Mormon's Codex: A Preview

This document serves to introduce readers to the content of *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, and, Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, Maxwell Institute Press), to be released in September 2013. The Preview conveys the intent of the book and provides a sample of the technical details included in the 800+ page hardbound volume and the digital edition.

[Mormon’s Codex: A Summary, a 125-page e-book (44,751 words) which will soon be available at JohnLSorenson.com, makes major points of the book’s argument accessible in a concise and portable format, but it does not include the expanded discussions, 11 maps, 19 illustrations, over 2,000 footnotes, 1,300 bibliographical references, an appendix, or the extensive index accessible only in the full book.]

**Introduction**

Beginning as early as 1955 I undertook to synthesize what I was learning about ancient southern Mexico and northern Central America to answer the question, how did the Book of Mormon relate to the civilization that once occupied that area? I have repeated that effort a number of times since. I have now published what will probably be my last major work reporting what I have learned over more than 60 years of professional study of this matter: *Mormon’s Codex: An Ancient American Book*. The work is issued in both print and e-book editions by the Maxwell Institute Press at BYU jointly with Deseret Book. This presentation contains a sample of its essentials.

The book is written in language meant to reach both the informed general reader and archaeologists thus I have avoided professional jargon as much as possible. The book provides full explanations of how the scriptural text relates to scholarship on Mesoamerica, as well as maps, illustrations, and extensive documentation. A great deal of preparatory research lies behind the book that may not be readily apparent. Typically I have worked out in detail crucial aspects of the data used, especially when they contradict the position of conventional scholars. As a single example, note that I (with Martin Raish) have previously addressed the question of whether voyagers to or from the New World in ancient times actually crossed the oceans. Our definitive bibliographical work comprised two volumes of some 1200 pages that abstracted relevant content from over 5,000 printed sources. This and other comprehensive and labor-intensive studies preceded and under-girded my decision seven years ago to produce Mormon’s Codex as the capstone of my research on this topic.

I chose to follow a research model recently used in studying the relationship between the Old Testament and archaeology. William Dever used it in his 2001 book *What Did the Biblical Writers Know & When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans). There he vigorously disputed the view held by some modern scholars that the Hebrew scripture was first written out only in the last few centuries BC on the basis of oral traditions and historical inferences projected back by anonymous writers on the previous several thousand years. Dever, an eminent archaeologist, successfully redeems the status of the Old Testament as a broadly reliable history.

He proceeds by identifying “convergences,” which is what he calls specific points of agreement between statements in the text and finds by archaeologists. When the written source is supported by sufficiently “hard” external evidence, no explanation for the convergence of factual information of the two sorts makes sense except that the archaeological data and the scriptural record refer to the same moment in time and that the author of the written account
could not have put down what he did without contemporary knowledge of the circumstances and history of that area.

For example, Dever explains that “The many biblical passages that mention city gates . . . fit remarkably well with [what is known from] excavated gates at a number of sites of the tenth to seventh centuries [BC], and only of this period. . . . No writer living [several centuries later] could have ‘invented’ [references to] city gates like [those], known only long before.” Using numerous instances of this logic, the author shows convincingly that the historical skeleton whose bones, as it were, show through in the Old Testament was real.

I follow the same logic in identifying what I call “correspondences” between the archaeological record for Mesoamerica and the text of the Book of Mormon. While Dever identified a few score of “convergences” to demonstrate the historicity of the Old Testament, I identify hundreds of correspondences that tie the Book of Mormon to the picture of ancient Mesoamerican civilization constructed by archaeologists and other researchers.

A vital step in this procedure was to identify Book of Mormon lands. It was a simple matter for Professor Dever to specify the Syria-Palestine area as the setting where he found his Old Testament parallels. Everyone knows that Palestine is where the Israelite narrative took place. But the where of the Book of Mormon account is not obvious. First it is necessary to establish the location correctly, or else any references to potential Book of Mormon comparisons to archaeology would be in error.

Two steps are required to settle Book of Mormon geography. The first is to reconstruct an internal map that accommodates all 600 passages in the Book of Mormon that state or imply geographical facts. I did this in previous books, determining that all of those statement fit consistently into what I call “Mormon’s map” – the map he had in his mind of the scene of the events he wrote into his volume. The second step was to compare the map in Mormon’s mind, based entirely on statements in the text, with the geography of the Americas in order to find the best fit. That task is simplified by the fact that Mormon’s Nephites are said to have dwelt in cities and compiled many books containing their written history. Only one area in the New World meets those conditions: Mesoamerica.

The remaining question, then, is, in what portion of that sizable area do the details of “Mormon’s map” fit? Researchers have suggested scores of possible correlations but all of them except one display fatal flaws that rule out their identification as the territory Mormon had in his mind [based on his eyewitness/personal experience]. The one satisfactory answer goes like this:

- The Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico is the narrow neck of land of the Nephites;
- The highlands of southern Guatemala was the location of the land of Nephi;
- The basin of the Grijalva river and adjacent areas in extreme southern Mexico is the land of Zarahemla;
- Areas immediately north and west of the isthmus are the land northward; and,
- One of the Tuxtla Mountains a little north of the isthmus was the hill Cumorah where the Nephites and Lamanites fought their final battle.

