

Archaeology: Quest for the Nephites

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The Archaeological Item List

By asserting that pre-Columbian America was settled by Israelites exclusively after 600 BCE, and giving extensive details of the material culture, the Book of Mormon provided us with numerous opportunities to test its claims. Even if we don't consider the Jaredites, the period of the Nephite/Lamanite civilizations covers a thousand years. In real-world archaeology, major sites sometimes cover only a couple of centuries. Classical Greece lasted only three centuries. During a millennium, major remains should be produced. In addition to cities, towns, ports and villages, there is the material culture, including their tools, furnishings, clothing, weapons, and food items, in particular the crops and animals for food, wool and work. Modern archaeology meticulously sifts what is dug up, and analyzes even the smallest find, including seeds, pollen, and bones, both human and animal. Rubbish heaps and sacrificial/slaughter/butcher sites are treasure-troves to learn what the people ate, and hence, what they grew, husbanded, hunted and fished. Not to be outdone, the Book of Mormon is careful to detail many items of agriculture, herding, architecture, crafts/technology, and commerce.

To systematize this inquiry in the most efficient manner, an item table has been prepared, as follows:

<u>Book of Mormon Item</u>	<u>Found in the New World?</u>
Texts in Hebrew	none, in either book or inscriptional format
Texts in reformed Egyptian	none, in either book or inscriptional format
City walls	yes, but associated with other cultures only
High places, temples	yes, but associated with known Mayan, Olmec, Aztec (etc.) cultures
Iron works	no smelted iron has been found in the New World
Steel works	no evidence of steel production in the New World
Brass	no evidence of brass in the New World, but bronze existed in South America
Copper	yes, especially in South America
Gold	yes, but spread rather late into Mesoamerica
Silver	yes, but spread rather late into Mesoamerica
Chains	none
Swords of metal	none
Cement houses	none
Plowshares	none
Wheeled vehicles	none (only toys, but no vehicles, since there were no draft animals)
Chariots	none
Roads	only paved paths, to enable teams of men to carry heavy tax/tribute bundles through rainforests and similar terrain, as witnessed by the Spanish
Gold & silver coins	no coinage has been found in the New World (note: the BOM does not use the word "coin" but "pieces" of silver & gold, each with a different name, which it refers to as "money", and the chapter heading used to say—up to the 1960's—"Nephite coins and measures" but now says "Nephite coinage")
Horses	no horses were found by the Europeans when they arrived, and no bones have been found of horses dated to within the last 7,000 years
Cattle, bull, calf, ox	no cattle found by the Europeans, nor any bones of cattle
Sheep	no sheep found by the Europeans, nor any bones of sheep
Goats	no goats found by the Europeans, nor any bones of goats
Ass	not found
Swine	not found
Flocks, herds	none for any of the above animals
Elephants (Jaredites)	not found (or even mammoths, in the last 7,000 years, nor bones of this period)

Barley	none found
Wheat	none found
Grapes	?
Figs	none
Silk	none
Linen	none
Crucifixion cataclysm	see discussion below
Israelite DNA	not found (see discussion below)

It is clear from this list that nineteenth-century authors replicated their New England farm life in the Book of Mormon, with an item list that is just not found in the New World.

Pre-Columbian DNA

The result here is quite definitive. It has been best presented in the Mormon context by Simon G. Southerton, an accomplished research scientist, and former Mormon, who served two years as an LDS missionary, and two years as a bishop. His study discusses the scientific findings in detail. His conclusions are succinctly stated as follows:

The ancestors of Native Americans were Asians who unknowingly became the first Americans as they walked across Beringia over 14,000 years ago. The ancestors of the Polynesians were Asians who honed their considerable nautical skills among the islands of Southeast Asia before sailing out into the Pacific during the last 3,000 years. Regardless of coincidental cultural, linguistic or morphological parallels with the Old World, the peoples of the Pacific Rim who met Columbus and Cook were not Israelites. They were descendants of a far more ancient branch of the human family tree that had existed thousands of years before the Israelite branch sprouted into existence. (*Losing a Lost Tribe. Native Americans, DNA and the Mormon Church*, Signature Books, Salt Lake City, 2004, p.130)

It is worth noting here, too, that the languages of the pre-Columbian peoples are in no way similar to the Semitic family or to Egyptian. The Polynesian language group has been identified as being most closely linked to the pre-Chinese people of Taiwan.

