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A Real People, Time, and Place: Contextualizing the Book of Mormon



Brant Gardner

Perhaps the best illustration of a popular tactic in the on-going polemic against the Book of Mormon was encapsulated in a question Abraham Lincoln reportedly asked of some in the crowd who were disputing him. He asked, “If you call a sheep’s tail a leg, how many legs does a sheep have?” After many answers of “five,” he replied, “A sheep has four legs. Calling a tail a leg doesn’t make it one.”

It is precisely this process, with an interesting twist, that underlies many attacks on the Book of Mormon. A tail is called a leg, and then declared with great flourish to be no leg at all. The Book of Mormon is declared to have failed the test because of something it never said it was in the first place. Perhaps the simplest example of this process is the contention that the Book of Mormon must explain all of the Native Americans on the Western Hemisphere throughout all time. While many Latter-day Saints have believed this, the text does not require it, and the best research on the text itself denies that claim. Nevertheless, the claim is made, and then easily refuted. The saddest part of this process is not that it occurs, but that so many Latter-day Saints enjoin the discussion by attempting to prove that the tail really was a leg—perhaps in Hebrew, or Egyptian, or in pure unabashed speculation. The problem will always remain, however, that the tail will never be a leg for as much as we try to call it one.

With such an abstract beginning, it is time to begin to identify some of these mislabeled tails. The LDS community frequently has one of the same problems with the Book of Mormon that the rest of the world does, and that is that it is like a fish out of water. It is a history bereft of history, a chronology

bereft of time, a world bereft of topography. In such an artificial context, it is no wonder that the tails are not recognized as tails from inside the church community nearly as often as they are mistaken from the outside. What we shall attempt in this brief discussion is a contextualization of the Book of Mormon, a reinstatement of time, place, and community that can provide for us the context in which the tails can be most clearly seen as tails.

With some minor calendric adjustments, the Book of Mormon resolves our question of time, and the real questions are place and community. Those last two questions receive their best answer in the geographic hypothesis most often called the Limited Tehuantepec Theory. This geographic correlation is most clearly and cogently argued in John L. Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. It is not my intent to discuss that possible correlation, nor to quibble with any of the points Sorenson makes. Rather, what I propose is that the Mesoamerican location proposed provides for us the requisite place and community into which our text may be placed. Against that reasonably known backdrop we may place the text of the Book of Mormon to attempt to find the hits or misses in the text.

First, it is important to provide some foundation for this discussion. While archaeology is one of those sciences heavily infused with the art of interpretation, there are, nevertheless, some very solid data that describe the Mesoamerican world known to exist during Book of Mormon times in the geography argued to plausibly contain Book of Mormon peoples. In that context there are some realities of the time and place that must inform our picture of the Book of Mormon. The first and most important backdrop to the Book of Mormon is that Lehi and his family entered a world that contained other peoples. Rather than argue the evidence of that point from inside the text, I propose to simply accept it for now as one of the realities of that time, topography, and now most importantly, community.

The second important consideration is that there are regionalized and recognized artistic trends that nevertheless fit into a large continuum of Mesoamerican material culture. There is no evidence of a transported Jerusalem. There is no clear and obvious material culture that reflects the Old World rather than the New. Once again, rather than argue this particular point, I suggest for this discussion that we accept that Lehi and his descendants adopted the material culture of the peoples who were native to the land into which these Old World people had immigrated. Just as the early Israelite material culture is indistinguishable from the existing Canaanite material culture during the time of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, our heroes of the Book of Mormon appear to have adopted the patterns that had already been developed in their new homeland.

What I am suggesting first and foremost is that the Book of Mormon is an ancient document that was created by ancient people who behaved (and thought) as ancient people did. They would have lived in an area that had to have dealt with the same climatic challenges as their neighbors, and it would be very surprising if the gross trends of Mesoamerican history completely passed by the smaller enclave of Nephites located in the midst of those larger cultural and historical patterns. When we admit that the sheep's tail may not necessarily be Hebrew, what does a Book of Mormon tail begin to look like?

A culture and context can shine a bright light into the smaller corners of the Book of Mormon where few have attempted to critically examine the text. One of the earliest places where the assumptions of the text have been unexamined, and where potentially important conflicts exist, comes relatively early in the history of the Nephites in the New World. Jacob is a brother of Nephi, and had been with Nephi throughout the creation of their new community. In his own eponymous book he records a powerful sermon he gave dealing with some of the problems that were developing in that community only 55 to 70 years (we are not told the year of the discourse) after the departure of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem.

