 400. Stone monument carving of texts was practiced no later than the third century B.C. (see Omni 1:20–22). By the first century B.C., the Nephite account reports: “There are many records kept of the proceedings of this people, by many of this people, which are particular and very large,” as well as “many books and many

records of every kind" (Helaman 3:13, 15). Mormon,²² the last major writer in the Nephite tradition, buried a whole library of documents during his people's final days in the fourth century A.D. (Mormon 6:6; cf. Mormon 1:3). Moreover, the tradition of literacy quite surely continued after the destruction at Cumorah among "robbers" (see Mormon 8:9; they were probably either ex-Nephites or totally "other" people) and among descendants of the Nephites who defected to the Lamanites (see Moroni 9:24). The Lamanites were earlier said to have copied the Nephite pattern (see Mosiah 24:6); that tradition may have continued separately regardless of what happened among surviving (ex-)Nephite groups.

The limit on literacy among Book of Mormon peoples is evident at many places in the text (for example, 3 Nephi 6:12, and see discussion below). William Eggington has analyzed language in the Book of Mormon that develops this point and contrasts the oral and literate dimensions of Nephite and Lamanite cultures.²³ He points out persuasive evidence that orality was predominant and that writing was reserved for restricted kinds of activities, along lines typical throughout the world in similar social and historical situations.

Kinds of Books and Their Uses: Mesoamerica

Aztec records are the ones described in the fullest detail. They included "annals of ancient times, contemporary events, year counts, accounts compiled yearly, specific records for each year, books of each day and day-by-day count or diaries."²⁴ Some of the records constituted histories of whole peoples, and they incorporated accounts of "victories, defeats, the lives of rulers, memorable ceremonial occasions" and even "the adventures of individual heroes, often in intimate and vivid detail."²⁵ Letters were also written. According to Spanish eyewitnesses who talked with

native priests about their books, the Maya of Yucatan “used to write their histories and the ceremonies and method of sacrifices to their idols, and their calendar, in books.” Also “they had written records of important things which had occurred in the past . . . the prognostications of their prophets and the lives . . . of their lords.”²⁶ Another description mentions “brief chronicles, fragmentary historical narratives, rituals, . . . mythological accounts of the creation of the world, almanacs and medical treatises,” as well as prophecies of future events.²⁷ Tax and trade records were also kept.²⁸ Other Mesoamerican peoples had similar types of documents.

We know a good deal about the Maya writing tradition from the content of the four surviving Maya codices, from sixteen lineage histories from Yucatan (the “Chilam Balam” records), and from inscriptions on many stone monuments, which are now substantially deciphered. At least during the Postclassic period (from A.D. 900 on), the Mayas wrote prophecies forecasting what would take place during each coming calendrical period, and they had public readings of those prophecies. The predictions were compiled in books (*huunob*), while historical memorials were also engraved on stone. They also wrote letters to one another. Those same types of records were surely kept long before, as well. In fact, many of the documents near the time of the conquest were “simply transcriptions of the old hieroglyphic manuscripts” put into Spanish characters.²⁹ “The Postclassic codices certainly suggest that the Classic Maya [A.D. 300–900] had books of divination and astronomy, and it would be surprising if they [like their Post-Classic descendants] had not had books of historical prophecy.”³⁰ Gordon Brotherston uses slightly different categories to refer to the kinds of records kept by the Maya: “highly structured ritual and cosmogonical histories, . . . political and migration histories, genealogies and lives, and year-by-year annals.”³¹

One additional interesting type of document may have been used anciently. On the basis of the scenes painted on vases found in Maya tombs, Coe believed that rites for the dead leaders interred there might well have utilized the text of "a long hymn which could have been sung over the dead or dying person." Indeed, "it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that there was a real Book of the Dead for the Classic Maya, akin [in function] to the Book of the Dead of the ancient Egyptians." The scenes and texts reproduced on the hundreds of funerary vases are all that survive of such a document, if it existed.³² The Maya handling of death differed only in details from the ways of other Mesoamericans. There could have been parallel funerary texts in other cultures, for "there was a single, unified body of thought in Mesoamerica . . . which we would call a Mesoamerican religion," Coe and others believe.³³ In fact, an actual book or codex was found in a tomb at the site of Mirador in western Chiapas that probably dates to around A.D. 400–450, and possible fragments of others from tombs are known. Unfortunately the condition of the Mirador codex was not good enough to learn anything of its content.³⁴

Kinds of Books and Their Uses: Book of Mormon Peoples

The Book of Mormon emphasizes its necessary brevity (see 3 Nephi 5:8, "this book cannot contain even a hundredth part of what was done among so many people in the space of twenty and five years," let alone centuries). There simply was not room on the plates containing the sacred record to discuss incidental matters; hence, we cannot make an exhaustive comparison to Mesoamerica or any topic. But even the cursory view that is permitted to us is interesting when we compare the types of documents given in the sources

cited above with the purposes and contents of Nephite records alluded to in the scripture.

Annals by Year

The annalistic format is frequent in the Book of Mormon, as illustrated by Alma 63:4–6, which begins “And it came to pass that in the thirty and seventh year of the reign of the judges” and ends “And thus ended the thirty and seventh year.” A particularly interesting example has been discussed by John W. Welch. He shows that Helaman 6:7–13 constitutes a fine chiasm, obviously drafted at the end of a notable year to formally document the most salient events and conditions.³⁵

Contemporary Events

Many incidents are treated in such fine detail that only contemporary records could have supplied editor Mormon₂ with that much information. An example is the account of Ammon’s fight with the thieves at the waters of Sebus, as told in Alma 19.

Letters

A number of letters are included in the Book of Mormon. Specific mention is made of the sending of messages in this form (for example, the interchange of Giddianhi with Lachoneus [see 3 Nephi 3]).

Victories and Defeats

There are scores of battle accounts in the Book of Mormon, ranging in detail from the merest mention to the intri-

cate account of the war begun by Amalickiah that continued for many years.³⁶

Lives of Rulers

The pattern obviously began with Nephi₁, but especially the material on Benjamin and Mosiah₂ clearly continues it.

Adventures of Individual Heroes

The Book of Mormon gives many examples, such as Nephi₁, Ammon, Teancum, and Helaman₁.

Political and Migration Histories

The primary narrative in the middle of the book is, of course, a rather detailed political history, abridged by Mormon₂ from the formal records kept by the Nephite rulers. Over a dozen migrations are described, ranging from the epic Jaredite trek and voyage across the ocean, to the final Nephite retreat. Political history was one of two basic kinds of Nephite records: “the history of this people which are called the people of Nephi” was one, while the other dealt with “preaching which was sacred, or revelation . . . or prophesying” (Jacob 1:2, 4). It is of interest to see the same distinction in Carrasco’s discussion of Mesoamerican documents, which he dichotomizes as respectively historical-genealogical and ritual-calendrical. Moreover, in his view, “one of the important relations expressed in these [Mexican] books is the relation between ancient or mythic events and future or prophetic events” where “sequences of events, loaded with sacred meanings, which were set in motion in a remembered past, are enacted in the present, and will lead toward an expected repetition in the future.”³⁷ The principle

guiding the preparation of the major Nephite records could hardly be phrased more appropriately than that.

Genealogies

A major part of the first chapter of Ether gives that prophet's genealogy. Lehi₁ rejoiced because the brass plates contained his own genealogy (see 1 Nephi 3:12). Enos and others felt strongly the need to maintain the tradition of recording one's line (see Jacob 7:27; Jarom 1:1; Omni 1:1, 9). Zarahemla recited his ancestors (see Omni 1:18), and Mormon₂ was well acquainted with the line of his forefathers (see Mormon 8:13).

Memorable Ceremonial Occasions

Most notable is the detailed recounting of the inauguration of Mosiah₂ as king.³⁸ Other occasions are noted but not treated so extensively, presumably because no farewell speech as choice as Benjamin's was delivered on the other occasions or because of the need for brevity (see 1 Nephi 7:22). The nature of the Book of Mormon, which is primarily a lineage history, no doubt explains why another of the functions of Mesoamerican documents, that is, as a guide to the conduct of ceremonies, is mainly missing. This is not a handbook. But notice three tantalizingly brief instances of ceremonies, all involving executions: (1) Mosiah 19:24, concerning Noah, "after they had ended the ceremony"; (2) Alma 1:15, "they carried [Nehor] upon the top of the hill Manti, and there he . . . did acknowledge, between the heavens and the earth, that what he had taught to the people was contrary to the word of God; and there he suffered an ignominious death"; (3) 3 Nephi 4:28–33, "Zemnah, was taken and hanged upon a tree, yea, even upon the top thereof un-

til he was dead. And when they had hanged him until he was dead they did fell the tree to the earth, and did cry with a loud voice. . . ." More could and probably would have been said about each ceremony had there been room in the record, although the casual dropping of the word ceremony in the first case also suggests that here was a case of "everyone knows about that," which was felt not to need explanation.

Prophecies

Substantial sections of the scripture are devoted to recording and interpreting prophecy. A notable example is that by Samuel the Lamanite in Helaman 13–15. The importance of this function for the records was underlined by Jesus Christ's chiding the Nephite record keeper for not having written down a particular bit of prophecy by Samuel (see 3 Nephi 23:7–13). (See also below on the role of prophets in relation to records.)

Year Counts, Calendar, and Calendric History

The Nephite record is meticulous, throughout Mormon's abridgment from the historical plates of Nephi (Mosiah to 4 Nephi) as well as in his own account, to specify exact year dates for all events. Numbered months, numbered days, and "hours" are also noted on occasion (for example, see Alma 56:1 and 3 Nephi 8:2). The extensive treatment of Nephite chronological systems by Randall P. Spackman should be consulted to appreciate the intricacies of what can be gleaned from the scripture on these matters. In summary, he asserts that "if the Book of Mormon is to be placed in a Mesoamerican context, then there should be a correlation between the chronology and astronomy of the Book of Mormon, the Bible, Palestine, Babylonia and Mesoamerica. In

fact, there appears to be such a correlation—not just to general time periods, but to the exact day.”³⁹ He lists and analyzes the statements in the Book of Mormon congruent with his position. Two passages out of many illustrate the deep concern of the Nephites with the calendar, with prophecy, and with historical fulfillment.

Now it came to pass that the ninety and first year had passed away and it was six hundred years from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem; and it was in the year that Lachoneus was the chief judge and the governor over the land. . . . And it came to pass that in the commencement of the ninety and second year, behold, the prophecies of the prophets began to be fulfilled more fully; for there began to be greater signs. . . . But there were some who began to say that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite. And they began to rejoice over their brethren, saying: Behold the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled. . . . But behold, they [the believers] did watch steadfastly for that day and that night and that day which should be as one day. (3 Nephi 1:1, 4–6, 8)

The other states:

And now it came to pass that according to our record, and we know our record to be true, for behold, it was a just man who did keep the record—for he truly did many miracles in the name of Jesus. . . . If there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away;

And the people began to look with great earnestness for the sign which had been given by the prophet Samuel, the Lamanite, yea, for the time that there should be darkness for the space of three days over the face of the land. . . . And it came to pass in the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, [the sign appeared]. (3 Nephi 8:1–3, 5)

An intriguing possibility arises in connection with the prophecy of Samuel. He prophesied that “four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people,” the Nephites (Helaman 13:5, 9). (He here echoes Alma₂ in Alma 45:10: The Nephites, “in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, shall dwindle in unbelief.”) Now, in certain areas of Mesoamerica, we know of prophecies being made for several calendrical periods—one year, the 20-year (7200-day) *katun*, the 52-year cycle, and the 256-year period.⁴⁰ Another major cycle in the Maya numeration system was 400 years. The 400-year prophecies by Alma₂ and Samuel would be on a potentially correct calendrical target even though so far we lack documentation from secular sources for occurrence of prophecies for a like period.

Another parallel is also of interest. In Yucatan at the time of the Spanish conquest, the ruler or his spokesman, the Chilam, had the duty to prophesy five years in advance what fate the next twenty-year *katun* would bring.⁴¹ Samuel the Lamanite prophesied “in” the 86th year of the Judges (Helaman 13:1–2). If a related *katun* prophecy pattern prevailed then (and of course it might not), the fulfillment of Samuel’s predictions should have commenced in the 91st year. The initial fulfillment is, instead, reported in the 92nd year. But the people might have expected the fulfillment sometime in the previous year, for “there were some who began to say [in the 92nd year] that the time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite” (3 Nephi 1:5). This response would make sense in terms of a five-year prediction. Even if the details of this comparison are somewhat speculative, the general concern of the Nephites with prophecy tied to the calendar rings true in Mesoamerica.

Edmonson has offered suggestions on how the heavily

anticipated beginning of the 256-year cycle may mark major turning points in Maya history, and Puleston is in general agreement.⁴² Several notable Nephite events fall at or near Maya calendrical turnings, according to Edmonson's reckoning (see below). Among many other indicators of Nephite-Lamanite concern with chronological determinism are the New Year's Day behavior of the Lamanites upon finding their leader dead (Alma 52:1) and the setting of an appointment for war at Cumorah (Mormon 6:2–5). The point of interest, though, is less the specific dates than the cultural expectation that calendar and history were closely related (see Carrasco above). This view was shared by Israelites and all Mesoamericans, as well as by various other Old World civilizations.⁴³

Divination and Astrology

There is no direct confirmation of this type of information in the Nephite record, but several confirmatory points may be seen in the indications of calendrical concerns. The mention of "sorceries" and "witchcrafts" could be related (see Mormon 1:19). Besides, the strong interest in divination in earlier Israel and the development of astrology in neighboring Babylonian culture from a base that Lehi₁ shared may be indicative.

Funerary Texts

Nothing in the scripture indicates these to have been in use; however, neither do we positively know that such texts existed in Mesoamerica, except for Coe's plausible suggestion on the basis of the painted funerary vases (see above). That a ceremonial document was involved in Nephite and perhaps even Lamanite burial ceremonies is not illogical

given the evident ritualization indicated in Alma 18:43–19:1 and Alma 30:2.

Tax or Tribute List

While in the nature of the Book of Mormon as a sacred text we would hardly expect to find any trace of this sort of list, in fact, this type of document is reflected there. King Noah's tax on the Zeniffites is enumerated in Mosiah 11:3: "one fifth part of all they possessed, a fifth part of their gold and of their silver, and . . . a fifth part of their fatlings; and also a fifth part of all their grain." Mosiah 19:15 gives us the Lamanite list of tribute put upon the conquered Noah and his people; they had to "deliver up their property, even one half of all they possessed, one half of their gold, and their silver, and all their precious things, and thus they should pay tribute to the king of the Lamanites from year to year." Jarom 1:8 may reflect another such list. The previous verse focuses on "our kings and our leaders," who taught the people and led their defense against the Lamanites. Verse 8 then lists forms of Nephite riches: gold, silver, precious things, fine workmanship of wood, buildings, machinery, iron, copper, brass, steel, tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war. The connection is suggestive. But King Benjamin points out the contrast in his (probably unique) reign: he had personally labored to support himself "that [his people] should not be laden with taxes" (Mosiah 2:14). Ether 10:5–6 shows us the Jaredite tribute system at a particularly onerous moment: Riplakish "did tax them with heavy taxes; and with the taxes he did build many spacious buildings. And he did erect him an exceedingly beautiful throne; and he did build many prisons, and whoso would not be subject unto taxes he did cast into prison."

Altogether, it is possible to see virtually all the kinds of

documents or texts known in Mesoamerica manifested or referred to in the Book of Mormon.

The Forms of Books: Mesoamerica

Screenfold books were the most common form of document. These consisted of long strips made from the bark of a type of fig tree.⁴⁴ The material was first soaked, then pounded to make a paper; a thin coating of lime plaster was then spread over it to stiffen it and make a smooth, clean surface on which characters were painted. The strips were folded back and forth accordion fashion to pile up “pages.” A book could be opened either to a pair of folds/pages or several adjacent pages could be exposed simultaneously. This paper was relatively easy to manufacture. Finished books were harder to produce, of course, because the symbols or pictures on the pages had to be hand painted by scribes.

There could have been other forms of perishable documents that we do not know about because the products have not been preserved. The Catholic fathers burned many of the paper books in the early sixteenth century out of zeal against “the heathen rites” they pictured. An Aztec ruler, Itzcoatl, caused many books to be burned a century before the Spaniards came (see below). It has also been suggested that mass destructions of records happened earlier, especially at the time of the collapse of Classic Maya civilization.⁴⁵ Records on stone—both those on which script appears and others bearing nothing but symbolic art—were also destroyed in the history of Mesoamerica. One view is that conquerors who were of differing beliefs deliberately sought to eliminate traces of those whom they had defeated, and thus their history.⁴⁶

Characters were typically, though not invariably, arranged in pairs of columns, which were read in alternating

steps from top to bottom. "The column seems to be the essential organizing principle."⁴⁷ Script signs so arranged were combined with mythological or genealogical scenes according to the needs of the content. In the centuries just preceding the Spanish conquest in central Mexico, a zigzag manner of reading pages prevailed instead of columns, so there could have been additional formats in earlier times that we have not learned about for lack of surviving examples.

The other large class of documents of which we know consisted of inscribed stones. Those too typically were written in double columns. Again some human figure or a more complex historical or mythological scene would be presented. Sometimes it was the texts that were primary, and the art secondary, and at other times, the reverse. Large stelae (free-standing stone monuments) or architectural insets of stone are best known because their size has allowed them to survive, but small portable objects of stone and bone bearing inscriptions are known in a few cases.

The Aztecs and Mixtecs usually used deer skin for codices, although they also used paper abundantly. In Colonial times the natives sometimes painted on leather and cloth. It is usually thought that the lack of very early forms of writing may be because they were done on wood instead of stone monuments; of course, any such objects would be likely to have decayed away. (If writing was a result of stimulus from the Old World, as a few scholars suppose, that would explain, in an entirely different way, why no formative stage of Mesoamerican glyphs has been discovered.) Nor is there any example of their use of clay surfaces, on which they pressed characters, as with cuneiform writing in ancient Mesopotamia, although abundant Mesoamerican "cylinder seals," or "rollers," very similar to those of the Near East are known whose uses in this hemisphere remain uncertain. Usually it is supposed that they served to make decorative

marks on the human body, or perhaps on paper, but there is no actual evidence to support these suppositions.⁴⁸

There is very limited evidence in America for the use of hammered metal on which records were written (as described for the Nephites' most precious records).⁴⁹ It would be far-fetched to expect that such precious objects would come to light through routine archaeological excavations, although there is always a slight chance.

The Forms of Books: Book of Mormon Peoples

In 1976 I pointed out that "the text published as the Book of Mormon was broadly similar [in many ways] to the class of ancient documents from Mesoamerica termed codices." Elements of form, style, and content were arrayed to demonstrate a "congruence . . . between Book of Mormon-described cultural patterns [of record keeping] and those of Mesoamerica."⁵⁰ Scores of features common to the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican codices were noted; many of the cultural patterns mentioned or implied in the scripture are shared not only with Middle American civilization, but also with that of the Near East. Inasmuch as the 1976 publication is still available, the information on content featured there will not be repeated. The original points about style and form are here expanded.

The only firm descriptions we have of the arrangement of Mormon₂'s text come secondhand from Charles Anthon, the professor to whom Martin Harris took a copy of some "caractors" on the plates. Later, on two occasions (in 1834 and 1841), Anthon described in letters to anti-Mormon inquirers what he recalled of the material Harris had shown him. He said he saw "all kinds of singular characters . . . arranged and placed in perpendicular columns, and the whole ended in a rude delineation of a circle, divided into

various compartments, arched with various strange marks, and evidently copied after the Mexican calendar by Humboldt, but copied in such a way as not to betray the source."⁵¹ His letter seven years later generally confirmed the form of the document: "The characters were arranged in columns, like the Chinese mode of writing. . . . Greek, Hebrew and all sorts of letters, more or less distorted, . . . were intermingled with sundry delineations of half moons, stars, and other natural objects, and the whole ended in a rude representation of the Mexican zodiac."⁵²

The published versions of the "Anthon transcript" of characters drawn from the plates show something quite different.⁵³ They have only rather cursive signs printed in horizontal rows. According to David Whitmer, Joseph Smith personally prepared "a copy of the hieroglyphics made from the first of the gold plates" on which he spent "a whole week to copy so particular was he that the characters should be perfectly reproduced and that the 'reformed Egyptian' language should be shown up in all its native simplicity."⁵⁴ Whitmer possessed what he repeatedly claimed was the original Anthon Transcript.⁵⁵ One statement by him implies that he also had copies of other characters from the plates.⁵⁶ Joseph Smith reported at the beginning of his translation effort, "I commenced copying the characters off the plates. I copied a considerable number of them, and by means of the Urim and Thummim I translated some of them." Very soon afterward, Martin Harris "got the characters which [Joseph] had drawn off the plates, and started with them to the city of New York."⁵⁷ One of the earliest sources to publicly report the Harris incident said that he took with him "several manuscripts in his pocket . . . for the purpose of showing them" to a professor, who thought "them" very curious but admitted that he could not decipher "them."⁵⁸ That more than one paper was involved is confirmed directly by Harris in

the most often cited account. He said that he first presented to "Professor Anthony the characters which had been translated, with the translation thereof. . . . I then showed him [in addition] those which were not yet translated."⁵⁹ It is plausible that the seven-line piece familiar to us (which would hardly have taken Joseph Smith a whole week to copy, no matter how meticulous he was) constituted one of the papers Harris showed the scholar, but there had to be at least one more, likely one sheet of the "considerable number" referred to by Joseph Smith. Anthon's letters must have described a second sheet that Harris put before him. For example, there are no traces in the only published transcript we have in hand of the "half moons, stars, and other natural objects," which he explicitly described, let alone of anything like a "Mexican zodiac."⁶⁰

In any case, existing sources of information fail to provide definitive information about or authority for the horizontal arrangement in which the known transcript has invariably been printed. One would think that Anthon's description of "perpendicular columns" ought to have an objective basis. As a scholar in antiquities he probably was a good observer and describer of inscriptions. Perhaps if we had the second sheet before us, we could resolve the apparent contradiction in the vertical versus horizontal question. It is true that the professor's two letters are not consistent regarding what went on during his interview with Harris. There are direct conflicts between the two letters in what he says, for instance, about giving a certificate or not doing so.⁶¹ It appears that he was trying to "contain the damage" to his professional reputation from the notoriety of the incident involving him and the Mormons. Understandably, he wanted his professional judgment put in the best light possible and so put his own belated spin on the story about the "certificate."⁶² But to return to the matter of the technical descrip-

tion of the sheet and its characters, there is no reason to think he would not give an unbiased recollection as far as memory served him; the two letters are in reasonable agreement in this respect. So it seems that something Harris showed Anthon displayed columns of characters. Confirmation about the “rude delineation of a circle” also reported by the professor comes from a statement in a newspaper in the Palmyra area: “Harris was in the habit of exhibiting to his hearers what he claimed to be a facsimile copy of the title page of the forthcoming book. The following description of it is given by one of the lucky ones who obtained sight of it. ‘On it were drawn rudely and bunglingly, concentric circles, between, above and below, which were characters, with little resemblance to letters.’ ”⁶³ The sources thus seem to provide significant evidence that the original document, the plates, was inscribed in a manner consistent with a Mesoamerican codex format, with vertical columns and other appropriate features, despite the Latter-day Saint readers’ impressions based solely on the seven-line horizontal Anthon Transcript.

The record obtained by Joseph Smith was engraved on thin metal plates having “the appearance of gold.” However, using such an expensive material to ensure the permanency of a record was exceptional for the Nephites, not the norm. Jacob 4:2 acknowledges that “whatsoever things we write upon anything save it be upon plates must perish and vanish away; but we can write a few words upon plates. . . .” This is an oblique acknowledgment that the majority of their writing was on perishable materials. Note that when those who believed the preaching of Alma₂ were being persecuted by the people of the city of Ammonihah, “they also brought forth their records which contained the holy scriptures, and cast them into the fire also, that they might be burned and destroyed by fire” (Alma 14:8). Paper seems the obvious substance. The same would be true of the material used when

King Benjamin “caused that the words which he spake should be written and sent forth,” on the spur of the moment, to the waiting congregation of his subjects who could not hear his voice (Mosiah 2:8). Note that Lehi₁ and Nephi₁ would surely have been fully familiar with Egyptian paper made from papyrus; one would expect Lehi₁’s and Nephi₁’s records on which they kept the account of their journey through Arabia to have been written on paper, considering that they carried only a minimum of materials beyond their subsistence necessities.

