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**John Bernhisel's Gift to a Prophet:
Incidents of Travel in Central America
and the Book of Mormon**

Matthew Roper

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JOHN BERNHISEL'S GIFT TO A PROPHET: INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

Matthew Roper

Abstract: The claim that God revealed the details of Book of Mormon geography is not new, but the recent argument that there was a conspiracy while the Prophet was still alive to oppose a revealed geography is a novel innovation. A recent theory argues that the “Mesoamerican theory” or “limited Mesoamerican geography” originated in 1841 with Benjamin Winchester, an early Mormon missionary, writer, and dissident, who rejected the leadership of Brigham Young and the Twelve after 1844. This theory also claims that three unsigned editorials on Central America and the Book of Mormon published in the Times and Seasons on September 15 and October 1, 1842, were written by Benjamin Winchester, who successfully conspired with other dissidents to publish them against the will of the Prophet. Three articles address these claims. The first article addressed two questions: Did Joseph Smith, as some have claimed, know the details of and put forth a revealed Book of Mormon geography? Second, what is a Mesoamerican geography and does it constitute a believable motive for a proposed Winchester conspiracy? This second article provides additional historical background on the question of Joseph Smith’s thinking on the Book of Mormon by examining the influence of John L. Stephen’s 1841 work, Incidents of Travel in Central America, upon early Latter-day Saints, including Joseph Smith.

The claim that Joseph Smith opposed cultural, historical, and geographical connections between Central America (Mesoamerica) and the Book of Mormon is based on the assumption that the details of an external Book of Mormon geography had been revealed to him.¹

¹ Jonathan Neville, *The Lost City of Zarahemla: From Iowa to Guatemala and Back Again* (New York: LetMEREAD.com, 2015). Neville engages in a great deal of unanchored speculation about what Joseph Smith and others thought and felt about

Proponents of the so-called “Heartland” interpretation claim that Joseph Smith’s usage of such terms as *this land*, *this continent*, or *this country* indicate a specialized usage that must and can refer only to territory within the United States.² Contrary to that view, the historical evidence suggests that Joseph Smith never considered that the question of Book of Mormon geography was settled by revelation, and that those terms, as applied to the Book of Mormon, do not reflect a specialized usage, but refer to the land, continent, and country of America, meaning North and South America, not only the United States.³ The interest of Joseph Smith and other early Latter-day Saints in the remains of pre-Columbian culture accessible to them does not justify the claim that he believed or taught an exclusive United States geography.⁴ Early usage

the articles on Central America. “The Prophet *doesn’t agree*” with Winchester (3). “The Book of Mormon is a cause of conflict between [Winchester] and Joseph. It is a direct challenge to Joseph’s role as prophet and accuracy — or sufficiency — of the translation of the Book of Mormon itself” (151). Where is the evidence that the Prophet didn’t agree with the articles or that he felt in the least threatened by them? Joseph “*thought* they [the articles] would be recognized for what they were” (8, emphasis added). William Smith “*doesn’t care* what Joseph *thinks*” about Book of Mormon geography “because he *knows* his brother won’t do anything about it, whether out of fear or loyalty” (141). When Joseph meets with John Taylor in the fall of 1842 they are really strategizing about William Smith and Winchester, although the record is silent (149). It is “easy to *imagine* that when the ‘Zarahemla’ article is published, *Joseph is furious*” (160, emphasis added). “Joseph did not *want* Winchester’s ideas to take hold” (190). How does Neville know what Joseph wanted? He claims that Joseph labeled the articles on Central America “mistakes” (8). Not true. He grants that Joseph “never expressly repudiates them” (145). That wording is misleading, because it suggests that he *did* repudiate them, just not *expressly*. In fact, there is absolutely no historical documentation that he repudiated them *at all* or was opposed to their content outside of the author’s imagination.

2 Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum, *Prophecies and Promises: The Book of Mormon and The United States of America* (New York: Digital Legend, 2009); Rod Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America’s Heartland* (New York: Digital Legend, 2011).

3 Matthew Roper, “Joseph Smith, Revelation, and Book of Mormon Geography,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 15-85; Roper, “Losing the Remnant: The New Exclusivist ‘Movement’ and the Book of Mormon,” *FARMS Review* 22/2 (2010): 87-124; Roper, “The Treason of the Geographers: Mythical Mesoamerican Conspiracy and the Book of Mormon,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 16 (2015). Descendants of Book of Mormon people may have become dispersed throughout the Americas even though the geographical setting for events described in the book was likely limited in scope.

4 Brigham Young refers to restrictions placed on Joseph Smith which kept him from visiting Lamanites in other places. Oliver Cowdery shared reports of the

of the term *Indian* and *American Indian* as applied to the Lamanites likewise reflected this broad usage, not a restrictive one.

The American hemispheric interpretation of the Book of Mormon was widely held from 1830 on and is additional strong evidence against the claim of a revealed external geography. It is highly unlikely that the Prophet would have allowed that view to receive such wide circulation for so long a time had he felt that it contradicted anything of significant doctrinal or revelatory significance to the Saints. Neville tries to set Joseph Smith against efforts to connect the Book of Mormon narrative with Mesoamerica, but Latter-day Saints had been making connections with that region since 1830.

In 1844, John Stephens and Frederick Catherwood published an account of their travels in Central America, along with a description and drawings of notable ruins they found in the region. Some Mormons, like Benjamin Winchester, heard of these discoveries, yet their ideas about Book of Mormon geography continued to reflect the traditional interpretation. Stephens's work did influence the writings of other Latter-day Saints whose interpretations show a growing recognition of the importance of Mesoamerica as a key center for the events in the Book of Mormon. These are best described as *antecedents* or modifications within the traditional hemispheric framework, rather than limited Mesoamerican geographies of the kind we know today.⁵ In light of the recent efforts of some to distance Joseph Smith from ideas about Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon, his personal interest and evaluation of *Incidents of Travel in Central America* clearly provide historical evidence on the question of who wrote three unsigned editorials in for the *Times and Seasons* in 1842. This article will show how Joseph Smith's 1841 letter to John Bernhisel reflects the Prophet's

Navajo in the Rocky Mountains whom he described as "Lamanites." See Roper, "Losing the Remnant," 103–05.

5 Roper, "Limited Geography," 225–75. Orson Pratt thought that "a careful reader" of the Book of Mormon might be able to "trace the relative bearings and distances of many of these cities from each other; and, if acquainted with the present geographical features of the country" and "by the descriptions given in that book, determine, very nearly, the precise spot of ground they once occupied" (Orson Pratt, "Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?" *Millennial Star* 10/19 [1 October, 1848]: 289), but he never attempted it himself. We have no evidence, for example, that any Latter-day Saint addressed the implications of distances described in the text until the early twentieth century. Neville anachronistically attributes to Joseph Smith an antipathy toward a "limited Mesoamerican geography" (191), a theory that, as far as we can tell, did not exist in Joseph Smith's day.

personal interest in, enthusiasm for, and assessment of the value of Stephens's book, including correspondences between Central America and the Book of Mormon.

“Out of the Best Books”

Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan was published in 1841.⁶ The two-volume work by John Lloyd Stephens, with illustrations by Frederick Catherwood, describes the two explorers' experiences and discoveries in 1839 and 1840 as they traveled through the region. It was widely praised in the American press for their interesting description of pre-Columbian ruins and their excellent illustrations, which pointed to a level of civilization in the region previously unanticipated by most Americans. The two men returned to northern Yucatan in 1841 for a second expedition, described in another publication, *Incidents of Travels in Yucatan*, published in 1843.⁷ In 1844, Catherwood published his own work, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, which included twenty-five hand-colored lithographs interspersed with his commentary.⁸

The books were enthusiastically received by American readers, including Latter-day Saints. Even before they were able to read the book, missionaries were citing reports of the travelers' lectures in New York City as evidence for and to refute criticism of the Book of Mormon. Parley P. Pratt reprinted one report from the *New York Express* in the September 1840 *Millennial Star*. The article reported Stephens and Catherwood's descriptions of numerous statues, monuments and obelisks “wholly covered with hieroglyphics and inscriptions” at the sites of Quirigua and Palenque.⁹ In November, 1840 Erastus Snow chided an anonymous critic who had insisted that there was no evidence of pre-Columbian writing: “Here is a specimen of your consummate ignorance of American Antiquities. ... Nearly all the principal papers of this country have of late published the results of the researches of Messrs. Stephens and Catherwood, in Central America. On the river

6 John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841).

7 John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1843). Both this and the 1841 work was reprinted by Dover Publications in 1969.

8 F. Catherwood, *Views of Ancient Monuments in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (New York: Bartlett and Welford, 1844).

9 “Antiquities of America,” *Millennial Star* 1/5 (September 1840): 118.

Montagua, Monuments and Statues in abundance were found, many of which are covered with writings, and yet you say these are no proofs that the science of writing was ever known here. The system of Logic by which you arrive at your conclusion must be peculiar to yourself.¹⁰ The June 15, 1841, issue of the *Times and Seasons* reprinted another article from the *New York Weekly Herald* reporting the substance of the travelers' lectures. The Nauvoo editor who introduced the article thought the report "proved beyond controversy that, on this vast continent, once flourished a mighty people, skilled in the arts and sciences."¹¹

In a letter to Joseph Smith in September 1841, John E. Page explained a "new course of argument" that he had adopted and found useful:

I have great access to the people in a new course of argument which I have adopted and that is this — I have lately availed myself of the purchase of Stevens [Stephens] and Catherwoods travels in Guatemala or central America in which those gentlemen have exhibited by seventy plates the antiquities of that count[r]y which when compared with The Book of Mormon so completely proves the truth and divinity of the Book of Mormon there is not a gentile dog left to stir a tongue in an attempt to put down the collateral testimony which those records afford me in proof of the Book of Mormon — Next or second argument is the fulfilment of the Prophetical sayings which are in the Book of Mormon itself.¹²

Neville repeatedly attributes this "new course of argument" to Winchester, and mis-characterizes it as one that used evidence from

10 E. Snow, *E. Snow's Reply to the Self-Styled Philanthropist, of Chester County* (Philadelphia: 1840), 2-3. The bulk of the pamphlet consists of a letter from Snow to the anonymous critic dated November 1840.

11 "American Antiquities — More Proofs of the Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons* 2/16 (15 June, 1841): 440. At the time, Don Carlos Smith and Robert B. Thompson were editors.

12 John E. Page to Joseph Smith, 1 September, 1841, Philadelphia, PA, Joseph Smith Collection, Church Historian's Library. Page had previously used the fulfillment of prophetic promises in the Book of Mormon. On July, 1839, he spoke on the subject "and went on to show that no impostor would ever attempt to make such promises as are contained [in] pages 541 and 34th — which he did in a very satisfactory manner. <& then bore testimony>" Joseph Smith Journal, 7 July, 1839, in Dean C. Jesse, Mark Ashurst-McGee, Richard Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers. Journals Volume 1: 1832-1839* (Salt Lake City: The Church Historian's Press, 2008), 345, 347. The promises to which page referred are those found in Ether 2:4-13 and Mormon 8:26-36 in the current edition of the Book of Mormon.

Mesoamerica to support the Book of Mormon (1, 3, 39, 42, 139, 151, 182, 189, 266), but there was nothing “new” about the appeal to Central American discoveries. Page’s approach (and it was *his*, not Winchester’s) consisted of actually using Stephens’s book in his defense of the Book of Mormon. Winchester never mentioned Stephens until 1842. And while this approach may have been new to Page, other missionaries, such as Parley P. Pratt and Erastus Snow, were referencing Stephens in 1840.