Jacob proclaims that he is weighted down by the burden from the Lord to discuss their sins, although he tells them that:

For behold, as yet, ye have been obedient unto the word of the Lord, which I have given unto you. But behold, hearken ye unto me, and know that by the help of the all-powerful Creator of heaven and earth I can tell you concerning your thoughts, how that ye are beginning to labor in sin, which sin appeareth very abominable unto me, yea, and abominable unto God.¹

They are just beginning to sin. Modern readers tend to spend most of their time on Jacob's discourse on polygamy among the Nephites, but what is most relevant to our current discussion is his very first point:

And now behold, my brethren, this is the word which I declare unto you, that many of you have begun to search for gold, and for silver, and for all manner of precious ores, in the which this land, which is a land of promise unto you and to your seed, doth abound most plentifully. And the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches; and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that

ye are better than they. And now, my brethren, do ye suppose that God justifieth you in this thing? Behold, I say unto you, Nay. But he condemneth you, and if ye persist in these things his judgments must speedily come unto you. O that he would show you that he can pierce you, and with one glance of his eye he can smite you to the dust! O that he would rid you from this iniquity and abomination. And, O that ye would listen unto the word of his commands, and let not this pride of your hearts destroy your souls! Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you.²

From a socio-historical perspective, the problem in these verses is not precisely in what Jacob says, but in the assumptions that we bring to his text. Modern readers can easily make this mistake in reading these verses: we may suppose that the finding of the precious ores is the very thing that has made them wealthy. While it is certainly related, it is not the possession of the precious ores that Jacob complains about, but rather the “costliness of [their] apparel.” In order to understand why the “costliness of [their] apparel” is the problem rather than obtaining gold and silver, we need to understand more of the economics of the New World.

As a first step, we need to understand the value of gold and silver to the Mesoamericans. Perhaps most intriguing is the word for both gold and silver in the language of the Aztecs: *teocuitlatl* “god excrement.”³ To a people like the Aztecs who used night-soil as a fertilizer, certainly there is some value to excrement that is much greater than for many a modern society. However, the very fact that there is a collective label for the two metals suggests that neither was of sufficient importance to warrant a specific name (much as many males would assume that “brown” and “purple” are sufficient, while their wives insist upon further distinctions into “taupe” and “mauve”).

Mesoamerica was not a money economy: it was a barter economy. The closest thing to a universally accepted token of exchange was cacao beans. For anything else, the value of something depended entirely upon whether or not someone else wanted it. In this context, it is interesting to examine the Codex Mendoza, a tribute book for the Mexica (commonly called Aztec) empire. The price of Mexica conquest over a city or village was an annual tribute. The types of items recorded in the tribute book show the types of goods valued by the empire. Most common are blankets, warrior uniforms, and shields. Other items might include some foodstuffs, and large wooden beams. Incense was required as tribute. In most cases, the tribute is processed goods of a fairly pragmatic nature.

To be sure, there are some inclusions of what might be termed luxury items—jade beads and bars of gold. However, since the Codex Mendoza was created after the Spanish conquest, it is not

absolutely clear whether or not the gold was included for the Spaniards or for the Mexica. In any case, the emphasis of the tribute is on things other than gold, and the gold occurs in bars much like the large wooden beams appear as raw materials. The wood and the gold are raw materials to be worked later, not items of manufacture.

Two exceptions to this occur for a list of several pueblos on plate 98 where a worked head band of gold and a breastplate of gold are listed.⁴ This worked form of gold fits better into the categories of worked goods that fit the majority of the tribute items, and is more representative of the types of tribute that would have been required prior to the conquest.

All of this simply points to a lesser value for gold and silver among the Mesoamericans than among the Europeans. The Lerites would have brought a tradition of value for gold and silver from the Old World. The question is whether the Mesoamerican or Old World value for gold and silver is driving Jacob's discourse.

I suggest that it must be the New World's relative value of the metals rather than the Old World intrinsic value. In the first place, Jacob notes in verse 12 that these ores are "abundant." Economic value is usually associated with scarcity. Consider the joke about the man who receives special permission to take something of value with him into the next life. As he approaches Peter at the Gates, Peter notices a suitcase, and asks the man what is in it. The man proudly announces that he had special permission to bring it, and opens the suitcase to show off bars of gold. Peter then asks him why he wanted to bring paving bricks. In much the same concept, the ease of finding the ores suggests, again, that the metal does not have an intrinsic value.