Other media were no doubt also used. One is mentioned: Omni 1:20–22 reported “a large stone” on which were “engravings” that gave genealogical and historical information about the last Jaredite king. That inscription was read by the Nephite ruler, and nobody seemed surprised at the idea of writing on stones, for, after all, in the Near East, inscribing on stone was common. Moreover, the Nephites possessed the brass plates that contained “the five books of Moses” (1 Nephi 5:11), where surely they read about the stone tablets at Sinai. All the peoples around their homeland were familiar with stelae (free-standing erect stones), which were carved with scenes involving divinities or sovereigns and bearing inscriptions.⁶⁴

Lineage Histories: Mesoamerica

One type of historical record has been termed a “lineage history.” (A lineage may be considered a group whose members are related by claiming descent from a common ancestor.) We know most about their function among the tribes of highland Guatemala, where they were important both before and after the Spanish conquest. “Almost every major lineage of the preconquest period is known to have written a lineage history comparable to the fourth section of the *Popol*

Vuh," the most famous book of the Maya.⁶⁵ These were maintained and interpreted by priest-scholars on behalf of the lineage. The records were consulted to settle questions of history and policy and to foretell the future. They recited the formal origin story of the group, and so they served as symbols of the power and legitimacy of its rulers. Other sacred artifacts were significant symbols too, but a book had special validating power that was linked to the sacredness of writing and the superior social status of knowing one's ancestors beyond question.⁶⁶ Leaders publicly displayed their historical documents on ceremonial occasions and had portions of them read to their subjects. The records also served to justify and explain how the existing social order came to be, including why there was cooperation or conflict with surrounding peoples.⁶⁷

The use of lineage records must have begun thousands of years ago. At least, many of the stories found in the *Popol Vuh* already existed in Classic Maya times (as can be seen in scenes on funerary vases from that period), and some stories probably are represented on the monuments at Izapa, before the time of Christ.⁶⁸ Lawrence H. Feldman has described similar kinds of records for central Mexico. He refers to "migration traditions," which were numerous. One subtype of these emphasized some particular people or other in each account, "migrants who suffer trials and win triumphs as they make their way to a predestined homeland. . . . The purpose of these accounts is quite clear, it was a recital 'of the genealogy and lineage of the Lords' . . . given in order to establish the rights of their descendants to certain privileges."⁶⁹

It should be emphasized that lineage accounts are not histories of territories but of groups. The Quichés, like the fabled "Tultecas" before them, were in constant movement. They seized power in an area, including domination of

resident peoples of different language and ethnicity, but “they moved by lineage, not by town or tribe. Thus, few of the major town sites were actually abandoned at any point. Rather, they passed from the control of one lineage to that of another—indigenous or foreign—in response to the fortunes of war, the terms of priestly office, and the vicissitudes of lineage politics. The Popol Vuh chronicles the spectacular success of one such lineage: the Kaveks of Quiche.”⁷⁰ It largely ignores other groups surrounding the Kaveks simply because its writers did not care about them, so it is impossible to reconstruct on the basis of this history “what happened” throughout a given territory.⁷¹

Lineage Histories: Book of Mormon Peoples

The Nephite record in itself or in what it says of its ancient source documents exhibits all the characteristics enumerated for Mesoamerica, and the Jaredite story shows many of them.

Each Lineage Had Its Own Record

Nephi₁, the founder of the ruling Nephite line, personally crafted and began writing on two sets of metal plates. On one he wrote those sacred things “which are good in my sight, for the profit of [my] people . . . that which is pleasing unto God” (2 Nephi 5:30, 32). The other record dealt with “the more particular part of the history of [Nephi₁’s] people” consisting of “an account of the reign of the kings, and the wars and contentions” (2 Nephi 5:33 and 1 Nephi 9:4). It was from the latter record—the Nephite lineage history—that Mormon₂, “a descendant of Nephi” (Mormon 1:5; I think he was probably the last head of the lineage [compare Mormon 1:15; 2:1–2; and Words of Mormon 1:11]), constructed

his abridgment of that lengthier history that we have in the books of Mosiah through Mormon (see Words of Mormon 1:3, 5).

The presence of alternative lineage histories is implied by a statement in Alma 54:23–24. A Nephite dissident who gained power among the Lamanites, Ammoron, claimed descent from Zoram, “whom your [the Nephites’] fathers pressed and brought out of Jerusalem.” But Nephi₁’s history gives a completely different version of events, representing Zoram₁ as being satisfied with the oath-bound deal he struck with Nephi₁ and the other brothers to come along with them (see 1 Nephi 4:20–37; compare 2 Nephi 1:30). Conflicts in tradition like this fueled the Nephites’ judgment that Lamanite accounts were “not correct” (Mosiah 1:5). Ammoron’s spin on the story in Alma 54:16–17 must have come either from a tradition among his own (sub-)lineage or from the Lamanites whom he now claimed to represent.

An even more egregious case of conflict in the historical documents or traditions must have prevailed between the Nephites and “the people of Zarahemla,” who were more numerous than the Nephites per se (see Mosiah 25:2). Is it not likely that the “Mulekite” account would see Mosiah₁ as a usurper over chief Zarahemla? (see Omni 1:19). Meanwhile, among the nominal Lamanites, relationships and records (perhaps mainly oral) of specific groups must have been equally complicated. One noticeable case involves Lamoni. As king over a land named for Ishmael, he may have been a descendant of Ishmael, and so too, presumably, was his father, the king over all the Lamanites. This situation implies a separate identity for the Ishmaelites and probably a tradition or record of their own.⁷²

For the Jaredites on this point it is sufficient to note that Ether, the last prophet and record keeper, traced his genealogy back exclusively to Jared. His line held the right of

rulership (see Ether 6:22–25), and Ether’s record is mainly the dynastic history of that line. At least one other lineage reigned at times, but about those rulers we are left ignorant. Ether 10:30–31 tells us that in the days of a king named Hearthom, the kingdom “was taken away” from him—obviously by another lineage, since the name of the new king was not even recorded in Ether’s account. Thereafter, four more of the rightful (i.e., Jared line) kings lived out their days in captivity, obviously under the domination of someone from another lineage. (Competitors for the throne from within the Jared lineage are mentioned by name, as at Ether 7:15; there were eight barges on the transoceanic journey, so there could have been a total of eight lineages [see Ether 3:1, and note the “friends” in Ether 1:41.]) Meanwhile, the brother of Jared held the role of religious leader at the beginning. Not surprisingly, the brother’s descendants are mostly ignored in Ether’s own dynastic record; mention is made of one such descendant who gained the throne (Ether 11:17), but he remains anonymous. Surely the priestly lineage’s record would tell the story differently.

Nonterritorial History

Gaps and mysteries appear if we attempt to interpret the Nephite account as a territorial record. It is much more economical to interpret it as intentionally ignoring important areas of their nominal “lands” because those territories were of only secondary concern to the Nephi lineage. Three examples will suffice. First is the enigmatic reference to “the most capital parts of the land” of Zarahemla, which are described as lying between the city of Zarahemla and Bountiful (Helaman 1:27). The “many cities and strongholds” said to have been taken there by invader Coriantumr₂ seem never to be named. Second is the lack of identification of the area

where the Nephite dissidents, the Amlicites at one time and the king-men at another, were at home. I have analyzed the geographical texts to show that “the most capital parts” must have been chiefly along the river Sidon downstream from the city of Zarahemla and that the dissenters’ territory fits there too.⁷³ Probably it was a region long held by “the people of Zarahemla.” Captain Moroni₁ invaded their area and defeated the rebellious king-men and their armies “in their cities” (Alma 51:17–20) without any concern to name those places—all this inside “the land of Zarahemla” and necessarily in the same area as “the most capital parts.” Third is that when Alma₂ went on his preaching mission (Alma 5–15), he circled right around this area. At the end of their teaching, he and Amulek, his companion, “came over to the land of Zarahemla” from Sidom (Alma 15:18); the “over” implies a highland route. Traveling along the river would seem a more direct way, but it would also have taken them through those dissident centers. Many other examples could be given of places within Nephite lands about which we are told essentially nothing but which make sense if we interpret the Book of Mormon as a nonterritorial history of just one lineage.

Kept by Religious Specialists

A detailed treatment of the references to record keepers would show that it was elite religious functionaries who kept the national, that is, the royal lineage’s, documentary archive. A few examples are typical: Mosiah 28:20, when King Mosiah₂ abdicated his office in favor of a chief judge, “he took the plates of brass, and all the things which he had kept, and conferred them upon Alma₂ (the high priest), . . . yea, all the records, . . . and commanded him that he should keep and preserve them, . . . handing them down from one generation

to another, even as they had been handed down from the time that Lehi left Jerusalem." That is, the ruler had primary responsibility for his lineage's records, although obviously he would have had specialists actually handling them. (Notice Mosiah 2:8, where the king "caused that the words which he spake should be written," and Mosiah 27:22, "he caused that the priests should.") Following the pattern, 3 Nephi 1:1–2 says, "It was in the year that Lachoneus was the chief judge and the governor over the land. And [the prophet] Nephi . . . had departed out of the land of Zarahemla, giving charge unto his son Nephi [a prophet and probably a priest], who was his eldest son, concerning the plates of brass, and all the records which had been kept." Among the Zeniffites the priests were the apparent custodians and interpreters of "the words which are written, and which have been taught by our fathers" (Mosiah 12:20; compare 4 Nephi 1:19–21, 47–48 and Mormon 1:16–17; 4:23).

Symbol of Legitimacy of Rulers and Right to Privileges, and Public Display and Reading from Records

Noel B. Reynolds has discussed the question, "Did Nephi's descendants and those who followed them have a legitimate right to rule? Or should the right have belonged to Lehi's oldest son Laman, and his descendants? This quarrel is the cause of centuries of political and military struggle."⁷⁴ He argues persuasively that the small plates of Nephi, those we have in translated form in the early part of the Book of Mormon, were written in part "as a political tract" to "defend the Nephite tradition and refute the account advanced by the Lamanites and dissenters."⁷⁵ Ammoron, king of the Lamanites, was only one who made clear that the essential quarrel between the two lineages was over the "rights to the government" (Alma 54:24; see also Alma 54:18). The issue

that motivated the dissidents, whether their rhetoric was about “Lamanite rights” or “Nephite robbery,” was not just a preferred version of “history” or even about government in a mere political sense, but about feudal privilege and perquisites.⁷⁶ Giddianhi, a leader of the robbers, claimed that he wished to “recover [the] rights and government [for those] who have dissented away from you because of your wickedness in retaining from them their rights of government” (3 Nephi 3:10). What he was talking about, he then makes clear, was control of “cities” and “lands” and “possessions” (see 3 Nephi 3:6–7), that is, of enjoying the revenue from tribute or taxes. One of the strengths of the Nephite claim to this right was that they possessed the sacred records that confirmed those privileges on the Nephite rulers. The Lamanites, the robbers, and the people of Zarahemla all lacked similar authoritative, ancient credentials. They claimed that Nephi₁ had stolen the artifacts that were the tokens of power; “they said that he had taken the ruling of the people out of their hands. . . . And again, they were wroth with him because he departed into the wilderness . . . and took the records, . . . for they said that he robbed them” (Mosiah 10:15–16). Already in the third Nephite generation, Enos reported that the Lamanites “would destroy our records and us, and also all the traditions of our fathers” (Enos 1:14). And still, at the end of Nephite history, Mormon₂, “having been commanded of the Lord that [he] should not suffer the records which had been handed down by [his] fathers . . . to fall into the hands of the Lamanites, (for the Lamanites would destroy them)” (Mormon 6:6), hid the lineage archive in a safe place. To nail down their political “rights” after Cumorah, the avengers no doubt destroyed such Nephite books and monuments as they could find (as Aztec monarch Itzcoatl did) in an effort to rewrite history in their favor. Given the absence of clear references to the Nephites in

surviving Mesoamerican records, it appears that they generally succeeded.⁷⁷

Possession of physical tokens of political legitimacy in the form of sacred objects, including records, must have been influential on the public mind in granting legitimacy to their rulers. That would be especially true in a society where a majority of the people were not literate. It seems likely that the ascendancy of immigrating King Mosiah₁ over the “people of Zarahemla,” while partly a consequence of his possession of an impressive store of other sacred artifacts, also would have involved the books he carried with him (Omni 1:18–20). For “Mulekite” religious personnel, as for commoners, the most spectacular objects possessed by incoming Mosiah₁ could well have been the Liahona (ball/compass/directors; see Mosiah 1:16, etc.) and the sacred translating stones, for there were Mesoamerican parallels to both those.⁷⁸ But in terms of political authority, his possession of books that “proved” his regal ancestry, joined with the ability to write down for nonliterate chief Zarahemla that man’s oral genealogy, must have been an ultimate convincing argument that Mosiah₁ should rule. Without documents, whatever bona fides one might offer would always be suspect of having been manufactured for convenience.

Within the tradition of Nephite rulership, possession of the records helped confirm legitimacy. When Mosiah₂ was being installed as king by his father, Benjamin, “he gave him charge concerning all the affairs of the kingdom. Moreover, he also gave him charge concerning the records” (Mosiah 1:15–16).⁷⁹ Records were involved in coronation too. King Benjamin’s installation of his son, which is reported in the first chapters of the book of Mosiah, seems to have co-incided with the Israelite Feast of Tabernacles. The Torah was publicly read on such an occasion in the land of Judah. John

Welch points out why we may suppose the same thing happened at Benjamin's ceremony and why such ceremonial reading would have been normal among the Nephites.⁸⁰ Mosiah₂, on a later occasion, "read the records of the people of Zeniff" and also "the account of Alma and his brethren" (Mosiah 25:5–6) to an assembly. When the Savior appeared to a body of surviving Nephites, the key record was close at hand in the charge of the senior religious functionary. (See 3 Nephi 23.)

Genealogy of Rulers

Their sacred books were valued by the Nephites as a record of their ancestry. Lehi₁ rejoiced to find his genealogy on the brass plates (see 1 Nephi 5:16–17). Later, the record of Nephi was added to specifically so "that [the Nephites'] genealogy may be kept" (Jarom 1:1; compare Omni 1:1). It must have been in part from the records in his possession that Mormon₂, many centuries later, could state confidently that he was "a pure descendant of Lehi" (3 Nephi 5:20; compare Words of Mormon 1:9–11) and "a descendant of Nephi" (Mormon 1:5). Interestingly, in later Yucatan the noble class were distinguished from the peasants because the former knew their ancestry while the folk did not, hence "ye motherless and ye fatherless," as well as "orphans" and "monkeys," referred to the commoners.⁸¹

Origin, Migration History, and Trials En Route to Their Promised Home

In large measure this is a succinct characterization of much of the historical aspect of the Nephite record, particularly 1 Nephi.

Incorporates Sacred Myths

Knowledgeable references are made in the Book of Mormon to mythic events central to the official Nephite belief system, such as Adam and creation (e.g., Alma 12), Moses and the children of Israel at Sinai (e.g., Mosiah 13:5), the crossing of the Red Sea (e.g., 1 Nephi 17:26–27), the destruction of Jerusalem (e.g., 2 Nephi 1:4), and the saving of the fathers in crossing the sea to the promised land (see 1 Nephi 17–18). The account of the appearance of the resurrected Christ to the Nephites is only the most dramatic of a long series of “sacred myths” in the Nephi lineage’s own history that were central to their religious life. (John Clark has suggested to me in a personal communication that the whole book of Ether might be seen as a myth of “hero twins,” Jared and his brother, a motif common in later Mesoamerica.)

Used to Foretell the Future

Scores of pages contain prophecies about the Nephite and Lamanite future and events to come in the day of the Gentile [i.e., European] invasion and occupation of America. Among the more notable prophecies that were used to foretell or interpret the future were those by the lineage founder, Nephi₁, his brother Jacob₂, Benjamin, Alma₂, Abinadi, Samuel, and Mormon₂.

Defines Relations with Other Groups

Among the relationships defined in the Book of Mormon are Nephites to Lamanites and vice versa, all Lehi₁’s descendants to the Gentiles, Nephites to the people of Zarahemla (“Mulekites”), and Jaredites (and presumable descendants from them) to the Nephites. For example, Mormon₂ refers to the historical record to explain the revival of

the Lamanites, Lemuelites, and Ishmaelites in the third century A.D., a century and a half after their disappearance as overt social categories (see 4 Nephi 1:38).

Ethnocentric Bias and Politically Motivated Revision of “History”: Mesoamerica

Customarily “history was [periodically] rewritten to conform with contemporary political realities. Because of the nature of the means of recording data, ancient legends were also reinterpreted in terms of contemporary cultural reality. This was due [in part] to the need for the interpretation of [the written] symbols having several possible meanings.”⁸² Dieter Dütting agrees, speaking of “the multiple meanings of many Maya words, which sometimes can be reconciled with totally different text interpretations.”⁸³ In other words, ambiguity in the characters allowed differing interpretations of history to be given to “the same” record.

A more potent problem for our trying to discern ancient history is that all records—Old World, until the Greeks, or New World—were produced according to an agenda that rarely featured straightforward reporting of events. “We encounter a disconcerting degree of in-built bias and have to face the fact that Mesoamerican sources are seldom unprejudiced in their accounts.” And “as a general rule, the documents offer the official historical version of one city-state, laying particular stress upon the claims to legitimacy of its rulers and on their success in conquering their neighbors against adverse odds.”⁸⁴ Furthermore, “the history of ancient peoples tended toward concepts different from our own, being devised to edify as much as to instruct.”⁸⁵ The consequent confusion of facts is not peculiar to Mesoamerica, of course; for example, Egypt’s “Ramses III enumerates his

conquests in Asia, but his list is simply copied from that of the previous pharaoh, Ramses II, who in turn had used one that really originated with Tuthmosis III."⁸⁶ Facts often take second seat to the political or ideological agenda of the editorial source.

Recognizing that, many scholars now view with skepticism any uncritical acceptance of details of "history" put forward in local documents or on monuments. William Sanders speaks of "the strong likelihood that the 'histories' were deliberately manipulated for political ends," and he is convinced that "much of Mesoamerican political 'history' consists of outright propaganda." What is told there "was written by political leaders for political purposes and clearly was used as propaganda to enhance the prestige and power of the ruling class."⁸⁷ Andrea Stone concurs, speaking of "ideological manipulation rather than historical events,"⁸⁸ while Debra Nagao warns of "a high degree of manipulation of public monuments to communicate a political image rather than a true reality."⁸⁹

A blatant example of recasting history—a process that surely occurred many other times as well (as it did in the Old World)—was perpetrated by Itzcoatl, the fourth chief of Aztec Tenochtitlan, before it became the dominant center in the Valley of Mexico. At his accession in 1428 he ordered all historical picture manuscripts to be burned, at the insistence of a wily political advisor. As we would expect, thereafter the official histories are in close agreement with each other. But those written before that date that happened to survive outside the ruler's control show considerable conflict in the history they report. Itzcoatl's act permitted the construction of a new, slanted history that made his people—country rubes in their actual origin—appear to have long been part of the existing civilization into which they had in fact recently migrated.⁹⁰ Coe suggests that the same type of

destruction of records occurred upon the collapse of the Maya Classic civilization around A.D. 900.⁹¹ Resultant discontinuities in the sources hinder our coming up with any definitive history of the Mesoamerican past, for archaeology provides only a vague "history."

The Spanish conquest of Mexico can be taken as a model for interpreting earlier conquests of one Mesoamerican people by another. The conquistadors were anxious to picture the Indian peoples whom they defeated as heathens for whom they were doing a favor. The Europeans felt they had a burden to civilize the natives by extirpating all trace of the old ideology, as far as they could manage it. One tool toward that end was to teach a "new history." It had to involve Spain, her royalty, and Christianity, and these had to claim superiority to the defeated Mexica state and its heathen gods, like Tezcatlipoca. What the new Iberian conquerors tried to do was broadly the same as earlier conquerors, such as the Toltecs and Aztecs, had done with the nations they had subdued and redefined historically in their day. But most of the native empire-builders were more tolerant and less sweeping than the Spaniards in demanding change. Lamanite expansionists centuries before were the most like the Spaniards in causing a "complete revolution throughout all the face of the land" (Mormon 2:8). The role of the native books as symbols and prime vehicles of cultural continuity was a central concern for the Spaniards. "The material and spiritual conquest of the Mexican kingdom [by the Spaniards] was partially accomplished by the destruction of indigenous monuments, books, images, and symbols."⁹² More than formal political legitimacy or emotional ethnic rivalry was involved. The issue was gaining the power to control the people, the wealth-producers of society. The conquerors wished to dominate and exploit the land and its inhabitants, and they had to destroy the culture, not just defeat

the armies resisting them, in order to control those inhabitants. Consequently, the calculated destruction of books and other symbols of all the most powerful kinds in the native society was “part of a much larger plan of cultural alteration, a plan to gain control of the content and transmission of the ancient worldview in order to transform it. One does not have to read far into the documents to see that the Spaniards had more in mind than the destruction of dead men’s thoughts lingering in the screenfolds [books].” Particularly the Spanish priests intended to “put an end to everything indigenous, especially in the realm of ideas, even so far as to leave no sign of them.”⁹³ So while the native books were of significance in themselves as historical validators of power, more important to a determined conqueror was to destroy the cultural (including religious and political) power that the records provided for native lifeways. As long as the old documents were available, a resistance movement could continue to challenge the conquest in “the hearts and minds of the people” by maintaining the old ways underground. Only total destruction of the old worldview and its symbols could make the new rulers feel safe.

In the earlier cases where there was no single conqueror, constructing a replacement “history” was more of a problem. Several competing “histories” could arise, so the would-be historian’s task today is complicated. For instance, among highland Guatemalan peoples, the history and even the genealogy in the *Popol Vuh* has been confused by old rivalries and changing political fortunes of multiple lineages. As a result, the Quiché record, the *Popol Vuh*, came to differ in certain ways from *The Annals of the Cakchiquels*, the parallel account from a related but rival tribe. The genealogical lists for their earlier shared ancestry differ, for example. This represents “a mythological and genealogical rationalization . . . subject to conflict and change with the rise and fall of vari-

ous 'houses' and their differing viewpoints about the myths by which they validated their positions."⁹⁴ Furthermore, "all the lineages appear to have 'adopted' [that is, fudged] some illustrious ancestors in order to confirm the principles of older-younger brother seniority and father-son succession by primogeniture, but these principles were [in fact] honored mainly in the breach."⁹⁵ (Such genealogical rationalizations are well-known elsewhere, notably in biblical and tribal lists.)⁹⁶

Ethnocentric Bias and Politically Motivated Revision of "History": Book of Mormon Peoples

Political and historical differences in interpretation of tradition and records were a key issue in the millennium-long conflict between Nephites and Lamanites. We saw above how their traditions differed drastically in interpreting past events. So much was at stake between the two dominant groups that there would be no give or take on the key issue of who was to rule.

The epistles exchanged between Nephite captain Moroni₁ and Ammoron, the Lamanite leader, underline the highly charged rivalry: "Our armies shall come upon you except ye withdraw, and ye shall soon be visited with death" (Alma 54:10); "thou art a child of hell" (verse 11); "I will come against you with my armies; yea, even I will arm my women and my children, and I will come against you, and I will follow you even into your own land, . . . and it shall be blood for blood, yea, life for life; and I will give you battle even until you are destroyed from off the face of the earth" (verse 12); "I will avenge [my brother's] blood upon you" (verse 16); "we will wage a war which shall be eternal, either to the subjecting the Nephites to our authority or to their eternal

extinction" (verse 20). The same absolute enmity recurred four centuries later (see Mormon 5). And the stance of Coriantumr₂ and Shiz, the Jaredite rivals for the kingship, was just as adamant (Ether 15).