A Book Review from a Prophet

In September 1841, Wilford Woodruff, returning from an apostolic mission in Great Britain, passed through New York City. On September 8, John Bernhisel, a recent convert, wrote to Joseph Smith informing him that he was sending him a copy of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* “as a token of my regard for you as a Prophet of the Lord.”¹³ The next day he asked Woodruff to carry it with him to Nauvoo, along with the accompanying letter. On the long journey home, the apostle had time to read. On September 13, after completing the first volume, he wrote, “I felt truly interested in this work for it brought to light a flood of testimony in proof of the book of mormon in the discovery & survey of the city *Copan* in Central america A correct drawing of the monuments, pyramids, portraits, & Hieroglyphics as executed by Mr. Catherwood is now presented before the publick & is truly a wonder to the world. Their whole travels are truly interesting.”¹⁴ On September 16 he wrote, “I perused the 2d Vol of Stephens travels In Central America Chiapas of Yucatan & the ruins of Palenque & Copan. It is truly one of the most interesting histories I have ever read.”¹⁵ He arrived home on October 6, where the Prophet received Bernhisel’s gift.

On November 16, 1841, Joseph Smith responded to Bernhisel, thanking him for the gift:

I received your kind present by the hand of Er [Elder] Woodruff & feel myself under many obligations for this mark of your esteem & friendship which to me is the more

13 John Bernhisel to Joseph Smith, 8 September 1841, in Dean C. Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, revised edition (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 533.

14 Wilford Woodruff Journal, 13 September, 1841, in Scott G. Kenney, ed., *Wilford Woodruff’s Journal* (Midvale, UT: Signature Books, 1983), 2:126. Spelling in the original.

15 Wilford Woodruff Journal, 16 September, 1841, in Kenney, 2:126. Spelling in the original.

interesting as it unfolds & develops many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon; I have read the volumes with the greatest interest & pleasure & must say that of all histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct luminous & comprihensive.¹⁶

The letter to Bernhisel belongs to a class of historical documents that are only extant in the hand of scribes but are part of the Joseph Smith corpus.¹⁷ Dean Jesse identified the handwriting as that of John Taylor.¹⁸ The Joseph Smith Papers website indicates that the handwriting is at present unidentified.¹⁹ Based upon current information it appears that Smith either dictated the letter to a scribe, or that he directed him to write to Bernhisel on his behalf using the words he deemed proper. In either case, it would be unlikely for Taylor or any other of his scribes to knowingly attribute to the Smith views and opinions that were not his own or that were inconsistent with revelatory teachings of the Prophet. As with several other letters of this kind, it is reasonable to see the content of the letter to Bernhisel as an accurate representation of Joseph Smith's intent, if not his own words. Joseph Smith's comments are notable in that they constitute a very brief but informative book review expressing the Prophet's personal evaluation of what he had read.

Of “greatest interest” and a “pleasure” to read

Joseph Smith told Bernhisel that he had not only read the volumes, but found them “of greatest interest” and a “pleasure to read.” Stephens wrote in a personable and self-effacing style that welcomes the reader to his story. When I first read *Incidents* I could not help but like the

16 Joseph Smith to John Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, in Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533.

17 See, for example, Joseph Smith letters to Oliver Granger, May 4, 1841, and Jennetta Richards, June 23, 1842, which were written in the hands of Robert B. Thompson and William Clayton respectively, in Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 527-28, 551-52. Joseph Smith's oft-cited letter to Emma Smith on June 4, 1834, from Zion's Camp was also dictated; a copy exists only in the handwriting of James Mulholland. See Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 344.

18 Jesse, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533.

19 <http://josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/letter-to-john-bernhisel-16-november-1841>.

man and immediately relate to some of his experiences. His description of standing in the ruined palace of Palenque one night reading a New York newspaper by the enchanting light of fireflies recalled a treasured experience I had shared with my children years ago.²⁰ The other insects of Mexico and Central America caused Stephens and his companions no end of difficulty:

Besides moschetoes and garrapatas, or ticks, we suffered from another worse insect, called by the native *niguas*, which, we are told, pestered the Spaniards on their first entry into the country, and which says the historian, “ate their Way into the Flesh, under the Nails of the Toes, then laid their Nits there within, and multiplied in such a manner that there was no ridding them but by Cauteries, so that some lost their Toes, and some their Feet, whereas they should at first have been picked out; but being as yet unacquainted with the Evil, they knew not how to apply the Remedy.” This description is true even to the last clause.²¹

Stephens, also a careful observer, asked good questions. His carefully reasoned conclusions and recommendations to future scholars provided “a rich fund for thought.”²² The work, wrote another reviewer, “unites both literary and scientific merit of a higher order. . . . We do not doubt that this book, both on account of its doubly national character and its undoubted superior merit, will find its way into the libraries of all persons who ever read anything else than a novel.”²³

“It unfolds and develops many things that are of great importance to this generation”

The violent and depressing Spanish conquest and subjugation of native populations of Mesoamerica laid the foundation for destructive currents, some of which continue even today. In southern Mexico, under the rule of Spain, frustration over social inequality and injustice had bubbled over into the violence. Stephens relates:

20 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:301-02.

21 *Ibid.*, 2:322.

22 Review of Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America*, in *North American Review* 53/2 (1841): 503.

23 *New York Review*, (July 1841): 225. *Incidents* was simultaneously published in New York and London.

The Indians submitted to the dominion of the Spaniards until the year 1700, when the whole province revolted, and in Chillon, Tumbala, and Palenque they apostatized from Christianity, murdered the priests, profaned the churches, paid impious adoration to an Indian female, massacred the white men, and took women for their wives. But, as soon as the intelligence reached Guatemala, a strong force was sent against them, the revolted towns were reduced and recovered to the Catholic faith, and tranquility was restored. The right of the Indians, however, to the ownership of the soil was still recognized, and down to the time of the Mexican Independence they received rent for land in the villages and the milpas in the neighborhood.²⁴

Central American Independence from Spain in 1823 did not put an end to these difficulties. The Liberal faction worked to unite Central America under one government and impose progressive policies that went against entrenched native traditions and practices and tended to reduce the power of the Catholic church in the region. Opposition to these policies by the Conservative faction led to a new round of violence, some of which Stephens witnessed and described for his American readers. In the early sixteenth century, Stephens reflected, the highland and piedmont regions through which he traveled were “the most populous, the most civilized, and best cultivated in Guatemala. The people who occupied it were descendants of those found there by Alvarado, and perhaps four fifths were Indians of untainted blood.” By 1839, however, long suppressed tensions again exploded into violence. “For three centuries they had submitted quietly to the dominion of the whites, but the rising of Carrera had awakened a recollection of their fathers, and it was rumored that their eyes rolled strangely upon the white men as enemies of their race.”²⁵ Joseph Smith and his fellow Latter-day Saints would have taken interest in “the wars and complexities” of Mesoamerica’s bloody history (D&C 88:79).

United States President Martin Van Buren, the same who had told Joseph Smith, “Your cause is just, but I can do nothing for you,” tasked Stephens with the confidential and difficult assignment to learn who was actually in power in Central America and establish relations with them on behalf of the United States. This he found impossible, given that the

24 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:286.

25 *Ibid.*, 2:143.

region was in the midst of a chaotic civil war, yet Stephens was able to visit parts of Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica, as well as parts of southern Mexico, and provide detailed descriptions of current events. “Although he minimized the threat,” notes one authority, “he and Catherwood were in very dangerous territory, at considerable risk to life and limb.”²⁶ “Stephens was wandering through Central America at a time when the political infrastructure of the modern state was forming — or perhaps it would be more accurate to say ‘misforming.’ He witnessed a key clash between forces of the Central union (the Liberals) and disunion (the Conservatives) in something approaching a definitive battle.”²⁷ Stephens met both Carrera and Morazan, leaders of the rival factions, and *Incidents* contains a description of these interviews and his impressions.

“Luminous” and “Comprehensive”

Joseph Smith’s term *luminous* also aptly applies to Stephens’s work. Much of what he reported was new to American readers, and his writing style was clear and captivating. Stephens’s description of Copan, for example, is notable: “Rarely has the discovery of an archaeological site received such polished literary treatment.”²⁸ Stephens’s language would almost impel a Latter-day Saint reader in 1841 to think of the Book of Mormon. He praised the sculptor of monuments at Copan: “Little did he imagine that the time would come when his works would perish, his race be extinct, his city a desolation and abode for reptiles, for strangers to gaze at and wonder by what race it had been inhabited.”²⁹ He described Copan as a “desolate city.” Nobody knows “the time and means by which it was depopulated, and became a desolation and ruin; whether it fell by the sword, or famine, or pestilence. The trees which shroud it may have sprung from the blood of its slaughtered inhabitants; they may have perished howling with hunger; or pestilence, like the cholera, may have piled its streets with dead, and driven forever the feeble remnants from their homes.”³⁰ “In the moment of greatness and power, the builders [of

26 Michael Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 93.

27 Steve Glassman, *On the Trail of the Maya Explorer: Tracing the Epic Journey of John Lloyd Stephens* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2003), 6.

28 Brian Fagan, *Elusive Treasure: The Story of the First Archaeologists in the Americas* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1977), 157

29 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1:146.

30 *Ibid.*, 1:159.

Uxmal] never contemplated that the time would come when their city would be a desolation."³¹ Stephens seemed most impressed by the ruins of Palenque.

Amid all the wreck of empires, nothing ever spoke so forcibly the world's mutations as this immense forest shrouding what was once a great city. Once it had been a great highway, thronged with people who were stimulated by the same passions that give impulse to human action now; and they are all gone, their habitations buried, and no traces of them left.

Here were the remains of a cultivated, polished, and peculiar people, who had passed through all the stages incident to the rise and fall of nations; reached their golden age, and perished, entirely unknown. The links which connected them with the human family were severed and lost, and these were the only memorials of their footsteps upon earth. We lived in the ruined palace of their kings; we went up to their desolate temples and fallen altars; and wherever we moved we saw the evidences of their taste, their skill in arts, their wealth and power. In the midst of desolation and ruin we looked back to the past, cleared away the gloomy forest, and fancied every building perfect, with its terraces and pyramids, its sculptured and painted ornaments, grand, lofty, and imposing, and overlooking an immense inhabited plain; we called back into life the strange people who gazed at us in sadness from the walls; pictured them in fanciful costumes and adorned with plumes and feathers, ascending the terraces of the palace and the steps leading to the temples, and often we imagined a scene of unique and gorgeous beauty and magnificence, realizing the creation of oriental poets. ... In the romance of the world's history nothing ever impressed me more forcibly than the spectacle of this once great and lovely city, overturned, desolate, and lost; discovered by accident, overgrown with trees for miles around, and without even a name to distinguish it.³²

The Prophet's term *luminous* is equally apt for Catherwood's drawings. In our day of modern photography, digital cameras, computers,

31 Ibid., 2:431.

32 Ibid., 2:291, 356-57.

and image manipulation, it is easy to forget just how difficult it was for Catherwood to represent accurately what his group discovered. In their travels, Stephens took the lead in bird-dogging ruins and monuments, which his companion could then draw. After spending the good part of one day at Copan scouting the surroundings, Stephens returned to find his companion struggling through a much harder work.

I found him not so well pleased as I expected with my report. He was standing with his feet in the mud, and was drawing with his gloves on to protect his hands from the moschettoes. As we feared, the designs were so intricate and complicated, the subjects so entirely new and unintelligible, that he had great difficulty in drawing. He had made several attempts, both with the camera lucida and without, but failed to satisfy himself or even me, who was less severe in criticism. The “idol” seemed to defy his art; two monkeys on a tree on one side appeared to be laughing at him, and I felt discouraged and despondent.³³

Fortunately, Catherwood persisted and succeeded in producing representations that were both accurate and beautiful.

