

GENERAL NOTES

Anachronisms: Critics of the Book of Mormon frequently offer long lists of anachronisms, that is, things that would seem out of place in pre-Columbian America. These typically include horses, elephants, cattle, sheep, goats, swine, barley, wheat, steel, silk, swords, and chariots. Several of these items are mentioned only in passing, and it may be that the attention of the translator was focused on other, more significant matters. The King James Bible similarly includes anachronistic references to silk, steel, brass, and candles, and the Book of Mormon follows that translation in many respects. Or familiar terms may have been used to represent things that were unknown to the early Nephite settlers or to readers in Joseph Smith's day, as happened when the Spaniards first encountered New World animals, plants, and artifacts. For instance, many of the "swords" in the Book of Mormon could have been *macuahuitl*—wooden clubs embedded with obsidian blades (such weapons, unlike metal swords, could be stained with blood, as at Alma 24.12–15). Some of the anachronistic items may have had very limited production, though it is possible that future discoveries will validate at least a few. References to cement at Helaman 3.7–11 were long thought to be anachronistic but have since been amply documented in Mesoamerica of the first century BC, and a New World species of barley was confirmed in the 1980s (though not yet in Mesoamerica). Perhaps the most troublesome of the commonly mentioned anachronisms is horses, which Joseph Smith certainly had experience with, yet there may be more to the story. The Nephite scripture mentions horses in ten verses (aside from biblical quotations), but no one in the Book of Mormon is ever said to have ridden a horse. This is odd from a nineteenth-century American perspective. In any case, lists of apparent anachronisms should be considered alongside lists of correspondences with the ancient Americas such as roads, large cities, seasonal warfare, earthwork and timber fortifications, and sophisticated writing systems, as well as cultural connections to the ancient Near East that were recognized only after the publication of the Book of Mormon, including prophetic commission and covenant patterns (1 Ne 1, Mos 2–6), literary devices (e.g., 2 Ne 4, Alma 36), a few Hebrew and Egyptian names (e.g., Nephi, Sariah, Mosiah, Alma, Jershon, Paanchi), and details regarding ancient olive cultivation (Jacob 5).

Chronology: The internal chronology of the Book of Mormon is quite consistent, with Lehi leaving Jerusalem some 600 years before the birth of the Savior, a transition to the reign of the judges 509 years later (Mos 29.43–47), and the signs of Christ's birth in the ninety-second year of the judges (3 Ne 1.1, 4, 26). The calendar, however, needs to be adjusted slightly in light of modern historical research. Nephite chronology is anchored to two events in the Old World: the first year of the reign of Zedekiah in 597 BC (1 Ne 1.4) and the birth of Christ about 6–4 BC (3 Ne 1.10–21). Lehi, Nephi, and Mormon speak of six hundred years between the two (1 Ne 10.4; 19.8; 2 Ne 25.19; 3 Ne 1.1). They may have been using approximate figures, though some have suggested that the ancient Hebrew lunar calendar of 354 days or the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar year of 360 days would better fit the data. To avoid

confusion, this edition uses a countdown style of chronological notes once the reign of the judges begins, and then it marks years by counting up from the sign of Jesus's birth.

Coherence: Some of the strongest evidences for the ancient origins of the text can be seen in its complicated narrative structure, which features flashbacks (Mos 9–27, 23–24; Alma 17–27); embedded documents (sermons, letters, personal records); year-by-year chronological markers through a century of judges (with some years taking just a few sentences and other stretching over many chapters); multiple wars, including one fought on two fronts simultaneously (Alma 52–62); scriptural quotations and exegesis; frequent intratextual allusions; editorial comment sections; sources in various plates and records; genealogical relationships; successions of rulers (including the Jaredite king-list of Ether 1.6–33 that is reversed and expanded in chapters 7–11); parallel narratives; and literary devices such as poetry, allegory, and chiasmus. All of this—including nearly two hundred named individuals, some ninety different place-names, and about seven hundred geographical references—is handled virtually without contradiction or error. In fact, there are only two geographical mistakes in the entire book: one place-name each at Alma 51.26 and 53.6. The section headings, charts, and maps in this volume can help readers keep all this straight. The level of narrative consistency and coherence is all the more remarkable since eyewitnesses and the original manuscript clearly show that the Book of Mormon's nearly six hundred pages were transcribed from Joseph's rapid dictation as he looked into a seer stone, working without notes or books, over the course of just three months when he was twenty-three years old. The text was dictated one time through, with no revisions before its initial publication, and only two corrections to the narrative structure since that time: changing the name Benjamin to Mosiah at Mos 21.28 (1837) and also at Ether 4.1 (1849)—neither of which appears absolutely necessary. The coherence and complexity of the text suggest that its ultimate origins were in a carefully composed written record, rather than in an extemporaneous oral performance by a talented storyteller working from a general mental outline.