If we remember that part of the value of gold [do you mean "part of value in the Old World" or "part of the value of gold in the Old World"?] in the Old World is as a medium of measurement for the value of a monetary economy, which was absent in the New World, we understand a little more of the nature of gold and silver in the New World. They were abundant ores, and as something relatively abundant, they held no intrinsic value. This may be contrasted with jade, which in addition to an esthetic attraction, appears to have had a religious significance, and certainly an intrinsic value greater than either gold or silver for the Mesoamerican cultures.

We should also note that while Jacob is *going* to chastise the men, he does *not* chastise them for looking for gold and silver. What he says is: "that many of you have begun to search for gold, and for silver, and for all manner of precious ores, in the which this land, which is a land of promise unto you

and to your seed, doth abound most plentifully." This appears to indicate that the presence of the gold and silver are simply part of the land of promise.

It is the next phrase that is the most important. Jacob notes that after the search for gold and silver, "the hand of providence hath smiled upon you most pleasingly, that you have obtained many riches." The finding of the ore leads to "many riches." So far, even the "many riches" are part of "the hand of providence" smiling on them. The very first point that Jacob makes is that the riches are not in and of themselves bad.

We now must answer the question of how the discovery of the relatively unvalued ore has been transformed into "many riches." Of course we are once again in speculative territory, but understanding the nature of Mesoamerican economies in general can supply some important information. The Nephites have found ore that is abundant.

In addition to refining the metals, Nephi also understands something of metalworking, having made tools to build a boat.⁵ Certainly once in the New World, Nephi again demonstrated both the ability to extract and work metal with the creation of the two sets of plates. Thus, Nephi brings with him the ability to both extract the metal from its naturally occurring state, and to work that metal into something that is useful. We may therefore presume, without much of a leap of imagination, that the Nephites refined their gold and silver, and then made something from the metals. In a labor-intensive society, finished goods are of much greater value than raw materials, and so it is most likely that the Nephites went as far as the creation of some type of object from the gold and silver they refined.

With artisans in the Nephite colony making metal goods, does that make them wealthy? No; as Jacob specifically notes, wealth occurs only when there is a relative difference in the accumulation of valued goods. Since the Nephites had fairly easy access to the raw materials, and presumably each artisan would create more objects that could be used it is also quite likely that objects of gold and silver would be very common among the Nephites, and with easy availability comes depreciation in value.

Jacob's distress is not over the accumulation of goods, but the social segregation that it is costing. Notice the particulars of his complaint in verse 13: "and because some of you have obtained more abundantly than that of your brethren ye are lifted up in the pride of your hearts, and wear stiff necks and high heads because of the costliness of your apparel, and persecute your brethren because ye suppose that ye are better than they."

Jacob's problem is in their pride and the supposition of superiority held by those who are wealthy. Jacob's indicator of that wealth is costliness of apparel. This gives us yet another economic problem. How do we get costly apparel in a relatively small village? Indeed, in an economy with no money, and no stores, how can we even determine what "costly" means?

In an ancient village, we must suppose that the village would need to be as self-sustaining as possible. In addition to raising sufficient food to feed their own population, they will need to make their own dwellings (as well as cooperate on public edifices). In addition, one would suspect that they would make their own clothing. Once again we enter the realm of raw materials. What is available to one is available to all. If all are making their own clothes, and all have access to the same raw materials, how could some garments be more costly than others?

The only answer in ancient Mesoamerica is trade. Only in the exchange of goods between communities can we begin to make sense of Jacob's evidences. The scenario would be that the worked gold and silver pieces become trade items with other communities. It is very likely that many different types of goods were traded, as trade creates social networks and extended bonds that are as important as the trade goods themselves.⁶ However, in this case we are interested in the worked gold and silver.

Worked gold and silver are luxury items, not because of the metal, but because any functional use can be replicated in other means. They might be made into cups, but many other substances may also be used for cups. They might be used to write on (as did Nephi and Jacob), but other materials were available, and perhaps easier to work with than the metal. Because the metals themselves held no intrinsic value, whatever was made of them was not a necessity but an item of surplus and luxury. This excess among the Nephites would be traded for similar excess items from another village. In this case, the evidence is that the trade was made for apparel. Being from another location, this apparel would have a different appearance and perhaps be of different materials entirely. In any case, the necessity of having worked to produce an exchange good, travel to the trade community, and make the exchange, all increases the value of the apparel brought back to the land of the Nephites.

