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ANACHRONISMS IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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AN ANACHRONISM IS SOMETHING THAT APPEARS IN A TEXT PRIOR TO the time that it could have been present. When a clear anachronism is found in any document claiming to be an original historical record, it immediately marks the document as false. The reason is obvious. No writer could know to include something that had not yet been invented or had not yet happened. Many have assumed that anachronisms in the Book of Mormon should similarly prove that it must be false, and it is a modern text only posing as an ancient one. That would be as true for the Book of Mormon as it is for any other text if the Book of Mormon claimed to be an ancient text, but it does not. It claims to be a translation of an ancient text, and that is a very important difference. The fact that we have the Book of Mormon in translation doesn't mean that we can ignore the proposed anachronisms, but it does mean that we can, and should, carefully look to see if there are reasonable explanations for the proposed anachronisms.

Critics of the Book of Mormon have long noted what appear to be anachronisms in the text that Joseph Smith provided from what he claimed was a set of plates that contained the record of ancient inhabitants of the American continents. They have noted references to donkeys, bees, cattle, elephants, sheep, goats, silkworms, swine, wheat, and barley—all creatures and plants not associated with pre-Columbian America. Others identify biblical references that are either incorrect or would not have been available to the Nephites, such as the words of Malachi, New Testament text, Jerusalem as the site of Christ's birth, and references to the Holy Ghost before the birth of Christ. In addition, there are coins, a compass, and cement, which are objects

and substances not associated with that era in America. Taken together, the stack of supposed anachronisms can seem quite daunting and disastrous to a historical claim regarding the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

EVALUATING ANACHRONISMS

Though complete explanations for some of these seeming anachronisms are currently elusive, a careful study of one verse in Alma may serve as a model to approach the study of all such supposed anachronisms in the Book of Mormon. Alma 18:9 states, “And they said unto him: Behold, he is feeding thy horses. Now the king had commanded his servants, previous to the time of the watering of their flocks, that they should prepare his horses and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi; for there had been a great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land.” The controversy focuses on the *horses* and *chariots* in this verse. Of course it is commonly believed there were no horses in the New World prior to the arrival of the Spanish, and there had never been chariots pulled by those non-existent horses in ancient America, so how is one to account for references to *horses* and *chariots* in the Book of Mormon?

EMERGING SCIENTIFIC AND ARCHAEOLOGIC EVIDENCE

LDS scholars have approached the issue of anachronisms in multiple ways,¹ and the verse with both *horses* and *chariots* provides a convenient way to describe the two major approaches. One explanation has been to search for reasons why the anachronism wasn’t actually anachronistic. For example, contrasted to the common knowledge that there were no horses in the Americas prior to the Spanish Conquest, some scholars have argued that there were pre-Columbian horses.

In one way, the common understanding about horses is both right and wrong. There certainly were pre-Columbian horses, and fossil evidence provides a reasonable developmental history of the New World horse. However, these readily acceptable horses appear to have become extinct in the Pleistocene period. Appealing to those horses does not support the Book of Mormon because the Pleistocene ended long before the earliest parts of the Book of Mormon. However, researchers have found some anomalous remains that do appear to show that there were horses prior to the Spanish Conquest—both closer to and after Book of Mormon times.

Wade E. Miller, a retired paleontologist from the Department of Geology at Brigham Young University, notes results from recent studies: “Small scattered populations of horse and ass, especially in remote areas, probably survived in North America until shortly before they were reintroduced by the Spaniards. . . . The Carbon-14 dating involved was first instigated by Dr. Steven E. Jones, former physics professor at Brigham Young University.

I later worked with him on these.”² Miller notes that horse fossils found in North America have been dated from 5,890 BC to 1,120 BC.³

This research suggests caution in the firm declaration that there were no horses during Book of Mormon times. Although not yet to the point that the evidence is widely accepted, the presence of the data introduces the possibility that the Book of Mormon horse might not be anachronistic after all. Others have also accepted that there would have been modern horses among the Nephites. LDS scholar Robert R. Bennett accepts that the word *horse* accurately represented that animal: “In short, the Book of Mormon claims only that horses were known to some New World peoples before the time of Christ in certain limited regions of the New World. Thus we need not conclude from the text that horses were universally known in the Americas throughout pre-Columbian history.”⁴

Although some of the suggested anachronisms in the Book of Mormon might be resolved by the discovery that they really weren’t anachronistic at all, it is not an approach that can explain all of the anachronistic terms. Returning to our verse from Alma, so far there is no archaeological discovery that explains *chariots*. To date, attempts to show that *chariots* are not anachronistic have centered on discussions of the wheel. Because a part of the argument against *chariots* has also been the presumed ignorance of the wheel and axle, LDS scholars have emphasized the evidence that the wheel and axle were known. Several small ancient ceremonial objects with wheels have been recovered.⁵ Although that shows there was pre-Columbian knowledge of the wheel and axle, it really doesn’t tell us about *chariots* or any other larger wheeled vehicle, which are still unknown to exist during Book of Mormon times.