One cannot fail to be impressed by Catherwood’s extraordinary achievements under these terrible conditions. His drawings are vivid and accurate, dramatic and sensitive, bringing the ruins of Palenque to life in their dense setting of sprawling vegetation. Stephens’s lengthy descriptions of the structures are an equally memorable tribute to the two explorers’ tenacity and single-minded dedication to archaeology.³⁴

According to archaeologist Michael Coe,

The quality of the illustrations in the 1841 and 1843 publications was a quantum jump away from anything that had been heretofore published on the antiquities of the New World. One has only to compare Catherwood’s rendering of the great tablet of the Temple of the Cross at Palenque with the garbled version in the del Rio 1822 report to see the difference. The same holds true with Catherwood’s more purely architectural drawings: many years ago (when I was

33 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1:120.

34 Fagan, *Elusive Treasure*, 176.

still an undergraduate at Harvard), I was at Uxmal, armed with a copy of Stephens and Catherwood. Catherwood's superb plate of the facade of the Governor's Palace at Uxmal is folded into the volume. Standing in front of the same palace, I directly compared the original with the copy: setting aside the reconstructions that had been carried out by the Mexican government in this century, they were virtually identical. Stephens and Catherwood could have lied and exaggerated like Waldeck about the Uxmal ruins — who among their readers in 1843 would have known the difference? — but they did not.³⁵

Art can have a powerful effect on readers of a text. Early editions of the Book of Mormon had no illustrations to supplement the volume. Catherwood's drawings from Central America, published in 1841, 1843, and 1844, helped Latter-day Saints conceptualize the Book of Mormon setting. For the first time since its publication, readers of the Book of Mormon could develop some idea of what places in the Book of Mormon may have looked like. The writers for the *Times and Seasons* editorial on September 15, 1842, regretted that they were unable to reproduce Catherwood's drawings of Palenque,³⁶ but in 1845, the Latter-day Saint editors of *The Prophet* reprinted Catherwood's drawings of the ruins of Zayl,³⁷ Sennacte, Sanachtsche³⁸ and Labna³⁹ from *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, apparently the first reproductions of those drawings published by Mormons.

Catherwood's influence can be seen in some of the earliest Latter-day Saint art on the Book of Mormon, particularly that of George Ottinger, whose art was used in George Reynolds's popular book *The Story of the Book of Mormon*.⁴⁰ Today, readers of the Book of Mormon have likely

35 Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code*, 93-94.

36 "Extract From Stephens' *Incidents of Travel in Central America*" *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (15 September, 1842), 914.

37 "A Portion of the Façade of the Ruins of Zyal in Yucatan," *The Prophet*, 25 January 1845.

38 *The Prophet*, 1 February 1845.

39 *The Prophet*, 8 February 1845; *The Prophet*, 22 February 1845.

40 Noel A. Carmack, "A Picturesque and Dramatic History': George Reynolds's Story of the Book of Mormon," *BYU Studies* 47/2 (2008)115-41. For interesting comparisons between Ottinger's paintings and Catherwood's work see figures 9-12. For insight into Friberg's Book of Mormon art see Vern Swanson, "The Book of Mormon Art of Arnold Friberg: Painter of Scripture," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/1 (2001): 26-35.

seen Arnold Friberg's depiction of Samuel the Lamanite preaching on the wall of Zarahemla. He "contextualizes the narrative within an architectural setting based upon the well-known models of Puuc style Maya and Teotihuacano architecture." Samuel "stands by a tower that shows "the characteristic stone latticework and centralized Chac mask of Uxmal's Nunnery complex," the same buildings described by Stephens and illustrated by Catherwood. In another well-known painting, Friberg depicts Jesus appearing at the temple in Bountiful, which resembles the "stepped masonry platforms of Teotihuacan's Avenue of the Dead."⁴¹

Joseph Smith's term *comprehensive* was also well chosen. Stephens and Catherwood covered a lot of ground in their travels through Belize, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Chiapas, Mexico and Yucatan. The 1841 narrative provided an abundance of useful information for future travelers to the region. Missionary-minded Latter-day Saints like Wilford Woodruff, who also traveled widely, would have appreciated the narrative, which paints a broad portrait of Central America at this time, both its natural and human environments. Information from histories of the region provided valuable context for their discoveries.

"Most Correct"

The discovery of Central American ruins was of great interest to Joseph Smith and the Latter-day Saints, but *Incidents* also provided useful historical information. Stephens drew upon the work of Don Domingo Juarros, whose history was published in a London English translation in 1823.⁴² The Juarros history itself depended on the valuable *Historia de Guatemala* or *Recordacion Florida* by Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzman.⁴³ The wide publication of *Incidents of Travel* made the historical information in these sources widely known to American readers.

What did Joseph Smith mean when he said *Incidents* was the "most correct" of all the books on American antiquities with which he was familiar? Earlier reports of the ruins of Palenque, some reprinted in

41 R. Tripp Evans, *Romancing the Maya: Mexican Antiquity in the American Imagination 1820-1915* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 94.

42 Don Domingo Juarros, *A Statistical and Commercial History of the Kingdom of Guatemala in Spanish America*, ... Translated by J. Baily (London: J. F. Dove, 1823).

43 Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzman, *Historia de Guatemala, o, Recordacion Florida* (Madrid: 1882).

Mormon publications, had circulated years before 1840. They included exaggerated claims about the size and extent of the site. Stephens with good humor noted that some reports claimed the site was “ten times larger than New York” or “three times as large as London.” The author gently corrected these erroneous claims and provided more accurate information, based on his own observations.⁴⁴ As already noted, Catherwood’s drawings also greatly helped to correct previous confusion.

It seems reasonable to assume that Joseph Smith was acquainted with some of the more popular works by Latter-day Saints on the Book of Mormon, such as Parley Pratt’s *Voice of Warning*, which evidence indicates he read and suggested that corrections be incorporated into the 1839 edition.⁴⁵ In that edition Pratt cited reports on the Palenque ruins printed in the *Family Magazine* and Josiah Priest’s 1833 *American Antiquities*, a work well known to early missionaries. Other Latter-day Saint pamphlets referenced the works of Boudinot, Davis, and Humboldt. While he may not have read these very books, Joseph Smith could easily have become acquainted with the passages used and cited by missionaries. Significantly, he assigned higher confidence to Stephens’s work than he did to these other sources, which in his view were less “correct,” “luminous,” and “comprehensive.”

Correspondences

Seeking to distance Joseph Smith from *any* Mesoamerican correlation with Book of Mormon events, Neville has difficulty providing an adequate explanation for Joseph Smith’s 1841 letter to John Bernhisel. He downplays the letter to Bernhisel as “more of a polite but brief thank-you note to a friend and business associate with whom Joseph had been corresponding” (60). He suggests that the letter reflects a more general interest in Central America, rather than one which might place Book of Mormon events in a Mesoamerican setting (58). “Joseph’s letter does not tie any Book of Mormon events to the locations in Central America” (57). How then would Stephens’s work, as Joseph indicated, “correspond with” or “support” the Book of Mormon? In a rather dodgy argument, Neville insists that these correspondences did not have reference to anything Stephens wrote about Central America, but rather to a brief aside which mentions discoveries farther north. Just before discussing

44 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:304; also 2:305-7, 355-57.

45 Peter Crawley, *A Descriptive Bibliography of the Mormon Church. Volume One 1830-1847* (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 1997), 97-98.

the ruins of Copan, Stephens mentioned countless theories about native American origins, some of them farfetched.

Some suggested they might have been of a race “separate” from the family of Adam. Or perhaps “some remnant of the antediluvian inhabitants of the earth”? Might the ark even have planted itself in the State of New York? Were they descendants of ancient Near Eastern peoples, or of the Chinese, or even of “modern” Europeans? Perhaps a single continent had been “rent asunder” by an earthquake; or the “fabled island of Atlantis ... been lifted out of the ocean. ... The monuments and architectural remains of the aborigines have heretofore formed but a small part of the groundwork for these speculations.”⁴⁶

Stephens also noted that historians like Robinson claimed that native American peoples were incapable of significant cultural achievements and that this attitude had influenced popular perceptions of pre-Columbian history.

Since Dr. Robinson wrote, a new flood of light has poured upon the world, and the field of American antiquities has been opened. The ignorance, carelessness, and indifference of the inhabitants of Spanish America on this subject are matter of wonder. In our own country, the opening of forests and the discovery of tumuli or mound and fortifications, extending in ranges from the lakes through the valleys of Ohio and Mississippi, mummies in a cave in Kentucky, the inscription on the rock at Dighton, supposed to be in Phoenician characters, and the ruins of walls and a great city in Arkansas and Wisconsin Territory, had suggested wild and wandering ideas in regard to the first peopling of this country, and the strong belief that powerful and populous nations had occupied it and had passed away, whose histories are entirely unknown. The same evidences continue in Texas, and in Mexico they assume a still more definite form.⁴⁷

Neville’s claim that Joseph was interested in Stephens because of what it said about Midwestern mound builders, rather than what it said about Central American correspondences, makes little sense. After all, the title of the book was *Incidents of Travel in Central America*. Stephens’s remarks on mound builders is but a brief aside in a two-volume work of nearly nine-hundred pages! The passage is short, very general, and

⁴⁶ Stephens, *Incidents*, 1:96–97.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1:98.

contributes nothing new. A reader could find more detail in other books of the time, such as Josiah Priest's *American Antiquities*, which were already known to Latter-day Saints through the publications of Parley Pratt and other Mormon writers. Stephens's passing comment provides no new information. If, as Joseph said, Stephens work was *more* correct, luminous, and comprehensive than other earlier works, he obviously was referring to what Stephens said about Central America.

Age of Pre-Columbian Civilization in Mesoamerica

It is important to remember that when Latter-day Saints speak and write about the external geography of Book of Mormon events and also secondary and secular evidence of its truth, these are opinions and personal interpretations, not revelation. Arguments, suppositions, deductions, and interpretations may or may not be well-informed and carefully reasoned. This was as true for Joseph Smith and his contemporaries when they expressed their own views, as it is of us today. Of course it is no longer 1842. Our knowledge about the Book of Mormon, American geography, and the ancient world has increased substantially since Joseph Smith's day. We know that some things once argued or thought to be strong evidence for the Book of Mormon were based on faulty information or mistaken assumptions. We are not bound to evidence and arguments that have since been shown to be wrong. On the other hand we also know things today that earlier writers did not.

At the conclusion of his 1841 work, Stephens expressed his own well-reasoned conclusion about the age of the ruins his group had visited.