Where Did All the Cities Go?

The Book of Mormon mentions at least 41 cities by name, including only one Jaredite city. The fact that this civilization, its cities, inscriptions and artifacts have never been found anywhere in the Americas would seem to require the assumption that the great cataclysm at the time of Christ's crucifixion had vaporized everything. Venice Priddis has made the most extravagant argument, *to wit*, that South America was largely below sea level until the crucifixion. The land that had been above sea level was the land of the Book of Mormon. At the time of the crucifixion, South America rose up thousands of feet in an hour or two. Still, this leaves it, the Andes highlands, as a candidate for exploration, where everything on the item list should be discoverable. To save the day, her cataclysm should not have been just a sudden emergence from the deep, but a kerplop, a turning over of the whole continent like a pancake, so that everything would wind up at the bottom. A sci-fi kerplop, or vaporization? (*The Book and the Map; New Insights into Book of Mormon Geography*, Bookcraft, Salt Lake City, 1975)

Well, this is a lot of fun, but on a more serious note, and to be fair, most Book of Mormon cartographers minimize the effect of the cataclysm. After all, only some cities were destroyed, sixteen mentioned by name. (3 Nephi 8:15) Six were burned, three sunk into the earth, 2 were buried in the earth, three were flooded and one was covered by a mountain. When a city burns, it is still available for archaeology. The fire will just leave a burn level in the stratigraphy. A couple of major cities are said to have been rebuilt. And this was followed by another four centuries of Nephite-Lamanite history, obviously with cities and a material culture. Mormon around 420 CE observed, "The whole face of the land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea." (Mormon 1:7) Furthermore, the Jaredites also built many cities. (Ether 9:23 & 10:12) There is no cataclysm to erase their cities from the face of the land, the same territory occupied by the Nephites.

When a city undergoes a major cataclysm, this fact can be observed in the archaeological record. Slippage into the sea leaves a large debris field, a ready candidate for marine archaeology. Fire leaves a burn level in the stratigraphy. Collapsed buildings not only leave their own debris, but often skeletons under it.

The last battles of both civilizations should have left behind a mass of steel swords, breastplates and helmets. In the Jaredite final conflict, millions of combatants fell to the sword, equipped with these items. In the end-of-days scenario for the Nephites, each of twenty-four commanders commanded 10,000 combatants, similarly equipped, resulting in 240,000 dead, and at least as many Lamanites. Both final confrontations happened in upstate New York. What a field day for weekenders wielding metal detectors.

Crucifixion Cataclysm: Cover-up Gone Awry

In the Book of Mormon, at the time of the crucifixion of Jesus, the whole land was convulsed and swept with terrible destruction. This great cataclysm was clearly intended to obscure the issue, so as to provide a way to evade the issue of the missing cities, and for many this has been its function in their faith. But it is often the case that when one undertakes an elaborate effort to eliminate evidence, the cover-up creates more evidence than it effaces. Such a major cataclysm, on a regional if not a bicontinental level, at a time not so long ago in geological time, would have left very obvious consequences. There are four areas of major investigation, any one of which should have found at least some evidence of this event, over a broad territory and at the same time. Indeed, such a discovery would have been front-page news. First, the Panama Canal involved massive earth moving over a long distance, creating a huge geological cross section. A special team of paleogeologists, paleontologists and archaeologists worked feverishly between the creation of the cross-section and the canal construction, to document everything of geological and archaeological interest. At present, for the expansion of the canal, the Smithsonian in collaboration with other institutions is taking advantage of this more recent massive earth excavation, to document geological and paleontological information. Second, there has been extensive geological research, on land and offshore, in the whole area of the Chicxulub asteroid impact that wiped out the dinosaurs, on the coast of the Yucatan Peninsula. This has involved core samples, marine seabed research and investigation into the pattern and formation of the cenotes. Cenote and other Mayan cave exploration would also reveal the effects of such a cataclysm on the often fragile structures, datable by the subsequent formation of calcite deposits. Third, there have been numerous archaeological excavations covering the first-century timeframe, that have done painstaking stratigraphy research, often with spoons and small brushes, sifting everything, and comparing the strata within and across sites, that would have detected such a disruption. Many sites are known to have been continuously

occupied straddling the first centuries BCE and CE. Fourth, there is all the modern development activity in what has become highly populated countries, including geological surveys in search of resources, highway construction and excavations for buildings, all of which have a history of discovering paleogeological and archaeological elements that were not within the original scope of work. Given all of this, it is safe to say that the cataclysm story borders on tales inspired by smoking wacky tabaki.