WORD CHOICE IN TRANSLATION

The use of words that have no counterpart in ancient culture is a larger category of potential anachronisms than the mention of plants and animals that are presently unknown to have been on the American continents before its European discovery in the late fifteenth century. These items have a better explanation in the fact that the Book of Mormon is a translation rather than an original document. It is entirely possible to have an anachronism in a translation that was not present in the original.

We need look no further than the King James translation of the Bible (KJV) for examples of anachronisms that occur only in the translation and not in the text being translated. The KJV frequently mentions candles,⁶ even though oil lamps provided light during both the Old and New Testament times. Technically, *candles* are an anachronism. No one suggests that the Old and New Testament must be false because they mention candles, even when candles were not yet used. The availability of the Hebrew and Greek source texts makes it clear that the original documents refer to the oil lamps

rather than candles. The anachronism was the result of an assumption the translators made based on their time and culture. Candles were the common means of providing light in early seventeenth century when King James commissioned the English translation of the Bible.

Another anachronism cited by critics is the use of the French word *adieu*. Jacob, Nephi's brother, concludes his final remarks to his people with "I bid farewell, hoping that many of my brethren may read my words. Brethren, *adieu*."⁷ Critics have jumped on this phrase as proof positive that the Book of Mormon is not authentic because the Nephites would be unaware of words in the French language, which is a relatively modern language and was nonexistent at the time of Jacob's death. This, however, like the use of *candles* in the KJV, is most likely the result of the translator using words common to his time to express concepts in the text.

This type of anachronism is not singular to books of translated scripture. William Whiston, translator of the autobiography of Flavius Josephus, which was written in the last decade of the first century AD, provides this translation of Josephus's opening lines: "Thus have I set down the genealogy of my family as I have found it described in the public records, and so bid *adieu* to those who calumniate me."⁸ Though the French language was well known at the time Whiston was translating Josephus's memoir in the eighteenth century, it was not a language in Josephus's day when he was writing his authoritative history of the Jews and Romans. While scholars would balk at the idea that Josephus used the word *adieu* in his autobiography, they have not cried foul at Whiston's use of the word in the translation or indicated that Whiston changed, embellished, or made up the text. He was simply rendering the text into a new language for a new audience through the process of translation.

SHIFTING MEANINGS OF WORDS

The case of the use of *chariots* in the Book of Mormon presents another issue in translation in addition to the one mentioned above. All languages evolve over time as vocabulary is added and the meanings associated with words shift. Modern readers see the word *chariot* and may mentally conjure images of Egyptian or Roman chariots, which were two-wheeled conveyances. Nevertheless, the word *chariot* has also been applied to four-wheeled conveyances—specifically, the very wheeled figurines from Mesoamerica that some have used as support for pre-Columbian *chariots*.

William Henry Holmes (1846–1933), an anthropologist and archaeologist, recorded, "[Désiré] Charnay [1828–1915] obtained from an ancient cemetery at Tenenpanco, Mexico, a number of toy chariots of terra cotta, presumably buried with the body of a child, some of which retained their wheels."⁹ Holmes had no problem using the same word that Charnay had used in his original text.¹⁰ Holmes and Charnay wrote that there were

chariots in Mesoamerica. They did not mean Old World war chariots. The use of *chariots* in the Book of Mormon translation need not either. Sometimes the translation anachronism might partially depend on changes in English meanings that make it appear that something was more anachronistic than it was at the time that Joseph translated the Book of Mormon.

TRANSLATION ANACHRONISMS

There are two types of explanations for translation anachronisms in the Book of Mormon. The LDS scholars who propose one or the other make their selection on the basis of their understanding of the type of translation we see in the Book of Mormon. Those who understand a very literal, almost word for word translation from the plates to the English text will favor one approach. Those who see a less literal translation tend to favor the other.