Demographics: The Book of Mormon speaks as if Lehi's promised land had been populated solely by Jaredites, Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites (see Jacob 1.13–14; 4 Ne 1.36–37). Consequently, early Latter-day Saints assumed that all American Indians were descendants of the Lamanites. The development of the academic disciplines of history, archaeology, and physical anthropology has shown that the peopling of the Americas was much more complicated than that. It now appears that the Nephites and Lamanites were minority ethnic groups within the cultural sphere of genetic populations that came to the New World from Asia some fifteen to twelve thousand years ago (hence the difficulty of discovering traces of their distinctive DNA today). Undoubtedly, there was a fair amount of intercultural influence and even intermarriage with indigenous populations, which helps explain the rapid population growth attributed to the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon is characterized by regular hostility between the Nephites and Lamanites, and racial stereotypes were apparently a component of group identity. Nevertheless, there were times when dark-skinned Lamanites surpassed the Nephites in righteousness, and the two populations intermingled in the centuries following Christ's visit. One lesson of the Book of Mormon is that the gospel can help overcome cultural

biases concerning race and ethnicity. (It should be noted that some LDS readers see the designations “dark” or “white” as metaphorical rather than physical.)

Geography: The narrative begins in Jerusalem and quickly moves to the Arabian Peninsula, both of which are familiar regions. The route of Lehi’s family through the Arabian Peninsula can be traced; what was not well known in Joseph Smith’s time is that there are locations on the coast of Oman that match the descriptions of Bountiful, where Lehi’s family constructed a ship. In addition, recent discoveries of altars bearing the name *NHM*, at the place where Lehi’s family was said to have arrived at “Nahom” (1 Ne 16.34), are the most promising candidates to date for archaeological confirmation of a story from the Book of Mormon. After Lehi’s family is led to a new promised land somewhere in the Americas, the geography is uncertain. Many early Latter-day Saints believed that the events of the Book of Mormon took place throughout North and South America, with the Isthmus of Panama as the “narrow neck of land” (Alma 22.32; 63.4; Ether 10.20). More careful readings of the Nephite scripture, however, indicate that the entire narrative took place within a much more limited area, about five hundred miles long and two hundred miles wide. Most Latter-day Saint scholars believe that Mesoamerica is the most likely location, though some Mormons hold to a North American setting that draws on the statements of nineteenth-century leaders. The Church itself has not taken an official position. The hypothetical map included in this volume is based on internal geographical references.

Language: The language of the Book of Mormon is roughly similar to that of the King James Bible, though the grammar of the earliest manuscripts was often nonstandard for both the Bible and nineteenth-century America (many of these grammatical irregularities have been edited out of the text since 1830). Some scholars have detected traces of Hebraisms, as well as nonbiblical, archaic English syntax and usages from the 1500s and 1600s that were obsolete by Joseph Smith’s time. Biblical phrases from both the Old and New Testaments are used throughout the Book of Mormon, and several chapters are quoted with only slight variations from the 1611 King James Bible, even though that version reflects Hebrew and Greek texts that had been significantly revised and modified over hundreds of years. The Nephite record also includes numerous instances of religious language and concepts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Book of Mormon may be a rather free translation (which is a different issue than whether it was revealed to Joseph in a fairly exact form); that is, the words of ancient Nephite prophets may have been updated and transformed into a narrative that resonated with biblically literate nineteenth-century Americans. Nevertheless, some of what may seem anachronistic language—Christian theology before the birth of Jesus, for example—is integral to the message of the scripture; as a righteous remnant of the house of Israel, the Nephites had revelatory access to more of the Christian gospel than their contemporaries in the Old World. Without our being able to consult the original text in reformed Egyptian (Morm 9.32), it is difficult to know how the 1830 Book of Mormon compares to what was written on the gold plates. At the same time, however, the presence of Early Modern English usages suggests that the Book of Mormon was in some ways external to Joseph and his immediate environment. The genesis of this ancient scripture, as well as its delivery to

the modern world, was apparently a more complex, eclectic, and multidimensional process than many Latter-day Saints have imagined. It is indeed “a marvelous work and a wonder” (Isa 29.14; 2 Ne 25.17–18).