Anthropologists have long known that clothing serves a social function, with different types of clothing being appropriate to different classes. For instance, Jesus tells of a story about a rich man and a beggar. In the introduction to the story we learn: "There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day."⁷

We are told that he is a rich man, but the rest of the verse answers the question, "How rich was he?" Perhaps no modifier is more telling than that he was "clothed in purple." The purple dye was

very difficult to come by and, therefore, extremely expensive. Only those of great wealth could afford to wear purple. Indeed it was restricted to royalty in certain ages of England, hence the term “royal purple.” Clothing is an immediate outward sign of a social segregation of class.

Jacob’s complaint is precisely this division into classes, that those who are wearing the costly apparel deem themselves better than others. Jacob had been with the Nephites from their formation, from a time when there were no such social divisions, from the time when Nephi would have fought with the sword of Laban in their defense. This unified society was now fragmenting through trade connections that inevitably brought in differences in material goods but just as inevitably outside ideas as well. As a final confirmation that it is the social stratification that is Jacob’s concern, we have only to look to Jacob’s solution to the problem. He does not suggest abandonment of gold and silver nor of any type of wealth. What he advocates is, “Think of your brethren like unto yourselves, and be familiar with all and free with your substance, that they may be rich like unto you.”⁸ Rather than vertical stratification, Jacob suggests horizontal distribution of goods.

This early pressure to social stratification only increased over the life of the Nephite colony. As time went on, the pressures of an impinging outside world continued to increase in Nephite society, and these eventually become associated with a particular form of competing politico-religious ideal (an ideal eventually given the label “order of the Nehors”). The complex of associated traits that are universally condemned become wearing costly apparel, not laboring with one’s own hands, and, after the initiation of the reign of the Judges, a return to kings. The theological issue of this competing politico-religious movement is the denial of the atoning Messiah.

Notice how these themes interweave through the description of Nehor, the man whose name will become shorthand for this type of competing culture:

And he had gone about among the people, preaching to them that which he termed to be the word of God, bearing down against the church; declaring unto the people that every priest and teacher ought to become popular; and they ought not to labor with their hands, but that they ought to be supported by the people. And he also testified unto the people that all mankind should be saved at the last day, and that they need not fear nor tremble, but that they might lift up their heads and rejoice; for the Lord had created all men, and had also redeemed all men; and, in the end, all men should have eternal life. And it came to pass that he did teach these things so much that many did believe on his words, even so many that they began to support him and give him money. And he began to be lifted up in the pride of his heart, and to wear very costly apparel, yea, and even began to establish a church after the manner of his preaching.⁹

Right away in verse 3 we have the issue of laboring with one's own hands. In verse 4 Nehor denies the need for a Redeeming/Atoning Messiah, and the entire condemnation of Nehor and his kind is capped by that very unique Book of Mormon condemnation that they began to wear costly apparel. Why does costly apparel become so intimately associated with all of the evils that beset Nephite society? What is so significant about what one wears that it becomes the focus of a major sign of apostasy?

The answer lies not inside the Book of Mormon but in the cultural context in which the Book of Mormon may be plausibly set. To understand better the pressures on Nephite society, we need to back away from the Book of Mormon for a moment and examine the general trend of culture in the Mesoamerican setting most plausible for the Book of Mormon events. Remember that the Nephites were participants in this larger world, and not creators of it.

Mesoamerican archaeology divides the time periods of Maya culture into various stages, which do not precisely overlap with the major events in Book of Mormon history since the periods are described by general cultural developments. The particular time period of the events at the end of the reign of Mosiah II and the beginning of the reign of the Judges falls into the Late Preclassic Period, roughly dated from 400 BC to 250 AD. John S. Henderson provides a general picture of the overall world into which the Book of Mormon might plausibly be placed at this point in time:

Although some parts of the Maya world—mostly in the highlands—were firmly tied into the economic networks and related patterns of interaction of the Olmec world, centered to the west on the Gulf Coast, most early Maya communities, especially in the lowlands, were small, simple, egalitarian vil-lages. By the end of the Middle Preclassic period, after 500 B.C., communities like Mirador were beginning to reflect a new developmental trajectory. Jewelry and other goods made from exotic raw materials indicate increasing prosperity, expanded economic ties to distant regions, and sharper differences in wealth and social status; large-scale, elaborately decorated public buildings reflect the emergence of powerful permanent leaders, chiefs or kings. These trends continued and intensified during the Late Preclassic period, setting the fundamental patterns of Classic-period Maya city-states.