ANACHRONISMS INTRODUCED BY AUTHORS

The first explanation of the presence of a translation anachronism suggests that the problem occurred with the Book of Mormon peoples, and Joseph accurately translated the linguistic anachronism the Book of Mormon peoples created. When people from different cultures and speaking different languages meet, there is a known phenomenon where unknown animals in the new culture receive names based on words and animals already known in one's own culture. For example, Latin speakers encountered a previously unknown animal in the Nile and called it a "river horse," which is now known as a hippopotamus. None of us would think a hippopotamus either looks or acts like a horse—but someone used that name to describe it. The Maya did not have a word for *horse* when the Spanish arrived, and they typically described horses with some version of the word for *deer*.¹¹ Again, we understand that there are major differences between deer and horses, yet when we read Maya language documents describing the Spaniard's horses, they are called deer.

The suggestion is that this labeling process generated the anachronistic names in the Book of Mormon. Nephites who knew horses from the Old World found some different animal in the New World and used an Old World name for it. This labeling attribution has been recorded so frequently in history that it is not implausible to believe that it could have happened when the Nephites settled on the American continent. In this scenario, the initial contact created the anachronistic term, which Joseph translated just as the word was found on the plates.

ANACHRONISMS INTRODUCED BY TRANSLATORS

The second explanation is based on a less literal translation method. Rather than suggest that Nephite linguistic labeling created the anachronism, the translation anachronisms came from Joseph as the translator. The vocabulary

reflects Joseph's time and understanding in the same way that candles were the linguistic choice of the KJV translators.¹²

This explanation allows for a different way of seeing the anachronistic animals and provides an explanation for other phrases that are more appropriate to Joseph's time. For example, in 2 Nephi 9:47 we find: "Would I harrow up your souls if your minds were pure?" The verb *harrow* comes from the farm implement of that name that was used to break up ground for planting. It was an implement that was unknown in the New World, or even in the Old World, during Book of Mormon times.¹³ The Book of Mormon exclusively uses the verb to describe emotions. It never describes the implement. Thus the concept being translated as *harrow up* could easily have been on the plates; the particular word Joseph chose depended upon his own time and understanding.

Understanding the difference between using *harrow up* and describing someone using a harrow is important. Using a harrow would still be anachronistic. Describing the emotion with *harrow up* is a translation anachronism only in the vocabulary—not in the meaning. The fact that an anachronism can exist in translation cannot simply dismiss all possible anachronisms in the Book of Mormon. As with *harrow up*, we can understand it as a translation anachronism only after examining how it is used in the text. Our initial examples of the *horses* and *chariots* provide an important test case.

ANACHRONISMS IN CONTEXT

The way words are used in a text tell us what the meaning of the words might have been when the text was written. For example, Jeremiah 51:21 states: "And with thee will I break in pieces the horse and his rider; and with thee will I break in pieces the chariot and his rider." It is abundantly clear that men ride horses and ride in chariots. Similarly, Jeremiah 46:9 declares, "Come up, ye horses; and rage, ye chariots; and let the mighty men come forth; the Ethiopians and the Libyans, that handle the shield; and the Lydians, that handle and bend the bow." Here both the horse and the chariot function in a military setting in which, again, men ride on horses and in chariots. The contexts justify our assumptions of what *horses* and *chariots* mean in those verses.

The problem comes when we use those assumptions to govern our reading of the text. For example, Deanne Matheny, a lawyer with archaeological training, notes, "Twice King Lamoni's horses and chariots are prepared for traveling."¹⁴ Horses and chariots also are among the items that the Nephites assembled before their battle with the Gadianton robbers.¹⁵ These references indicate that horses functioned in several areas to pull conveyances of some sort.¹⁶

The verses Matheny references are particularly interesting for the context in which she places them as opposed to their original context. For

example, she says “horses and chariots are among the items with the Nephites assembled before their battle with the Gadianton robbers.” That clearly intends to place horses and chariots in a military context. However, they are also used in nonmilitary contexts: “And it came to pass in the seventeenth year, in the latter end of the year, the proclamation of Lachoneus had gone forth throughout all the face of the land, and they had taken their horses, and their chariots, and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance, and did march forth by thousands and by tens of thousands, until they had all gone forth to the place which had been appointed that they should gather themselves together, to defend themselves against their enemies.”¹⁷ Although the reason for gathering the material is a military situation, the actual context of the mention of horses and chariots is in a gathering of all their belongings: “and their cattle, and all their flocks, and their herds, and their grain, and all their substance.” That is not a military context. When we examine the contextual data carefully, there is no such militaristic connection.¹⁸