We are not warranted in going back to any ancient nation of the Old World for the builders of these cities; that they are not the work of people who have passed away and whose history is lost, but that there are strong reasons to believe them the creations of the same races who inhabited the country at the time of the Spanish conquest, or some not very distant progenitors. ... Some are beyond doubt older than others; some are known to have been inhabited at the time of the Spanish conquest, and others, perhaps, were really ruins before.⁴⁸

Today we know that Stephens's opinion of the age of these ruins was essentially correct. Copan, Quirigua, Palenque, and Uxmal were all

48 Ibid., 2:455.

pre-Columbian, dating to the later Maya Classic Period after the Book of Mormon era. Small groups of ancestral predecessors of those who built these cities likely lived there before that time, but the notable ruins Stephens and his companions described and illustrated represent a later cultural development.⁴⁹

What Stephens Didn't Know

Neville thinks no reasonable person could have considered these ruins evidence. “Stephens himself refutes the basic premise of the Mesoamerican connection, i.e., that the ruins in Copan were Nephite cities as described in the Book of Mormon narrative” (58). Those who thought that Copan, Quirigua, Palenque, and Uxmal were the very cities named in the Book of Mormon text were mistaken. We know that now, but nobody in 1842, or for a long time afterward, could date accurately the age of those ruins. Stephens’s opinion, thoughtful and well informed, was still just one among many at the time. So it was not unreasonable for Joseph Smith or Latter-day Saints in 1842 to draw their own conclusions. *Incidents* provided a glimpse of a civilization whose level and complexity few had witnessed, and Stephens was keenly aware of many other cities yet to be discovered.⁵⁰ Latter-day Saints *never* held that Stephens’s ruins were the full story. They fully expected that future explorations and research would yield additional evidence and discoveries consistent with Mormon’s record. “Should ruins of many cities be discovered [in Central America],” wrote W. W. Phelps, “it would be no more than a confirmation of what was once on this land of the Lord.”⁵¹ In 1855 the editor of *The Mormon* wrote, “The Book of Mormon becomes still more interesting to the archaeological student in its corroborative testimony, since its publicity was anterior to the researches of Stevens and Catherwood and most other explorers of Yucatan, Central America and California. It relates *not only to the numerous ruins already exhumed* but to hundreds of cities and temples, *whose ruins yet remain buried* amid the boundless forests.”⁵²

Neville’s discussion could leave his readers with the mistaken impression that no Mesoamerican ruins date to Book of Mormon times

49 Coe, *The Maya*, 95-99, 108-115, 131.

50 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:193-97, 305, 364; *ibid.*, 2:128-29, 280.

51 “Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America,” *Evening and Morning Star*, 1/9 (February, 1833), [71].

52 “Ancient Ruins in America,” *The Mormon*, 28 April 1855, emphasis added. At this time John Taylor was the editor.

(58). Stephens was unaware that many other Mesoamerican ruins, of greater antiquity, would later be discovered throughout Mesoamerica. When he rode across the valley to Guatemala City, he had no idea that beneath his very feet were the remains of Kaminaljuyu, “one of the greatest of all archaeological sites in the New World,” whose ruins date to Book of Mormon times, but lie mostly destroyed under the streets and buildings of that sprawling modern city.⁵³ He noted the beauty of Lake Atitlan, “the most magnificent spectacle we ever saw,” and described the lake basin from his perspective on the surrounding hills. “All the requisites of the grand and beautiful were there; gigantic mountains, a valley of poetic softness, lake, and volcanoes, and from the height on which we stood a waterfall marked a silver line down its sides.”⁵⁴ Nobody knew until recently that those waters concealed Preclassic ruins covered by water two thousand years ago⁵⁵ or that his road through Chiapas, Mexico likely took him within a stone’s throw of ruins of comparable age and complexity.⁵⁶ Given Joseph Smith’s interest in Stephens’s work, there is every reason to believe that the Prophet would have greeted those discoveries with similar interest and enthusiasm.

Geographical Correspondences

The issue at hand, however, is not whether we think there exists evidence from Mesoamerica that supports the Book of Mormon, although I believe that is abundant, but what Joseph Smith and the early Latter-day Saints thought about it. Joseph Smith suggested that *Incidents of Travel in Central America* corresponded with and supported the testimony of the Book of Mormon. Was he right?

In fact, it is not difficult for a reader to find such correspondences. An obvious one was the *location* of the cities Stephens and Catherwood described and visited. Early readers of the Book of Mormon commonly assumed Central America to be the “narrow neck of land” mentioned in the text. John Taylor and others thought the geographical location of the discoveries was consistent with descriptions in the Book of Mormon. “It has fallen to his [Stephens’s] lot,” wrote John Taylor, “to explore the

53 Coe, *The Maya*, 40. For correlations with the Book of Mormon see Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 82-86, 240-41, 547-78, 638-49.

54 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:158.

55 Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 646-47.

56 *Ibid.*, 581-604. The site of Chinkultic near Comitán and most other sites within the central depression of Chiapas were abandoned in the Early Classic period. See Sorenson, *Mormon’s Codex*, 674-78.

ruins of this once mighty people, but the ‘Book of Mormon’ unfolds their history; and published as it was, years before these discoveries were made, and giving as it does, accounts of a people, and of cities that bear a striking resemblance to those mentioned by Mr. Stephens, both in regard to magnificence and location.”⁵⁷

A related correlation had to do with the *level* of civilization that Central American discoveries revealed. The number of ruins described by Catherwood and Stephens in their books surprised and astounded many readers. In their subsequent expedition to Yucatan, the explorers visited forty-four sites, and they had obviously only scratched the surface. When Amos Wickerhsham observed that reports of the ruins of Palenque had been known before 1840, William Appleby could respond, “The ruins of the city of Ottolum [Palenque] was known; but Stevens visited altogether 43.”⁵⁸ Orson Pratt observed:

Now no one will dispute the fact that the existence of antique remains in different parts of America was known long before Smith was born. But every well informed person knows that the most of the discoveries made by Catherwood and Stephens were original — that the most of the forty-four cities described by him had not been described by previous travelers. Now the Book of Mormon gives us the names and location of great numbers of cities in the very region where Catherwood and Stephens afterwards discovered them. This, therefore, taking into consideration all the circumstances, is an additional evidence, of a very positive nature, in favour of the divine inspiration of this unlearned and inexperienced young man.⁵⁹

In addition to correspondences of location and cultural complexity, a few writers suggested that additional correlations among specific cities might be possible. The writers of the unsigned editorial on October 1, 1842, noted correspondences between Catherwood’s description of Quirigua and the city of Zarahemla,⁶⁰ based on several obvious

57 “Stephens’s Works on Central America,” *Times and Seasons* 4/22 (1 October 1843): 346-47.

58 W. I. Appleby, *Mormonism Consistent ...* (Washington, DE.: Porter and Nave, 1843), 17-18.

59 Orson Pratt, “Reply to a pamphlet, printed in Glasgow, entitled, ‘Remarks on Mormonism,’” *Millennial Star* 11/8 (15 April, 1849): 115-16.

60 As previously noted, Quirigua is now known to date after Book of Mormon times.

correlations between Stephens and Catherwood's report of the site and the Book of Mormon description of Zarahemla.⁶¹

1. Quirigua was located at a narrow point of land between the Bay of Honduras and the Pacific Ocean and nearly surrounded by water.
2. A river flowed by the ruined city, like the river Sidon, which flowed by Zarahemla.
3. The Nephite city was on the west side of the river Sidon. Quirigua lay on the left bank of the river, reportedly flowing into the Atlantic Ocean (Alma 2:3; 6:7).
4. Several miles upstream, the river was fordable: "Upstream, the river was here about two hundred feet wide, and fordable in very part except a few deep holes. Generally it did not exceed three feet in depth, and in many places not so deep." Nephite armies were able to cross over to the west bank of the Sidon as they attempted to head off Lamanite armies attacking the city (Alma 2:34).
5. The river Sidon eventually flowed into the sea (Alma 3:3; 44:22). After it passed by Quirigua, the river "was said to be navigable to the sea for boats not drawing more than three feet of water."
6. 6) Some Latter-day Saints compared the description of "a large round stone, with its sides sculptured in hieroglyphics" which could not be read, with the stone interpreted by King Mosiah at Zarahemla, which gave an account of the destruction of the Jaredites whose "bones lay scattered in the land northward" (Omni 1:20–22).
7. Like Zarahemla, Quirigua seemed to resemble a culturally significant place. Catherwood described pyramidal structure, altars, and large monuments covered with hieroglyphic writing: "Of one thing there is no doubt: a large city once stood there; its name is lost, its history unknown" and "no account of its existence has ever before been published."⁶²

61 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:118–23.

62 *Ibid.*, 2:123.

On the basis of Stephens's report, it is understandable that some readers of the Book of Mormon would see a correlation. In October 1842, an editorial in the *Times and Seasons* suggested a possible link with the Nephite capital city: "It is certainly a good thing for the excellency and veracity, of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, that the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them: and that a large stone with engravings upon it, as Mosiah said; and a 'large round stone, with the sides sculptured in hieroglyphics,' as Mr. Stephens has published, is also among the left remembrances of the (to him) lost and unknown." The writer then qualified this statement as a matter of opinion.

We are not going to declare positively that the ruins of Quirigua are those of Zarahemla, but when the land and the stones, and the books tell the story so plain, we are of opinion, that it would require more proof than the Jews could bring to prove the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb, to prove that the ruins of the city in question, are not one of those referred to in the Book of Mormon. . . . It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens' ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon: light cleaves to light, and facts are supported by facts. The truth injures no one, and so we make another.⁶³

Buildings of Cement and Other Materials

The Book of Mormon mentions that the people of Lehi built many cities, some of are described as "large" (Mosiah 27:6). Some of the people of Nephi who migrated northward became "exceedingly expert in the working of cement; therefore they did build houses of cement in the which they did dwell" (Helaman 3:7). Stephens and Catherwood found numerous large cities with buildings of well-cut stone, although they also

63 "Zarahemla," *Times and Seasons* 3/23 (1 October, 1842), 927. Neville expresses contempt and scorn for the writer of the unsigned editorial, whom he imagines to be Winchester. The view that "the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them" is, according to Neville, "a bald-faced lie if taken literally — and if it refers to Central America" (128). With a surprising lack of charity, he further characterizes him as irrational and even applies Korihor's derisive epithet "the effect of a frenzied mind" (Alma 30:16) to the writer of the editorial (123, 128). This is simply bizarre. The editorial is clearly set forth as an "opinion" based on Stephens's report and the common assumption that the narrow neck of land was within Central America. No one may care if Neville disparages a sourpuss like Winchester, but what if Joseph Smith was the writer?

recognized that the cities they described likely had also contained many other buildings made of “frail and perishable materials” that had “not survived.”⁶⁴ They described one palace at Utatlan as “covered with hard cement” and one farther north at Palenque, where Stephens observed, “The floors are of cement, as hard as the best seen in the remains of Roman baths and cisterns.”⁶⁵

Temples

Temples are mentioned in the Book of Mormon, although little information is given about their structure. There was one at Zarahemla (Mosiah 2:1), but also others in the land of Nephi and Zarahemla (Alma 16:13; 26:29) and the land northward, to which groups of the people of Nephi migrated (Helaman 3:14). Other kinds of religious structures are mentioned, including “synagogues” and “sanctuaries” (Alma 16:13; 21:5; 22:7; 26:29; Moroni 7:1). The Savior appeared at the Nephite temple in Bountiful (3 Nephi 11:1). Stephens visited many buildings that he described as temples and other religious structures.⁶⁶ Of the monuments and buildings found at Copan, including what he described as a “temple,” Stephens wrote, “The genii who attended on King Solomon seem to have been the artists.” This language reminded some early readers of Nephi’s description of the temple of Nephi (2 Nephi 5:16).⁶⁷

Palaces

King Noah built a “spacious palace” (Mosiah 11:9), which may have been used later by the king of the Lamanites (Alma 22:2). The Quiche palace, according to historical sources, was said to contain a gardens, baths, a treasury, armory, aviaries, menageries, as well as a section of the place for the queen and royal concubines⁶⁸ The Palace at Palenque had several courtyards, which Stephens thought must have been used “for public and state occasions.”⁶⁹

The Judgment Seat

During the reign of the judges there was a “judgment seat” (Alma 1:2), or “the *place* of the judgement seat” (Helaman 9:7, 14). It indicates that people went “*in unto* the judgment seat,” suggesting that it was perhaps

64 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:355.

65 Ibid., 2:183; 2:313.

66 Ibid., 2:353-54.

67 “Ancient Ruins in America,” *The Mormon*, 28 April, 1855.

68 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:179.