Ethnic bias on both sides is manifested frequently. Rare glimpses of kinder or more objective views of "the other side" only underline the prevalence of ethnochauvinism. Compare Jacob₂'s positive evaluation of Lamanite family relations (Jacob 2:35) with Nephi₁'s harsh contrast between his people and the Lamanites (2 Nephi 5:21–24). (Might Nephi₁ have recognized his bias, perhaps shown by the last sentence in 2 Nephi 4:27?) The good guy/bad guy stereotyping continues in Enos 1:20–21. Opposing judgments of the Lamanites are again featured in Zeniff's reminiscence of his first encounter with them, in which his personal experience contradicted his cultural bias (Mosiah 9:1–2). Lamanite condemnation of all things Nephite is illustrated pointedly by the words and actions of the Lamanite king in relation to his son Lamoni and to Ammon: "Lamoni, thou art going to deliver these Nephites, who are sons of a liar. Behold, he robbed our fathers; and now his children are also come amongst us that they may, by their cunning and their lyings, deceive us, that they again may rob us of our property" (Alma 20:13). The reverse side of that prejudice is once more shown when Ammon₂, near the completion of a fourteen-year proselytizing mission among the Lamanites, with his companions reminisces about conditions when they began: "Now do ye remember, my brethren, that we said unto our brethren in the land of Zarahemla, we go up to the land of Nephi, to preach unto our brethren, the Lamanites, and they laughed us to scorn? For they said unto us: Do ye suppose that ye can bring the Lamanites to the knowledge of the truth? Do ye suppose that ye can convince the Lamanites of the incorrectness of the traditions of their fathers, as stiff-necked a people as they are; whose hearts delight in the shedding of

blood; whose days have been spent in the grossest iniquity; whose ways have been the ways of a transgressor from the beginning? . . . Let us take up arms against them, that we destroy them and their iniquity out of the land" (Alma 26:23–25). In short, "the only good Lamanite is a dead Lamanite."

Central to the quarrel was the record that their fathers had shared in the beginning, the brass plates, and perhaps Lehi₁'s own record, both of which Nephi₁ had taken with him when he fled from his brothers (see 2 Nephi 5:12). In fact, it was the adamant hostility of those brothers that caused Nephi₁ to prepare his record in the form he did, as a political testament justifying his actions, his retention of the ancestral emblems, and his rulership.⁹⁷ But as with the Spanish conquerors, so with the Lamanites. The only safe Nephite culture was a dead Nephite culture, and destruction of the records would kill it, as Lehi₁, Nephi₁, and Benjamin had understood. Carrasco's statement above about the Spaniards' intent to utterly destroy native Mexican culture in order to ensure their own ascendancy is a perfect parallel to the intent of the Lamanite conquerors as seen by the Nephites. They knew their enemies were "angry . . . because of [their] religion" (Alma 44:2) and more; consequently, they were "contending with the Lamanites, to defend themselves, and their families, and their lands, their country, and their rights, and their religion" (Alma 43:47). All were wrapped together in a single cultural package held together by the records. The Lamanites, like the Spaniards, while ready to destroy their foes' records, to repeat Carrasco's words, had "more in mind than the destruction of dead men's thoughts."⁹⁸

Obscure Language: Mesoamerica

There was "a true consciousness of history"⁹⁹ in Mesoamerica, but it encountered difficulty being expressed. One reason was the nature of the script, which hindered clear

communication. Glyphic writing systems were never capable of conveying perfectly crisp information. For instance, “a slurred line [of characters put down by a scribe] might result in a totally different reading.”¹⁰⁰ Yet even where the writing was impeccable, glyphic characters were always subject to interpretation because they endeavored to convey many whole concepts rather than simply to represent spoken words. Particularly problematic was “the richness of metaphors and the techniques of paraphrasing,” as well as the use of cover names, nicknames, or code terms. For example, in the colonial era documents kept by the Yucatec Mayas, the Spaniards were referred to by nicknames: “guayaba eaters,” “red beards,” “foreigners,” “white men,” and “sons of the sun.”¹⁰¹ Puns and wordplay were also common. Jill Leslie Furst notes an instance from the Mixtec Codex Vienna where stars are represented by human eyes, reflecting a pun on the Mixtec word for star. She demonstrates how the single image of the eye could have been used by a skillful storyteller to mean “the chief or head eye of the heavens, an object that moves and returns to its proper place—and that in doing so, marks the passage of time.”¹⁰² Another form of metaphorical expression has been termed “difrasismo” or “kenning”; for example, to the Aztecs *skirt and blouse* signified the sexual aspect of woman, *flower and song* meant “poetry and art,” and *my hand, my foot* stood for “my body.”¹⁰³ Meanwhile Dieter Dütting observes the difficulty that “lies in the multiple meanings of many Maya words, which sometimes can be reconciled with totally different text interpretation. Intended ambiguity in meaning, enhanced by metaphorical expressions, seems to be one of the crucial features of the Maya texts. The loss of [knowledge of ancient] metaphors severely restricts all attempts towards decipherment.”¹⁰⁴ A “literal interpretation” of any text utilizing a great deal of such symbolism was thus impossible. Of the *Popol Vuh*,

which is no different from other documents in this respect, Edmonson concluded that the subtleties of the language “have eluded all its translators, including me,” especially because “often a dozen or more quite disparate meanings may legitimately be proposed for a particular monosyllabic root.”¹⁰⁵

One had to be deeply schooled in the relevant Mesoamerican language to catch its allusions. In native priestly schools, students were taught explanations of the paintings and glyphs in the codices accompanied by interpretive commentaries that they had to learn by rote. The nucleus of the teachings was indeed in the documents, but commentaries were necessary to shape the tradition “correctly.”¹⁰⁶ Regarding the Maya glyphs, Dütting notes “a content dictated by the historical and ritual-religious interests of a small sophisticated nobility.”¹⁰⁷ Carrasco calls the central Mexican codices “part of the art of the ruling classes [that] contained stories painted and understood by very few individuals, usually the priestly sons of noble families who memorized the stories and pictorial conventions of their culture.”¹⁰⁸ No degree of linguistic fluency in everyday speech would serve.

The problem was worse for Mixtec and Aztec documents, which were more dependent on pictures with resulting “creative leeway in interpretation” for the specialists. And those trained experts in language and script liked to show off a “penchant for varying place-names and name signs, employing different graphemes and grapheme combinations to produce the same result.” Ideographic puns and complex metaphorical meanings were embedded in apparently simple signs. This complexity and ambiguity is behind the problem of translation, from picture manuscript to Nahuatl to Spanish, of the Aztec Codex Mendoza immediately following Cortez’s conquest of Mexico. In the process, “the Indian interpreters of the pictures in the document

argued so intensely over a number of images” that the Spanish official in charge of the project became frustrated over the delay.¹⁰⁹

In southern Mesoamerica there was a traditional “language of Zuyva,” which one needed to learn in order to master the key records. It is not clear if this only consisted of a special body of knowledge of the myths and metaphors or whether a distinct tongue existed.¹¹⁰ In either case, “it came eventually to mean only mysterious words which were obscure to all but the ruling class.”¹¹¹ Common people and even most leaders did not have the leisure or social opportunity to invest in the complicated learning process entailed in controlling this “occult knowledge.”¹¹²

Much, if not all, in Mesoamerican documents is in poetic form. For example, we are told “The *Popol Vuh* is primarily a work of literature, and . . . it cannot be properly read apart from the literary form in which it is expressed”; indeed, it “cannot be accurately understood in prose.”¹¹³ A pattern of phrasing in parallelistic couplets is fundamental in Mesoamerican documents in general and is even found in contemporary Quiché Maya speech (e.g., “on the road of day, on the road of light”).¹¹⁴ J. E. S. Thompson said of this duplicative pattern, “There are close parallels in Maya transcriptions of the colonial period, and, I am convinced, in the hieroglyphic texts themselves to the verses of the Psalms, and the poetry of Job.” Both “have an antiphonal arrangement in which the second line of a verse answers or repeats a variant of the first.”¹¹⁵ The same pattern occurs in many other Mesoamerican languages.¹¹⁶

One of the best-analyzed and most highly developed forms of stylistic parallelism in ancient literature is called chiasmus (defined as a literary form in which the second part of a passage is inverted and balanced against the first). Its presence and many detailed examples have been detected

in the Hebrew Bible, in the New Testament, and in Greek, Latin, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Sumerian literatures.¹¹⁷ Because of a somewhat similar emphasis on parallelistic style that is evident in Maya speaking and writing, it occurred to me that chiasmus might have occurred in Mesoamerica too. So, about twenty-five years ago, I asked Sir Eric Thompson if he was aware of its presence in Maya documents. He was not acquainted with the form, but when it was explained and illustrated, he suggested that indeed certain passages in the translated Chilam Balam texts might qualify and urged a closer look for it in the original language, which he did not control.¹¹⁸ That remained for Allen J. Christenson to pursue. Christenson discovered that early sixteenth-century native texts from Guatemala, which were apparently based on pre-Columbian documents and stylistics, did utilize the chiastic form. Yet no examples could be found in native writings after a half century or more of Spanish influence had displaced the old style. Obviously chiasmus was pre-Columbian in Mesoamerica; it did not spring from imitating the Bible or from any Spanish influence. The *Popol Vuh* yields a nice example of a six-line chiasm, while *The Annals of the Cakchiquels* incorporates one having seven elements with two subordinate chiasms inside it.¹¹⁹

Obscure Language: Book of Mormon Peoples

When Mormon₂ outlined his responsibility and stated his intent in making his record, he emphasized that “there are many things which, according to our language, we are not able to write” (3 Nephi 5:18). His son Moroni₂ echoed the point in the books of Mormon and Ether, where he lamented, “Lord, the Gentiles will mock at these things, because of our weakness in writing; . . . thou hast not made us mighty in writing. . . . Thou hast made us that we could write

but little, because of the awkwardness of our hands. . . . Thou hast also made our words powerful and great, even that we cannot write them; wherefore, when we write we behold our weakness, and stumble because of the placing of our words" (Ether 12:23–25; see also Mormon 8:12, 17; 9:31, 33). Despite reassurance from the Lord that his "weakness" would not matter, Moroni₂ came back to his concern in Ether 12:40 and again, finally, on the Book of Mormon's title page, where he worried once more about the remaining "faults . . . of men."

Jacob₂, Moroni₂'s distant uncle, had referred to the brevity and obscurity problem nine centuries earlier: "I cannot write but a little of my words, because of the difficulty of engraving our words upon plates" (Jacob 4:1). His expression "difficulty of engraving our words" joins with Moroni₂'s "because of the awkwardness of our hands" to reveal a problem that evidently went beyond the scribe's skill in making marks on metal. Moroni₂ had plenty of time on his hands and should have been able to work to the most meticulous level, if only the technological problem of making the right marks stood in the way of clarity. Neither was it their tongues or minds that limited expression. Rather, it must have had something to do with the script system they were using. Of course their "engravings" had to be got reasonably right or the reader would be puzzled, yet in using alphabetic writing, for example, a good deal of leeway remains where even poor spelling or awkward hand do not hurt clear expression that much. Moroni₂'s and Jacob₂'s shared frustration seems more with the whole system—that is, with their inability to express through their writing system the subtleties of what they were thinking and feeling. Mesoamerican scribes seem to have felt much the same limitation about the records alone, which is why commentaries on the texts were essential. Through them subtleties could be conveyed orally, beyond the inexactness of the glyphs, but the Nephite writ-

ers would not have that privilege, their people being doomed to extinction.

Moroni₂ was perfectly aware that it was possible to write with greater clarity using other systems. He was filled with admiration for the writing of the brother of Jared: “Behold [Lord], thou hast not made us mighty in writing like unto the brother of Jared, for thou madest him that the things which he wrote were mighty even as thou art, unto the overpowering of man to read them” (Ether 12:24). (Likely his appreciation came about in the course of his assignment to translate the account of the superlative vision from this great early prophet; see Ether 3:25–27 and 4:4–5.)¹²⁰ Moroni₂ could read and appreciate the Jaredite record by use of the sacred interpreter stones, but the Lord had told the brother of Jared, “The language which ye shall write I have confounded” (Ether 3:24). Moroni₂ could feel the contrast in quality of expression between his text and that of Ether, but he had to stick with the language and script that he knew and that his fathers had used.

He also had knowledge of the superior Hebrew alphabetic system. Of it he said, “If our plates had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also; and if we could have written in Hebrew, behold, ye would have had no imperfection in our record” (Mormon 9:33). That reinforces the point that it was the “reformed Egyptian” writing system, not his speech or engraving skill, that caused his problem of incoherence.

The lack of clarity stemming from the script that the Nephites used for their key sacred and historical documents is implied also by the difficulty of learning the system. King Benjamin wanted his three sons to become “men of understanding,” so he “caused that they should be taught in all the language of his fathers . . . that they might know concerning the prophecies which had been spoken by the

mouths of their fathers” (Mosiah 1:2). The expression “in *all* the language” conveys that degrees of learning were possible. He wanted them to have mastery of the system, not a superficial knowledge only. “The language of their fathers” refers to the script system, with its many characters and modifiers. (A glyphic system like Egyptian uses over seven hundred characters, with many variants, but each sign could have multiple meanings, all of which, with their contexts, had to be memorized). But he could also be referring to the complex semantic content needed to read the characters as fully and accurately as possible. Nephi₁ had spoken of this phenomenon in the founding era of their history. “I, Nephi, have not taught [my people] many things concerning the manner of the Jews” (2 Nephi 25:2). Then he repeats, “I, Nephi, have not taught my children after the manner of the Jews; but behold, I, of myself, have dwelt at Jerusalem, wherefore I know concerning the regions round about” (2 Nephi 25:6). He is not talking here about the script, which he surely did teach to his children so they could keep their record. The only thing he could have meant is the body of literary, historical, and theological allusions; stylistic forms; vocabulary; and nuanced interpretations the Jews had elaborately developed surrounding their books. But it was only that part of this esoteric information which Nephi₁ considered perverse that he held back. In order to comprehend what was written on the plates of brass, his descendants would have had to control a great deal of Jewish contextual information regardless of what Nephi₂ may have omitted. King Benjamin knew that without being able to penetrate the brass plates text, “[the people] must have suffered in ignorance, . . . not knowing the mysteries of God” (Mosiah 1:3). To avoid that, Lehi₂ had “taught them [i.e., the mysteries/interpretations] to his children” with “the help of these plates,” so that the children “could teach them to their chil-

dren . . . even down to this present time" (Mosiah 1:4). Benjamin was seeing to it that his sons "might read and understand of [God's] mysteries" (Mosiah 1:5) by mastering both the script in a mechanical sense and "the language of his fathers" (Mosiah 1:2) in a conceptual sense. Rather similarly, Nephi₁ began his record by speaking of "the language of my father, which consists of the learning [i.e., culture] of the Jews and the language [i.e., script] of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2).¹²¹ Lehi₁ had "been taught in the language of the Egyptians therefore he could read these engravings" (Mosiah 1:4) on the brass plates. This "language" had to include a lot of subtle interpretive coloring, and that could not be grasped without significant schooling. The time investment required would explain the later observation that "some were ignorant because of their poverty, and others did receive great learning because of their riches" (3 Nephi 6:12). Unlike Benjamin's princes, the Nephite poor could not afford the years of study needed to master literacy. The notion of interpretational subtlety and depth also fits with the description of the Nephite script system as "reformed Egyptian" (Mormon 9:32), for "the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4) is notoriously complex to interpret fully, even when one may simplistically "read" a sequence of characters.

All this also sounds very much like Mesoamerican writing, where, we have noted, extensive training was necessary to fully grasp the metaphors, paraphrasings, and esoteric cover names.¹²²

One of the most striking developments in modern research on the Book of Mormon has been John Welch's discovery of chiasmus in it. He has shown that the volume is "replete with precise and extensive chiastic compositions."¹²³ Not only are there detailed minor constructions, even large sections are structured on the chiastic principle. For example, one segment consisting of twenty-two chapters of 1 Nephi

treats ten topics in sequence, culminates in the eleventh chapter, where Nephi₁ has a direct experience with “the Spirit of the Lord,” then moves through the ten subjects in reverse order. Meanwhile the thirty verses making up Alma 36 form “a rigorous chiasmic pattern.” “It is difficult to imagine a more paradigmatic or a more effective use of chiasmus than this.” It is “worthy in form to the best of any [Old World] ancient chiasmic writer.”¹²⁴ In many cases quite complex subchiasms are included in larger structures.

Most interestingly for the question of a Mesoamerican connection, Welch has also shown that Helaman 6:7–13, a “fine example of chiasmus,” is an annal of events for the sixty-fourth year of the reign of the Nephite judges. “Since the chiasm encompasses the entire report for the year, this unifying structure strongly suggests that the account was written as a single literary unit that Mormon₂ copied verbatim from the Large Plates of Nephi into his abridgment.”¹²⁵ Welch further observes, “It may be that other reports from antiquity were written in chiasmic form. The Mesoamerican *Chilam Balam of Chumayel*, like Helaman 6, not only focuses chiasmically on the migration of the people into the land they now occupy, but also similarly features, at the center, a word-play on the land’s name, as J. E. S. Thompson has noted.”¹²⁶

Writing Systems: Mesoamerica

Many treatments of Mesoamerican writing systems have tried to sort out the scripts and to relate them to general conceptions of what writing is or is not. None are fully satisfactory. The scholars do not agree on definitions or their application to particular sets of characters. For example, Coe supposes that certain signs used at the Olmec site of La Venta are “pseudo-writing,” not real writing,¹²⁷ while others are confident that it is.¹²⁸ The usual view in such studies is that

an evolutionary progression moved from sheer “picture writing” to full-fledged writing. (Few scholars take seriously the idea that New World scripts owe anything to those in the Old World, but see below.) However, the evolutionary scheme is highly problematic, since chronologically late writing systems (e.g., the Aztec) display characteristics that qualify as “more primitive” in this analytical scheme than systems in use earlier that are more “advanced.”¹²⁹ Moreover, examples matching all the claimed “evolutionary stages” of writing occur simultaneously (for instance, in the complete Maya system).¹³⁰ Even at the level of sheer observation there are conflicts. The level of expert difference of opinion is shown again where Sylvia Méluzin agrees with Thompson that the very early glyphs on Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 “appear to be Maya or Maya-like,”¹³¹ yet Coe sees “no resemblances” between them and the Maya.¹³² Agreement is still a long way off both about what concepts and principles should be used and about the data. Méluzin speaks correctly of an “ill-defined array” of non-Maya and early regional Maya script systems in use during late B.C. and early A.D. centuries.¹³³

What is best known is the Classic Maya system, in use in lowland Guatemala from about A.D. 250 (or perhaps from three centuries earlier). It continued being used, in modified form, until long after the Spanish conquest, although no European ever wrote down much useful information about it. This system was able to represent a wide variety of types of information, as indicated above. Different types of glyphs had distinct functions. A study by Linda Miller Van Blerkom concluded that the same six types of signs were employed in Mayan script as in Egyptian: (1) primary signs or simple pictographs; (2) associative signs or pictures used to stand for concepts related to the pictures; (3) abstract geometric forms; (4) determinatives used to clarify the meaning

of expressions that sound the same but have different meanings; (5) phonetic signs used for rebus writing (e.g., in English, a picture of an ant to represent the word *aunt*); and (6) phonetic complements that clarify or reinforce the sound value of other signs.¹³⁴ That is to say, Maya writing was structurally similar to Egyptian, although, of course, concepts and phonetics differed according to culture and language.

All the Mesoamerican glyph systems about which we know enough to judge seem similar in important respects to the best-known, that of the Maya lowlands.¹³⁵ All depended heavily on “logographs,” which convey one concept per character. Potentially, one had to memorize thousands of characters, each character having a different semantic significance. (To be truly literate in Chinese, a similar system, a person had to learn at least seven thousand characters.¹³⁶) The systems also involved a phonetic principle, so that names and words could be, and often were, sounded out.

The Maya system is so well documented that much of our knowledge of other schemes has developed by extending principles outward from the knowledge base about Mayan.¹³⁷ That system apparently took its form in an area where one particular language of the Mayan family, ancestral Cholan, was used. Decipherment is succeeding based upon connecting words from modern Chol to glyph after glyph using the principles of homophony and polyvalence.¹³⁸ At their origin the glyphs apparently represented speech sounds specific to ancient Cholan, but “in time, as the language changes, the phonetic side of the script becomes less and less obvious.”¹³⁹ Various graphic and linguistic devices were developed that allowed the system to function across other speech communities, “internationally.”¹⁴⁰

It is apparent to most researchers that many, and perhaps all, of the hieroglyphic writing systems in Mesoamerica are related to each other. Historical details of those relation-

ships or influences remain unclear because of the lack of sufficient inscriptions to permit tracking the details through time and space. We know that individual glyphs or types of glyphs were changed in order to adapt older systems to fit the needs of communicating in new languages amidst new sounds, customs, and beliefs.¹⁴¹ Such “reformed” usage may be related to the well-known fact that many ruling elites in Mesoamerica were ethnic foreigners who dominated varied local populations and who related to each other by sociopolitical interaction, by intermarriage, and probably by genes. The governing elite sector sometimes spoke a different language from the one the commoners spoke.¹⁴² This puts in question just how everyday language and the glyphs were related. As Méluzin notes, “It is frequently true that writing is a property of the elite who may not be identical in ethnic, and therefore linguistic, affiliation with the masses,” while “the presence of a substratum language, different from that of the rulers, may affect the official language and its reflection in writing. For example, the person who ordered a text in the official language, who dictated it, so to speak, may not have been a native speaker of that language—it was his second, acquired language.” She also points out that the writing of “religious and/or political subject matter raises the question of anachronisms, of words, phrases, and styles purposely retained from an earlier time and possibly even from another language.”¹⁴³

It is evident that certain writing systems flourished for a time then died out. An example that is under intense study today is that of southern Veracruz as represented on the Tuxtla Statuette and La Mojarra Stela 1.¹⁴⁴

Claims have been made that actual Old World scripts have been found fragmentarily in Mesoamerica, but these assertions are not accepted by orthodox scholars working on New World writing systems. For example, Wei ChuHsien,

Dennis Lou Wing-Sou, and Francisco Loayza have discussed and shown American artifacts on which are Chinese characters.¹⁴⁵ More notorious is a cylinder seal found in 1957 at Chiapa de Corzo in southern Mexico. Thomas Stuart Ferguson publicized it with a flourish in his 1958 book.¹⁴⁶ He cited correspondence with noted Near Eastern archaeologist William F. Albright, of Johns Hopkins University, in which Albright affirmed the presence of "several clearly recognizable Egyptian hieroglyphs." In the face of ensuing controversy, Albright seems to have waffled somewhat (judging by reports of more cautionary letters he later sent to inquirers). However, there is no question about the definiteness of his initial response to Ferguson. George F. Carter, who was a professor at Hopkins at the time, has reported, "Albright called me to his office to look at those items [several seals from Chiapa de Corzo] with him. He recognized a letter or two and concluded that these were degenerate cartouches of Mediterranean inspiration. He was roundly denounced for such a heresy."¹⁴⁷

Alphabetic writing is not considered by most scholars to have been present in Mesoamerica.¹⁴⁸ Yet a few believe that an alphabet may be present on isolated objects. One candidate is a cylinder seal reported by David H. Kelley.¹⁴⁹ This find came from incidental digging at the site of Tlatilco in central Mexico; hence its date is not certain. However, it appeared in a context that suggests it "may well be the earliest writing known from Mesoamerica," perhaps 600 B.C., give or take a couple of centuries. Kelley noted its "sequences of arbitrary symbols which are surely parts of a hitherto unknown writing system." None of the symbols are pictures (i.e., pictographic); hence, it may be unrelated to any hieroglyphic system. John Graham has said of this writing that it may "represent the most advanced script ever developed in the New World," even though it would be the oldest! He

goes on: “The markings of this seal closely resemble various oriental scripts ranging from Burma and China to the rim of the Mediterranean. If the signs of this seal were writing, and the seal were accepted as authentic, we would almost surely be dealing with an instance of Trans-Pacific contact during the Pre-Classic.”¹⁵⁰ That no other example has been found is puzzling at first glance, but Graham observes that “most of our excavations into the Central Mexican Pre-Classic [the area where the seal was found] have not been conducted in localities where the retrieval of specimens of writings would be likely.”¹⁵¹ Meanwhile, other objects are known on which are seen what could be alphabetic or syllabic signs.¹⁵² The whole story of Mesoamerican writing systems has by no means been fully reconstructed yet.