The most distinctive features of political art and propaganda that would typify Maya states of the Classic period appeared first at Abaj Takalik and other towns in the highlands, the adjacent piedmont and coastal zones, and throughout the Intermediate Zone. Stelae with relief carvings that depicted rulers in elaborate dress, studded with emblems of their office, also bore hieroglyphic texts recording their names, biographical details, and great deeds in the context of the Long Count calendar (Fig. 5-4). Standing before public buildings, often paired with altars, these monuments reinforced the power

of the lords both by highlighting their genealogical and supernatural connections and by celebrating the fact of their offices. Some aspects of this dynastic political art can be found in towns scattered across the Maya lowlands, where it would reach its full elaboration, in the Late Preclassic period. But there is no evidence of the full pattern—notably, monuments with texts that include Long Count dates—until the Classic period.¹⁰

Notice in Henderson's description of the developing kingdoms of the Maya the undercurrents that flow parallel to the issues we have just analyzed in the Book of Mormon. The kingdoms are increasing in power and influence—and wealth. Note that the wealth was described as jewelry of exotic raw materials. In the monumental art of these people, one thing that stands out is the elaborate dress of the kings. Our final cultural tie to this larger Mesoamerican trend comes in the nature of displays of wealth:

The Maya used commodities both in their raw state and as worked objects for money. These currencies included jade and other green stones; flint and obsidian, in both worked and unworked forms; other precious stones and minerals; spondylus (spiny oyster) shells; cacao beans; lengths of cotton cloth, both in plain weave and made into clothes; spices; measures of sea salt; birds and their feathers; animal pelts; forest products such as dyes, resins, incense, and rubber; wood in both worked and unworked form; and ceramics, especially beautifully painted elite wares. People at all levels of society used these currencies within their communities as well as in the markets and fairs. Farmers and villagers could use their crops and handicrafts to barter for or buy other goods for use in their daily lives or in special rituals, such as marriages, funerals, and house dedications.

People throughout Mesoamerica wore these currencies as jewelry and clothing to display the wealth and enterprise of their families.¹¹

Here is the final key to the puzzle. In this world where there were no banks, no stores, and no universally accepted currency, value was in trade, and the way one could show their wealth was by wearing it—precisely the issue that Jacob had with some of his people only a relatively few short years into their Mesoamerican experience. Costly apparel becomes, in the Book of Mormon, a part of a complex of cultural items that indicate the adoption of the culture and values of the outside Mesoamerican world. Among those values are social stratification and separation. In the Mesoamerican world around the Nephites, social class was maintained through the visual displays of relative wealth, as well as the differentiation by class where the upper class need not labor with their own hands for food, but were supplied by right.

For the Book of Mormon, assuming that gold and silver and fine clothing have modern meanings is the equivalent of calling a tail a leg. It leads to tremendous misunderstandings of the way the economic world of an ancient society would work. What is most amazing, and completely gratifying, is that when the Book of Mormon is critically examined for these details, it emerges as an even stronger document contemporary with an ancient world, not New England in 1830.

Another place where the cultural background of a Mesoamerican setting helps deal with some anomalies in the Book of Mormon text occurs with the setting for King Benjamin's speech recorded in the Book of Mosiah. To understand the undercurrents in King Benjamin's speech, we need to understand both Book of Mormon history and Mesoamerican material culture.

It is impossible to properly understand King Benjamin's speech without reference to the historical events that led up to that speech. Those events are, at times, easy to miss because they are only briefly discussed in Mormon's transitional book, Words of Mormon. In verses 12-18, Mormon quickly summarizes a series of events. Because he does talk about wars with the Lamanites, it is easy to assume that all of the contentions were with the Lamanites. A closer reading of those verses makes it clear that even more serious were "contentions," a word that the Book of Mormon uses fairly consistently to indicate internal strife, not external conflict. Externally there are wars; internally there are contentions. These internal contentions are so serious that there are defections to the Lamanites.¹² Since the current point of this discussion is not on those contentions but upon the aftermath of their resolution, we won't dwell on the evidence for their nature. However, it must be noted that the principle important background to Benjamin's speech is a tremendous internal division that must have caused significant upheaval in the society. With a people torn by civil and religious contention so great as to cause physical separations and the departure of many of their community, Benjamin gathers his people. It is essential that we understand that his motive in doing so was to heal rifts and put his society back together again. He intends to do this by formally discarding the Nephite/Zarahemlaite distinctions, and making them a new unified people with only one name—a new name of "Christian."