69 Ibid., 2:319.

inside a building (Helaman 8:27; 9:3). Stephens cited historical sources which described the palace of the Quiche kings: “In one of the saloons stood a throne, under four canopies of feathers” and also “tribunals of the judges.”⁷⁰ At Palenque,

The long, unbroken corridors in front of the palace were probably intended for lords and gentlemen in waiting; or perhaps, in that beautiful position, which, before the forest grew up, must have commanded an extended view of a cultivated and inhabited plain, the king himself sat in it to receive the reports of his officers and to administer justice.⁷¹

At one building Stephens found a set two large tablets of hieroglyphics, eight feet high and thirteen feet long, on either side a door that was the entrance to a corridor divided into three apartments. “The Indians call this building as escuela or school, but our friends the padres called it a tribunal of justice, and these stones, they said, contained the tables of the law.”⁷²

Walls and Towers

Walls of earth, wood, and stone are mentioned in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah; 9:8; Alma 48:8; 52:4; Helaman 1:21; 12:4). Stephens describes many walls of stone.⁷³ Towers are mentioned in the Book of Mormon (Mosiah 11:12–13). Stephens describes an enigmatic stone “tower” at Palenque on the south side of the palace and found the remains of what may have been others nearby. “On top was a high mound of stones, with a foundation wall still remaining. Probably a tower or temple had stood there.”⁷⁴

Structures for Astronomical Purposes

The Book of Mormon indicates that the Nephites to some degree were interested in astronomical phenomena. They kept a careful calendar over hundreds of years and looked for and reported significant heavenly phenomena (Alma 30:44; Helaman 12:15; 14:3–6; 16:13; 3 Nephi 1:4–21). Stephens speculated that one of the buildings at Palenque “perhaps was intended as an observatory.”⁷⁵

70 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:179.

71 *Ibid.*, 2:314.

72 *Ibid.*, 2:343.

73 *Ibid.*, 1:101–4, 134; 2:153, 171.

74 *Ibid.*, 2:317, 320–21.

75 *Ibid.*, 2:348.

Ornamented Buildings

Nephi taught his people to build buildings and work in “all manner of wood” and other materials (2 Nephi 5:15); and according to Jarom, subsequent early Nephites did the same (Jarom 1:8). King Noah “built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and all manner of precious things” (Mosiah 11:8). The explorers described and depicted many examples of finely sculpted buildings. Stephens was particularly fascinated with the discovery at Uxmal of a large wooden beam, elegantly carved with hieroglyphics.⁷⁶ It had once been placed as a lintel in the doorway of one of the larger buildings. Ten feet long and very heavy, it required ten men to carry it. The explorers brought it back with them to New York City, where it was proudly displayed as part of an exhibit, but was destroyed in a tragic fire, along with many of Catherwood’s drawings and other valuable artifacts.⁷⁷

Altars and Idols

At the ruins of Copan, Stephens encountered many large carved statues which some characterized as “idols.” At Copan, these often stood before what he called an altar.⁷⁸ He discussed the pre-Columbian practice of human sacrifice⁷⁹ and interpreted one of the tablets at Palenque as representing one “in the act of making an offering, perhaps of a child.”⁸⁰ Like ancient Israel, Lehi’s people worshiped at “altars” (Alma 15:17; 17:4). In times of wickedness the people worshiped idols (2 Nephi 9:37; Enos 1:20; Alma 31:1) and were sometimes known to sacrifice women and children to “idol gods” (Mormon 4:14, 21).⁸¹

Ruined Buildings from Earthquake

Alma and Amulek were miraculously delivered during a powerful earthquake that destroyed the prison building in which they were held and killed their captors (Alma 14:27). An earthquake is described in the City of Nephi (Helaman 5:30-32). During the great destruction at the time of Christ’s death, “many great and notable cities were ... shaken

76 Ibid., 2:432-33.

77 Ibid., 1:102-3.

78 At Copan, *ibid.*, 1:102; 137-40, 150-59. At Quirigua, see *ibid.*, 2:121-22.

79 Ibid., 1:159; 2:184-85.

80 Ibid., 2:346-47.

81 W. I. Appleby, *Mormonism Consistent ...* (Washington, DE: Porter and Nave, 1843), 17-18.

till the building thereof had fallen to the earth, and the inhabitants thereof were slain, and the places were left desolate” (3 Nephi 8:14). “And there were some cities which remained, but the damage thereof was exceedingly great” (3 Nephi 8:15). Some of the inhabitants “were fallen upon and crushed to death” (3 Nephi 10:13). At Palenque: “Near this, on the top of another pyramidal structure, was another building entirely in ruins, which apparently had been shattered and hurled down by an earthquake. The stones were strewn on the side of the pyramid, and it was impossible to make out the ground-plan.”⁸²

Nakedness

According to Stephens, many of the Indians he encountered “were naked, except a small piece of cotton cloth around the loins, and crossing in front between the legs” (1:40). He cited historical sources that indicate that when Mayan warriors fought, “their bodies were naked, except around the loins, and stained all over with earth of different colors.”⁸³ Similar descriptions are found in the Book of Mormon (Enos 1:20).

Pre-Columbian Writing

Critics of the Book of Mormon could not credit the idea that pre-Columbian peoples ever had a knowledge of writing, as the Book of Mormon suggests. “According to Mormon, these native Americans could read, and write, ... but when that country first became known to Europeans, the inhabitants knew no more about letters than a four-legged animal knows the rules of logic; and not a scrap of writing was to be found.”⁸⁴ There was not “even so much as a shadow or proof, that the sciences of reading and writing [and other evidences of advanced culture mentioned in the Book of Mormon] were ever known here.”⁸⁵ Latter-day Saints found the new discoveries helpful in responding to such criticisms.⁸⁶ Stephens and Catherwood found numerous examples of hieroglyphics in their travels and were convinced that these contained historical information about the former rulers and people who once inhabited the ruins they explored. While the cause of Copan’s

82 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:354.

83 *Ibid.*, 1:30.

84 H. Stevenson, *Lecture on Mormonism ...* (1839), 12.

85 A Philanthropist, *Mormonism Unmasked* (Philadelphia, PA.: T. K. & P. G. Collins, 1840), 5-6.

86 E. Snow, 1841, 2-3.

destruction seemed a mystery, “One thing I believe, that its history is graven on its monuments. No Champolion has yet brought to them the energies of his inquiring mind. Who shall read them?”⁸⁷ Although Stephens’s contemporaries and many later scholars once doubted that these monuments contained writing of a historical nature, this has since proven true. “After four decades,” David Stuart writes, “Mayanists are now accustomed to the idea that ancient Maya artisans and scribes, when composing and carving monumental inscriptions, were principally concerned with the commemoration of historical events surrounding kings, their families, and their courts.”⁸⁸ The tradition of pre-Columbian writing in Mesoamerica (nothing comparable has been found anywhere else in the New World) compares favorably to that described in the Book of Mormon and is known to date from Preclassic times.⁸⁹ The ruins of Kaminaljuyu in the valley of Guatemala are older than the ruins of ASDFCopan, yet centuries before the time of Christ, “the elite of this Valley were fully literate at a time when other Maya were perhaps just learning that writing existed.”⁹⁰

Similar Stories

Fuentes described a bloody war waged to avenge the abduction of the Ixconsocil and Ecselixpua, the daughter and niece of Balam Acan, the Quiche king. As Stephens told the story,

The rape of Helen did not produce more wars and bloodshed than the carrying off of these two young ladies with unpronounceable names. Balam Acan was a naturally mild man, but the abduction of his daughter was an affront not to be pardoned. With eighty thousand veterans, himself in the center squadron, ... he marched against Zutugilebpop, who met him with sixty thousand men, commanded by Iloacab, his chief general and accomplice. The most bloody battle

87 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1841, 1:159-60.

88 David Stuart, “A Foreign Past: The Writing and Representation of History on a Royal Ancestral Shrine at Copan.” In E. Wyllys Andrews and William L. Fash, eds., *Copan: The History of An Ancient Maya Kingdom* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2004), 373.

89 Sorenson, “Records and Writing Systems” in *Mormon’s Codex*, 184-232 for a detailed discussion.

90 Coe, *The Maya*, 60. Compare Mosiah 23:6-7.

ever fought in the country took place; the field was so deeply inundated with blood that not a blade of grass could be seen⁹¹

This story reminded some Latter-day Saints readers of the priests of King Noah who kidnapped the daughters of the Lamanites and thereby incited a deadly war (Mosiah 20:1-15).⁹²

The Book of Mormon prophet Samuel the Lamanite prophesied of signs that would accompany the birth of Christ, which would be witnessed by those in the American land of promise. The most notable of these signs was that there “shall be one day and a night and a day, as if it were one day and there were no night” (Helaman 14:4). Five years after this prophecy was made, the sign was fulfilled (3 Nephi 1:15). “Is it probable,” wrote Origen Bachelier, “that when Christ was born, the inhabitants of America were notified of it by a supernatural light, insomuch that it was as light as noon-day during the whole night”⁹³ “We Yankees,” wrote another critic in 1841, “have been taught to believe, that the light was called day, and the darkness called night; but the Mormons, to outdo all others, they have night in the day time.”⁹⁴ *Incidents of Travel* told of a tradition of the division of the pre-Columbian kingdom of Guatemala among three sons. “This division was made on a day when three suns were visible at the same time, which extraordinary circumstance, says the manuscript, has induced some persons to believe that it was made on the day of our Saviour’s birth.”⁹⁵ Some readers associated this tradition with the Book of Mormon account of the sign of Christ’s birth.⁹⁶

Elephants

The Book of Mormon indicates that the Jaredites knew of elephants (Ether 9:19). Stephens described one of the elaborately carved stone monuments at Copan (now known as Stela B) as portraying

91 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:173-74.

92 John E. Page, “Collateral testimony of the truth and divinity of the Book of Mormon. — No. 4,” *Gospel Herald* 3/27 (September 21, 1848): 125-26.

93 Origen Bachelier, *Mormonism Exposed* (New York: 1838), 19.

94 Parsons, 22.

95 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:173.

96 John E. Page, “Collateral testimony of the truth and divinity of the Book of Mormon — No. 3,” *Gospel Herald* 3/26 (September 14, 1848): 123. Understandably, some early readers would connect the two events, but it seems unlikely that the event reported in Stephens’s source had any direct relationship with that described in the Book of Mormon. For a recent perspective see Gardner, *Second Witness*, 5:193-95, 238.

elephantine-like representations. “The two ornaments at the top appear link the trunk of an elephant, an animal unknown in that country.”⁹⁷ During their subsequent travels in western highlands Guatemala, near Gueguetenango, they learned of the discovery of the remains of a mastodon.

The next morning Don Joaquim told us of the skeleton of a colossal animal supposed to be a mastodon which had been found in the neighborhood. Some of the bones had been collected and were then in the town, and having seen them, we took a guide and walked to the place where they had been discovered on the borders of the Rio Chinaca, about half a mile distant. At the time the river was low, but the year before, welled by the immense flood of the rainy season, it had burst its bounds, carried away its left bank, and laid bare one side of the skeleton. The bank was perpendicular, about thirty feet high, and the animal had been buried in an upright position. Besides the bones in the town, some had been carried away by the flood, others remained imbedded in the earth; but the impression of the whole animal, from twenty-five to thirty feet long was distinctly visible. We were told that about eight leagues above, on the bank of the same river, the skeleton of a much larger animal had been discovered.⁹⁸

Stephens also mentioned elephantine-like figures found on other buildings, including one at Uxmal, which “resembles somewhat an elephant’s trunk,” but thought it improbable that this was intended by the pre-Columbian artisan, “for the elephant was unknown on the Continent of America.”⁹⁹ Early Mormon readers of the Book of Mormon would likely have disagreed.¹⁰⁰

Traditions

Early critics of the Book of Mormon argued that no native American traditions supported the Book of Mormon. LaRoy Sunderland, who

97 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1841, 1:156.