Can the Issue Be Finessed?

Some have argued that BOM civilization built with wood, and it all decayed, became soil, leaving nothing to find. There are a number of references in the BOM of building of wood. We also find references to "cities both of wood and cement" in the land northward. This gives rise to the idea that the BOM authors confused adobe with cement. (Helaman 3:7-11) When Nephi builds his temple, he says of it, "the manner of the construction was like unto the temple of Solomon; and the workmanship thereof was exceedingly fine." (2 Nephi 5:11) There are many mentions of fortified cities, some with earthen circumvallation, and others with defensive stone walls: (Alma 48:8)

Yea, he had been strengthening the armies of the Nephites, and erecting small forts, or places of resort; throwing up banks of earth round about to enclose his armies, and also building walls of stone to encircle them about, round about their cities and the borders of their lands; yea, all round

In addition to the main construction, there are mentions of fine materials used to ornament the walls (Mosiah 11:8-13):

And it came to pass that king Noah built many elegant and spacious buildings; and he ornamented them with fine work of wood, and of all manner of precious things, of gold, and of silver, and of iron, and of brass, and of ziff, and of copper;

And he also built him a spacious palace, and a throne in the midst thereof, all of which was of fine wood and was ornamented with gold and silver and with precious things.

And he also caused that his workmen should work all manner of fine work within the walls of the temple, of fine wood, and of copper, and of brass.

And the seats which were set apart for the high priests, which were above all the other seats, he did ornament with pure gold; and he caused a breastwork to be built before them, that they might rest their bodies and their arms upon while they should speak lying and vain words to his people.

And it came to pass that he built a tower near the temple; yea, a very high tower, even so high that he could stand upon the top thereof and overlook the land of Shilom, and also the land of Shemlon, which was possessed by the Lamanites; and he could even look over all the land round about.

And it came to pass that he caused many buildings to be built in the land Shilom; and he caused a great tower to be built on the hill north of the land Shilom, which had been a resort for the

children of Nephi at the time they fled out of the land; and thus he did do with the riches which he obtained by the taxation of his people.

In view of the fact that so much has remained of wood-built sites, sometimes with earthen mounds or walls, and sometimes with stone city walls, from even long before BOM times, such as in China, Los Millares in Spain, and the mound builders in North America, it is clear that even if we limit BOM construction to that which the BOM authors knew in New England, the cities should be found.

Many Mormons have generally believed that BOM architecture also involved some stone monumental structures. Surprisingly, some seek a way out by asserting that the Nephites were early Olmecs, or early Mayans. David A. Palmer flirts with the idea that the Olmecs relate to the Jaredites (*In Search of Cumorah, New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico*, 1981, p. 125) E. L. Peay believed that “the ancient Maya and the Nephites are the same people.” (*The Lands of Zarahemla. A Book of Mormon Commentary*, 1993, vi) A general discussion of connections between the Olmecs, Maya and Aztecs, and the Book of Mormon peoples, can be found in John L. Sorenson. (*An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, 1985, pp. 96-137) As writers become more aware of the wealth of archaeological and written information, this strategy has been losing steam. The sites are decorated with deities that are now well known, and with Mayan inscriptions that we can now read. (See the DVD documentary *Breaking the Mayan Code*, which shows step by step how Mayan was deciphered.)

The comment made in this regard by David A. Palmer now takes on considerable poignancy: “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has no official position of Book of Mormon geography. In fact, the Church sponsored New World Archaeological Foundation (NWAf), which for two decades has been conducting excavations in the state of Chiapas, Mexico, has steered away from direct Book of Mormon studies.” (op. cit., p. 19) Many suspect that the real mission of the NWAf is to conduct valid research, so that the Church can point to its archaeologists and say, “See. They are experts, and they still believe.”