Translation: Despite Joseph Smith’s assertion that he had translated the Nephite record “through the gift and power of God” (title page), there is still no consensus among Latter-day Saints as to how exactly he produced the Book of Mormon. Some scholars believe that the seer stone provided mental impressions, which Joseph then put into his own words (perhaps something like his reception of most of the revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants). This mode of translation might account for some of the irregular grammar, the anachronisms, and the phrases borrowed from the King James Bible, as well as Joseph’s willingness to modify wording and grammar in later editions. Others scholars, however, think that Joseph probably saw the text in the seer stone and read it aloud to his scribes—which better explains the consistency of language, the intricacies of the narrative, the internal allusions, the testimony of eyewitnesses to the translation process, and the immediate corrections that appear regularly in the original manuscript when scribes got a word wrong or misspelled a name at its first appearance. In this case, Joseph would have been using the seer stone to gain access to a previously existing translation, perhaps one done by God himself or by appointed angels. However the translation occurred, the resulting text seems sufficient for the Lord’s purposes, and many people in both the nineteenth century and today have heard His voice as they have read the Book of Mormon. This sacred record bears testimony of Jesus Christ from beginning to end, with an invitation to come unto Him and to see His hand at work throughout history as He answers prayers, keeps covenants, and prepares a people for his coming.

Witnesses: The most significant artifact connected with the Book of Mormon is the set of gold plates that the angel Moroni entrusted to Joseph Smith in 1827. This was a material rather than a visionary object, and a number of Joseph’s contemporaries, both Mormon and non-Mormon, claimed to have seen or hefted the plates. The Three and the Eight Witnesses are particularly significant because they saw the plates openly and were questioned many times throughout their lives about their experience. They all remained firm in their testimony, despite the fact that many had fallen out with Joseph Smith at one time or another. There were also several women who claimed to have held the plates while they were covered with a thin cloth or secured in a box. These included Emma Smith, Lucy Mack Smith, Katherine Smith Salisbury, and Lucy Harris and her daughter (both nonbelievers). In addition, there is a family tradition that Mary Whitmer, the mother of David Whitmer, was shown the plates by an angel while Joseph, Emma, and Oliver Cowdery were boarding at her home during the final weeks of the translation. (The testimonies of some of these women are included in this volume.) Joseph reported in 1838 that the plates “remained safe in my hands, until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, the messenger [Moroni] called for them, I delivered them up to him; and he has them in his charge until this day” (Joseph Smith—History 1.60). Although the gold plates are no longer available for inspection, the Book of Mormon concludes with an invitation for all readers to become witnesses themselves by asking God directly, with a promise that “he

will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost” (Moro 10.4). There is still much that we do not know about the Book of Mormon, but it contains the word of the Lord to our generation, and as Nephi’s brother Jacob wrote, quoting Psalm 95, “Today, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts” (Jacob 6.6).

Further Reading

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- . *Mormon’s Map*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000.
- Welch, John W., David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely, eds. *Glimpses of Lehi’s Jerusalem*. Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004.

The Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship at Brigham Young University has published a great deal of material on LDS scriptures in various books, multimedia presentations, and periodicals, including the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (note that the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, or FARMS, became part of BYU in 1997 and has since been incorporated into the Maxwell Institute). Other BYU affiliates that regularly publish scholarly work on the Book of Mormon include *BYU Studies*, *Religious Educator*, and the Religious Studies Center. In addition, *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* (an online journal at mormoninterpreter.com) and *Book of Mormon Central* (bookofmormoncentral.org) are also valuable resources for Book of Mormon scholarship.