Writing Systems: Book of Mormon Peoples

Lehi₁'s party came from the civilized heart of the ancient Near Eastern world where a majority of the crucial developments in writing took place. They had direct knowledge of Hebrew and its script and also of “the language of the Egyptians” (Mosiah 1:4). It would not be surprising if they had also had exposure to Mesopotamian writing—at least the basic elements of it—in view of the role of the Babylonians in Palestine during Lehi₁'s and Nephi₁'s lifetime immediately prior to the Babylonian captivity. They would have been aware that multiple systems were in use, so from their beginning, the Nephites as a people were faced with linguistic decisions about how to keep their records.

The “Egyptian” they came to utilize is not likely to have been the demotic writing coming into common use in Lehi₁'s day.¹⁵³ Their purpose in obtaining the brass plates was to “preserve unto our children the language of our fathers” (1 Nephi 3:19). Had “the language of our fathers” merely

referred to the Hebrew tongue, or the content of the Jewish sacred canon (generally our Old Testament), Lehi₁ would quite surely not have had his sons go to so much trouble to obtain one particular record, the brass plates; they could have obtained a copy of the regular Jewish scripture written in alphabetic Hebrew by simpler means than sneaking into Laban's treasury. What they did get differed substantially from the contemporary Jewish scripture in two ways: (1) it was in characters called "the language of the Egyptians," and (2) the content of the volume was significantly different from the Jewish Torah. "The fathers" whose words Lehi₁ was most concerned about were not his immediate ancestors, about whom nothing is said in the record we have. The ancestor of prime concern to Lehi₁ was Joseph₁, the one with the strongest Egyptian connection. In 2 Nephi 3, Lehi₁ cited unique information on Joseph₁ that he found on the brass plates. He includes in his last instruction to his family specific reference to Joseph₁, alone, as "my father of old" (2 Nephi 3:22). A parallel phenomenon is seen when Amulek recites his genealogy. He traces his ancestry to Nephi₁, then to Lehi₁, jumping then to Manasseh, and terminating with "Joseph who was sold into Egypt" (Alma 10:2–3). Mormon₂ refers to "our father Jacob," but he does so primarily because of that patriarch's prophecy about "a remnant of the seed of Joseph," whom Mormon₂ interprets as his Nephites. I have shown elsewhere that on many points, the brass plates account displays connections with the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Joseph₁ super-tribe.¹⁵⁴

That the brass plates account should be written in "the language of the Egyptians" is best explained historically by reference to Joseph₁'s connection to high Egyptian culture (e.g., note his introduction of Egyptian embalming to his family [see Gen. 50:2–3, 26]). The text on the brass plates was apparently written in an Egyptian script that had its

origin as a vehicle for Israelite record keeping in that people's experience with Egypt in the time of Joseph₁, and that usage probably started with him personally. Lehi₁ read and quoted Joseph₁'s words in the first person from the brass plates (see 2 Nephi 3:4–22). Consistent with this preeminence of Joseph₁ as “father,” Latter-day Saint interpreters have, since the 1830s, maintained that the Book of Mormon is “the stick of *Joseph*” referred to in Ezekiel 37:19.

The most logical scenario for transmission of the brass plates is that chosen men among Joseph₁'s descendant tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh, continued the record and carried the plates with them upon the exodus from Egypt. Joseph₁'s descendants must have kept on using “the language [characters] of the Egyptians” by his commandment and in honor of their quasi-Egyptian founder father. The record would have come south from the Northern Kingdom to the land of Judah with the Josephite ancestors of either Laban or Lehi₁, or more likely of both of them.¹⁵⁵ (It included also “a record of the Jews,” within which category Lehi₁, Ishmael, and Laban, all formally Josephites, had become a functional part [see 1 Nephi 5:12.]) At the time Lehi₁'s sons obtained the plates at such high risk, the record was still being kept up, for it contained some of the then current prophecies of Jeremiah (1 Nephi 5:12–13).

Note that Lehi₁ had been “taught in the language of the Egyptians” so that he could read the sacred engravings on the brass plates (Mosiah 1:4). There is no hint as to how he came to this closely held knowledge; no indication whatever in our text suggests that he had learned this or any other form of Egyptian writing through engaging in commerce with Egyptians, as some have suggested, and even if he had been exposed to the contemporary script, it would not have served for reading the archaic text on the brass plates.

The system employed on the brass plates was that

adopted by Lehi₁ and Nephi₁ for their own records (see 1 Nephi 1:2; compare Mosiah 1:4–5). For his personal records—one sacred, the other historical and kingly—Nephi₁ followed his father’s example and adopted what he obviously considered by then the approved script for sacred record keeping; thus he too wrote in “the language of the Egyptians” (1 Nephi 1:2). Jacob₂’s firsthand charge from his brother Nephi₁ to continue writing in the records (Jacob 1:2) would not have permitted him to use another writing system. (Born in the Arabian wilderness, where would Jacob₂ have learned any alternative?) John Welch has demonstrated the cultural continuity and conformity of Jacob₂’s descendants thereafter for the next several centuries in the manner of keeping the small plates.¹⁵⁶ Later, Benjamin said that Lehi₁ taught the contents of the brass plates to his children “that thereby they could teach them to their children, and so . . . even down to this present time” (Mosiah 1:4; ca. 130 B.C.). That could not have been done without their descendants having been “taught in the language of the Egyptians” as was Lehi₁. Spackman argues persuasively also that the calendar system that was set in motion by Lehi₁ would be very unlikely to be changed by his descendants, short of a major and noted crisis; we would expect the script to continue for the same initial reasons he adduces.¹⁵⁷ Anywhere in ancient times, it would have taken a daring scribe (almost an oxymoron) to change scripts in the middle of a record; the Nephite writers were clearly traditional and conformist—not daring.

The use of antiquated languages and scripts for sacred purposes is well attested. Latin was the language of sacred record throughout the Middle Ages. Sumerian was a language of scholarship and cult in Mesopotamia for millennia after the spoken tongue had gone out of general use.¹⁵⁸ And Middle Egyptian continued to be regarded as the “classical” language of Egypt for literary, religious, and monumen-

tal writing clear down into the Graeco-Roman period. The hieratic writing system was the Egyptian norm, the form that all later priests learned first because “it was the standard script for letters, accounts, and literature; most of the great literary works of Classical Egyptian are preserved in hieratic. . . . Hieratic . . . remained in use alongside the newer [demotic] writing [down to the fifth century A.D.], but it was reserved primarily for religious papyri written in the older (semi-Classical) language.”¹⁵⁹

In Benjamin’s day the same script and system of record transmission that Nephi₁ used were still in use, and they continued on via Mosiah₂ to Alma₁ and beyond. We reach the final custodian, Moroni₂, with no hint intervening of any system change. He lumps all the writers of the record—himself, his father, and “them who have written before him”—in a unified “we” / “us,” which he repeats often in verses 31 to 35 of Mormon 9: “We have written this record . . . in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, [only] according to our manner of speech” (v. 32). The most economical historical explanation of his statement is that the system of writing known to Lehi₁ and Nephi₁ was in use in the Near East for at least two thousand years—from the origin of the brass plates in Egypt (Joseph₁ dates nominally to around 1600–1700 B.C.) through early sixth century B.C. The system then was transferred to Lehi₁’s Mesoamerican land of promise where it continued to the fourth century A.D.

What about Moroni₂’s statement that changes in the characters were made “according to our manner of speech”? There would, obviously, have been changes in vocabulary over the millennia even if some version of “Hebrew” had remained their tongue. Supplementary characters would be required and certain others would have been lost from regular use because of changes in physical, social, and historical

environments. But Moroni₂'s inclusive "we" again links all the Nephite writers with the use of "reformed Egyptian" characters. It may be that he is saying that the system used was being reformed in minor but cumulative ways from the very beginning of its adoption by Joseph₁. Obviously, no writing system fails to change. Yet if we think of the standard hieroglyphic Egyptian as a basis for Joseph₁'s system, then Middle Egyptian hieratic script was already "reformed." Or reformed may refer primarily to changes that take account of phonetic elements.¹⁶⁰ Elements may have been added to permit spelling out Hebrew names, for example. Later on, the same degree of phoneticism would permit use of the system to write some other, Mesoamerican language. It is understandable how, after so many centuries of incremental change, Moroni₂ could say, "None other people knoweth our language" (Mormon 9:34). (Of course he is referring to the "characters," because he had just distinguished in verse 32 "our manner of speech" as a different phenomenon.) Moroni₂'s point was that nobody in Joseph Smith's day was going to be able to decipher what was on the golden plates by reference to knowledge of that day.

It is impossible for me to believe that the script Lehi₁ learned and used was the old pictorial hieroglyphics. After all, the Anthon Transcript fails to show anything like them. What we see there are somewhat cursive signs, not unlike hieratic. Some non-LDS Egyptologists have stated that the "characters" shown to Professor Anthon were derived from hieratic Egyptian.¹⁶¹ Hieratic originated by simplification of the original hieroglyphics due to the speeding up of the writing process incident to hand-copying documents on papyrus. It was in use from around the time of the Hebrew patriarchs in the second millennium B.C. Demotic Egyptian was still more abbreviated, but although it evolved continuously out of hieratic, it was still being developed as a dis-

tinct system out of late hieratic in Lehi₁'s day.¹⁶² That would have been too late for it to be utilized on the brass plates. If that record was begun in the era of Josephin verse 32 in Egypt, as proposed above, it probably was written in hieratic. In that case the characters first used were already "reformed" from the original hieroglyphic Egyptian, regardless of what the descendants of Lehi₁ or Nephi₁ might have done with them later.

Use of a hieratic form of Egyptian writing would have entailed just the kind of uncertainties and frustrations Moroni₂ encountered in trying to express himself. "The cur-sive characters have this disadvantage that they often obliterate the characteristic forms of the [original hieroglyphic] signs. . . . Thus mistakes of all kinds crept in."¹⁶³ At least the possibility of mistakes was ever present. Only by diligence could a scribe avoid being tripped up.

Moroni₂ observed that the characters that he and the other keepers of the Nephite records used had been "handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech" (Mormon 9:32), even beyond the system employed by Nephi₁ and Lehi₁. His description of the basis for changes in the signs agrees with what we know about phonetic elements in both the Egyptian and Mayan writing systems.

The only explicit description of the relationship between individual characters on the plates and the English translation written down by Smith's scribes comes from David Whitmer. According to one interview with Whitmer, "Some [characters] represented but one word or, name. Some represented several, and some [individual characters represented] from one to nearly two lines [of translated text]."¹⁶⁴ To the degree that this statement is accurate, it agrees with at least some of the characters being logographs or ideographs, that is, representing whole concepts, yet it also allows for a phonetic element.

Conventional archaeologists and linguists will have none of the idea that actual Egyptian hieroglyphs have been found in Mesoamerica. Less-skeptical observers point to evidence that a few inscriptions found in that area do show Egyptian characters and that notable elements of Egyptian culture and language provide supporting evidence. Potentially the most dramatic material is a pair of *ushabtiu* figurines, which, in Egypt, were placed in burials. These two figurines bear on their fronts typical cartouches containing hieroglyphic inscriptions of exactly the sort found on Egyptian examples. For years a pair of Egyptian *ushabtiu* figurines located in the national museum in El Salvador provoked interest in the possibility that they might prove to be concrete evidence for an intrusive Egyptian presence in ancient Mesoamerica. But it has always been obvious that the chance of finding any actual Old World artifacts in an American site that were introduced by a colonizing party is microscopically tiny. It had been claimed that these specimens were excavated in 1914 from a ruin in western El Salvador, not far from where Lehi's party likely landed. One would like to examine them directly, but it has now been established that they disappeared in a burglary a few years ago. The matter is moot, however, since John Gee, an Egyptologist, now believes he has established that they were part of a set of fake *ushabtiu* figures made early in this century and then "found" in a number of countries around the world. He plans to publish his evidence soon.¹⁶⁵

Other scholars have hypothesized an Egyptian origin for or Egyptian influence upon Mesoamerican civilizations. The most elaborate argument, which also contains considerable interesting data, is in the works of R. A. Jairazbhoy, a historian with substantial knowledge of the ancient Near East.¹⁶⁶ Additional data on the topic are found in my article in the important scholarly compendium *Man across the Sea*.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, David H. Kelley has shown that a sequence of three Maya day names

bear an enigmatic relationship to the Semitic alphabet. He shows that certain Asian calendrical signs are tied to the alphabet, which had its origin in Phoenicia. Each letter was represented by an animal or some other feature in nature. Those in turn related to sign sequences in India, Southeast Asia, and China. Mesoamerican calendar terms match certain of the Asian sequences in significant ways. Specifically, the Maya day name *manik*, represented by a glyph in the form of a hand, was probably pronounced "ka" (on the basis of the Yucatec Maya word *kab*, "hand"), and this corresponds in the Old World sequence with the position where the Hebrew letter *k* fits. The Hebrew letter, he says, probably was once represented by a picture of a hand and was pronounced "kaph." The next Maya day in sequence was named *lamat*, while the corresponding letter in the Hebrew alphabet was *lamed*. Then came Maya *mulu(c)*, represented by a shark; the Aztec equivalent day sign meant "water." In the Hebrew alphabet the equivalent character was *mem* ("waters"; compare Semitic neighbor Assyrian *mu*, "?water").¹⁶⁸ Recall also the discussion above of the cylinder seal excavated by the New World Archaeological Foundation at Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, which Professor Albright said contained Egyptian characters in the form of a cartouche.

None of these bits of evidence is definitive, to be sure, yet they have enough substance that anyone would do well to keep the book open on whether literal Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, per se, not just some structural local analogue to it, may have been present in Mesoamerica at the same point in time.

The cylinder seal from Tlatilco, which was mentioned earlier, was the subject of an important study by Carl Hugh Jones.¹⁶⁹ Jones carefully compared the characters on it with those on the Anthon Transcript, as published by B. H. Roberts; he made no attempt at decipherment. He found that of the twenty-four symbols, only two did not have "readily identifiable counterparts" on the transcript. From this he concluded, "The Tlatilco roller

stamp is indeed an archaeological example of the type of script represented in the Anthon Transcript." He also compared characters on a cylindrical seal or stamp from the site of La Venta, Tabasco,¹⁷⁰ which is probably of about the same age as the one from Tlatilco. He found transcript equivalents for all the second seal's symbols too (they were a good deal simpler than those from Tlatilco; hence, they were easier to match).

"The language of Nephi" was "taught among all the people of the Lamanites" by Nephite dissidents at the command of the Lamanite king (Mosiah 24:4; the date was between 150 and 125 B.C.). This "language" was probably a script, not a spoken language. It is hard to believe that a new tongue could be taught so quickly and widely as is implied here, or that the Lamanites would accept the notion of using their enemy's actual tongue, if it was different, even for commerce. Two verses later the nature and usage of this "language" is clarified. "The language of Nephi" referred to a writing system, for the aim in implementing it was "that they should keep their record, and that they might write one to another" (Mosiah 24:6). It is not made clear whether or how "the language of Nephi" related to "the language of the Egyptians," the writing system mentioned earlier as the vehicle for keeping the official records of the Nephites. The different name may suggest that a different system of characters was used, although perhaps based on similar principles. (When Mosiah₁ and his Nephite party first arrived in Zarahemla, he caused that "the language of Mosiah" be taught to some of the people of Zarahemla; however, the context establishes that in this case, it was speech that was involved, not script [see Omni 1:18]. Obviously, though, the more numerous "Mulekites" would not *all* have learned the Nephite tongue.) The fact that a script was taught among the Lamanites implies two things of interest here: (1) it appears that the Lamanites had not had a writing system of

their own before this event, and (2) it was possible to use “the language of Nephi” script among speakers of a (presumably, but not certainly) different tongue from that of the Nephites. The “internationalization” point recalls the Maya system.

The case of the Amulonites among the Lamanites is one illustration of the principle that it was an elite minority that controlled the script and the documents (see above). Furthermore, the priests of Noah were custodians, analysts of and teachers from the sacred record of the Zeniffites, which is shown in Mosiah 12:18–28, where they debate with Abinadi. The same was true of priests among the Nephites. The secular records of the Nephi lineage were in the hands of the king, the holder of the office of “Nephi,” while the sacred record was kept in the family of Jacob,² the earliest high priest and brother of the first king (see Jacob 1:1–4). The elite’s connection with literacy and record keeping among the Nephites is further shown in 3 Nephi 6:12 and elsewhere.

The decipherment of many Mayan inscriptions has revealed that individuals had personal names or titles that were spelled out in syllables. For example, the name of a famous ruler of Palenque, constructed by epigraphers as “Pacal,” was spelled out by three phonetic (syllabic) signs as *pa-ca-l(a)*.¹⁷¹ (I suppose it is by coincidence, though not without interest, that among the clearest cases for the use of specifically Egyptian personal names in the Book of Mormon are three that begin with the *pa-* prefix; see Nibley’s discussion of a whole class of late Egyptian names beginning thus, and particularly the names of Nephite chief judge Pahoran and his three sons, Pahoran, Paanchi, and Pacumeni.)¹⁷² One source reported that in translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph “Smith . . . was oftentimes compelled to spell the words out, not knowing the correct pronunciation.”¹⁷³ Presumably proper names would have been the hardest to deal with in this respect. In the Near East the practice was known to use

Egyptian characters to transliterate Semitic words, including names one had to spell out to read.¹⁷⁴

Another point has recently been of considerable interest to some Latter-day Saints. A set of Maya glyphs has been translated as signifying “it came to pass,” a phrase common in the Book of Mormon.¹⁷⁵ Obviously every language will have some way to convey this idea of narrative progression; nevertheless, it is interesting that the Maya used the concept often enough that a particular glyph suffix and word or phrase was used to state the formulaic notion concisely and precisely. The text of the Book of Mormon also must have had a regularized sign for the idea, judging by its frequency and consistency of translation.

We are not told in the Nephite account whether they came to utilize any Jaredite writing system. At least one Jaredite system is reported to have come to their knowledge. Omni 1:20–22 mentions a large stone “with engravings on it” on which Coriantumr₂, the last Jaredite ruler, had written historical material during his nine-month sojourn with the “Mulekites” before his death. Mosiah₁ interpreted the writing “by the gift and power of God” (Omni 1:20). We have no way of knowing whether Coriantumr₂’s script was the same one used by Ether (compare Ether 3:22) to prepare his lineage history, from which Mormon₂ or Moroni₂ translated/composed the book of Ether. We do know that substantial Jaredite cultural and linguistic influence reached the Nephites by some other channel, apparently by way of the “Mulekites.”¹⁷⁶ These included linguistic elements—personal names and terms in the system of measures, as well as crop names (and if there were crops, how could there not have been an agricultural calendar for planting the indigenous cultigens?). Given such extensive survivals, it would not be surprising if elements of Jaredite (i.e., Olmec-age) writing continued on through time via the “Mulekites,” who would have incorporated surviving elements of the earlier popula-

tion, but with the Nephites failing to associate the origin of such features with the “extinct” people.

There is one probable instance of transmission of a Jaredite document down to the Nephite period. Ether 8:9 says that the daughter of Jared, son of King Omer, referred to an Old World book among them: “Hath [my father] not read the record which our fathers brought across the great deep? Behold, is there not an account concerning them of old, that they by their secret plans did obtain kingdoms and great glory?” That document, of course, was brought by the Jaredite fathers from “the great tower” in Mesopotamia. From this record sprang a secret organization that was represented among the Jaredites more or less continuously until the demise of the dynasty represented by Coriantumr.¹ Millennia later, among the Nephites, Giddianhi, “the governor of . . . the secret society of Gadianton [a Jaredite name],” brags in a letter to Nephite chief judge Lachoneus about his organization, “which society and the works thereof I know to be good; and they are of ancient date and they have been handed down unto us” (3 Nephi 3:9). There is virtually a one hundred-percent chance that he refers to an ultimate Jaredite origin for his organization and its symbols. Helaman₃, or Mormon₂ (the editor at this point), supposed that “those secret oaths and covenants . . . were put into the heart of Gadianton” by the devil (Helaman 6:26). But, while the idea might be credited to that source, it is difficult to believe that knowledge of the operational code for conducting the organization was transmitted by that means or by merely oral tradition. Giddianhi’s statement seems to me to point to his having an actual Jaredite record. It appears that we are being told of a document whose substance came down from the early second millennium B.C. or earlier to Gadianton’s day, near the Christian era. This record would have been entirely different from Ether’s plates, for Helaman

6:26 assures us that information about the secrecy pattern was not derived from the twenty-four gold plates Helaman₃ held. We cannot tell how the script of the secret document might have compared with that of Ether.

We know that certain spoken languages and writing systems failed to survive from the Mesoamerican past.¹⁷⁷ The fact of their extinction reminds us of Moroni₂'s assurance that "none other people knoweth our [Nephite] language" (Mormon 9:34). Ether's "language" (script?) also failed to survive (Ether 3:24). Whether Jaredite spoken language(s) continued, we do not know, although the use of Jaredite terms among the Nephites suggests the affirmative.¹⁷⁸ Some Nephite groups survived past Cumorah's decimation, of course (see Alma 45:13–14; Moroni 9:24), but we do not know whether their language(s) also continued, although it seems probable.¹⁷⁹

Mesoamerican Priesthood and Records

Most Mesoamerican records were in the hands of priests, for few other than they were thoroughly literate (see above).¹⁸⁰ To be sure, a larger number of the populace would probably have had a functional knowledge of portions of the system, as shown, for example, by the existence of Classic-age graffiti that only commoners would have produced.¹⁸¹ Presumably, merchants knew a certain amount. (Interestingly, at the time of the Spanish arrival, the noted exceptions among the Maya to the rule of mainly priestly use of writing were "some of the principal lords . . . from curiosity" and some sons of the lords "if . . . they had an inclination," which recalls Mosiah₂ and his sons.)¹⁸²

The priesthood among the Mesoamerican peoples consisted of several levels of power and jurisdiction, and priests varied in their functions, but many of them had to do with

books. Among the Maya of Yucatan, a “high priest” was held in general respect, and a similar office existed elsewhere in Mexico.¹⁸³ He did little in the way of routine sacrificing or divination, but “provided [other] priests for the towns when they were needed, examining them in the sciences and ceremonies . . . and provided them with books and sent them forth. And they employed themselves in the duties of the temples and in teaching their sciences as well as in writing books about them. . . . The sciences which they taught were the computation of the years, months and days, the festivals and ceremonies, the administration of the sacraments, the fateful days and seasons, their methods of divination and their prophecies.”¹⁸⁴ That list of activities pretty much defines also what the lower-level priests did—scheduled, planned, and carried out community ritual events and provided some religious instruction, all of which required a certain degree of literacy.

