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## Food Plants in the Book of Mormon

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**Abstract:** Miller discusses the claims made by Book of Mormon critics that the appearance of some food plants such as barley and wheat in the record is anachronistic, and that these didn't exist in the Americas prior to Columbus. While the presence of a type of barley has been identified by archaeologists in North America, wheat has not. Miller is not troubled by this, and believes it will be at a future date. The possibility of a domesticated version that became extinct due to neglect is mentioned. While "neas" and "sheum" are both mentioned as foodstuffs, at present we do not have any clue as to their identity.

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## Food Plants in the Book of Mormon

Some different familiar grains are briefly listed in the Book of Mormon (e.g., barley, wheat, and corn), along with two unfamiliar ones, neas, and sheum. (Mosiah 9:9). Although the Jaredites brought seeds to the New World from the Old, types are not specified (Ether 1:41). It is stated, however, that they did have some types of grain (Ether 9:17; 10:12).

The presence of barley and wheat, which originally are Old World grains, caused many Book of Mormon critics to state that this alone challenges the veracity of the Book. As most people know corn (or maize) is a New World plant. The mention of “corn” in the Bible is usually understood as a general term, and includes different types of grain (e.g., Genesis 41:5; Isaiah 28:28). According to Ball and Hess, “It is generally believed that maize originated in Mexico and was domesticated from wild maize ...” (2004, p. 163).

Possibly the Nephites domesticated a variety of maize, or corn, as they seemingly lived in the southern part of Mexico to Guatemala (Sorenson, 1985, p. 37). As related in Ball and Hess, domesticated maize dates between 5000 and 3000 B.C. (2004, p. 164).

The major objection to plants “that shouldn’t be” in the Book of Mormon has mostly centered on barley and wheat. Since these are Old World grains, and “would not occur” in the Americas before Columbus, the critics have made much of this. However, archaeologist Daniel B. Adams reported that barley had been recovered from a site in Arizona (1983, p. 32, 37). Archaeologists Nancy and David Asch discovered further evidence for barley in America in Oklahoma and Illinois that predates the arrival of Spaniards (1985, p. 79). Although this is a different variety of barley

than that of the Old World, as might be expected, it nonetheless is still barley. Wheat yet seemingly presents a problem. To my knowledge this grain has never been identified in Precolumbian time in America.

Keep in mind that barley was not found in America until fairly recently, though, even after a century of extensive archaeological digs have taken place in North and Central America. What we do know of wheat is, that it, too, is an Old World grain. It was probably first domesticated in the upper parts of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in an area known as the Fertile Crescent (Levy-Yardun et al., 2000, p. 1602).

Wheat was grown anciently in many Old World civilizations. Joseph of Egypt, ancestor of Lehi (1 Nephi 5:14), was in charge of Pharaoh's extensive granaries. While the general term for grain, "corn", is used in Genesis, the main type was most likely wheat. Ancient wheat is certainly known from Egypt. One of the reasons for a lack of evidence of wheat in the Americas in Precolumbian time was explained by Ball and Hess. They stated, "The cultivated species of wheat and barley the Lehites [Nephites and Lamanites] would have had available to them were already highly domesticated by the seventh century B.C. Domesticated plants generally cannot survive without human intervention." (2004, p. 152).

Therefore, wheat could have been present at the time of the Nephites, but later became extinct as a domesticated plant after generations of neglect. Archaeologists John L. Sorenson and Carl L. Johannessen also commented on the problem of maintaining domesticated life. They said, "Domesticated plants and animals are almost never successfully transplanted by humans to a strange area

without appropriate care being given the transplanted specimens.” (2006, p. 277).

Concerning wheat, I think that there will probably come a time when evidence for it will be discovered in Precolumbian America by archaeologists. Its absence to date, though, should not cause anyone to question their faith as to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The names “neas” and “sheum” as given in the Book of Mosiah, must be ones representing some type of edible plant. They are mentioned in conjunction with corn, wheat, and barley, so they might represent types of grains. However, this cannot be known for a surety. Why the strange names, though? It would seem that Joseph Smith did not have a knowledge of any plant with which to relate them. Apparently, he just used the original untranslated names, or else they appeared to him in that form. This might also be the case with two animals mentioned in the Jaredite record, *cu-reloms* and *cumoms* (Ether 9:19). These animals are discussed in a later chapter of this book.