Benjamin will do two things during this ceremony that may require some extra explanation. First, he will abdicate three years before he dies. This is unusual in the Book of Mormon. Second, he will build a tower. Both of these events are fairly mundane, but may be loaded with much greater meaning than previously assumed.

In a recent article describing the probably Jewish festival behind Benjamin's setting, Terrence Szink and John Welch suggest:

Of the three annual festival times in ancient Israel, the autumn festival complex was the most important and certainly the most popular in ancient Israel. In early times apparently it was called the Feast of Ingathering. According to many scholars, the various components of the autumn festival were celebrated as a single season of celebration in the earliest periods of Israelite history. Its many elements were not sharply differentiated until later times, when the first day of the seventh month became Rosh ha-Shanah (New Year), followed by eight days of penitence, then followed on the tenth day of the month by Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and on the fifteenth day by Sukkot (Festival of the Tabernacles), concluding with a full holy week...¹³

The authors discuss their reasons for relating King Benjamin's situation to the historical Israelite festivities, and there are important correlations. There are also, however, some indications that not all of what is going on resonates to a uniquely Old World chord. Given the 476 years that have passed since the departure from Jerusalem,¹⁴ we should expect that there would be some changes to the nature of the festivals. In particular we should expect some type of interaction with customary festivals of the New World which would surely have been known and probably practiced by the Zarahemlaites prior to their union with the immigrant Nephites.

One point of conjunction between the Israelite and New World practices occurs in the New Year celebration. Allen Christenson has examined the correlation between the Maya November harvest festival and rituals of coronation and renewal performed by the ruler:

Throughout the history of the Maya, who dominated southern Mesoamerica, the most important public festival of the year was timed to coincide with the main corn harvest in mid-November. For the most part, this also served as the New Year's day of the solar calendar, when kingship was renewed...¹⁵

As noted, the Hebrew autumn festivals included the New Year celebration. Indeed, this particular speech may have been given in the context of a special type of New Year celebration. For a possible background, we can examine the Mesoamerican background for New Year's celebrations. The changing to a new year was also heralded with great ceremony. However, there is another very important type of New Year celebration that may enter into Benjamin's New World accounting. To understand the possible Mesoamerican context, we must take a short side trip into the Mesoamerican calendar, with which the Zarahemlaites were most certainly familiar, and the Nephites would have had difficulty avoiding:

The 260-day cycle, already in use during Preclassic times, formed a basic part of all Mesoamerican calculations. Among the Mexica, this cycle was known as the Tonalpohualli...; the Maya called it the Tzolkin. This cycle was composed of 20 day signs, which ran consecutively, combined with a number from 1 to 13 as a pre-fix. A day would be designated, for example, as 5 Atl (water) or 8 Tochtli (rabbit) in the Tonalpohualli. In order for the exact day 5 Atl to come around again, 260 days would have to elapse (or 20×13 , since there is no common denominator). This 260-day cycle is not based on any natural phenomenon and we do not know how to account for its invention.

In addition to the Tonalpohualli or Tzolkin, another cycle ran con-currently, resembling our solar year of 365 days. This was made up of 18 months of 20 days each ($18 \times 20 = 360$), plus 5 additional days of apprehension and bad luck at the end of the year. Days were numbered from 0 to 19. The Mexica called the 360-day year the Xihuitl, and the 5-day period of bad luck the Nemontemi. The equivalent Maya periods were named the Haab (360 days) and Uayeb (5 days).¹⁶

These two independently running calendars both began again every 260 and 360+5 days. However, every 52 years they both coincided:

The Tzolkin and the Haab ran concurrently, like intermeshed cog-wheels, and to return to any given date, 52 years, or 18,980 days, would have to elapse (because both 365×52 and $260 \times 73 = 18,980$). In other words, the Tzolkin would make 73 revolutions and the Haab 52, so that every 52 calendar years of 365 days one would return to the same date. A complete date in this 52-year cycle might be, for example, 2 1k 0 Pop (2 1k being the position of the day in the Tzolkin, 0 Pop the position in the Haab). Fifty-two years would pass before another 2 1k 0 Pop date returned.

One cannot overemphasize the significance of this 52-year cycle for Mesoamerican peoples. It is called the Calendar Round or Sacred Round. Aside from the Maya and Mexica we know it was in use by the Mixtecs, Otomis, Huastecs, Totonacs, Matlazinca, Tarascans, and many other groups.... The cycles of time are believed to have been primarily divinatory in purpose. When these coincided, it was an event of great importance, marked by special ceremonies and perhaps by the enlargement of architectural structures.