98 *Ibid.*, 1841, 2:228-29.

99 *Ibid.*, 1:97.

100 Many scholars today reject the correlation suggesting that the figures portrayed at Copan likely show the beaks of macaws rather than elephants. See Brant Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford, 2007), 6:260.

argued that Joseph Smith fabricated the Book of Mormon, claimed, “Smith knew, very well, that those traditions would not countenance the book of Mormon, but which they would in all probability have done, had that book been true.”¹⁰¹ Latter-day Saints, however, found in Stephens’s *Incidents* a useful rebuttal to such criticisms. At the time of the conquest, the Quiche King in Guatemala received word of the coming of the Spaniards and through divination received ill omens warning that his people were soon to be conquered. These omens reportedly included “the ominous circumstance of a certain stone, brought by their forefathers from Egypt, having suddenly split into two, predicted the inevitable ruins of the kingdom.”¹⁰² Stephens cited a tradition suggesting that some of the native inhabitants of that land were descended from Israel:

Fuentes, the chronicler of the kingdom of Guatemala, the kings of Quiche and Kachiquel were descended from the Toltecan Indians, who, when they came into this country, found it *already inhabited* by people of different nations. According to the manuscript of Don Juan Torres, the grandson of the last king of the Quiche’s, which was in the possession of the lieutenant-general appointed by Pedro de Alvarado, and when Fuentes says he obtained by means of Father Francis Vasques, the historian of the order of San Francis, the Toltecas themselves descended from the house of Israel, who were released by Moses from the tyranny of Pharaoh, and after crossing the Red Sea, fell into idolatry. To avoid the reproofs of Moses, or from fear of his inflicting upon them some chastisement, the separated from him and his brethren, and under the guidance of Tanub, their chief, passed from one continent to the other, to a place which they called the seven caverns, a part of the kingdom of Mexico, where they founded the celebrated city of Tula. From Tanub sprang the families of the kings of Tula and Quiche, and the first monarch of the Toltecs.¹⁰³

Early Latter-day Saints enthusiastically received reports of ancient Israelite connections with Central America,¹⁰⁴ but were less inclined to

101 LaRoy Sunderland, “Mormonism,” *Zion’s Watchman*, 24 February, 1838.

102 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:175.

103 *Ibid.*, 2:171-72.

104 “Facts are stubborn things,” *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (September 15, 1842): 922; John E. Page, “Collateral testimony of the truth and divinity of the Book of

probe the implication of these reports. The tale recounted by Stephens said that the Toltecs were descendants of the House of Israel, and when they arrived in Guatemala they “found it already inhabited by people of different nations.” The unquestioned assumption of most Latter-day Saint readers throughout the nineteenth century was that Book of Mormon migrants were the sole ancestors of all native Americans, even though that idea is not grounded in the text itself.

Much of the criticism of Book of Mormon and Latter-day Saint literature discussing the book has been based on this non-textual assumption of both critics and believers.¹⁰⁵ It is then of some interest to note that the Quiche tradition cited above indicates that the pre-Columbian inhabitants of Guatemala and Mexico included more than Israelite descendants, but as far as can be determined, no Latter-day Saint reader of Stephens and Catherwood seems to have taken note of that point. Had they done so, one wonders if past defenders of Book of Mormon may have been able to more effectively address thorny historical questions that have vexed some readers. The Latter-day Saint discovery of Mesoamerican traditions marked the beginning of a long interest in the subject that continues even today.

Machinery

The Book of Mormon indicates that the early Nephites had “machinery” (Jarom 1:8). Machines need not be complicated, but early critics were amused.¹⁰⁶ “What kind of machinery the Nephites had is not stated,” wrote an opponent of the Book of Mormon. “It cannot be too little to suppose, that they had cotton mills, and worsted mills, and steam engines to run on rail ways. But then, what has become of them all?”¹⁰⁷ One historical description of a battle, cited by Stephens, indicates that the native forces who opposed the Spaniards in Guatemala had in their camp “several military *machines*, formed of beams and rollers, to be

Mormon.—No. 1,” *Gospel Herald* 3/24 (August 31, 1848): 108.

105 See, for example, B. H. Roberts, “Book of Mormon Difficulties” in Brigham D. Madsen, ed., *B. H. Roberts Studies of the Book of Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 64-148.

106 *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary of the English Language* defines *machine* as “An artificial work, simple or complicated, that serves to apply or regulate moving power, or to produce motion, so as to save time or force.”

107 Stevenson (1839), 12-13.

moved from place to place” to resupply weapons to their forces, a datum that subsequent defenders of the Book of Mormon could point out.¹⁰⁸

Weaponry

Nephite weaponry included “swords” (Mosiah 9:16; 10:10; Alma 43:18, 20), “darts” (Jarom 1:8), the “bow” (Enos 1:20) and “arrow” (Jarom 1:8; Mosiah 9:16; 10:8; Alma 3:5); 43:20; 49:20), “slings” (Mosiah 9:16; 10:8; Alma 2:12; 3:5; 43:20; 49:20), “stones” (Mosiah 10:8; Alma 2:12; 3:5,) and the “javelin” (Jarom 1:8; Alma 51:34; 62:36). Defensive weaponry included protective armor of “thick clothing” (Alma 43:19) and “very thick garments to cover their nakedness” (Alma 49:6). Some warriors at times wore “breastplates” (Alma 49:6) and various kinds of shields, which included “arm shields” (Alma 43:19, 38). E. D. Howe, author of the first anti-Mormon book, thought that Book of Mormon weaponry was excessive and unrealistic. “Their implements of war consisted of swords, spears, scimitars, javelins, bows and arrows, slings, &c. We can see no propriety in the omission by the author of the use of guns and ammunition. We think it would have been as credible as most of the events of the narrative, and would have been matter for Mormon credulity and admiration.”¹⁰⁹ *Incidents* quoted historical sources that affirmed that pre-Columbian warriors in Central America fought with weapons corresponding in many ways to those described in the Book of Mormon. These included “swords,” specifically “wooden swords having stones edges.”¹¹⁰ Sources also mention “arrows and slings, ... stones and darts, ... javelins and pikes.” On some of the monuments at Copan, “the figures have all breastplates.”¹¹¹ Mayan warriors “wore loose coats stuffed with cotton” and had “shields,” including arm shields. Warriors “had each a shield covered with the skin of the danta on his arm.”¹¹²

Incidents cited additional reports from early Spanish descriptions of Mayan warriors:

Large bodies of warriors came upon them from the town, armed with **bows** and **arrows**, lances, **shields**, double-handed

108 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:177, emphasis added; E. L. Kelly, in *Braden Kelly Debate*, 58.

109 E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (1834), 71.

110 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1843, 1:255, 258, Plate XXIII.

111 *Ibid.*, 1841, 142.

112 *Ibid.*, 1841, 1:100; 2:175; 178.

swords, slings, and stones, their faces painted white, black, and red, and their head adorned with plumed feathers.¹¹³

The Indians were armed with **quivers of arrows**, sticks burned at the ends, lances pointed with sharp flints, and two-handed **swords** of very hard wood. They had flutes, and large sea-shells for trumpets, and turtle-shells which they struck with deer horns. **Their bodies were naked, except around their loins**, and stained all over with earth of different colours, and they wore stone rings in their ears and noses.¹¹⁴

Swords made of Wood, having a Gutter in the fore Part, in which were sharp-edged Flints strongly fixed with a sort of Bitumen and Thread.¹¹⁵

At the ruins of Kabah, Stephens found a stone doorjamb with a carved figure of a warrior carrying such a sword.¹¹⁶

Battle Numbers

In 1833 Parley P. Pratt and William McLellin preached to congregations in Illinois, where they encountered opposition from local ministers, including the Reverend J. M. Peck.¹¹⁷ Pratt says that Peck claimed “there were no antiquities in America, no ruins cities, buildings, monuments, inscriptions, mounds or fortifications, to show the existence of such a people as the Book of Mormon described.” Pratt pointed to Mound Builder remains in the American Midwest, but Peck remained unimpressed.¹¹⁸ In his *Gazeteer of Illinois*, published the following year, Peck made light of the Book of Mormon account.

Those who are particularly desirous of information concerning the millions of warriors, and the bloody battles in which more were slain than ever fell in all the wars of Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon, with a particular description of their military

113 Ibid., 1843, 1:25.

114 Ibid., 1843, 1:30.

115 Ibid., 1:258.

116 Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, 1843, 1:255, 258, Plate XXIII.

117 William McLellin Journal, 14-21 April, 1833, in Jan Shipps and John W. Welch, eds., *The Journals of William E. McLellin 1831-1836* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 114-17.

118 Parley P. Pratt, *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 69-70.

works, would do well to read the “Book of Mormon,” made out of the “golden plates” of that distinguished antiquarian Joe Smith!¹¹⁹

In 1841, Tyler Parsons, another critic, expressed a similar view: “This Mormon bulletin or sword fight with the Lamanites sets Napoleon Bonaparte all in the shade. The battle of Waterloo or Trafalgar is not a circumstance to this. Here is 230,000 of God’s people killed, but the 24 that General Mormon saved in his 10,000.”¹²⁰ That same year, Stephens cited historical accounts of pre-Columbian warfare in Guatemala that placed accounts of warfare in the Book of Mormon in a more favorable light. “Their history, like that of man in other parts of the world, is one of war and bloodshed.” One pre-Columbian battle reportedly involved over one hundred and forty thousand warriors, “the most bloody battle ever fought in the country”; “the field was so deeply inundated with blood that not a blade of grass could be seen.”¹²¹ Pre-Columbian armies and those during the later Spanish Conquest of Guatemala are reported as numbering “sixty thousand,” “seventy thousand,” “seventy-two thousand,” “eighty thousand,” “ninety thousand.”¹²² Direct correspondences with the Book of Mormon include armies numbering in the thousands and tens of thousands (Alma 3:26; 28:2, 10–11),¹²³ thirty thousand (Mormon 1:11; 2:25),¹²⁴ numbers in the forty thousands (Mormon 2:9),¹²⁵ and even forces on one rare occasion said to have numbered over 230,000, the size of the Nephite force mustered at the Hill Cumorah (Mormon 6:11–15).¹²⁶

Great Destructions

When early Latter-day Saints heard reports of ruined cities, they were led to ask, What may have caused their destruction? Some suggested that the Book of Mormon account of destruction at the time of the Savior’s death might provide a reasonable explanation. Critics in Joseph Smith’s day and throughout the nineteenth century made mock of the narrative

119 J. M. Peck, *A Gazetteer of Illinois ...* (1834), 53.

120 Tyler Parsons, *Mormonism Fanaticism Exposed* (1842), 27.

121 Stephens, *Incidents*, 2:173–74.

122 *Ibid.*, 2:173–78.

123 *Ibid.*, 2:173–174, 176–77.

124 *Ibid.*, 1:100; 2:174.

125 Mormon fought a Lamanite army of 44,000 with an army of 42,000. Stephens mentions Guatemalan armies of 40,000 and 46,000 (*ibid.*, 2:174, 176).

126 *Ibid.*, 2:176.

in 3 Nephi, but Stephens's work contained numerous correspondences that set the account in a more plausible light. Stephens described Central America aptly as "a land of volcanoes and earthquakes,"¹²⁷ and he witnessed firsthand some of violent geological changes common to the region, including several earthquakes. As he descended from Guatemala City to the Pacific Coast he passed by Agua and Fuego rising on either side of the road.