Both “prophet” and “seer” were established roles, and as indicated above, records of their statements were kept as part of the general historical archives of official documents of native states. Among different groups and in different ages, details of the roles no doubt changed, but essential functions did not. The Quiché Maya had *hiq' vachinel*, “far seers,” who were prophetic diviners with second sight able to “see at a distance” or scrutinize (*niq'oh*) and peer into (*vachih*) things. Peering into special stones was widespread in Mesoamerica¹⁸⁵ and elsewhere in the world.¹⁸⁶ An *ilol* was another type of seer (from *iloh*, “see”), one who interpreted omens.¹⁸⁷ Among the Aztecs, a type of diviner was called *tlaachtopaitoani*, or “prophet,” while another was the *quinextiani*, whose title was translated to Spanish as “revealer.”¹⁸⁸ A prophet in Yucatan was called *ah bobat*. The man holding the office of *Chilam Balam* (“spokesman”) was not only a prophet but *the* prophet—the official prophet in his

city-state for the *katun* calendar period. He had to be highly trained and a sage (*ah miatz*). When disagreements arose over the prophecies, he was the one to resolve them (compare 3 Nephi 1:4–8). Failing that, a convocation of sages would be called. There are also mentions of “false prophets.”¹⁸⁹ The document *Chilam Balam of Tizimin* reports that a prophet named Xupan Nauat prophesied in Yucatan in A.D. 1527 that strangers (whose description and actions turned out to fit the Spaniards) would arrive in three years.¹⁹⁰ Other prophets gave similar predictions about the coming of the foreigners.¹⁹¹

The role of seer seems to have been connected with rulership—and particularly with the possession and use of mirrors. Use of a mirror was a special manifestation of the widespread Mesoamerican use of polished stones into which priests gazed to divine the future, as mentioned above. Concave mirrors were formed from a mosaic of polished fragments of iron ore or from a single polished stone, such as obsidian; they were used from Olmec to Aztec times. They sometimes served to divine the future. One of their characteristics, which must have seemed magical, was that as the convex face was moved toward one’s eyes, at a certain distance related to its focal length, the image suddenly flipped upside down, an impressive phenomenon. Also, the use of a mirror to concentrate the sun’s rays and start a fire must have been impressive.¹⁹² (The use of bronze mirrors in a number of similar ways was highly developed in China.)¹⁹³ Moctezuma (the Aztec “Montezuma”) saw his coming tragic fate at the hands of the Spaniards in a prophetic mirror said to be fixed in the forehead of a magical crane (bird). The Aztec lord of Tacuba saw in a clouded mirror that Mexico would be lost to the Spanish. The Motul dictionary of the Maya language relates *nen*, “mirror,” with rulership. Certain gods were directly connected with, used, or are depicted wearing mirrors, such as Aztec Tezcatlipoca, who bore the

title "Smoking Mirror."¹⁹⁴ There probably was a mirror ceremony involved with transfer of royal power; among the Maya, "the mirror ceremony might have conferred the all-encompassing office of wiseman, seer, and priest as well as of secular leader of the people."¹⁹⁵

One specific function of foretelling was related to war. A highland Guatemalan high priest, his assistant, and four other priests would meet to ascertain "by sorcery and enchantment" (such was the Spanish assessment; a native might have called it "revelation") if they should make war, or if foes were coming to attack them. They then told the *caciques*, or rulers, "whether they should go to meet them."¹⁹⁶

Nephite Priesthood and Records

The Nephites had a priesthood structure with many of the same positions and functions as the Mesoamerican peoples had. Record keeping was a special concern for them too. The small plates of Nephi, particularly, were passed down in the line from the first Nephite head priest, Jacob₂, under a formulaic commandment to keep them and record on them special religious materials.¹⁹⁷ Moreover, the main Nephite historical record was also kept by religious functionaries, such as Alma₁ and his descendants (see 3 Nephi 1:2–3). "The other plates of Nephi . . . upon [which] the records of our wars are engraven" were termed "the writings of the kings," but even those were probably kept by some sort of priest, for the ruler only "caused" their contents to be written (Jarom 1:14).

The Book of Mormon speaks fairly often of written communications playing a role in public life among the Nephites. This does not contradict the view that mainly priests and the social elite were the ones who controlled most writing.¹⁹⁸ For instance, Mosiah 29:4 reports that King

Mosiah₂ sent “even a written word . . . among the people.” But in the short time frame implied and in the absence of a system of printing, for which there is not the slightest evidence, his communication could only have been reproduced in a limited number of hand copies, which would be sent to regional or local rulers. (It need not have been in the same script as the sacred records.) They in turn probably would have read the document to an assembly of local kin group heads for discussion. This system of local government we see at work in Alma 46:36, where Moroni₁ “caused the title of liberty to be hoisted upon every tower which was in all the land” as the means of mustering support of the people, following the model of King Benjamin himself (see Mosiah 2:7–8). A situation occurred among the dissident Nephites reported in Alma 51:20 that is consistent with this view of the role of documents in the political process; the rebels were “compelled to hoist the title of liberty upon their towers”; that is, local noble lords had to demonstrate to their people—not in writing, but via political ritual—that Moroni₁ had their loyalty, though reluctant. The same system of predominantly oral/visual communication prevailed among the Lamanites, where commoners were stirred up by Amalickiah, who “did appoint men to speak unto the Lamanites from their towers, against the Nephites” (Alma 48:1). But no doubt Nephite local leaders and merchants also controlled enough of some script to decipher royal documents, being able to “keep their record, and . . . write one to another,” and especially use writing to facilitate “trade one with another” (Mosiah 24:6–7). Some among the Lamanites imitated the Nephites in this and quickly learned to do just the same things (see Mosiah 24:7). However, few of them would have gained the kind of mastery of the most complex or sacred system of writing, which Benjamin (who was actually a quasi-priest, as shown in his sermon), his princes, and presumably his priests

learned by long effort that commoners were not expected to exert (see Mosiah 1:1–4). We have seen that some rulers as well as motivated elite youths were among those taught in the Maya system.

Nephite groups had “high priests” who consecrated and generally administered the activities of lesser priests (see Mosiah 11:11; 18:18; Alma 4:7; 8:23; 13:8–10; 45:22; 46:6, 38; 3 Nephi 2:9). Alma₁ ensured that the lesser priests whom he ordained would preach and teach only “the things which he had taught, and which had been spoken by the mouth of the holy prophets,” implying that he furnished them copies of whatever sacred documents they needed (see Mosiah 18:19; Alma 1:10), as with the Maya.

Book of Mormon peoples sometimes reported the presence of “churches” among them. Were there corresponding “churches” in ancient Mesoamerica? Maybe, but this is a definitional not a substantive question. Ignacio Bernal speculated that within the general stream of “Mesoamerican religion,” there may have been “branches” similar to “Catholicism, Protestantism, or other Christian religions.” Conflict among these could explain the violent destruction of religious images that frequently occurred in Mesoamerica.¹⁹⁹ Eva Hunt, one of the best-informed ethnohistorians on ancient central Mexico, has referred to “the pre-Hispanic church organization,” which may have crossed state and national boundaries, as did that of the Nephites on occasion (see, for example, Helaman 4:23 and 5:14–20). It was her opinion “that the pre-Hispanic religious cults of each state were organized in an integrated manner involving the priesthood of more than one temple”²⁰⁰ and sometimes local cult units of multiple states, according to a specialized calendar. This parallel may enlighten us about the nature of “the church” in Nephite times (see, for example, 4 Nephi 1:1, 27–30).

There is no evidence for the presence of priests among

the Lamanites until Nephites began to have influence (although the brevity of the record about the Lamanites makes the picture uncertain). Amalekite and Amulonite dissidents at least had priests to serve their own minority enclaves in the midst of the Lamanites (see Alma 22:7). When the Nephite missionaries began to have success in Lamanite territory, they “did establish a church among [the Lamanites]” and local priests were then activated (see Alma 19:35; compare Alma 23:16 and 21:1–6). (This relative lack of religious specialists is understandable since the Lamanites were clearly at a “lower level of sociopolitical integration,” as anthropologists say, than the Nephites. The former would be considered by scholars to have been organized only into “chiefdoms,”²⁰¹ as shown in Alma 20–22 and other places, but the Nephites were at times at an incipient “state” level, as shown in 3 Nephi 6:11.)

The functions of priests among the Nephites are nowhere spelled out in detail, but until the coming of Christ among them, “they observed to keep the law of Moses and the sabbath day holy unto the Lord. And they profaned not; neither did they blaspheme. And the laws of the land were exceedingly strict. . . . Wherefore, the prophets, and the priests, and the teachers, did labor diligently, exhorting with all long-suffering the people to diligence; teaching the law of Moses” (Jarom 1:5, 11). Their priests would, this shows, have followed generally the pattern of preexilic Jewish priests, paying considerable attention to setting dates for ceremonies by calendrical tracking, officiating in community-related rituals, and serving as custodians and watchdogs of the ethnic, mythic, and ideological tradition and of the ritual and moral purity of their people.

Among the Jews at the time of the Babylonian exile, “Jeremiah tells us that it is the peculiar function of the priests to handle the Torah,”²⁰² and we could assume that it would

be so among the Nephites, who derived from Jeremiah's Jerusalem. The determination of the date for the coronation of Mosiah₂, as told in Mosiah 1:10 would probably not have been done without their expert input, for example. The reckoning of time among the Nephites appears to have been specifically in charge of a religious officiant: "According to our record, and we know our record to be true, for behold, it was a just man who did keep the record—for he truly did many miracles . . . —if there was no mistake made by this man in the reckoning of our time, the thirty and third year had passed away. . . . In the thirty and fourth year, in the first month, on the fourth day of the month, there arose a great storm" (3 Nephi 8:1–2, 5). With this concern with chronology in the hands of religious personnel, it must be assumed that astronomical knowledge was also in their control. The few statements in the Book of Mormon relating to Nephite astronomy are all made in a religious/prophetic context and involved religious functionaries: Alma 30:44, the motion of the earth and "the planets"; Helaman 12:15, the sun moves around the earth; Helaman 14:20 and 3 Nephi 1:8, absence of light from the sun, moon, and stars as a prophetic sign; and Helaman 14:5 and 3 Nephi 1:21, a new star appears. No mention is made of astrological phenomena, but it would be no surprise if they were present among some groups connected with the Book of Mormon population, considering their Near Eastern background where astrology was routine.²⁰³

Prophets and prophecy were frequently noted among the Nephites (see, for example, Enos 1:22; Mosiah 2:34; Helaman 13:24; and 3 Nephi 6:25 and 7:14). False prophets were also a social fixture (see Words of Mormon 1:16; Helaman 13:26; 4 Nephi 1:34).

Ten times the office or function of "seer" is mentioned directly, and the activity as such appears at other times (see,

for example, Mosiah 8:13–17). Of special concern was the device called the “interpreters,” which originated with the brother of Jared (see Ether 3), then eventually came into the hands of King Mosiah₂ by unspecified channels. It consisted of stones “wherewith that he can look. . . . And whosoever is commanded to look in them, the same is called seer” (Mosiah 8:13). How Mesoamerican mirror- and stone-gazing might have related to similar practices reported among the Israelites (compare “the Urim and Thummim”), Jaredites (“interpreters”), and Nephites is not clear but deserves consideration.

One particular divinatory function among the Nephites was related to war. Just as Mesoamerican priests sometimes served as guides in planning and conducting war, so did Alma₂. “He that had been appointed chief captain over the armies of the Nephites . . . knowing that Alma . . . had the spirit of prophecy, therefore [the chief captain and his sons] went unto him . . . to know whither the Lord would that they should go . . . in search of their brethren, who had been taken captive by the Lamanites” (Alma 16:5). Alma₂ “inquired of the Lord” and then gave the military folks detailed instructions about the spot to which they needed to proceed (see Alma 16:5–6). The setting of the appointment for the final Nephite-Lamanite battle at the hill Cumorah might well have been done according to astronomical or calendrical omens (see Mormon 6:2–6).²⁰⁴ Other instances, even less explicit but of the same tenor, could be cited.

Finally, it should be noted that certain priests among the Nephites either held political power themselves or were closely allied with rulers; that is, they were part of the elite (see Mosiah 17:6; 29:42; Alma 14:18; 30:29; 4 Nephi 1:34). The king’s court at the time of Mosiah₂ had a corps of priests around the monarch who seem to have had no connection to the “church” (see Mosiah 27:1). Sometimes the rulers as

such were also religious leaders, as in Jarom 1:7; Words of Mormon 1:17; and Alma 4:16–17 and 35:5 (compare Alma 50:39).

Mesoamerican History and the Calendar

In Yucatan the basic Maya “year” for religious purposes was the *tun* of 360 days. Twenty *tuns* made a *katun*, that is, 7200 days or nearly twenty of our years. Each *katun* was identified by the name of the day that began it; for example, the *katun* 11 Ahau had its start on the day named 11 Ahau. The way the complex calendar system(s) worked, *katun* 11 Ahau would be followed twenty years later by *katun* 9 Ahau. It would be 256 years before the day 11 Ahau would again begin a *katun*.

The Maya, as well as other Mesoamerican groups, held a profound faith that each period of time would see essentially a reenactment of what had gone on the last time that calendar label was in use. Priests were expected to consult the sacred astrological books and announce in advance what calendrical fate had decreed for the next 20-year or 256-year cycle. Predictions for a *katun* were customarily drawn up five years before its beginning and were announced at the inauguration of the Jaguar (Balam), ruling lord/priest for that *katun*. It was also his duty, or that of his spokesman (the Chilam) to write the history of the *katun* five years after leaving office, as a basis for future prophecy.²⁰⁵ Details of this mode of thinking and ritual for other Mesoamerican areas are not so clearly known, but the sense of a strong fate tied to the calendar was probably universal, although it was not manifested everywhere in the same form or to the same degree.²⁰⁶

Puleston, Edmonson, and other Mayanists consider that Maya peoples’ minds supposed that the fate prophesied was

so inexorable that they acted as though all that could be done was to bow their heads and accept what had been announced. This literally made for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Edmonson suggests that the actual pattern of Maya history that can be detected in the written records and archaeological remains strongly suggests that major changes really did take place at “the turning of the *may*” (the time when the beginning date 8 Ahau came around). He suggests how this recurring anniversary might have marked actual, important points in Maya history.²⁰⁷

We know details about a dramatic instance of the power of this sense of prophecy and fate. The Spaniards conquered northern Yucatan in three phases between 1527 and 1546. But a defiant group, the Itza Mayas, maintained an anti-Spanish, anti-Christian center deep in the jungle to the south at Tayasal among the great ruined cities of the Peten region. When Cortez first tried to deal with them (in 1539), they rejected him as premature, according to their calendrical expectations. Another attempt at conquest in 1618 they successfully repelled. But in 1697 when *katun* 8 Ahau approached, the Itzas concluded that the time for change was propitious, and they sent a messenger to Mérida to ask the Spanish governor to send Catholic priests to convert them when the critical day arrived. “Obliging with their usual obtuse alacrity,” as Edmonson puts it, a Spanish armed force arrived with the priests some days before 8 Ahau began; the Itza were confused that the Spanish did not understand the cultural rules that were so apparent to them; consequently, they fled into the forests. But on the “correct” day, true to the *katun* cycle prophecy as they interpreted it, the Itzas did submit.²⁰⁸

Other Mesoamerican groups were not quite as calendar-beholden as the Maya. The view of the Mexica or Aztecs was closer to the Mesoamerican norm: “Among attitudes,

fate was prominent, but humanity was not left in despair. Through dedicated and active participation in rituals and careful attention to astrology and divination, any Mexica could help mold fate. In the large-scale ceremonies, it was critical that the Mexica perform penances and other acts of devotion properly and sincerely. . . . In individualized rites involving the interpretation of one's astrology or other forms of divination, the Mexica attempted not only to discover fate but also perhaps to manipulate it."²⁰⁹

Despite the existence of the calendar-based format, this does not mean that other styles of presentation of history and prophecy were not also present. There were multiple formats, as noted above in the section on the kinds of books.

Nephite History and the Calendar

The Nephites manifested continuing concern with the repetitiveness of history and prophecy. The record as we have it starts out with emphasis on the prophesied doom of Jerusalem and the Jews, and with Lehi₁'s and Nephi₁'s concern to avoid a similar fate for their own group. The first historical substance of 1 Nephi has Lehi₁ learning, from a heavenly book that was shown to him in revelation, that Jerusalem "should be destroyed, and the inhabitants thereof" (1 Nephi 1:11–13). A leading motif in the whole history of Lehi₁'s people is established when Nephi₁ believes his father's revelation, but brothers Laman₁ and Lemuel do not "believe that Jerusalem, that great city, could be destroyed according to the words of the prophets. And they were like unto the Jews who were at Jerusalem" (1 Nephi 2:13; see also 1 Nephi 2:12, 16). Again and again the Nephites were "destroyed" in part, only to be saved in the nick of time by a measure of repentance and divine mercy. A dramatic counterinstance is told with some relish by Mormon₂.²¹⁰ He tells how the Nephites in the

land of Ammonihah echoed back to Alma₂ nearly the same fateful words as the Jews at Jerusalem when Lehi₁ warned them: “We will not believe thy words if thou shouldst prophesy that this great city should be destroyed in one day.” Alma₂’s pointed response was, “Do ye not remember that our father, Lehi, was brought out of Jerusalem by the hand of God?” (Alma 9:4, 9). Then shortly afterward, “every living soul of the Ammonihahites was destroyed, and also their great city, which they said God could not destroy, because of its greatness. But behold, in one day it was left desolate” (Alma 16:9–10).

The Nephites’ deep concern with prophetic history linked with the sacred records is dramatized best on the occasion of the birth of Jesus Christ. Samuel, the Lamanite prophet, had prophesied the rise of a number of precursor conditions and then a specific day when the birth would occur. “In the commencement of the ninety and second year, behold, the prophecies of the prophets began to be fulfilled more fully; for there began to be greater signs and greater miracles wrought among the people. But there were some who began to say that time was past for the words to be fulfilled, which were spoken by Samuel, the Lamanite. And they began to rejoice over their brethren, saying: Behold the time is past, and the words of Samuel are not fulfilled” (3 Nephi 1:4–6). Then “there was a day set apart by the unbelievers, that all those who believed in those traditions should be put to death except the sign should come to pass, which had been given by Samuel the prophet” (3 Nephi 1:9). That very day, the Nephite record states, the predicted sign (a night without darkness) came to pass. Calendrical fulfillment of prophecy was clearly of major importance in the Nephites’ sacred records.

Finally, despite prophetic warnings in abundance about where their rebellion against God was taking them, in the late fourth century A.D., prophesied destruction caught up

with them, and they reached a point of no return: "From this time forth did the Nephites gain no power over the Lamanites, but began to be swept off by them even as a dew before the sun" (Mormon 4:18). In order that his ultimate readers might not miss the lesson so plainly laid out in the record of his own people, Moroni₂, the last writer, tacked on the history of the Jaredites, "those ancient inhabitants who were [similarly] destroyed by the hand of the Lord" (Ether 1:1).

While the language of the prophecies in the Book of Mormon is often conditional, from the beginning their "future history" bore a sense of inevitability. First Nephi 12:19, for instance, is definite about the destruction at the crucifixion and the final demise of the Nephites. Alma₂ prophesied of the Nephite fate in unconditional terms ("this prophecy shall be fulfilled" [Alma 45:10–14]). Furthermore, he said that "in four hundred years from the time that Jesus Christ shall manifest himself unto them, [the Nephites] shall dwindle in unbelief," "the people of Nephi shall become extinct," and "the fourth generation shall not all pass away before this great iniquity shall come" (Alma 45:10–12). Samuel the Lamanite was equally definite about chronology: "four hundred years pass not away save the sword of justice falleth upon this people," despite a final pleading, "if ye will repent . . . I will turn away mine anger, saith the Lord" (Helaman 13:5, 11; see also verses 8–11). Maya prophecy partakes of the same tone of decreed fate.

It may be of some interest also that certain turning points in the "Mayan" (it was in use by earlier peoples who were probably not Mayan speakers) calendar system, as noted by Edmonson, could relate to hinge events in Nephite history. Most notable of the cycle turnings is 590 B.C., which could correspond closely to the end of the Jaredites.²¹¹ Another "turning of the *may*" fell at 77 B.C., near the time (we cannot correlate Nephite chronology to our own precisely) of

Amalickiah's seizing power over the Lamanites and his subsequent grand offensive, aimed to take control of the land northward. Considering the panicked response of the Lamanites upon Amalickiah's death at Teancum's hand on their New Year's Eve (see Alma 51:34–52:2), it is possible that their extreme reaction was triggered by the fact that that particular new year actually marked the 77 B.C. Maya/Lamanite "turning of the *may*," à la Edmonson, rather than being just a regular year change! (Amalickiah may have timed his offensive on the assumption that he could reach and capture his most crucial objective, the city Bountiful, precisely on the key date.) Still another pivotal date in the Nephite record is A.D. 175, roughly corresponding with the reemergence of the Lamanites as a people, as per 4 Nephi 1:2. That date is another 256-year time marker in the Maya calendar. While all these notions are speculative, given the correspondence we have seen in Nephite/Lamanite and Mesoamerican treatments of history and the calendar, at least the possibility is opened up of reexamining Book of Mormon chronology in terms of possible correlation with Mesoamerican calendrical calculations. Spackman's work on chronology has begun to do exactly that, but more needs to be done.²¹²

Summary

A detailed comparison has been made between the Book of Mormon, considered as an ancient American record, and the books and other records known from prehispanic Mesoamerica. This comparison has demonstrated that a substantial degree of similarity exists. In respect to form, content, social functions, materials, scribes and users, writing systems, and other features, the Book of Mormon fits in all general ways and in many detailed ways within the class of

records known from pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. The following table displays the most salient of the similarities.

<u>Book of Mormon</u>	<u>Mesoamerica</u>
Setting: The geographical, cultural, historical information in the text of this volume fits only in Mesoamerica.	This is the area of greatest civilizational complexity in the Americas; only here are there recognized scripts and written records.
Nephites, Jaredites had many books in more than one language, and in at least three scripts	Thousands of books are reported in many languages, and in many scripts
Written records in use for millennia earliest writing already sophisticated	Written records in use for millennia earliest writing already sophisticated
Restricted use of documents; literacy limited, orality primary	Restricted use of documents; literacy limited, orality primary
Kinds or uses of records: annals of events by year contemporary events record letters political histories wars, battles, victories recorded history of sacred matters, rites calendar, year counts prophecies lives of rulers adventures of heroes genealogies about ceremonial occasions tribute lists	Kinds or uses of records: annals of events by year contemporary events record letters political histories wars, battles, victories recorded history of sacred matters, rites calendar, year counts prophecies lives of rulers adventures of heroes genealogies about ceremonial occasions tribute lists

Book of Mormon

Forms of documents:
books on perishable
material
records on metal sheets
(not the norm)

characters likely in
vertical columns
(limited information)
records on stone
presence of cylinder
seals plausible from
cultural background

Lineage histories:
all groups had, written
or oral
histories did not agree
specialists kept the
records
esoteric, needed
interpreting
origin story, key to
social order
rulers' genealogy
validator of right to rule
ceremonial display,
reading
migration history to
predestined
homeland
nonterritorial accounts
ruler's title from name
of early ruler
sacred artifacts with
record
incorporate sacred
myths
foretell the future

Mesoamerica

Forms of documents:
books on perishable
material
records on hammered
metal sheets (limited
evidence for)
characters often in
vertical columns

records on stone
presence of cylinder
seals

Lineage histories:
all groups had, written
or oral
histories did not agree
specialists kept the
records
esoteric, needed
interpreting
origin story, key to
social order
rulers' genealogy
validator of right to rule
ceremonial display,
reading
migration history to
predestined
homeland
nonterritorial accounts
ruler's title from name
of early ruler
sacred artifacts with
record
incorporate sacred
myths
foretell the future

Book of Mormon

Ethnocentric, political bias:
slanted reporting of
events
"propaganda" in "his-
tory"
justifies own group and
its values
attempt to destroy rival
records

Obscure language:
metaphors
complex concepts,
context needed to
interpret
ambiguity of script
deep learning time
parallelistic literary
style
chiasmus

Writing systems:
"reformed Egyptian"
system

Egyptian characters

logographs
(sign=concept)
"reformed" according to
speech sounds

names and words could
be spelled out
used by speakers of
different languages
scripts became extinct
alphabetic Hebrew
known

Mesoamerica

Ethnocentric, political bias:
slanted reporting of
events
"propaganda" in "his-
tory"
justifies own group and
its values
destruction of rival
records

Obscure language:
metaphors
complex concepts,
context needed to
interpret
ambiguity of script
deep learning time
parallelistic literary
style
chiasmus

Writing systems:
glyphic system similar
in structure to
Egyptian
isolated finds of
Egyptian characters,
cultural parallels
logographs important

"reformatted" according
to speech sounds

names and words could
be spelled out
used by speakers of
different languages
scripts became extinct
possible alphabetic
signs

<u>Book of Mormon</u>	<u>Mesoamerica</u>
Religious functionaries and records: mainly kept and used by priests multi-level, coordinated record-using priesthood prophets and records seers and their devices “false prophets”	Religious functionaries and records: mainly kept and used by priests multi-level, coordinated record-using priesthood prophets and records seers and their devices “false prophets”
Calendrical format for history: prophecy for set periods events at specified dates sense of inevitability	Calendrical format for history: prophecy for set periods events at specified dates sense of inevitability

Similarities between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican Records

As mentioned earlier, my paper “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex” constitutes a treatment of the contents of the scripture—symbolic, ritual, social, artistic, and historical motifs and other cultural patterns—“which could be found without surprise in a translated Mesoamerican document of codex form.”²¹³ Those materials supplement the parallels treated in the twelve categories listed above. Moreover, I have presented in another paper many cultural parallels between Mesoamerica and the Near East that further flesh out a picture of apparent ancient relations between the two areas.²¹⁴

Not surprisingly, the Book of Mormon is also dissimilar in some ways, just as no Mesoamerican codex is like others of the class in all features, although their “family resemblance” is generally obvious. Similarly, the Jewish Torah is

like other ancient Near Eastern records in many ways while unique in certain features.