It was expected that the world would end at the completion of a 52-year cycle. At this time, among the Mexica in the Valley of Mexico, all fires were extinguished, pregnant women were

locked up lest they be turned into wild animals, children were pinched to keep them awake so that they would not turn into mice, and all pottery was broken in preparation for the end of the world. In the event the gods decided to grant man another 52 years of life on earth, however, a nighttime ceremony was held in which the populace followed the priests through the darkness over a causeway to the top of an old extinct volcano that rises abruptly from the floor of the basin of Mexico, known today as the Hill of the Star, the hill above Ixtapalapa. There, with all eyes on the stars, they awaited the passage of the Pleiades across the center of the heavens, which would announce the continuation of the world for another 52 years. When the precise moment came, a victim was quickly sacrificed by making a single gash in his chest and extracting the still palpitating heart. In the gory cavity the priests, with a fire drill, kindled a new flame that was quickly carried by torches across the lake to the temple in Tenochtitlan, and from there to all temples and villages around the lake. This was known as the New Fire Ceremony among the Mexica, and in some way this same completion and renewal of each 52-year cycle was recognized by all Mesoamericans. It was probably rare for a person to witness more than one of these celebrations in his lifetime, so undoubtedly it was an event approached with great anticipation and relived many times after its passing.¹⁷

For our purposes, we note that the 52-year cycle is not only extremely significant, but also the occasion at times marked by the “enlargement of architectural structures.”¹⁸ This piece of information will be significant during our discussion of Benjamin’s tower. For now, the possible occurrence of a Mesoamerican century coinciding with the time normal festivals and Benjamin’s intent provides us an excellent hypothesis for Benjamin’s abdication. Rather than step down because of infirmity, he was choosing a time to step down and make a change at a time when that change would most likely be seen as a renewal and a fresh start. Thus the new king and the new covenant would coincide with a new year and a new century—a conversion of events that would not be available again in Benjamin’s lifetime.

Our second problem with the setting of Benjamin’s speech is his tower. In the context of Mesoamerican ceremonial centers, this description of the building of a tower is somewhat out of place. Mormons have usually appealed to the tower at the site of Palenque, but that site is much later than the close of the Book of Mormon and, therefore, very much too late to be an example for Benjamin’s speech. Additionally, it is quite clear that this is a temporary tower, not a permanent one. It is built because he “could not teach them all within the walls of the temple.”¹⁹ Combined with the apparent arrival of larger numbers of people, it would appear that the original plan called for the teaching within the walls of the temple, and only when it was apparent that they would not all fit was the tower erected. Since the information that a tower would be necessary came only upon the gathering of the

people, a tower to meet that exigency would necessarily be built of easily obtainable building materials, and just as reasonably be temporary rather than permanent.

The tower is also interesting because it should not be necessary. A tower elevates Benjamin so that he may see over the crowd, and so that his voice might be isolated from the hum of the crowd. However, temples in Mesoamerica were used for that precise purpose, with some excellent acoustics in some of the ceremonial centers where speaking from a temple would be heard on other temples or within the ceremonial courtyard. In the Mesoamerican context, then, the gathering at the temple should have already provided the benefits of a tower. Why did Benjamin build one? This issue is further complicated by the apparent difference between this occasion when Benjamin had to build a tower and a later occasion when his son, Mosiah, was able to speak with a presumably larger group of people (the people of Zarahemla should have increased, plus the later occasion included the people of Limhi and Alma) but did not need to build a tower.²⁰

If we return to the conception of building or expansion of the temples as part of the Mesoamerican new century ceremony, it becomes a tantalizing prospect to suggest that Benjamin had to build the temporary tower because the real “tower” (or temple) was not yet built. His son, Mosiah, would be able to use that temple in later years, and therefore would have had no need for the temporary tower.