In one place the horse-path lies through an immense chasm, rent asunder by a natural convulsion, over which huge stones, hurled in every direction, lay in the wildest confusion; in another it crosses a deep bed of ashes, and cinders, and scorified lava; and a little further on strata of decomposed vegetable matter cover the volcanic substances, and high shrubs and bushes have grown up, forming a thick shady arbour, fragrant as the fields of Araby the Blessed. At every step there was a strange contrast of the horrible and beautiful.¹²⁸

The oft-repeated comparison of the torment wicked to "a *lake of fire and brimstone, whose flames are unquenchable, and whose smoke ascendeth up forever and ever*" (Mosiah 3:27, emphasis added), conveys volcanic imagery. It appears more frequently in the Book of Mormon, than in the Bible, suggesting that actual examples were available to New World prophets and their audiences for comparison (2 Nephi 9:16,19, 26; 28:23; Jacob 3:11; 6:10; Alma 12:17; 14:14-15).¹²⁹ One evening near Zonzonate, Stephens climbed near the crater of one volcano. "The sight was fearfully grand," he said. "Night and day it forces up stones from the bowels of the earth, spouts them into the air, and receives them upon its sides. ... Every burst of the volcano sent forth a pillar of fire; in four places were steady fires, and in one a stream of fire was rolling down its side."¹³⁰ In addition to describing what he witnessed himself, Stephens also quoted liberally from historical sources on Guatemala and elsewhere that reported significant geological disturbances and the destruction they caused. These descriptions of destruction, all within

127 Ibid., 1:33

128 Ibid., 1:284.

129 Jacob, who lived in the land of Nephi, uses the analogy seven times, Benjamin's angel once, Alma and the wicked judge once each. The closest wording in biblical passages is found in Revelation 14:10-11 and 19:20, but see also Genesis 19:24; Psalms 11:6.

130 Ibid., 1:328-29.

Central America, are one long tale of woe. They include references to earthquakes, thunder, lightning, subterranean noises, changes on the face of the land, long periods of darkness, terrorized inhabitants, and the destruction and burial of cities — all of which recall events described in the Book of Mormon account of destruction at the time of Christ's death (3 Nephi 8-10).

At that time the old capital, twenty-five miles distant, shattered and destroyed by *earthquakes*, was abandoned by its inhabitants, and the present was built in the rich valley of Las Vaccas, in a style commensurate with the dignity of a captain-generalship of Spain.¹³¹

On the 27th of December, 1581, the population was again alarmed by the volcano, which began to emit fire; and so great was the quantity of ashes thrown out and spread in the air, that *the sun was entirely obscured, and artificial light was necessary in the city at midday.* ...

The years 1585 and 6 were dreadful in the extreme. On January 16th of the former, *earthquakes* were felt, and they continued through that and the following year so frequently, that not an interval of eight days elapsed during the whole period without a shock more or less violent. Fire issued incessantly, for months together, from the mountain, and greatly increased the general consternation. The greatest damage of this series took place on the 23d of December, 1586, when *the major part of the city again became a heap of ruins, burying under them many of the unfortunate inhabitants;* the *earth shook* with such violence that the tops of the high ridges were torn off, and deep chasms formed in various parts of the level ground. ...

On the 18th of February, 1651, about one o'clock, afternoon, a most extraordinary *subterranean noise* was heard, and immediately followed by three violent shocks, at very short intervals from each other, which *threw down many buildings and damaged others;* the tiles from the roofs of the houses were dispersed in all directions, like light straws by a *gust of wind;* the bells of the churches were rung by the vibrations;

131 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1:193, emphasis added.

masses of rock were detached from the mountains; and even the wild beasts were so terrified, that, losing their natural instinct, they quitted their retreats, and sought shelter from the habitations of men . . .

The year 1717 was memorable; on the night of August 27th the mountain began to emit flames, attended by a continued *subterranean rumbling noises*. On the night of the 28th the eruption increased to great violence, and very much alarmed the inhabitants. The images of saints were carried in procession, public prayers were put up, day after day, but the terrifying eruption still continued, and was followed by frequent shocks, at intervals, for more than four months. At last on the night of September 29th, the fate of Guatemala appeared to be decided, and inevitable *destruction* seemed to be at hand. *Great was the ruin among the public edifices; many of the houses were thrown down*, and nearly all that remained were dreadfully injured; but the greatest devastation was seen in the churches. . . .

The year 1773 was the most melancholy epoch in the annals of this metropolis; it was then *destroyed*, and, as the capital, *rose no more from its ruins.*" . . . "About four o'clock, on the afternoon of July 29th, a tremendous vibration was felt, and shortly after began the *dreadful convulsion* that decided the fate of the unfortunate city." . . . "On the 7th September there was another, which *threw down most of the building that were damaged* on the 29th of July; and on the 13th December, one still more violent terminated the work of destruction."¹³²

The most dreadful calamity that had as yet afflicted this unfortunate place occurred on the morning of September 11th, 1541. It had rained incessantly, and with great violence, on the three preceding days, particularly on the night of the 10th, when the water descended more like the torrent of a cataract than rain; the *fury of the wind*, the incessant appalling *lightning*, and *dreadful thunder*, were indescribable." "At 2 o'clock on the morning of the 11th, the *vibrations of the earth* were so violent, that the people were unable to stand; the shocks were accompanied by a terrible *subterranean*

132 Ibid., 1:267-69.

noise which spread universal dismay: shortly afterward, an immense torrent of water rushed down from the summit of the mountain, forcing away with it **enormous fragments of rocks** and large trees; which descending upon the ill-fated town, overwhelmed and **destroyed almost all the houses, and buried a great number of the inhabitants under the ruins.**¹³³

On his way back to Guatemala from Costa Rica, Stephens sailed by the volcano Cosaguina.

Before me was the volcano Cosaguina, with its field of lava and its desolate shore, and not a living being was in sight except my sleeping boatmen. Five years before, on the shores of the Mediterranean, and at the foot of Mount Etna, I read in a newspaper an account of the eruption of this volcano. Little did I then ever expect to see it; the most awful in the history of volcanic eruptions, the **noise** of which startled the people of Guatemala four hundred miles off; and at Kingston Jamaica, *eight hundred miles* distant, was supposed to be signal guns of distress from some vessel at sea. **The face of nature was changed;** the cone of the volcano was gone; a mountain and field of lava ran down to the sea; a forest old as creation had entirely disappeared, and two islands were formed in the sea; shoals were discovered, in one of which a large tree was fixed upside down; one river was completely choked up, and another formed, running in an opposite direction; seven men in the employ of my bungo-proprietor ran down to the water, pushed off in a bungo, and were never heard of more; wild beasts, howling, left their caves in the mountains, and ounces, leopards, and snakes fled for shelter to the abodes of men.

This eruption took place on the 20th of January 1835. Mr Savage was on that day on the side of the Volcano of San Miguel, distant one hundred and twenty miles, looking for cattle. At eight o'clock he saw a **dense cloud** rising in the south in a pyramidal form, and heard a noise which sounded like the roaring of the sea. Very soon the **thick clouds** were **lighted up by vivid flashes, rose-coloured and forked, shooting** and disappearing, which he supposed to be some electrical phenomenon. These appearances increased so fast

133 Stephens, *Incidents*, 1:280, emphasis added.

that his men became frightened and said it was a *ruina*, and that the end of the world was nigh. Very soon he himself was satisfied that it was the eruption of a volcano; and as Cosaguina was at that time a quiet mountain, not suspected to contain subterranean fires, he supposed it to proceed from the Volcano of Tigris. He returned to the town of San Miguel, and in riding three blocks felt three severe shocks of earthquake. The inhabitants were distracted with terror. Birds flew wildly through the streets, and, blinded by the dust, fell dead on the ground. ***At four o'clock it was so dark that, as Mr. S. Says, he held his hand before his eyes and could not see it. Nobody moved without a candle, which gave a dim and misty light, extending only a few feet.*** At this time the church was full, and could not contain half who wished to enter. The figure of the Virgin was brought out into the plaza and borne through the streets, followed by the inhabitants, with candles and torches, in penitential procession, crying upon the Lord to pardon their sins. Bells tolled, and during the procession there was another *earthquake*, so violent and long that it threw to the ground many people walking in the procession. ***The darkness continued till eleven o'clock the next day when the sun was partially visible, but dim and hazy, and without any brightness.*** The dust on the ground was four inches thick; the branches of trees broke with its weight, and people were so disfigured by it that they could not be recognized.

At this time Mr. S. set out for his hacienda at Zonzonate. He slept at the village, and at two or three o'clock in the morning was roused by a report like the breaking of most terrific *thunder* or the firing of thousands of cannon. This was the report which startled the people of Guatemala, when the commandant sallied out, supposing that the quartel was attacked, and which was heard at Kingston in Jamaica. It was accompanied by an *earthquake* so violent that it almost threw Mr S. Out of his hammock.¹³⁴

These descriptions of geological activities in Central America corresponded to similar descriptions of the disasters in 3 Nephi.¹³⁵

134 Ibid., 2:36-38, emphasis added.

135 Bart J. Kowallis, "In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Great Destruction in 3 Nephi," *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997-98), 136-90; Sorenson,

Obviously, the value of the above correspondence varies. Some of the above seem insignificant. Others noted by early writers, such as traditions of Israelite origins, and signs at the birth of Christ, were of obvious interest to nineteenth century readers, but would likely be dismissed today by most scholars as reflecting post-Columbian Christian influences. Personally, I find the correspondences in writing, Mesoamerican warfare, and descriptions of geological phenomena to be of particular interest and significance. To others they may seem less so. The issue, however, is not whether *we* find them convincing, but to show that Joseph was right. The correspondences are there. They are easy for the reader to find and, contrary to Neville, they deal with Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon.

Apostate Geography?

Neville observes that some of those who wrote about the Book of Mormon, such as William Smith and John E. Page, later rejected the leadership of Brigham Young and the Quorum of the Twelve after the death of Joseph Smith.¹³⁶ He attempts to use their previous associations with Winchester and their later apostasy to tar their ideas about the Book of Mormon with the brush of heresy so that he can more easily dismiss them. “Joseph Smith liberated William Smith and John Page. Now they could explicitly advocate the Mesoamerican argument he had never approved. Like Winchester, they took the position that Joseph was a fallen prophet; he lacked the vision to see how powerful the Mesoamerican links were to prove the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon to a disbelieving world” (189). Where is the evidence that William or John Page ever felt that they could not freely express their ideas about Book of Mormon geography or that anyone in the Church ever considered it an issue of controversy? William wrote very little about the subject before and after his excommunication, suggesting that it was not a matter of great importance. Neville characterizes William’s views as “Mesoamerican” when they were not, just as he misrepresented

Mormon’s Codex, 641-53; Jerry D. Grover, *Geology of the Book of Mormon* (2014); Neal Rappleye, “The Great and Terrible Judgements of the Lord: Destruction and Disaster in 3 Nephi and the Geology of Mesoamerica,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 15 (2015): 143-57.

136 On William Smith see Kyle R. Walker, *William B. Smith: In the Shadow of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Greg Kofford Books, 2015). On John E. Page see John Quist, “John E. Page: An Apostle of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 53-68.

those of Winchester. William's overview of the Book of Mormon, which, remarkably, Neville cites but has not read carefully, is one more example of traditional hemispheric thinking, with Central America in the middle. William, like Winchester, knows about Stephens and Catherwood,¹³⁷ but never seems to have allowed their work to influence his thinking about Book of Mormon geography.