In Alma 18:9, the servants explain, “Behold, he is feeding thy horses. Now the king had commanded his servants . . . that they should prepare his horses and chariots, and conduct him forth to the land of Nephi; for there had been a great feast appointed at the land of Nephi, by the father of Lamoni, who was king over all the land.” This context explains that *horses* and *chariots* are near the palace and that *horses* must be fed. Lamoni is going to the land of Nephi on a formal state visit, but the role of the *horses* and *chariots* is not clear. We assume that the horse pulls the chariot because of the meaning of those words as we have learned them. However, it isn’t the relationship between the meaning of the English words that is important but the discernible relationship between the use of *chariots* and *horses* in the text.

Rather than appear in the context of war, Book of Mormon *horses* and *chariots* are seen in the context of a formal state visit. *Horses* and *chariots* reappear in that setting when Ammon and Lamoni hear that Ammon’s brothers are in prison: “Lamoni . . . caused that his servants should make ready his horses and his chariots”¹⁹ for another state visit to the king of the land where they were held.

Chariots never appear in the context of Book of Mormon warfare. *Horses* only move and eat. They never explicitly pull anything. They are never ridden. There are no cultural innovations that followed the use of the horse in the Eastern hemisphere. If we replaced the word *horse* with a made-up word such as *glerk*, we would never suspect when reading the text that a *glerk* was a horse. Thus the text itself does not support *horse* as the only or even best translation for whatever word was on the plates.²⁰

Even assuming that *horse* and *chariot* represent translation anachronisms, the nouns still represent textual placeholders for some animal and conveyance in the original plate language. Just as with the problem of the KJV

translation of *candle*, there is some relationship to the original language. In that case, it is easy to see both the candle and the oil lamp as sources of light. We expect that both words will occur in contexts of providing light. Even if we didn't have the original, we could work our way back to oil lamps despite the translation anachronism.

In the case of horses and chariots, the proposed Mesoamerican location for the Book of Mormon provides a context in which we may see what might have been the underlying terms that had sufficient similarity to produce the translation anachronism of horses and chariots. The appropriate conveyance behind the word *chariot* would be a royal litter, carried on men's shoulders rather than pulled by an animal. Even the English of the text never mentions wheels, which were not known to be used for conveyance in ancient America. Our imagination supplies the wheels because of the word *chariot*. As translator, Joseph could have easily assumed wheels as we do, based on the common wheeled conveyances of his time.

As for the *horse*, it need not have pulled the *chariot*. The text never says that the *horse* pulls the *chariot*, only that *horses* and *chariots* are made ready. In Mesoamerica, the royal litter was also often associated with an animal. Freidel, Schele, and Parker—Maya researchers—commented on a scene found on one of the temples at Tikal. The king is “wearing the balloon head-dress of Tlaloc-Venus warfare adopted at the time of the Waxaktun conquest, and holding the bunched javelins and shield. . . . He sits in majesty on the litter that carried him into battle, while above him hulks Waxaklahun-Ubah-Kan, the great War Serpent. . . . Graffiti drawings scratched on the walls of Tikal palaces, depicting the conjuring of supernatural beings from the Otherworld, prove that these scenes were more than imaginary events seen only by the kings. . . . They are the poorly drawn images of witnesses, perhaps minor members of lordly families, who scratched the wonders that they saw during moments of ritual into the walls of the places where they lived their lives.”²¹

Karl Taube discusses the practice among the later lowland Maya: “Along with warriors and hunters, Maya kings had a distinct relation with the forest, as they were capable of passing beyond political and natural boundaries to visit or conquer distant realms. With this unique ability, they were identified with the jaguar (the “king” of the forest)—a concept vividly expressed by royal litters and palanquins topped by jaguar beings. First appearing on Stela 212 of Late Preclassic Izapa, such jaguar vehicles are common in Classic Maya art, including figurines. . . . The jaguar palanquins reveal that, during the Classic Maya period, Maya kings prowled the landscape as fierce beasts guarding and extending their domain.”²²

Both examples show that *chariots* and *horses* as used in the Book of Mormon text could refer to the type of animals and conveyances depicted in the artwork of ancient American cultures.