Conclusion

More than sixty general and specific ways have been presented that show that the Book of Mormon aligns with much of what is known about Mesoamerican records, documents, or books. Significant, supplementary cultural parallels have also been pointed out. It is legitimate to ask the question, Could this degree of similarity be found between the Book of Mormon or Mesoamerican records on one hand and those of some other area of the world on the other? While I have not made a systematic comparison with, say, Southeast Asian books, cursory consideration indicates fewer and vaguer similarities. It appears to me that the parallels considered above cannot be considered fortuitous but are very significant and indicative of a genetic or historical connection between Mormon's document and Mesoamerican records. Furthermore, it is totally implausible that such an array of similarities could have been produced by poorly educated Joseph Smith Jr. Significant information on most of the points discussed above had not been discovered or was inaccessible to him or any other American in 1829, so the Mesoamerican-like features of and in the Book of Mormon could not be due to any early-nineteenth-century author. Nor is it plausible that such a set of Mesoamerican features could have been produced as fiction by a Smith or any American creative writer of his era.

In light of the facts presented here, the only sensible explanation for the Mesoamerican cultural form and content shown in and by the Book of Mormon is that it was a

translation from a Mesoamerican document, that is, in general terms, a codex or native book.

An Epilogue for Mesoamericanists

To assert that the Book of Mormon derived from a Mesoamerican document is to challenge scholarly orthodoxy about both Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon. Experts on Mesoamerica suppose there will not be major new discoveries of documents for their use but only increments in knowledge from piecemeal archaeological interpretation, gradual epigraphic decipherment, and patient investigation of Spanish archival documents. They are little prepared to deal with the considerable cultural information offered in the Book of Mormon because it yields data that they believe to be contrary to what they “know.” So many have so often rejected the Book of Mormon as an authentic historical record that they are not likely to welcome what this paper has to say about the antiquity of its source. Besides, it is a “religious” book, which makes secular scholars nervous a priori. (Of course, virtually every document from or about Mesoamerican cultures dating before 1900 that is of substantial value is “religious” in some sense, “native” or Catholic.)

In contrast, some respected researchers on the history of religion including Christianity have come around to seeing the Book of Mormon as a source with which they need to deal seriously. The noted specialist on Old World Pseudepigrapha, James H. Charlesworth, was drawn to look at the Book of Mormon because “there are many . . . important parallels between the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon that deserve careful examination.”²¹⁵ Krister Stendahl, then dean of Harvard Divinity School, added, “I have applied standard methods of historical criticism, redaction criticism, and genre criticism [to the Book of Mormon]. From such

perspectives it seems very clear that the Book of Mormon belongs to and shows many of the typical signs of the Targums and the pseudepigraphic recasting of biblical material. . . . It is obvious to me that the Book of Mormon stands within both of these traditions if considered as a phenomenon of religious texts."²¹⁶ How long must we wait for the chauvinism of "neutral scholarship" to abate in Mesoamerican studies so that someone in that field has the courage to manifest similar concern with the Book of Mormon?

Parallel situations in Mesoamerican scholarship may provide valuable perspective. The lessons they convey can give logical and methodological guidance in dealing with the appropriate exploitation of this "new" source.

The *Popol Vuh* is a quintessentially religious volume. Probably no "facts" in it are unaccompanied or uncolored by Quiché beliefs about the supernatural. Its text is arcane. Its theology and mythology are weird to most moderns. Yet dozens of different translations have been made of it by scholars in an attempt to clarify its content and make it accessible. Its text is combed assiduously and cited repeatedly by any scholar who seriously wishes to contribute to understanding Mesoamerican civilization. How it is to be related to culture historical research has never been very clear. Robert Carmack attempted to relate its "Toltecs" to the highland Guatemalan archaeological setting, but his results were indeterminate.²¹⁷ He found evidence from linguistic examination of the text that "small numbers of the Toltec ancestors must have [entered the area and] come in contact with large, autochthonous, well-established populations." But thereafter the culture and genes of the intruders, as well as their language, "were apparently absorbed by the . . . much more numerous indigenous populations."²¹⁸ Because this "Book of Counsel" of the ancient Quiché was the product of an elite minority, an enclave within a larger people, only a

handful of specifically “Toltec” features it mentions have been found in the area’s archaeology or language—so far. “Many . . . features which would be expected as a result of [the presence of the immigrant party] . . . are lacking,”²¹⁹ so that what might be called “the archaeology of the *Popol Vuh*” is of limited scope or value. (Mormon readers may be forgiven a special moment of *déjà vu* at this point.) The cultural and historical situation behind the *Popol Vuh* is obviously not simple, yet the source remains indispensable for scholars. And researchers have been able to deal with the volume without feeling threatened about being converted to Quiché religion.

Another perspective comes from the situation presented not by an accepted text but by one whose authenticity has been called into question, like the Nephite book. Michael D. Coe, in his book *Breaking the Maya Code*, tells of a dispute that arose in 1971 over a purported Mesoamerican book, a newly discovered codex. He was a principal protagonist in the fight, arguing for the authenticity of the document.²²⁰ The circumstances of the codex’s discovery were mysterious; it was claimed to stem from unauthorized “archaeology” in southern Mexico (most archaeologists would call it looting).²²¹ Eventually labeled the “Grolier Codex, the document came to public attention under conditions that led conventional Mesoamericanists to label it a fake, without giving it much, if any, scrutiny. Coe took up the cudgels for it. His favorite villain and longtime friend, famed Mayanist Sir J. E. S. Thompson, played the role of key antagonist.

In *Breaking the Maya Code*, Coe describes how Thompson earlier had “hammered away” at Yuri Knorosov, the Soviet linguist to whom much of the credit eventually has gone for launching the successful decipherment of the Maya hieroglyphics. Knorosov had had the audacity to offer a theory about the glyphs in opposition to Thompson’s reigning view-

point; Thompson considered the Knorosov position completely mistaken and responded with “a contemptuous review,” as Coe terms it, labeling the Russian’s work “a Marxist hoax.” Thompson’s stance toward the new codex might be paraphrased as something like, “The Maya canon of books is already full. A codex? A codex? We already have three codices!”²²² He reviewed Coe’s publication of the Grolier document, writing in his typical slashing style. Coe says of that review that Thompson “ignor[ed] the main argument while concentrating on some detail where he thought the chances of a quick kill were best.”²²³ With justified satisfaction Coe tells the story of the codex’s subsequent vindication. The Grolier Codex is now generally acknowledged to be authentic, based on the characteristics of the document itself rather than on its unorthodox discovery. Coe comments on “the irony of the whole business” of the Grolier Codex.²²⁴ Had it had a less-prejudiced origin, he says, had it been found “while rummaging around in archives during the mid-nineteenth century, it would [have been] accepted by even the most rock-ribbed scholar as the genuine article.”²²⁵

It seems only fair to point out the irony in Coe’s treatment of the Book of Mormon. In an article in 1973, Coe discussed some of the history of Latter-day Saint concerns with “Book of Mormon archaeology” in a fairly well-informed, nonhostile manner; he had done a respectable amount of homework on that history in preparing his piece.²²⁶ He thought nothing written under that heading was worthwhile, and he peremptorily ruled Mormon₂’s scripture out of scientific court. No serious Mesoamericanist could take seriously such a bit of nineteenth-century folly, he courteously but firmly insisted. Yet nowhere in his discussion did he show that he had more than superficially studied the text of the Book of Mormon as a possible ancient document. The irony is heavy, because Coe did with the Book of Mormon

exactly what Thompson did with the Grolier Codex. Both men responded by reflex on the basis of opinions each had long since fixed in intellectual concrete of his own mix. In his 1973 article, Coe dismissed Joseph Smith's "outrageous claims," what Coe deemed "all the . . . nonsense generated by a nineteenth-century American subculture [i.e., Mormonism] intellectually grounded in white supremacy and proexpansionist tendencies."²²⁷ This is just as arrogant, mistaken, and irrelevant in judging the text as was Thompson's use of the "Marxist" brush to smear Knorosov's scholarship. By using epithets, each tried for a cheap dismissal of the case, thus avoiding the drudgery of doing that serious, unprejudiced, scholarly investigation that ought to precede a judgment about the authenticity of any potentially ancient text. Thompson found enough "nonsense" to disqualify the Grolier Codex without giving it the examination it deserved; Coe dismissed the Book of Mormon without studying it more than casually—six of one and half a dozen of the other.

More recently, a newly discovered stela from La Mojarra, Veracruz, has been labeled a fake by a Mexican archaeologist. John S. Justeson, who is confident it is not fraudulent, asks, "Who could have faked it? At the time that the monument was discovered, no one had all the linguistic and cultural knowledge needed to produce such a text."²²⁸ That issue—Who could have faked it?—is considered key to establishing the monument's authenticity. We ask precisely the same question about the Book of Mormon.

Is there hope that, in light of the comparisons made in the present work, professionals who have prejudged the Book of Mormon might look at it anew? Might they adopt the persona of the serious scholar long enough to examine the Nephite record as possibly stemming from a fourth-century Mesoamerican source? Or will they continue to assume that the Book of Mormon can only be a nineteenth-century

fraud that, in some inexplicable manner, issued from the hands of a barely literate frontier youth? Mesoamericanists, non-Mormon or Mormon, would uphold the ideals of scholarship better if they would follow Charlesworth's and Stendahl's example and get on with the job. Although puzzled by what they discovered inside the Book of Mormon, they might conclude that secular scholars have already lost too much for too long by excluding Mormon's pseudepigraphical codex from the field of Mesoamerican studies. It would be the responsible course for them to undertake careful scholarship on it regardless of any discomfort they may feel personally about how the New York farm boy brought the volume to light or about the church he founded.

Notes

1. The most ambitious attempt is Dan Vogel's *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986); the long, cautionary review of Vogel's book by Kevin Christensen in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 2* (1990): 214–57 points out some of the problems with Vogel's book, but much could be added about the book's selectivity and oversimplification in regard to the nineteenth-century intellectual picture. There were a score of competing answers being put forward at that time to the question, From where did the American Indians originate? Most of Vogel's attention goes to general notions about "Jews" and "the Ten Tribes," but they were just part of a cacophony of opinion. If Joseph Smith were so environmentally influenced as some claim, why would he reject them all, including the ten tribes view, and come forward with a new theory only superficially like any of the others?

2. This development is treated in John L. Sorenson, "Part 1. A History of Ideas: The Geography of Book of Mormon Events in Latter-day Saint Thought," in *The Geography of Book of Mormon*

Events: A Source Book, rev. ed. (Provo: FARMS, 1992), 5–35. See also Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985); Sorenson, “Digging into the Book of Mormon: Our Changing Understanding of Ancient America and Its Scripture,” *Ensign* (September 1984): 30 nn. 6, 8; and David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico*, rev. ed. (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1992).

3. Vernal Holley, *Book of Mormon Authorship: A Closer Look* (Ogden, Utah: Zenos Publications, 1983). See the review by L. Ara Norwood in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 80–8. Holley’s fantastic search for (modern) place-names that vaguely parallel Book of Mormon names is spread from Michigan to Pennsylvania, from Ohio to Ontario, only a tiny portion of which Joseph knew by 1829. And is it reasonable for a man living in upper New York State who is supposedly drawing upon his own experience of the physical environment to produce a book that fails to mention “cold,” “snow,” or “ice” in the climate of the “promised land,” or for him to write of oppressive heat at New Year’s (see Alma 51:33 and 52:1)?

4. The point is well illustrated by a letter from W. W. Phelps to Oliver Cowdery (two of the more literate disciples of the time) published in *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate* 2 (October 1835): 193, as cited by Grant Underwood in “Book of Mormon Usage in Early LDS Theology,” *Dialogue* 17/3 (1984): 45. The letter says, “The parts of the globe that are known [today] probably contain 700 millions of inhabitants, and those parts which are unknown may be supposed to contain more than four times as many more. . . . There may be a continent at the North Pole, of more than 1300 square miles, containing thousands of millions of Israelites.”

5. Most are printed in Sorenson, *A Source Book*, appendix A.

6. See Underwood, “Usage,” 52–60.

7. In 1890 President George Q. Cannon lamented that “No two of them [students of Book of Mormon geography], so far as we have learned, are agreed on all points, and in many cases the . . .

differences of views lead to discussion, contention and perplexity." The matter could not be settled without further revelation, he maintained ("Editorial Thoughts," *Juvenile Instructor* [1 January 1890]: 18).

8. For instance, in the early citations of the Book of Mormon analyzed by Underwood ("Usage," 40–1), explanations of "archaeological findings" were keyed to specific passages, such as Alma 48:7–8.

9. The generally low level of public information and chaotic jumble of "fact" on "pre-Indian" settlers of America that prevailed in Joseph Smith's day is illustrated by Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West . . .* (Albany: Hoffman and White, 1833). In this credulous mishmash of opinions and excerpts from many books, mainly about eastern North America, he believes that "not only Asiatic nations, very soon after the flood," but also "Polynesians, Malays, Australasians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Israelites, Tartars, Scandinavians, Danes, Norwegians, Welch, and Scotch, have colonized different parts of the continent" (p. iv). "All the principles of the stoic school of the Greeks are found in the practice of the American savages" (p. 386). Priest cites Humboldt in curious ways. Page 246 reproduces a drawing of the Aztec calendar stone from him, and he is the cited source for Priest's supposition that Quetzalcoatl, far from being identified with Jesus Christ, was a Buddhist or Brahman missionary from India (p. 206), yet contradictorily, he also thinks that this "white and bearded man" came from some island in the Pacific "on the northeast of Asia" whose inhabitants were more civilized than the Chinese (p. 208). Clavigero is the source for his notion that the Aztecs came from the China coast by sea near the Bering Strait, then on to Mexico (p. 272). Christian symbolism arrived via Asiatic Nestorian Christians who crossed to America in Mongol ships. The ten tribes reached America by ships via Norway, having amalgamated with the Scythians (=Tartars), hence the "Jewish" parallels evident among the Indians.

Incidentally, Dr. Samuel L. Mitchell, no doubt the same person who was seen by Martin Harris, is one of the "antiquarians" whose

opinions are summarized regarding the origin of the Indians; in Mitchell's view they included Malay, Tartar, and Scandinavian transoceanic voyagers. Also, see a piece in the *Portsmouth Journal* (New Hampshire) for 1 November 1834, that reported, obviously on the basis of some urban newspaper, the vague information that expeditions into Mexican back country in 1786, 1805, and 1807 had produced drawings and detailed descriptions of ancient monuments; however, these had remained in the portfolios of the Mexican Museum until 1828, when "M. Abbebaradere, a French savant," became possessor of them. He planned to publish them in Paris. The discoveries included "ancient idols of granite, . . . pyramids, subterranean sepulchres, . . . colossal bas-reliefs sculptured in granite or modeled in stucco, zodiacs, hieroglyphics differing from those of Egypt," and so on. But no such publication was ever issued, nor was there any equivalent volume until Stephens's. Clavigero's volume on Mexico appeared in an English edition in 1817 in Philadelphia, but it was mainly a description of the Aztecs that gave little ancient historical information. Humboldt's English edition of *Vues des cordillères* came out in London in 1814, but neither could it have informed Smith about more than snatches of fact on Mesoamerican civilization. The 1833 volume by Priest, who had vastly better library resources and scholarly skills than Smith, does not cite either Clavigero or Humboldt.

10. Pratt, *Millennial Star* 11/8 (15 April 1849): 116.

11. Victor Wolfgang Von Hagen, *Maya Explorer: The Life of John Lloyd Stephens* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1948), 75. Also on the novelty of Stephens's explorations, see his own book, *Incidents of Travel in Central American Chiapas* (New York: Dover, 1969), 1:98–9: "The first new light thrown upon this subject as regards Mexico was by the great Humboldt. . . . Unfortunately, of the great cities beyond the Vale of Mexico, buried in forests, ruined, desolate, and without a name, Humboldt never heard. . . . It is but lately that accounts of [even] their existence reached Europe and our own country."

It is interesting also that Stephens had studied at Columbia College (later, Columbia University) under Professor Charles Anthon, "America's most famous classicist." Stephens graduated

from Columbia in 1822 at age seventeen, being the same age as Joseph Smith Jr. Anthon was only eight years older.

12. See *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (15 September 1842): 921–2. The impact of the book on their thinking was dramatic. A passage from those pages reads: “From an extract from Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, it will be seen that the proof of the Nephites and Lamanites dwelling on this continent, according to the account in the Book of Mormon, is developing itself in a more satisfactory way than the most sanguine believer in that revelation, could have anticipated.” The October 1st issue shows even more how the new information stimulated study of the Book of Mormon along new lines: “Since our ‘Extract’ was published from Mr. Stephens’ [book two weeks earlier], we have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon.” Their new “important fact” was that “Central America, or Guatemala [sic]” was where “the city of Zarahemla . . . stood” (*Times and Seasons* 3/23 [1 October 1842]: 927). Incidentally, until 1824, Chiapas was part of Guatemala, and most maps continued to show it so for years afterward.

13. Lynn C. Layton, “An ‘Ideal’ Book of Mormon Geography,” *Improvement Era* 41 (July 1938): 394–5, 439.

14. John A. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” *Improvement Era* 53 (July 1950): 547. For a history of this whole topic, see Sorenson, “A History of Ideas,” *Source Book*, 10–35; see also *Source Book*, appendix A, especially the statement authored by George Q. Cannon (pp. 384–6).

15. See especially Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, chap. 1; references in footnote 2 above; and Sorenson, “Part 8. A Trial Map Incorporating the Criteria from the Text,” *Source Book*, 365.

16. See, for example, Thomas S. Barthel, “Writing Systems,” in *Native Languages of the Americas*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York: Plenum Press, 1977), 2:27; or Miguel León-Portilla, “Pre-Hispanic Literature,” in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1*, vol. 10 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 452–8.

17. Victoria de la Jara has made the strongest case that writing

(actually two systems) was in use in Peru, but her view has not been accepted by most Peruvianists, perhaps because her interesting evidence is little known, having appeared in an obscure publication. (See "La découverte de l'écriture péruvienne" and "Le déchiffrement de l'écriture inca," *Archeologia* 62 [Dijon, France: September 1973]: 9–15, 16–25). In any case, there is no evidence of books having existed in Peru.

18. Michael D. Coe, *The Maya Scribe and His World* (New York: Grolier Club, 1973), 8.

19. See Barthel, "Writing Systems," 32.

20. See Coe, "Early Steps in the Evolution of Maya Writing," in *Origins of Religious Art and Iconography in Preclassic Mesoamerica*, ed. Henry B. Nicholson (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center and Ethnic Arts Council of Los Angeles, 1976), 107–22, 110, wherein Coe identifies thirteen writing systems, but his list is not complete (see below).

21. See Carleton T. Hodge, "Ritual and Writing: An Inquiry into the Origin of Egyptian Script," in *Linguistics and Anthropology: In Honor of C. F. Voegelin*, ed. M. Dale Kinkade, et al. (Lisse, Belgium: Peter de Ridder Press, 1975), 333–4, 344. Compare Ralph L. Roys, *Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution of Washington, 1933), 3–5. For example, in colonial Mexico, the Spaniards considered "anything written in hieroglyphics" to be "prima facie evidence of the crime of idolatry" (p. 5).

22. See, for example, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, "The Consequences of Literacy," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304–45, and Deborah Tannen, "Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Narratives," *Language* 58/1 (1982): 1–21.

23. See Eggington, "'Our Weakness in Writing': Oral and Literate Culture in the Book of Mormon" (Provo: FARMS, 1992).

24. George C. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1950), 202–3, citing Chimalpahin, *Anales* (1889), vii–viii.

25. Frances F. Berdan, *The Aztecs of Central Mexico: An Imperial Society* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982), 158.

26. Alfred Marston Tozzer, ed., "Landa's *Relacion de las cosas de Yucatan: A Translation*," Harvard University Peabody Museum of American Archaeology and Ethnology Papers no. 18 (1941), 28.

27. Roys, *Chumayel*, 3, 5.

28. Part II of the Codex Mendoza, for example, is a copy of a pre-Spanish document known as the "Tribute Roll of Moctezuma." It was written on maguey (cactus) paper and lists, in glyphic form, the nature and amounts of tribute payments in goods made to the last independent ruler of Mexico by over four hundred towns (see *Codex Mendoza: Aztec Manuscript, Commentaries by Kurt Ross* [Fribourg, Germany: Miller Graphics, 1978]).

29. Roys, *Chumayel*, 5.

30. Munro S. Edmonson, "Some Postclassic Questions about the Classic Maya," *Estudios de Cultura Maya* 12 (1979): 166

31. Gordon Brotherston, "A Key to the Mesoamerican Reckoning of Time: The Chronology Recorded in Native Texts," British Museum Occasional Paper no. 38 (1982), 2.

32. See Coe, *Maya Scribe*, 22; see also Coe, "Ancient Maya Writing and Calligraphy," *Visible Language* 5/4 (1971): 292–307.

33. Coe, *Maya Scribe*, 8; see also David H. Kelley, "Astronomical Identities of Mesoamerican Gods," *Archaeoastronomy* (supplement to *Journal for the History of Astronomy*) 11/2 (1980): S52–S54. In *Ancient American Setting*, I compared that religion, in general terms, to the Baalism of Canaan and Israel (pp. 216–9).

34. See Pierre Agrinier, "Mounds 9 and 10 at Mirador, Chiapas, Mexico," Brigham Young University New World Archaeological Foundation Papers no. 39 (1975), 99–100. See also the discussion of that material in Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 340–2.

35. See Welch, "Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13" (Provo: FARMS, 1987), summarized in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1992), 230–2.

36. All battle references are listed in "Annals of the Nephite Wars," appendix to Sorenson, "Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 462–74.

37. David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 25–7.

38. See John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech in the Context of Ancient Israelite Festivals” (Provo: FARMS, 1985); and John A. Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin and the Feast of Tabernacles,” *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 2:197–237.

39. Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Primary Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates” (Provo: FARMS, 1993), iii; see also pp. 6–33.

40. See Edmonson, “Some Postclassic Questions,” 157–78.

41. Munro S. Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), xi–xii.

42. Edmonson, “Some Postclassic Questions,” Table 1, and Dennis E. Puleston, “An Epistemological Pathology and the Collapse, or Why the Maya Kept the Short Count,” in *Maya Archaeology and Ethnohistory*, ed. Norman Hammond and Gordon R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979), 64.

43. Robert F. Smith has offered provocative conjectures on this subject on an unpublished chart, “Research Outline of Book of Mormon Chronology,” 5th draft (1984). Smith notes the concern of Hebrew chronologists and prophets with specific prophetic times (see Gerhard Larsson, *The Secret System: A Study in the Chronology of the Old Testament* [Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1973], 41–3, 53–4) similar in concept with the Akkadians, Hindus, and Mesoamericans. Of course, many people have noted the coincidence of the Maya era, which was measured from 3114 B.C., with dates very near that for era markers in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. Smith notes the following possible intervals, based on a chronology of Book of Mormon events he had worked out:

From the “Great Tower” (in Mesopotamia, ca. 3140 B.C.) to Moroni₂’s termination of his record (Moroni 10:1) encompasses 3600 *tuns* or 9 *baktuns*, which equal 72 Israelite fifty-year jubilee

periods. From the Jaredite arrival to their destruction was 2600 *tuns* (=52 jubilees). From Lehi's departure from Jerusalem to the nativity of Jesus, 600 *tuns* (=12 jubilees). From the birth of Jesus to the destruction at Cumorah, 400 *tuns* or 1 *baktun* (=8 jubilees).

44. A classic paper by Paul Tolstoy, "Cultural Parallels between Southeast Asia and Mesoamerica in the Manufacture of Bark Cloth," *Transactions of the New York Academy of Sciences* no. 25 (1963), 646–62, not only describes the industry in Mesoamerica, but also demonstrates conclusively that the whole complex of tools and techniques involved must have reached the New World from Southeast Asia.

45. See Michael D. Coe, *The Maya*, 4th ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1987), 128.

46. See Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee Jr., and Eduardo Martínez Espinosa, "Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments," *Brigham Young University New World Archaeological Foundation Papers* no. 31 (1982), 28; and Lowe, "The Mixe-Zoque as Competing Neighbors of the Early Lowland Maya," in *The Origins of Maya Civilization*, ed. Richard E. W. Adams (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977), 235–40.