In contrast to those of Winchester and William Smith, the writings of John E. Page show enthusiasm for *and* familiarity with *Incidents*, which he frequently cites by page number, a clear indication of having read them. Neville attempts to portray Page's ideas about Book of Mormon geography as deviant or reflecting false doctrine. This ignores several important points. First, while some of these ideas were published in 1848 when Page was a follower of Strang, they likely reflect his earlier thinking about the Book of Mormon. His interest in the Stephens's work goes back to 1841, and he was using it in Pittsburgh to defend the Book of Mormon in 1842. He also lectured on the Book of Mormon in Boston and Washington in 1843 and 1844.¹³⁸ Second, while Page later associated with some dissident groups, these all claimed to accept the Book of Mormon. His belief and interest in this seem to have been a constant, even when his views of other doctrines, such as prophetic authority, were not.¹³⁹ Third, Page's ideas about Central America and the Book of Mormon do not differ significantly from those of others who followed the Twelve.

“The Ancient Centers of the Nephites”

Neville holds that Joseph Smith and his associates did not really view Central America as an important region of Book of Mormon events, but considered it merely a peripheral region to which the people of Lehi may have migrated during Book of Mormon times or afterward, but not the location of events described in the book (58). Neville is welcome to think that Mesoamerica was a “hinterland” to the Book of Mormon story. The problem is that he attributes that view to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries. Early publications on the Book of Mormon from 1830 on show that Central America was always a region of interest to readers of the Book of Mormon.

137 “American antiquities,” *The Wasp*, 1 October, 1842.

138 Page, “The Book of Mormon,” *Gospel Herald*, 6 July, 1848.

139 Joseph Smith Journal, 7 July, 1839, in Dean C. Jesse, Mark Ashurst McGee, Richard L. Jensen, eds., *The Joseph Smith Papers: Journals Volume 1: 1832-1839* (Salt Lake City: Church Historian's Press, 2008), 345-46; Quist, “John E. Page,” 64, 67-68.

In a reference to John Page's 1848 writings, Neville asks, "Had Joseph Smith taught, sanctioned, or even permitted the Mesoamerican course of argument, wouldn't it have been his rightful successor, Brigham Young, who would have given these speeches" instead of Page (189). His reference to Brigham Young is significant, but not for the reasons he may think. Early efforts to take the Gospel to the Lamanites were a key motivation for colonization activities in the later nineteenth century. A rare apostolic proclamation from the Quorum of the Twelve was issued under Young's leadership in 1845. The document is significant in reflecting the united voice of the Twelve to the world. They testified that "the 'Indians' (so-called) of North and South America" were the promised remnant spoken of in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴⁰ As the work expanded southward into Arizona, Young explained that these efforts were only a small beginning to the work that needed to be done by the Saints.

Nor do I expect we shall stop at Arizona, but I look forward to the time when settlements of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints will extend right through to the city of *Old Mexico*, and from thence on through *Central America* to *the land where the Nephites flourished in the Golden era of their history*, and the great backbone of the American continent be filled, north and south, with the cities and temples of the people of God. In this great work, I anticipate the children of Nephi, of Laman and Lemuel [native Indians] will take no small part.¹⁴¹

Given that Young was a participant in Zion's Camp in 1834 during the Zelph encounter, and was also one of Joseph Smith's closest associates during in the Nauvoo years when *Incidents* became known to Latter-day Saints, his view of Southern Mexico or Central America as "the land where the Nephites flourished in the Golden era of their history" shows how influential the work of Stephens and Catherwood was in his conception of the ancient geographical setting of Mormon's

140 *Proclamation of the Twelve Apostles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. To All the Kings of the World: To the President of the United States of America; To the Governors of the Several States; And to the Rulers and People of All Nations* (New York: 6 April, 1845), 2-3. On the background of this proclamation see Roper, "Losing the Remnant," 105-06.

141 Brigham Young to William Staines. 11 January 1876, Letterbook 14:124-26, in Leonard J. Arrington, *Brigham Young: American Moses*, 382, emphasis added.

record. Shortly before his death in 1877 he counseled his son Fera to “read all good books you can obtain.” Never a fan a novels, he advised him to read more history. “We should read the true and wise. The perusal of the rest is worse than time wasted, it is time abused. Sell your Dickens’ works and get Stephens’ & Catherwood’s Travels in Central America.”¹⁴² Young, one of Joseph Smith’s most intimate and trusted associates, can hardly have been unaware of his friend’s endorsement of their work.

John Taylor, who may have scribed Joseph Smith’s letter to Bernhisel, described the 1876 Lamanite mission to Arizona in language consistent with Brigham Young’s:

That mission [the Arizona mission] is a precursor of others that will be started still further south, *until* we enter Mexico, and go even to *the ancient centres of the Nephites*, where God dwelt among his ancient people, *where Jesus manifested himself in their midst*, and the ancient Gospel began to be proclaimed in purity and power among the people.¹⁴³

Consistent with Brigham Young’s reference to “the land where the Nephites flourished in the Golden era of their history,” Taylor associated Mexico and Central America with the “ancient centres of the Nephites.” This idea — the increased importance of Central America as the location of Book of Mormon events — apparently did not include an abandonment the old view that the Nephites were destroyed in New York State, which seems to have remained a part of their thinking. Taylor saw this expansion southward as reflecting an interesting symmetry with the Book of Mormon. “The nations of this continent started there and ended at Cumorah. The Gospel of our day started at Cumorah — it has been pushing east and south, and will continue to extend until all the land of Zion shall be visited.”¹⁴⁴ The idea that the nations of this continent (the Jaredite, Mulekite, and Lehite peoples) “started” in that region implies that these colonies landed in Mexico or Central America following their migrations from the Old World by sea, rather than the eastern territories of the United States or South America. This line of thinking is even

142 Brigham Young to F. L. Young, 23 August, 1877, in Dean C. Jesse, ed., *Letters of Brigham Young to His Sons* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974), 314.

143 John Taylor to William W. Taylor, 6 June 1876, in *Millennial Star* 38/28 (10 July 1876), 437, emphasis added.

144 John Taylor to William W. Taylor, 6 June 1876, in *Millennial Star* 38/28 (10 July 1876), 437, emphasis added.

apparent in the writings of those, like Orson Pratt, who still continued to view South America as a locale for some of those events.¹⁴⁵

George Q. Cannon, beginning at age sixteen, worked in the office of the *Times and Seasons* under the tutelage of John Taylor from April 1843 until early 1846. He would have become intimately familiar with the business of the printing office and the content of what was published and discussed there.¹⁴⁶ In 1853, as a missionary in Hawaii, on reading from Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, he reflected in his journal, "What mighty works the ancients have left in those countries, exciting the wonder and admiration of all travelers and <all> who read the account of their travels. These things are unanswerable arguments in favor of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon."¹⁴⁷ Writing for the *Western Standard* in 1857, Cannon explained the significance of Central America in his understanding of Book of Mormon events.

The Book of Mormon pointed out with remarkable definiteness, years before the discovery of ruins in Central America, the situation of cities built and occupied by the ancient dwellers of this continent. Explorations made subsequent to the printing and extensive circulation of this Book, revealed the fact that ruins occupying *the precise situation of these ancient cities*, did really exist. Prior to their discovery the nonexistence of ruins of cities such as the Book of Mormon described, had been plausibly urged as an argument against its authenticity. If, said the objector, such an enlightened and highly advanced people ever occupied this continent—if they built cities and temples of such magnitude as stated by the Book of Mormon, where are the ruins? The discoveries of Stephens and Catherwood in the country declared by the Book of Mormon to be the *principal residence* of one of the colonies that were

145 Orson Pratt, "Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?" *Millennial Star* 10/19 (1 October, 1848): 289, thought the narrative implied that "the northern portions of South America, and also Central America, were the most densely populated."

146 Davis Bitton, *George Q. Cannon: A Biography* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1999), 42-48.

147 George Q. Cannon Journal, 24 November, 1853, in Chad Orton, ed., *The Journals of George Q. Cannon: Hawaiian Mission 1850-1854* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2014), 383.

led to this land, overthrow the objections of those who were determined to view the Book as a forgery.¹⁴⁸

Cannon's comments again underscore the influence of Stephens's work on how Latter-day Saints understood and defended the Book of Mormon. His judgment that "the non-existence of ruins of cities" previous to the discoveries in Central America "had been *plausibly* urged as an argument against its authenticity" suggests that those discoveries were considered far more impressive in his view than reports of Midwestern mound builders. His description of southern Mexico and Central America, like those of Brigham Young, John Taylor and others, shows that it was not a peripheral region in their thinking, rather a "principal residence" of Book of Mormon people.

With what may reflect frustration at the absence of actual documentation for the Prophet's disapproval of things Mesoamerican, Neville wrote. "Joseph doesn't seem to appreciate the long-term damage Winchester's articles will create" (158). But does Neville?

If Joseph was angry or upset, or ever felt threatened by the publication of the unsigned articles, it seems strange that he would allow close and trusted associates like John Taylor to continue to publish those views after Smith retired as editor in 1842. Taylor continued to praise the work of Stephens and Catherwood in connection with the Book of Mormon and even recommended it to Latter day Saints. Exactly one year after the "Zarahemla" article was published, Taylor reviewed Stephens's more recent book *Incidents*:

This is a work that ought to be in the hands of every Latter-day Saint; corroborating, as it does the history of the Book of Mormon. There is no stronger circumstantial evidence of the authenticity of the latter book, can be given, than that contained in Stephens' works.¹⁴⁹

In another article published in December 1844 he wrote,

As to the original inhabitants of the continent of America, the Book of Mormon backs up the description of immense "ruins" in Central America, [and] dispels all doubt. ... To turn the attention of such as may read the works of Stevens

148 George Q. Cannon, "Buried Cities of the West," *Millennial Star* 19/2 (10 January, 1857), emphasis added.

149 "Stephens' Works on Central Americas," *Times and Seasons* 4/22 (1 October, 1843), 346-47.

upon the “ruins” of Central America, we ask a perusal of the following from the writings of Nephi in the Book of Mormon: “Behold, that great city Zarahemla have I burned with fire, and the inhabitants thereof.”¹⁵⁰

Taylor’s reference to Zarahemla in connection with Stephens’s ruins is notable and suggests he found nothing problematic in the idea. It would be strange if Joseph had ever opposed it. In March 1845 Taylor wrote, “Such relics are capital stock for the Latter-day Saints, as well as is the cities, and ruins in Central America, discovered by Mr. Stevens in the very places where the Book of Mormon left them.”¹⁵¹ One month later, Taylor, who by then had been seriously wounded in Carthage jail, eulogized his friend and martyred Prophet as “one of the greatest men that ever lived on the earth; emphatically proved so, by being inspired by God to bring forth the Book of Mormon, which gives a true history of the natives of this continent; their ancient glory and cities: — which cities have been discovered by Mr. Stevens in Central America, *exactly where the Book of Mormon left them.*”¹⁵²

Neville’s theory would have us accept the idea that Joseph Smith was able to persuade smart and faithful men like John Taylor to accept and practice the principle of plural marriage with all the difficulties that entailed, and yet could not get him to be quiet about the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerica. It assumes that Brigham Young, perhaps the Prophet’s most trusted friend and faithful associate, and a careful and close student of Joseph’s teachings, just didn’t really understand what Neville considers a meaty doctrine about a North American “Heartland” geography, which excluded Central America. It is a novel idea — fiction, not history.

150 “Ancient Ruins,” *Times and Seasons* 5/23 (15 December, 1844), 746–47.

151 “Another Mormon Witness,” *Times and Seasons* 6/4 (1 March 1845), 831.

152 “Remarks,” *Times and Seasons* 6/6 (1 April, 1845), 855, emphasis added.

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