This strategy can backfire. An example is that of self-taught archaeologist Thomas Stuart Ferguson, the principal founder and first president of the NWAf, coauthor (with Milton R. Hunter) of *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*, author of *One Fold, One Shepherd* (1958), popular Mormon apologist lecturer, and frequent author of articles published in LDS periodicals (*The Improvement Era*, *The Millennial Star*, and others). Posthumously, he is on the cover of *The Messiah in Ancient America*, along with Bruce W. Warren, although Ferguson’s coauthorship has been challenged, and he has not spoken from the grave. A sympathetic account of his life journey has been written by Stan Larson, (*Quest for the Gold Plates, Thomas Stuart Ferguson’s Archaeological Search for the Book of Mormon*, 1996), who details Ferguson’s slow loss of faith, and struggle with what to do about it. In 1961, the NWAf was reorganized, and a new Archaeological Committee was created to supervise it. The then Prophet, Seer, Revelator & President of the Church, David O. McKay appointed Howard W. Hunter, the youngest member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of the Church as Chairman, while Ferguson was demoted to secretary. Presumably, it was at this point that it was decided, at the highest level, to erect a firewall between the Book of Mormon and New World archaeology. Ferguson knew that major breakthroughs were happening in New World, especially Mesoamerican, archaeology, in the form of more numerous and exhaustive excavations, but especially the decipherment of the Mayan glyphs, and expected that the Book of Mormon would be vindicated, and, like the role of the Bible in the archeology of Palestine, it would become a textual source that even non-LDS researchers would have to consult. When it turned out to be just the opposite, Ferguson was unable to repress his growing doubts. Larson analyzes Ferguson’s

correspondence, and finds that eventually he decided that God does not get involved in any of the religions. On 9 February, 1976, he wrote to Harold W. Lawrence and his wife:

"Why not say the right things and keep your membership in the great fraternity [the LDS Church], enjoying the good things you like and discarding the ones you can't swallow (and keeping your mouths shut)? Hypocritical? Maybe. But perhaps a realistic way of dealing with a very difficult problem. There is lots left in the Church to enjoy—and thousands of members have done, and are doing, what I suggest you consider doing." (Larson, op. cit., p. 161)

Great Expectations

If the Book of Mormon were an authentic history, the first thing that one would expect to find is the defensive stone walls and earthen berms. Both were found at Los Millares, 5,000 years old. The BOM makes it clear that fortified walled cities existed in considerable number among the Nephites and Lamanites. Once found, the area enclosed would be investigated for foundations of buildings. Usually one does not find massive ancient temples, apart from Egypt and, of course, Central America. Often there is some sort of a promontory that would have been taken over for the palace, an acropolis. The elevation achieved would befit the position and prestige of the ruler or governor, and would enhance its other role as a last redoubt, against invaders, or one's own people. The BOM describes large and impressive buildings. These would have had adequate foundations. Thresholds and other recognizable construction elements may have been of stone, and the floors a sort of burnished clay plaster, if not stone. Principal buildings would include a palace, one or more temples or other shrines or places of worship, storage buildings for tribute in kind (crops), etc. The site would have no signage. Every little thing found and its location would be photographed, sometimes *in situ*, stored and studied in a dig house, and catalogued. Frequently, buildings are identified by what is found in association with them. Apart from all this, four data sources are potentially very rich. First, the site would typically be littered with pot shards. Some pieces may be distinctive enough to identify the culture, i.e., the people of the site. It is also possible that some otherwise unremarkable shards will bear some writing, a votive text on an offering jar, or graffiti, a curse against the king, a message passed between lovers, or simply, Jonathan was here. A second source of data would be the findings at a butcher or sacrificial site, where bones of animals would be found. A third, and very rich site would be the rubbish mound, which would be stratified to a degree, with dating implications. Finally, a fourth site would be that for the burials. Both Hebrews and Egyptians honored their dead, and took pains to bury them properly. There may be humble burials, richer burials of the notables, and more impressive burials of the rulers. Here one would expect to find grave goods appropriate to the culture, possibly bone boxes, and commemorative and blessing inscriptions.

Every site would have its own history, and ecological/historical vicissitudes. Some may be partially or largely covered over by soil and vegetation. Others may be wind-swept. Lucky sites might have had a mountain (mud slide?) fall on them, or volcanic ash. A site at the bottom of the sea would be in a cold and oxygen-starved environment. Ancient wood ships have been recovered from the sea in good repair, Viking burials in wood ships fare well under the ground. And Pompeii was protected by volcanic ash. They would also vary with respect to pillage. Earthquakes might cause objects to be covered up, including coinage, if it exists. Surprisingly, coins are almost always found. Islamic coins have been found as far away as Scandinavia.

If the Nephite/Lamanite civilization ever existed, all of the items in this study would be found. Most would be collocated in the same find, a whole city.