47. Joyce Marcus, "The Origins of Mesoamerican Writing," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 39. Coe, "Early Steps," 113–5, shows early examples of both double- and single-column glyph sequences.

48. George F. Carter and Sol Heinemann recap the evidence for deriving American cylinder and stamp seals from Old World predecessors in "Pre-Columbian Sellos: Another Artifact Showing Possible Cultural Contact and Transpacific Diffusion," *Anthropological Journal of Canada* 15/3 (1977): 2–6. They claim that two forms of alphabetic writing can be seen in examples from Mesoamerica. Sir Leonard Woolley, the excavator of Ur in Mesopotamia, considered the cylinder seal to be "a peculiar type [of artifact] not likely to be invented independently in two different countries. . . . Paper-using people would never invent the cylinder seal"; hence Mesopotamia is the obvious origin point, for

their use there to mark wet clay makes sense (see Woolley, *Digging up the Past* [Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1937], 76). On the uncertain function of New World seals or stamps, there has been little progress made since Muriel Noé Porter's indeterminate guessing in "Tlatilco and the Pre-Classic Cultures of the New World," Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology no. 19 (New York: Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., 1953), 41–2, 76. See also Jorge Enciso, *Design Motifs of Ancient Mexico* (New York: Dover, 1953).

49. See Sorenson, "Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon Text" (Provo: FARMS, 1992), 56, under the index item "Metal, records written on." For the Old World, see the extensive discussion and bibliography in H. Curtis Wright, "Ancient Burials of Metal Documents in Stone Boxes," University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science Occasional Papers no. 157 (1982), 1–42, reprinted in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. Lundquist and Ricks, 2:273–334.

50. See "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology* (S.E.H.A.) 139 (December 1976): 1–9, reissued as a FARMS Reprint in 1976 and summarized in *Ancient American Setting*, 58–61.

51. The mention of (Alexander von) Humboldt probably refers to *Monumens Americaine* (two volumes, Paris, 1816), which was in Anthon's personal library, or perhaps to *Vues des cordillères, et monuments des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique* (Paris, 1810) or to the two-volume English translation of it published in London in 1814, both of which the college collection could have included. (Anthon listed part of his library in an 1845 work; see FARMS Staff, "Martin Harris' Visit with Charles Anthon: Collected Documents on 'Shorthand Egyptian'" (Provo: FARMS, 1990), 25. It would be far-fetched, however, to suppose that Joseph Smith or anybody else west of the Hudson had seen a copy of any of Humboldt's tomes by the time the Book of Mormon was translated. In any case, Humboldt showed only an "Aztec" document.

52. FARMS Staff, "Harris' Visit," 16–18, gives the full text and lists their publication history. See also B. H. Roberts, *Comprehen-*

sive History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1965), 1:100–8.

53. See Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 1:100–8.

54. Lyndon W. Cook, ed., *David Whitmer Interviews: A Restoration Witness* (Orem, Utah: Grandin Book, 1991), 198. The George Q. Cannon interview refers to the transcript seen in David Whitmer's possession as "seven lines, the first four being about twice as long in size as the three last" (*ibid.*, 107–8). The James H. Hart interview describes the transcript simply as "on unruled paper, about three and a half inches deep, by seven inches wide" (*ibid.*, 120).

55. See *ibid.*, 212–3, Edward Stevenson interview and in other interviews. Of course, Whitmer also insisted wrongly that the manuscript copy of the text of the Book of Mormon in his possession was "the original," when it was really the printer's copy.

56. *Ibid.*, 21. The P. Wilhelm Poulson interview reads: "I—How did the engravings look? He—They were characters. We copied some, and if you visit my brother John, . . . John can show you some of the old manuscript which he borrowed from me." There is no transition in this sentence indicating that he has switched reference to the printer's manuscript, and the care with which he guarded that big manuscript leads one to doubt that he would divide it up, even with his brother. The interviewer's record may be garbled, of course (Whitmer said it was about other matters [see *ibid.*, n. 4]), but one interpretation of these words could be that sheets are referred to that contained the copies of the engravings that he said "we" had made, that is, a different document than the one paper he claimed was given to Anthon. One transcript, but not the other, ended up in the historical archives of the RLDS Church.

57. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. revised (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1980), 1:19. Royal Skousen, in a presentation for the FARMS Book of Mormon Brown Bag Lecture Series on 21 June 1995, said that Joseph's first procedure in translating seems to have been to copy characters from the plates to paper, after which he wrote the

translation on those sheets, probably underneath the drawn characters, by means of the interpreters.

58. *Canandaigua* (New York) *Morning Courier and Enquirer* (1 September 1831), cited in Stanley B. Kimball, "The Anthon Transcript: People, Primary Sources, and Problems," *BYU Studies* 10/3 (1970): 343; see also Smith, *History of the Church*, 1:20.

59. *Times and Seasons* 3 (2 May 1842): 773; reproduced in Joseph Smith—History 1:64–65 in the Pearl of Great Price.

60. Roberts, *Comprehensive History*, 1:105.

61. See "What Did Charles Anthon Really Say?" in *Reexploring*, 73–5. A more heavily documented version of the same appeared as "Martin Harris' Visit with Charles Anthon: Collected Documents on 'Shorthand Egyptian'" (previously cited).

62. See FARMS Staff, "Harris' Visit," 6.

63. Orsamus Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham's Purchase, and Morris' Reserve* (Rochester, N.Y.: Alling, 1851), 215. An account based on Turner appeared in *Shortsville Enterprize* 35 (ca. 1883); the quotation given here is from this. The mention of "the title page" recalls that Whitmer is reported to have said Joseph Smith made the transcript for Harris, and thus for Anthon, "from the first of the gold plates." See Cook, *Whitmer*, 198, from the *Omaha Herald* interview. Wayne D. Hamby, in "The Anthon Transcript," an unpublished paper (1975) in this author's position, briefly but astutely argues the point made here about there being multiple sheets, referring to "transcript A" and "transcript B."

64. They were ubiquitous in the ancient Near East. For example, note the stelae at Tell el-Husn in Palestine, biblical Beth-shan, described in Henry O. Thompson, "Tell el-Husn—Biblical Beth-shan," *Biblical Archaeologist* 30/4 (1967): 122; or the well-known Moabite Mesha Stela and the Rosetta Stone.

65. Munro S. Edmonson, "The Book of Counsel: The Popol Vuh of the Quiché Maya of Guatemala," Tulane University Middle American Research Institute Publication no. 35 (1971), xv.

66. For example, Toltec ethnic elements who settled among the Tarascans in west Mexico "lacked the investitures of authority and

did not set themselves up as rulers over the native populations, but were themselves subject to the Tarascan ruler at Tzintzuntzan" (Robert M. Carmack, "Toltec Influence on the Postclassic Culture History of Highland Guatemala," in *Archaeological Studies in Middle America*, Tulane University Middle American Research Institute Publication no. 26 (1970), 84. In contrast, the Quiché rulers had a "powerful aristocratic orientation, with emphasis on careful tracing of descent, elaborate investiture ceremonies, and multitudinous titles," all of which were facilitated and demonstrated by written records (see *ibid.*, 73, citing Henry B. Nicholson, "Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl of Tollan: A Problem in Mesoamerican Ethnohistory," doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1957). Furthermore, there was increased surety that a ruler would be acceptable if he could trace descent and authority from a fabled ancient center of civilization and sovereignty. In Mesoamerica the center in later times was "Tollan," or "Tula." This was true of the Aztecs and the Quiché, as well as of "peoples of remoter regions [who] were just as ready to claim descent from a city-state endowed by legend with a vast empire and posthumously famed as a great center of art and learning. The tendency for rulers to derive authority from some ancient site, presently bereft of temporal power, is not confined to Postclassic Mesoamerica; both Charlemagne and Napoleon were crowned in Rome and the emperors of far-off Ethiopia continued to proclaim themselves the Lion of Judah" (Nigel Davies, *The Toltec Heritage: From the Fall of Tula to the Rise of Tenochtitlán* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980], 9–10). Note the Amalekite and Lamanite naming of the city they established as "Jerusalem, calling it after the land of their fathers' nativity" (Alma 21:1).

67. See Robert M. Carmack, *Quichean Civilization: The Ethnohistoric, Ethnographic, and Archaeological Sources* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 16–8.

68. See Coe, *Maya Scribe*, 8–18; V. Garth Norman, "Izapa Sculpture, Part 2: Text," Brigham Young University New World Archaeological Foundation Papers no. 30 (1973), 325; and Lowe, et al., "Izapa," chap. 15.

69. Lawrence H. Feldman, "Tollan in Central Mexico: The Geography of Economic Specialization," *Katunob* 8/3 (1973): 3, 5.

70. Edmonson, *The Book of Counsel*, xvi.

71. *Ibid.*, xvi. The Kaveks were preceded by other "great houses" in highland Guatemala. The originator of the earliest in their record, or the first lineage, "Was he who had born and engendered sons. . . . This is the first lord then" (*ibid.*, 203). In the list of titles following, one of the sons of this first lord is named *Lol Met Keh Nay*. In trying to translate the name, Edmonson notes the following: "The Origin of the Lords of Zapotitlan [another document] says in a remarkable passage:

This Chief Two [the given name of the first ruler]
engendered *Keh Nay*

And five other sons,

Who were provided by this king as governors.

Hence until the Spaniards came

The kings had this name of *Keh Nay*

Because it is like [the royal title] 'Caesars' among the natives." (*Ibid.*)

This use of title is interesting—as a cultural pattern, if not as a historical fact—in light of Jacob 1:9–11, where we read, "Now Nephi began to be old, and he saw that he must soon die; wherefore, he anointed a man to be a king and a ruler over his people now, according to the reigns of the kings. The people having loved Nephi exceedingly, he having been a great protector for them . . . Wherefore, the people were desirous to retain in remembrance his name. And whoso should reign in his stead were called by the people, second Nephi, third Nephi, and so forth, according to the reigns of the kings; and thus they were called by the people, let them be of whatever name they would." Interestingly, Nephi₁ was one of six sons, like *Keh Nay*. Meanwhile, the Lamanite kings may have used "Laman" as a title, in parallel to the use of "Nephi" by the Nephites (see *Ancient American Setting*, 242; and Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* [New York: Macmillan, 1992], 1:191, s.v. "Book of Mormon peoples").

72. See Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:191, 193. The pos-

sibility exists, of course, that the presumed Ishmaelites in the land of Ishmael were ruled by intrusive kings of the Laman lineage, including Lamoni. Even if that was so, the fact that there was a distinct land of Ishmael argues for continuity and separateness of their own tradition. For both the “Mulekites” within the polity of the “Nephis” and the minor lineages within the broad Lamanite category, it is quite expectable, in Mesoamerican terms, that conflict would be endemic over power and perquisites. Compare the king-men business and the factionalism among the Lamanites reported in Alma 24–25 with this statement from an article by Robert S. Santley, Michael J. Berman, and Rani T. Alexander: “The picture that emerges [regarding later Tula] is one involving continual political strife and occasional open hostilities between factions of the city’s elite, not effective centralization of authority” (“The Politicization of the Mesoamerican Ballgame and Its Implications for the Interpretation of the Distribution of Ballcourts in Central Mexico,” in *The Mesoamerican Ballgame*, ed. Vernon L. Scarborough and David R. Wilcox [Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1991], 9).

73. See Sorenson, *Source Book*, 230, 266, 288.

74. Noel B. Reynolds, “Nephi’s Political Testament,” in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, ed. John L. Sorenson and Melvin J. Thorne (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1991), 220–1.

75. *Ibid.*, 221.

76. Interestingly, when the Quichés started their “developing conquest state . . . [that] began to expand . . . like a spreading fire,” they soon made their real motive clear. “The collection of tribute . . . became a primary, perhaps the primary, object of the conquests, for the luxury goods thus obtained were needed to maintain the expanding Toltec-originated upper class” (Carmack, “Toltec Influence,” 77).

77. The site of Mirador in western Chiapas is in an area that I have suggested may contain the land of David mentioned by Mormon, as on the Nephite route of retreat (see Mormon 2:5). Archaeologists have found that Mirador was abandoned near A.D. 400, then reoccupied by invaders. One of the things the new occupants

(or possibly the departing old inhabitants) did was to smash and bury a highly symbolic, sacred monument. They may have smashed other monuments, but pieces of only the one were located in the limited excavation effort completed (see Agrinier, "Mounds 9 and 10," 9, 90).

78. According to the *Popol Vuh* and the *Anales de los Cakchiqueles*, the post-Classic rulers of highland Guatemala traveled to "Tulán," perhaps Chichén Itzá or an unknown site in Tabasco where "the language of Zuiva" was known, to receive their investiture of politico-religious authority (see Davies, *The Toltecs: Until the Fall of Tula* [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977], 38; Adrián Recinos, *Anales de los Cakchiqueles* [México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1948], 170). Lord Nacxit, "King of the East, . . . the only supreme judge of all the kingdoms, . . . gave them the insignia of the kingdom and all its distinctive symbols," even "the insignia of royalty" (e.g., the canopy and the throne). (See Adrián Recinos, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya*, trans. Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley [Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1950], 207–9.) Among their important symbols were "the paintings of Tulán, the paintings, as these were called, in which they wrote their histories" (p. 209). Incidentally, the description of the nature of Lord Nacxit's power, which was primarily symbolic and charismatic rather than administrative, suggests how the king of the Lamanites described in Alma 22:27 managed to be king "over all the land" (Alma 22:1), which was spread over a vast area, through sub-kings subject to him.

The Quiché had already received from their founding fathers a sacred emblem, the *Pizom-Gagal*, or "bundle . . . of power," which had been left to them as a "symbol of [the ancestors'] being" (ibid., 205–6). This object consisted of a sacred stone "which they used in their incantations." *The Título de los Señores de Totonicapán*, another lineage history, speaks of "the precious gift which our father Nacxit gave us; it will be useful to us, because we have not yet found the place in which we are going to settle" (p. 205); in other words, it served as an instrument to receive divine guidance as to where they should travel and settle. Carmack, follow-

ing Nicholson, says that “this sacred symbol of power corresponds precisely” with the sacred bundle revered by descendants of the Toltecs in central Mexico. There it consisted of green stones (jade or turquoise) set into pieces of wood with holes bored in them and wrapped in cloth mantles; it symbolized “the hearts of [their] gods” (see Carmack, “Toltec Influence,” 73).

I find the similarities to the Liahona and the “interpreters” of the Nephites striking. The Liahona was a guide for Lehi’s party when they had “not yet found the place in which they were to settle.” The interpreters were sacred stones set in a device to facilitate their handling. Both instruments were divine gifts that reminded the holders of godly power to reveal; they were reminders of the ancestral founders; and they were among the insignia of office passed on between Nephite rulers. It seems possible that replicas, at least conceptual replicas, of the original objects held by the Nephite leaders may have been passed on by Lamanite or apostate Nephite rulers, which served as models for the paraphernalia of later groups.

79. Three recent treatments of the sacred Nephite tokens and accompanying records are valuable: Brett L. Holbrook, “The Sword of Laban as a Symbol of Divine Authority and Kingship,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 39–72, includes a helpful table that tracks the transmission of the “regalia” from ruler to ruler and prophet to prophet among the Nephites; see also Gordon C. Thomasson, “Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 21–38, and Daniel N. Rolph, “Prophets, Kings, and Swords: The Sword of Laban and Its Possible Pre-Laban Origin,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 73–9.

80. See John W. Welch, “King Benjamin’s Speech,” 16–8, 38ff; and see Tvedtnes, “King Benjamin.”

81. See Edmonson, *Ancient Future*, 47.

82. Feldman, “Tollan in Central Mexico,” 1.

83. Dieter Dütting, “‘Bats’ in the Usumacinta-Valley. Remarks on the Inscriptions of Bonampak and Neighboring Sites in Chiapas, Mexico,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 103 (1978): 53.

84. Davies, *The Toltec Heritage*, 14.

85. Davies, *The Toltecs: Until the Fall of Tula*, 16. Compare the title page of the Book of Mormon.

86. Ibid.

87. William T. Sanders, "The Epiclassic as a Stage in Mesoamerican Prehistory: An Evaluation," *Mesoamerica after the Decline of Teotihuacan, A.D. 700–900*, ed. Richard A. Diehl and Janet Catherine Berlo (Washington: Dumbarton Oaks, 1989), 216–7; however, Coe, in *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 271–4, considers Sanders among the dirt archaeologists who are simply reluctant to face up to the documentary version of history that is being revealed by the epigraphers, hence they denounce it.

88. Andrea Stone, "Disconnection, Foreign Insignia, and Political Expansion: Teotihuacan and the Warrior Stelae of Piedras Negras," in *Mesoamerica after the Decline of Teotihuacan*, 167.

89. Debra Nagao, "Public Proclamation in the Art of Cacaxtla and Xochicalco," *Mesoamerica after the Decline of Teotihuacan*, 83.

90. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico*, 107. A full discussion is in R. C. Padden, *The Hummingbird and the Hawk: Conquest and Sovereignty in the Valley of Mexico, 1503–1541* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1967).

91. See Coe, *The Maya*, 128.

92. Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 23.

93. Ibid., 14–5, quoting Angel Maria Garibay K.

94. Edmonson, *Book of Counsel*, 157.

95. Ibid., 254.

96. For example, see Abraham Malamat, "Tribal Societies: Biblical Genealogies and African Lineage Systems," *Archives européennes de sociologie (European Journal of Sociology)* 14 (1973): 126–36, or Robert R. Wilson, "The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 94/2 (1975): 169–89.

97. See Reynolds, "Nephi's Political Testament," 220–9. Also see Richard L. Bushman, "The Lamanite View of Book of Mormon History," in *By Study and Also by Faith*, ed. Lundquist and Ricks, 2:52–72. He conjectures that "Lamanite history would be a

bitter story, of a people obsessed with a perpetual sense of deprivation, wronged at the beginning, so they thought, and wronged ever after" (p. 70). True, but the analysis in his article fails to recognize two keys: (1) the nature of the records and sacred tokens as political and cultural validators, and (2) the practical consequences of their lack in keeping would-be Lamanite and dissident dynasts from receiving the tribute to which they considered themselves entitled. Taking those linked factors into consideration, it would be less of a puzzle to Bushman why "Nephi's one-time claim to rule [would] arouse the wrath of the Lamanites generation after generation for hundreds of years" (p. 55).

98. Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 14.

99. See Barthel, "Writing Systems," 34.

100. Vaillant, *The Aztecs of Mexico*, 204.

101. Edmondson, *Ancient Future*, 55.

102. Jill Leslie Furst, *Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I: A Commentary*, State University of New York at Albany Institute for Mesoamerican Studies Publication no. 4 (1978), 14, as cited in Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 23.

103. "Parallelism, Merismus, and Difrasismo," in *Reexploring*, ed. Welch, 80–2.

104. Dütting, "Bats," 53. Such a situation at least casts doubt on how thoroughly "translated" are the Mayan inscriptions handled by the Schele/Lounsbury group.

105. *Popol Vuh*, xii. Currently considered the best translation of the Quiché record is Dennis Tedlock, *Popol Vuh* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).

106. See León-Portilla, "Pre-Hispanic Literature," 453.

107. Dütting, "Bats," 53.

108. Carrasco, *Quetzalcoatl*, 20.

109. *Ibid.*, 23, quoting Henry B. Nicholson, "Phoneticism in Late Pre-Hispanic Central Mexican Writing Systems," in *Mesoamerican Writing Systems*, ed. Elizabeth Benson (Washington, D.C.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 3. An interesting comparison is in Robert M. Laughlin's fascinating account of his struggles, while working on a dictionary, to gain agreement among his

Tzotzil informants about even simple denotative terms (see *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantan*, Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology no. 19 [Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1975], 1–21).

110. Bruce Warren has pointed out to me that Brian Stross, in “The Language of Zuyúa,” *American Ethnologist* 10 (1983): 150–64, considers this to have been a distinct Mixean language, that is, related to the tongue of the ancient Olmec people.

111. Roys, *Chumayel*, 98 n. 1.

112. Tozzer, “Landa’s *Relacion*,” 62.

113. Edmonson, *Popol Vuh*, xi.

114. This has been termed “conceptual rhyming,” because it involves the planned repetition of ideas, not of sounds, as in much poetry in European languages (see *ibid.*).

115. J. E. S. Thompson, *Maya Hieroglyphic Writing: An Introduction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), 2, 61; compare the discussion in Sorenson, “Digging into the Book of Mormon,” Part 2, *Ensign* (October 1984): 16.

116. Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman, “Mayan Linguistics: Where Are We Now?” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 14 (1985): 194.

117. See John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim, Germany: Gerstenberg, 1981).

118. Personal communication (13 June 1970).

119. See Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus by the Ancient Quiché-Maya,” *Latin American Literatures Journal* 4/2 (1988): 125–50, summarized in *Reexploring*, 233–5. A much fuller version of this research is in Allen J. Christenson, “The Use of Chiasmus in Ancient Mesoamerica” (Provo: FARMS, 1988).

120. It is a reasonable guess that the superior ability of the brother of Jared to express himself had to do with his use of a syllabic script, such as was known early in Mesopotamia, from whence he came. Such writing permits full spelling out of words and thus presumably clearer expression than the only partially phonetic/substantially ideographic system of glyphs on the Egyptian model that Moroni₂ used.

121. That the Egyptian element consisted of “characters” is made clear by Moroni₂ in Mormon 9:32. I am, of course, aware that others, particularly Hugh Nibley and Robert F. Smith, think that the Egyptian tongue was involved, not just the writing system. Aside from Moroni₂’s clear statement to the contrary, it seems obvious in any case that Nephite literacy would have been miniscule had it depended on all writers and readers having to be schooled in a second, archaic tongue. I cannot read the text of the Book of Mormon as restricting literacy to that degree.

122. Barthel, “Writing Systems,” 45.

123. John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 198.

124. *Ibid.*, 206–7.

125. Welch, “Chiasmus in Helaman 6:7–13,” summarized in *Reexploring*, 230–2.

126. *Ibid.*, 232, citing the personal communication from Thompson to Sorenson mentioned above.

127. See Coe, “Early Steps,” 111, and J. Marcus, “The Origins of Mesoamerican Writing,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 5 (1976): 35–67.

128. For example, Carlo T. E. Gay, “Olmec Hieroglyphic Writing,” *Archaeology* 26/4 (1973): 278–88; and José Luis Franco C., “La escritura y los códices,” in *Esplendor del México Antiguo*, 3rd ed., ed. Raúl Noriega, et al. (México: Centro de Investigaciones Antropológicas de México, 1978), 361–78. Franco illustrates a seal from Tlatilco (see below for a second, very different one) on which are signs that he considers to be Olmec writing, and David Kelley agrees.

129. Barthel, “Writing Systems,” 35.

130. See Coe, “Early Steps,” 109, agreeing with Gelb and Knorosov. A devastating critique of the assumptions behind and evidence for a supposed evolutionary sequence for writing systems in general is found in C. F. Voegelin and Florence M. Voegelin, “Typological Classification of Systems with Included, Excluded and Self-sufficient Alphabets,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 3 (1968): 55–96, especially the last half a dozen pages.

131. Sylvia Méluzin, "The Tuxtla Statuette: An Internal Analysis of Its Writing System," in *The Periphery of the Southeastern Classic Maya Realm*, ed. Gary W. Pahl (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin America Center Publications, 1987), 108.

132. Coe, "Early Steps," 115.

133. Méluzin, "The Tuxtla Statuette," 110.

134. Blerkom, "A Comparison of Maya and Egyptian Hieroglyphics," *Katunob* 11/3 (1979): 1–7.

135. Coe lists thirteen Mesoamerican glyph systems as follows (dates for the likely earliest appearance of each are my own):

Monte Alban, Oaxaca, ?700 B.C.

(One scholar has suggested, however, that the system in use in M.A. I and II, up to ca. A.D. 300, was very different from that used in subsequent M.A. IIIA, which could be due to "a change of population and even of language." See Hanns J. Prem, "Calendrics and Writing," in R. F. Heizer and John A. Graham, *Observations on the Emergence of Civilization in Mesoamerica*, University of California Archaeological Research Facility Contributions no. 11 [1971], 121–2.)

Kaminaljuyu Stela 10, ?150 B.C.