At this point, another fascinating possibility enters the picture, this time from the dirt rather than the printed page. John L. Sorenson has suggested that the archaeological site of Santa Rosa is a good candidate for the Book of Mormon city of Zarahemla. During the excavations at that site, one temple (and one temple only) exhibited a very unique feature. Under the plaster floor was found a distinct division between two types of gravel. In the words of one archaeologist:

To the north the gravel was broken and to the south it was rounded. I supervised that excavation and, upon noting the difference, carefully searched the gravel, finding no mixture whatever. Not only does the difference suggest two sources of materials but it may be taken to imply two separate groups, each working on its section. Further, the medial line runs roughly east-west.²¹

As a further backdrop to how unusual this find was, it should be remembered that most Mesoamerican temples cared much more for the exterior than the interior. The exterior would have the nice facing stones and art, but typical rubble would provide the volume to fill the inside of the beautiful veneer. Here we have in a location that not only was not intended to ever be seen again, but was usually the location of a haphazard fill that might include broken pots, we have a very careful and intentional ordering of different types of gravel. The dating of this particular floor cannot be made

with precision, but the original excavating archaeologist indicates that the structures above that floor date to the Classic, with the substructures being earlier. This at least leaves open the probability that the floor is also pre-Classic (or the time period of the Book of Mormon) as the caches of later pottery found under the floor were found in pits dug through the floor. Thus the flooring already existed with the later pottery was cached.²²

It is impossible to provide more than sheer speculation, but given Benjamin's desire to unify a people torn by internal dissention, here is a plausible scenario that might lie behind Benjamin's speech and the preparations that went in to it. Benjamin may have decided that his people would need to have a new start, and that the occasion of a century renewal would give him the perfect opportunity. He therefore initiates a special event on top of the normal ceremonies. He would abdicate, and he would create a new people by providing them with a new name and therefore, perhaps, a new identity. To mark this new unification under a single name, he commissions a new temple, and has the people gather in the courtyard of the new temple. As the temple is not yet built, he erects a temporary tower to allow him to address the crowd. After the crowd has declared their acceptance of the new name, he asks them to symbolically represent themselves as Nephites and Zarahemlites by carefully placing different types of gravel in the floor of this new temple. He would then ask them to plaster it over, indicating that what was once two is now the foundation of one new thing—a new thing that is quite fittingly a temple to the God to whom they have just made a special covenant.

Returning to the issue of tails and legs with which this discussion began, the types of small details that have been discussed cannot in and of themselves prove that a tail is a tail, nor a leg a leg. What such information does, however, is present a major conundrum to those who would disparage the Book of Mormon. If one were to create a work of fiction claiming to be history, one would expect that the gross features of history would match, but that the details would betray the fiction in the account. Many people know the gross details, but typically only a few who are well versed in history know the fine-grained details. The Book of Mormon tosses that logic on its ear. There are some large points in the Book of Mormon that remain subjects of continued controversy, and it will likely be years before we hear the end of horses and elephants, chariots and wheat. Against those more obvious rough spots, we have in the Book of Mormon a confluence with known history down in the fine spots. Right at the very place where one expects fiction to fall apart entirely, the Book of Mormon appears at its strongest. This suggests that some of the controversies about the more obvious issues may eventually succumb to the discovery that we have been calling a tail a leg again.

Notes

¹ Jacob 2:4-5.

² Jacob 2:12-17.

³ Both Molina and Simeon agree on the basic meaning. There are extensions in Simeon that appear to give regional value to gold, but since one of these uses the Spanish word *corona* (crown) all such references are suspect as later alterations of the value system through European contact.

⁴ (Author,)"Codex Mendoza," *Antiguedades de Mexico* 1 (1964): 100.

⁵ See 1 Nephi 17:9-11.

⁶ Paul Radin, *The World of Primitive Man* (London: Abelard-Schuman, 1953), 130.

⁷ Luke 16:19.

⁸ Jacob 2:17.

⁹ Alma 1:3-6.

¹⁰ John S. Henderson, *The World of the Ancient Maya* (City, State: Cornell University Press, 1997), 87-88.

¹¹ Linda Schele and Peter Matthews, *The Code of Kings* (City, State: Scribner, 1998), 19.

¹² Words of Mormon 1:16.

¹³ Terrence L. Szink and John W. Welch, "An Ancient Israelite Festival Context," *King Benjamin's Speech* (Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1998), 159.

¹⁴ Mosiah 6:5.

¹⁵ Allen J. Christenson, "Maya Harvest Festivals and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 3 (1991): 1.

¹⁶ Muriel Porter Weaver, *The Aztecs, Maya, and their Predecessors* (City, State: Seminar Press, 1972), 103.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-104.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

¹⁹ Mosiah 2:7.

²⁰ See Mosiah 25: 1-4.

²¹ Donald L. Brockington, *The Ceramic History of Santa Rosa, Chiapas, Mexico* (Provo, UT: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1967), 60-61.

²² See: Augustin Delgado, *Archaeological Research at Santa Rosa, Chiapas, and in the Region of Tehuantepec* (Provo, UT: New World Archaeological Foundation, 1965), 29.