AN IMPERFECT TRANSLATION

There is no way to know precisely what was on the plates. Nevertheless, the very fact that we have the Book of Mormon in translation requires that we look at anachronisms in the text carefully. What at first may appear like a clear mistake, when studied carefully, may just as rationally be interpreted as a rendering of an unknown element to its closest known representation in the language and understanding of the author or translator. In the vast majority of the cases, it is reasonable that we are seeing a translation anachronism rather than a historical anachronism, and translation anachronisms do not impugn the authenticity of the original.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Clark, John E. "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins." *BYU Studies* 44, no. 4 (2005): 83–104.
- Gardner, Brant. *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon*. Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011.
- Miller, Wade E. and Matthew Roper. "Animals in the Book of Mormon: Challenges and Perspectives." *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/animals-in-the-book-of-mormon-challenges-and-perspectives/>.
- Miller, Wade E. *Science and the Book of Mormon: Careloms, Cumoms, Horses & More*. Highland, UT: Miller Publishing, 2010.
- Roper, Matthew. "Swords and 'Cimeters' in the Book of Mormon." *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 34–43.
- Wright, Mark Alan. "The Cultural Tapestry of Mesoamerica." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 22, no. 2 (2013): 4–21.

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NOTES

1. A catalog of potential anachronisms and responses may be found at FairMormon, “Book of Mormon Anachronisms,” FairMormon, http://en.fairmormon.org/Book_of_Mormon/Anachronisms.
2. Wade E. Miller, *Science and the Book of Mormon: Cures, Customs, Horses & More* (Highland, UT: Miller Publishing, 2010), 77.
3. Wade E. Miller and Matthew Roper, “Animals in the Book of Mormon: Challenges and Perspectives,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture*, <http://www.mormoninterpreter.com/?s=Animals+in+the+book+of+Mormon>.
4. Robert R. Bennett, “Horses in the Book of Mormon,” Neal A Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, <http://publications.maxwellinstitute.byu.edu/fullscreen/?pub=1055&index=1>.
5. Richard A. Diehl and Margaret D. Mandeville, “Tula, and Wheeled Animal Effigies in Mesoamerica,” *Antiquity* 61, no. 232 (1987): 239–46; Paul R. Cheesman, *The World of the Book of Mormon* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers & Distributors, 1984), 172–73; Paul R. Cheesman, “The Wheel in Ancient America,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 2 (Winter 1969): 185–97; John L. Sorenson, “Wheeled Figurines in the Ancient World,” *FARMS Preliminary Reports* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1981).
6. Job 18:6, 21:17; Psalm 18:28; Proverbs 20:27, 24:20, 31:18; Jeremiah 25:10; Matthew 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 8:16, 11:33, 15:8; Revelation 18:23, 22:5.
7. Jacob 7:27; emphasis added.
8. William Whiston, trans., *The Life of Flavius Josephus—Autobiography*, <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/autobiog.htm>; emphasis added. The author thanks Stephen Smoot for this insight.
9. William Henry Holmes, *Handbook of Aboriginal American Antiquities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), 20.
10. Désiré Charnay, *The Ancient Cities of the New World, Being Voyages and Explorations in Mexico and Central America from 1857–1882* (Charleston, SC: Nabu Press, 2010), 171.
11. The best explication of this concept is found in John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1975), 295–99.
12. Brant A. Gardner, *The Gift and Power: Translating the Book of Mormon* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2011), 187–92.
13. The harrow was known to the KJV translators, who also used it anachronistically as both the implement and the verb. See 1 Chronicles 20:3 and Job 39:10 among others.
14. Alma 18:9–10, 20:6.
15. 3 Nephi 3:22.
16. Deanne G. Matheny, “Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography,” in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 305, n. 23.
17. 3 Nephi 3:22.
18. In 2 Nephi 12:7 and 2 Nephi 15:28, descriptions of horses and chariots functioning in Old Testament contexts are, in fact, Old Testament quotations from Isaiah.
19. Alma 20:6.
20. In contrast to the vocabulary issue with *horse*, the use of metal plates in the Book of Mormon is not an anachronism because the context refers to creating them with ore (1 Nephi 19:1; Mosiah 21:27; Mormon 8:5), and they were metal when delivered to Joseph Smith. The

process of identifying an anachronism to vocabulary choices cannot be used indiscriminately but must be based on evidence from the text.

21. David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (1993; repr., New York: William Morrow Paperbacks, 1995), 311–13.

22. Karl Taube, "Ancient and Contemporary Maya Conceptions about Field and Forest," in *The Lowland Maya Area: Three Millennia at the Human-Wildland Interface*, ed. Scott Fedick et al. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2003), 480.