(See Graham, "Commentary on: Calendrics and Writing by Prem," *Observations on the Emergence of Civilization*, 135. Graham thinks this must be "a very sophisticated system," even though nobody can read the unique inscription yet.)

Southern Veracruz, ?100 B.C.

Maya, ?100 B.C.

Teotihuacan, A.D. ?100

Ñuiñe (Coe's "Huajuapán"), central Mexico, A.D. ?400

Tajín, north-central Veracruz, A.D. ?500

Borgia Group codices, central Mexico, A.D. ?500

Xochicalco, central Mexico, A.D. ?600

Cotzumalhuapa, coastal Guatemala, A.D. ?600

Mixtec, south-central Mexico, A.D. ?600

Aztec, A.D. ?1350

To these glyph systems may be added Olmec (?1000 B.C.) and possibly others (see below).

136. Coe, *The Maya*, 180.

137. See, for example, the effort at decipherment of the Monte Albán system based on principles and data from the Maya area, by Gordon Whittaker, "Los jeroglíficos preclásicos de Monte Albán," *Estudios de Antropología e Historia* 27(México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia y Centro Regional de Oaxaca, 1981).

138. An exceptionally clear and very interesting treatment of the decipherment process is in Coe's *Breaking the Maya Code*, especially chap. 10. However, Dütting and Barthel, constituting "the Tübingen group," question the efficacy or accuracy of "the Yale school" (Lounsbury, Schele, et al.) decipherment reported (exclusively and confidently) by Coe. They question it in part because the latter group pick and choose from the lexicons of a number of Mayan languages, not just the one, Chol. The Germans follow a different scheme. When they read the Palenque inscriptions, "a covert Hindu program" is revealed, and "Sanskrit terms become consistently apparent behind the Maya glyphs," while the Yale school decipherments yield no light on relations to India. The Germans believe that into the rapidly blossoming city of Palenque, around A.D. 400 to 600, representatives of Hindu brahmanism injected new key linguistic and cultural elements (see Thomas S. Barthel, "Hindu-Maya Syncretism: The Palenque Focus," *Ibero-Amerikanisches Archiv* 11 [1985]: 51–63).

139. Coe, *The Maya*, 180.

140. See Brotherston, "Mesoamerican Reckoning of Time," 1–2, where he distinguishes "hieroglyphic" writing, the initial form, from "iconographic" writing, the international sort.

141. See Méluzin, "The Tuxtla Statuette," 108.

142. See Eva Hunt, "Irrigation and the Socio-Political Organization of Cuicatec Cacicazgos," in *Chronology and Irrigation*, vol. 4 in *The Prehistory of the Tehuacan Valley*, ed. Frederick Johnson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 4:206, 214–5. Compare Robert J. Sharer, "Diversity and Continuity in Maya Civilization: Quirigua as a Case Study," in *Classic Maya Political History*:

Hieroglyphic and Archaeological Evidence, ed. T. Patrick Culbert (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 187, 186: "It is becoming increasingly clear that Classic Maya civilization was sustained by a population that spoke more than one language," however "the element of sociocultural diversity within Maya civilization is seldom emphasized, owing mostly to the difficulty in detecting this kind of variability in the archaeological record."

143. Méluzin, "Tuxtla Statuette," 107–8.

144. See *ibid.*, 68–113, and Fernando Winfield Capitaine, "La estela 1 de La Mojarra, Veracruz, México," *Research Reports on Ancient Maya Writing* 16 (Washington, D.C.: Center for Maya Research, 1988).

145. See John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contacts with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography* (Provo: Research Press, 1990), vol. 2: entries L-274 and W-075. Most recently H. Mike Xu (*Origin of Olmec Civilization* [Edmond, Oklahoma: University of Central Oklahoma Press, 1996]) claims to have deciphered inscriptions on cached Olmec celts as Shang Chinese characters.

146. Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *One Fold and One Shepherd* (San Francisco: Books of California, 1958), 22–3.

147. "Before Columbus," *The Book of Mormon: The Keystone Scripture*, ed. Paul R. Cheesman (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1988), 164.

148. Voegelin and Voegelin, "Typological Classification of Systems," 68–80, hedge on "alphabetic" by considering that Maya, like Chinese, Egyptian, and Hittite glyphic systems and the Sumerian-Akkadian cuneiform system, is of a type that they term "Alphabet Included Logographic System."

149. David H. Kelley, "A Cylinder Seal from Tlatilco," *American Antiquity* 31 (1966): 744–6.

150. Graham, *Emergence of Civilization*, 132.

151. *Ibid.*, 133. John Clark has suggested from a quick inspection of the Alexander Von Wuthenau collection of figurines at Tepoztlan, Morelos, that similar seals may be therein (personal communication, 1993).

152. Information is in the files of George F. Carter and John L.

Sorenson. Examples include: a cylinder seal from Nicaragua on which are characters that are repeated on a spindle whorl from the Huasteca, Gulf Coastal Mexico (see Samuel Kirkland Lothrop, *Pottery of Costa Rica and Nicaragua* [New York: Museum of the American Indian and Heye Foundation, 1926], vol. 8, part 2: 378, and Gordon F. Ekholm, "Excavations at Tampico and Panuco in the Huasteca, Mexico," *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History* 38/5 [1944], 463, item R); also two oval-shaped stamp seals each bearing a single column of nonpictorial characters somewhat resembling each other, one from Chiapas (in Carlos Navarrete, "Un reconocimiento de la Sierra Madre de Chiapas: Apuntes de un diario de campo," *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Cuadernos* 13 [1978], fig. 5a), and the other, which comes from coastal Oaxaca (Méluzin, "The Tuxtla Statuette," fig. 71a [p. 100], redrawn from de Cicco and Brockington, 1956). Méluzin shows and discusses others, as does Kelley (in "Cylinder Seal").

153. See, for example, the argument to that effect by Stephen E. Thompson, following Nibley (see the review of *Southwestern American Indian Rock Art and the Book of Mormon*, by James R. Harris, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 [1992]: 74–6), who erroneously supposes that the writing system started with Lehi₁, rendering the argument moot.

154. See John L. Sorenson, "The 'Brass Plates' and Biblical Scholarship," *Dialogue* 10/4 (1977): 31–9.

155. According to Bryant G. Wood, "The archaeological evidence suggests that toward the end of the eighth century Jerusalem expanded westward, apparently to accommodate refugees fleeing from the north" from the Assyrians ("Scholars Speak Out," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21/3 [May–June 1995]: 34). This is the most plausible time for Lehi₁'s, Ishmael's, and Laban's ancestors to have arrived in the land of Judah. Does it also hint that Lehi₁'s estate was "down" westward from Jerusalem, which happens to be in the direction of the most important trade route with Egypt (see 1 Nephi 3:22–3)?

156. See John W. Welch, "The Father's Command to Keep

Records in the Small Plates of Nephi" (FARMS, 1985).

157. Spackman, "Book of Mormon Chronology," 28–9.

158. David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:231, s.v. "Sumer, Sumerians."

159. Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:190, s.v. "Egyptian Language and Writing."

160. *Ibid.* The system from the beginning used "phonograms," representations of consonantal sounds that could have changed as vernacular speech required.

161. See FARMS Staff, "Harris' Visit," 7, 13; Robert C. Webb [James E. Homans], *The Case against Mormonism* (New York: L. L. Walton, 1915), 22–3; William C. Hayes, letter to Paul M. Hanson, President of the RLDS Council of the Twelve, published in *Saints' Herald* 103 (12 November 1956): 1098, supported by Kimball's interview with Hayes, reported in *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* 126 (August 1971): 1–5; Ariel L. Crowley, "The Anthon Transcript," *Improvement Era* 45 (1942): 14, 15, 58–60, 76–80, 124, 125, 150–1, 182–3; Crowley, "The Anthon Transcript," *Improvement Era* 47 (1944): 542–3, 576–83 (reprinted in his *About the Book of Mormon* [Idaho City, Idaho: Ariel Crowley, 1951], chapter 2; reissued by Deseret Book [Salt Lake City, 1961]).

162. Some have considered some of the transcript characters to be demotic. See Homans, *Case against Mormonism*, 23; Crowley, *About the Book of Mormon*, esp. pp. 18, 20; R. Parker, in an interview with Richard Bushman reported by Kimball in *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.*, mentioned in the previous note. Other specialists have said they see no relationship to either hieratic or demotic (see John A. Wilson and Alan H. Gardiner in Hanson, *Saints' Herald*, 1098, among others).

163. Adolf Erman, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Dover, 1971), 342.

164. Cook, ed., *Whitmer Interviews*, 115, 124.

165. "Two Figurines from the Belleza and Sanchez Collection," in *Reexploring*, 18–9; Mariano Cuevas, *Historia de la Nación Mexicana* (México:Talleres Tipográficos Modelo, 1940), 16; and personal com-

munications from Romeo Hristov, April 1997, and John Gee, March 1997.

166. Extensive abstracts of his article, all of which are published in obscure outlets, are included in Sorenson and Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact*, vol. 1: entries J-012 to J-017. An extensive set of additional material is found in Sorenson, "The Significance of an Apparent Relationship between the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica," *Man across the Sea: Problems of Pre-Columbian Contacts*, ed. Carroll L. Riley, et al. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 219–41.

167. See Sorenson, "The Significance of an Apparent Relationship."

168. David H. Kelley, "Calendar Animals and Deities," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 16 (1960): 325–9. This k=kaph=kab feature calls to mind a glyph in the form of an open hand that appears on the anomalous Kaminaljuyu Stela 10 inscription and that is very similar to an Egyptian glyph; this inscription is one of the earliest specimens of writing in southern Mesoamerica, dating to perhaps 150 B.C.; it comes from the site I identify as probably the city of Nephi. The similarity could still be a coincidence, however.

169. "The 'Anthon Transcript' and Two Mesoamerican Cylinder Seals," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* 122 (September 1970): 1–8.

170. See Philip Drucker, "La Venta, Tabasco: A Study of Olmec Ceramics and Art," *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin* no. 153 (1952), fig. 43 (p. 142).

171. See Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 206.

172. Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert and the World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1952), 24–5, 29–30. (The version of this book republished as *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites*, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Hugh W. Nibley* [Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988] has about the same material on pages 22–3; 27–30.)

173. See Cook, *Whitmer Interviews*, 174. On page 32 of the original edition of *Lehi in the Desert* (1952), Nibley says, "Joseph never

pronounced the proper names he came upon in the plates during the translation but always *spelled them out*" (emphasis in the original). The reference given was to the Edmund C. Briggs/Rudolph Etzenhouser interview in 1884; that interview is found on page 126 in Cook's volume, but no statement in it supports Nibley's emphasis. All that is said is a quote from Emma Smith: "He could not pronounce the word Sariah."

174. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Linguistic Implications of the Tel Arad Ostraca," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* 127 (October 1971): 1–5; and Tvedtnes, review of *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 37–8. Also see J. W. Crowfoot and G. M. Crowfoot, "The Ivories from Samaria," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (o.s., January 1933): 13, where it says that a small ivory plaque bears two rows of hieroglyphs: "It is possible to read on them a Semitic name . . . A-L-Y-W-Sh-B=ELIASHIB, 'God requites or restores'" (p. 13).

175. See, for example, Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *Notebook for the XVIIth Maya Hieroglyphic Workshop at Texas* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1993), 33–4, under "Ut 'It Happened.'"

176. See Sorenson, "The 'Mulekites,'" *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 17–8; and Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 19–22.

177. Implied in Terrence Kaufman, "Archaeological and Linguistic Correlations in Mayaland and Associated Areas of Meso-America," *World Archaeology* 8/1 (1976): 101–18; and Kaufman, "Areal Linguistics and Middle America," in *Native Languages of the Americas*, 2:63–87.

178. Lyle Campbell and Terrence Kaufman, "A Linguistic Look at the Olmecs," *American Antiquity* 41 (1976): 80–9, demonstrates that the Mixe-Zoque languages in isthmian Mesoamerica are descended from a language in use among the "Olmec." We have no way of knowing, however, exactly how "the Jaredites" related to "the Olmecs," although see suggestions in my review of "Does

the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography," by Deanne G. Matheny, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 354–7.

179. The whole subject of the languages (tongues) spoken by Book of Mormon groups has yet to be studied exhaustively from the text. See comments in Sorenson, "The 'Mulekites,'" 11–2. Most linguists suppose that there are no connections between Old and New World tongues, but that negative judgment has been based on failure to compare the possibilities systematically, rather than on any demonstration of a negative relation. Certain linguistically competent studies in recent years have shown apparent interhemispheric linguistic relationships.

The most sweeping and best-documented proposition is that of Otto Sadowszky. He has found that the California Penutian languages, such as Wintun and Costanoan, are so clearly similar to the Ob-Ugrian group of western Siberia that they must be classified in the same family. The data require that a direct migration took place to central California on the order of 500 B.C. (see Sorenson and Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact*, vol. 2: entries S-008 to S-017). Brian Stubbs ("Looking Over vs. Overlooking Native American Languages: Let's Void the Void," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 5/1 [1996]: 1–49) demonstrates that Uto-Aztecan languages yield more than a thousand similarities to Hebrew, in phonological, morphological, and semantic patterns consistent with modern linguistic methods. See also Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:179–81, s.v. "Book of Mormon Language." David H. Kelley ("Linguistics and Problems in Trans-Pacific Contacts," *Proceedings, 35th International Congress of Americanists* [México, 1962], 1:17–8, based on his 1957 Harvard dissertation) demonstrates the presence of some fifty cognate ritual and sacred terms from Uto-Aztecan in early Polynesian. Pierre Agrinier ("Linguistic Evidence for the Presence of Israelites in Mexico," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the S.E.H.A.* 112 [1969]: 4–5) reports on evidence for a relationship between Zapotec and Hebrew, which Robert F. Smith extended substantially in an unpublished manuscript, "Sawi-Zaa Word Comparisons," dated September 1977. Mary LeCron Foster,

of the University of California at Berkeley, maintains and documents that there were specific relationships between the Egyptian language and the Mixe-Zoquean family of languages of southern Mexico, as well as ties between Uto-Aztecan and Indo-European languages, following Morris Swadesh, who saw relations specifically between Aztec and Latin. See Foster, "Old World Language in the Americas: 1," a paper given at the annual meeting of the Association of American Geographers, San Diego, California (20 April 1992); and Foster's overlapping paper, "Old World Language in the Americas: 2," read at the annual meeting of the Language Origins Society, Cambridge University, England (September 1992). Lengthy abstracts are given in Sorenson and Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact*, second ed., entries F-146B and F-146C.

180. Ralph L. Roys, "Lowland Maya Native Society at Spanish Contact," in *Archaeology of Southern Mesoamerica, Part 2*, vol. 3 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Gordon R. Willey (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), 673.

181. Neil Steede, *Catálogo preliminar de los Tabiques de Comalcalco* (Cárdenas, Tabasco, México: Centro de Investigación Pre-columbina, 1984). The illustrations in this work make points of interest, especially about Maya script characters appearing in graffiti; however, the discussion and conclusions are generally unreliable.

182. Tozzer, "Landa's *Relacion*," 29.

183. Ibid.; and Henry B. Nicholson, "Religion in Pre-Hispanic Central Mexico," in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 1*, 436.

184. Tozzer, "Landa's *Relacion*," 27.

185. See Edmonson, *Popol Vuh*, 17. For the Maya at the conquest and in modern times, see Tozzer, "Landa's *Relacion*," 117, 130; on the Huastec Indians of the Gulf Coast, see Guy Stresser-Péan, "Ancient Sources on the Huasteca," in *Archaeology of Northern Mesoamerica, Part 2*, vol. 11 of *Handbook of Middle American Indians*, ed. Gordon F. Ekholm and Ignacio Bernal (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1971), 600; for the Aztec scrying in a polished

obsidian surface, virtually a “mirror,” see Nicholson, “Religion,” 440.

186. In general, see George F. Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1913).

187. See Edmonson, *Popol Vuh*, 17.

188. See Nicholson, “Religion,” 441.

189. See Edmonson, *Ancient Future*, 32 n. 514.

190. *Ibid.*; also Tozzer, “Landa’s *Relacion*,” 42, 207, 217. A number of other accounts were recorded of prophecies about the coming of Europeans. One of particular interest because it recalls Alma 19:16 (and 2 Nephi 29:7) is in Don Domingo Juarros’ history, *A Statistical and Commercial History of the Kingdom of Guatemala, in Spanish America* (London: John Hearne, 1823), translated by J. Baily from an 1809 Spanish publication and reprinted by AMS Press, New York, 1971. In 1622 Spanish missionaries attempted their first entry among the Xicaque Indians of Honduras by a pair of them simply having themselves set ashore in the area. After two days alone, they were approached by a sizable party led by an elite Indian who greeted them warmly. He had long expected them, he explained, and gave this reason: “Being one day at work in his plantation, there appeared to him a white child, more beautiful than any thing he had ever before seen or could imagine; it looked at him with great tenderness, and said, ‘Know that you will not die before you become a Christian; there will come here some white men, with robes of the colour of this ground, reaching to their feet; when they arrive, receive them kindly, and do not permit any one to anger them, for they are ministers of God, who has granted thee this signal mark of his mercy, because thou hast done well, and hast supported those who wanted assistance!’ It is worthy of notice that this old man, *even in his idolatry*, had employed himself in acts of kindness; he cultivated maize to distribute among those who were in distress; he composed strifes, and settled all disputes among his neighbours; besides performing many other kind offices where they were wanted” (*italics in original*).

191. Tozzer, “Landa’s *Relacion*,” 42–3; Hubert Howe Bancroft,

The Native Races of the Pacific States (San Francisco: A. L. Bancroft, 1883), 2:464–9.

192. Suggested by John B. Carlson, "Olmec Concave Iron-Ore Mirrors: The Aesthetics of a Lithic Technology and the Lord of the Mirror," *The Olmec and Their Neighbors: Essays in Memory of Matthew W. Stirling*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1981), 117–47.

193. *Ibid.*, 126, 132. See also Peter S. Probst, "Mirrors of Ancient China and Pre-Columbian America" (master's thesis, Columbia University, 1963).

194. Carlson, *Olmec*, 124–6.

195. *Ibid.*, 126–9.

196. See Lawrence H. Feldman, "Papers of Escuintla and Guazacapan: A Contribution to the History and Ethnography of South Eastern Guatemala," University of Northern Colorado Museum of Anthropology Occasional Publications in Mesoamerican Anthropology no. 7 (1974), 23.

197. See John W. Welch, "The Father's Command to Keep Records in the Small Plates of Nephi" (Provo: FARMS, 1985).

198. Gordon C. Thomasson, "Mosiah: The Complex Symbolism and Symbolic Complex of Kingship in the Book of Mormon," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 24, argues for "widespread public literacy rather than a narrowly specialized literate priestly elite." I do not find the existence of a substantial number of historical source documents that he enumerates—but spread over a number of generations—to be evidence of such wide literacy as he supposes. It is completely agreeable to the kind of literary tradition, chiefly in priestly hands, that we know from among the Mayas and that yielded for them literally thousands of books. The scripture deserves a comprehensive survey regarding the question.

199. Comment in *Dumbarton Oaks Conference on the Olmec*, ed. Elizabeth P. Benson (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1968), 75. (Conference held 28–29 October 1967.)

200. "Irrigation and the Socio-Political Organization of Cuicatec Cacicazgos," in *The Prehistory of the Tehuacan Valley*, ed.

Frederick Johnson, vol. 4 in *Chronology and Irrigation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), 207.

201. The basic concept of chiefdom as a stage in cultural evolution is laid out in Elman R. Service, *The Origins of the State and Civilization: The Process of Cultural Evolution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975). For a rather strained application of the concept to highland Guatemala, see Joseph W. Michels, "Political Organization at Kaminaljuyu: Its Implications for Interpreting Teotihuacan Influence," *Teotihuacan and Kaminaljuyú: A Study in Prehistoric Culture Contact*, ed. William T. Sanders and Joseph W. Michels (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), 453–67.

202. Freedman, *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 4:308, s.v. "Levites and Priests"; see also Jeremiah 2:8.

203. Compare *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 1:504–7, s.v. "Astrology in the Ancient Near East." Certain Mesoamerican divinatory and astrological practices are very much like those of the Near East, although nobody has systematically explored the parallels.

204. Michael D. Coe, review of *Skywatchers of Ancient Mexico*, by Anthony F. Aveni, *Archaeoastronomy: Bulletin of the Center for Archaeoastronomy* 4/1 (1981): 40, notes that investigators recently showed "that the timing of the famous battle shown in the Bonampak murals was set by 'an event in the synodic period of [the planet] Venus; 'Star wars' indeed!" he exclaims.

205. See Puleston, "An Epistemological Pathology," 63–71; and Edmonson, *Ancient Future*, xi.

206. See, for instance, Nicholson, "Religion," 439–41.

207. Edmonson, *Ancient Future*, xi; see also Edmonson, "Some Postclassic Questions," Table 1.

208. Edmonson, *Ancient Future*, xix; and Grant D. Jones, "Rebellious Prophets," *New Theories on the Ancient Maya*, ed. Elin C. Damien and Robert J. Sharer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 197–204.

209. Berdan, *An Imperial Society*, 120.

210. See Grant R. Hardy, "Mormon as Editor," in *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 23–5.

211. Edmonson, "Some Postclassic Questions," Table 1. My

reasoning in dating the Jaredite final wars to this period of time is in Sorenson, "The 'Mulekites,'" 13–4.

212. See Spackman, "Book of Mormon Chronology." Some may fear that this articulation with the calendar hints of a benighted "magic," "numerology," or "astrology," yet obviously there is a divine calendar for key earthly events. If it were not so, how would the "new star" have appeared at the time of the Savior's birth (see Helaman 14:5), for quite certainly the cosmic physical phenomenon that made the "star" visible to people's eyes at that moment took place in some distant place in the heavens long before—years before—yet it was scheduled to be seen first on earth at that precise date long afterward. Note too that the Prophet Joseph was visited by Moroni, and then received the plates at the autumnal equinox (which was also the Jewish New Year), and the appearance of Elijah in the Kirtland Temple took place on a Passover anniversary. These examples could be multiplied.

For the record, I note that an odd calendrical pattern that deserves analysis is manifested in one Nephite count of years. Gareth Lowe pointed out to me years ago that 4 Nephi 1:6 has "the thirty and eighth year pass away, and also the thirty and ninth," but then jumps to the "forty and first." The pattern is repeated in the jump from "forty and nine years" to "the fifty and first . . . and even until fifty and nine years had passed away." Verse 14 continues the scheme, from the "seventy and first . . . and in fine, till the seventy and ninth year had passed away." Why are the decadal years omitted?

213. Sorenson, "The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Codex," 4.

214. Sorenson, "The Significance of an Apparent Relationship between the Ancient Near East and Mesoamerica," 219–41.

215. James H. Charlesworth, "Messianism in the Pseudepigrapha and the Book of Mormon," in *Reflections on Mormonism: Judaean-Christian Parallels*, ed. Truman G. Madsen (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978), 129.

216. Krister Stendahl, "The Sermon on the Mount and Third Nephi," in *Reflections on Mormonism*, 152.

217. See Carmack, "Toltec Influence."

218. Ibid., 71.

219. Ibid., 64.

220. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 227–9.

221. I find an interesting parallel in Stephen Williams' unique notion that the gold plates that Joseph Smith had were obtained by "discovery and excavation," and that the LDS faith "has deep roots in what must be called the 'archaeological discoveries' in 1827 by Joseph Smith" (Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology: The Wild Side of North American Prehistory* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991], 161, 25). Also see Diane E. Wirth's review of his book and my review in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 4 (1992): 251–3 and 254–7, respectively.

222. Compare Williams, *Fantastic Archaeology*, 152–3.

223. Ibid. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 229. Chapter 6 tells in gory detail how effective Thompson had been against previous foes following this critical strategy. I discussed that point and the Coe/Thompson conflict in my review of "Does the Shoe Fit?" by Deanne G. Matheny, 302–3.

224. Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 229.

225. Ibid.

226. Michael D. Coe, "Mormons and Archeology: An Outside View," *Dialogue* 8/2 (1973): 40–5.

227. Ibid., 47.

228. A. M. H. Schuster, "Case of the Suspect Stela," *Archaeology* (September–October, 1994): 53.