In general this defines the area where it makes sense to look for correspondences between the Book of Mormon and the archaeological/cultural record.
The Correspondences

Beyond the introduction, Mormon’s Codex is arranged in two parts. The first consists of 14 chapters treating various cultural topics—such as writing and records, society, government, warfare, and religion. The five chapters that follow deal with history and archaeology.

Because of the large numbers of correspondences discussed in the book, it will be impossible to present here more than a sample of the total, for the detailed arguments and documentation in support of their identification are lengthy. See the book itself for the details.

Geographical Correspondences

Starting with the broad geographical placement already sketched, the book identifies 25 pointed correspondences between specific map features near the Isthmus of Tehuantepec on the one hand and lands according to the Book of Mormon on the other. Here I list only three of the total:

1. According to the Nephite record, a “narrow pass” connected the land northward with the land southward at a strategic point within the narrow neck. In Mesoamerican terms a minor elevation a number of miles long occurs in the geology of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec that forms a “pass” over which ancient (and modern) communication links run northward and southward above surrounding annual flood waters.

2. The account in Alma chapter 2 of a battle between Nephite rebels and loyalists begins on a hill across the Sidon river immediately east of the capital city; from there the rebels were pursued up to the nearby land of Gideon, then they moved back down to the Sidon, where a battle ensued at a ford across the river. Precise, plausible parallels are found in the upper basin of the Grijalva river (and there only) for all the geographical features reported.

3. The hill Ramah of the Jaredites, which was the same as the hill Cumorah of the Nephites, was where the final extermination of both peoples took place; that hill corresponds in all relevant parameters to Cerro El Vigía in the Tuxtla Mountains of south-central Veracruz state, Mexico.

Writing Systems and Records

1. The Book of Mormon describes literate cultures from the third millennium BC to the end of the record early in the fifth century AD. The Book of Mormon reports multiple writing systems in use. Mesoamerican cultures used writing systems of a similar nature from at least the second millennium BC down to the Spanish conquest. Several distinct scripts were in use in that area as far back as several millennia ago, although little is yet known about them.

2. Many uses of written documents are known from Mesoamerica. At least 14 of those uses are represented or are referred to in the Nephite record: for example, they kept records of contemporary events, letters of correspondence, adventures of individual heroes and villains, and genealogies.

3. In Mesoamerica as in the Book of Mormon “lineage histories” provided validation of a lineage’s right to rule or other political claims and were displayed and read publicly on ceremonial occasions to assert that fact. Furthermore, Mesoamerican lineage histories and the Book of Mormon also correspond in more specific ways. Four of them are:

4. The accounts were geographically selective, telling only of events and figures important for the people whose history they comprised, while effectively ignoring groups deemed not significant.
5. Competition among elite factions for the right to rule meant that histories were considered political weapons; winners tried to eliminate the position of rivals by destroying their records.

6. These records included predictions about the lineage’s future history.

7. Lineage histories also served to define relationships to neighboring peoples.

**Human Biology**

1. The skin color of some native American groups in Mexico and Central America according to early Spanish observers was virtually the same as European “white” people. This corresponds to the Book of Mormon description of its Nephite population as (at least in part) “fair” as against the darker, more numerous Lamanites.

2. Artistic representations of individuals from ancient Mesoamerica patently show among them Mediterranean- or Near Eastern-looking folks, as well as Asians, Oceanians and Africans. Moreover, a minority of specifically Semitic people are seen to be one component among ancient Mesoamericans.

3. Mesoamerican art also represents men with substantial beards whose parallel in ancient times is almost exclusively with the Near East. Those representations are concentrated in the area in Mesoamerica where and at the times when Book of Mormon peoples apparently dwelt.

**Political Economy**

1. Both in Mesoamerica and in Book of Mormon societies an elite formally dominated in political, social and economic terms, similar to the pattern in essentially all ancient civilizations (but very different from rural New York state in the 19th century).

   Both sources further confirm that:

2. Rulers and their dependents held their positions in accordance with an ideology that considered traditional (sometimes “divine”) rulership as part of the natural social order.

3. The perquisites of the ruling elite granted them legal power and an economic mechanism through tribute assessments to amass considerable wealth. Customs associated with kingship and nobility limited their personal use of that wealth, nevertheless they exercised much power by virtue of it.

4. Priests were usually closely related to the dominant elite. Their teaching of a traditional ideology provided validation for the structure of exploitation.

**Society**

1. Mesoamericanist scholars have concluded that the primary social actors in ancient Mesoamerica were not individual persons so much as social groups. Social bodies made most decisions and took most responsibility. Analysis of Book of Mormon societies reveals the same; individuals as such did not count for as much as social elements, especially those based on extended kinship. (Again this view is contrary to the norms of early 19th-century USA).

2. One of the nuclear family’s primary functions in society, both in Mesoamerica and according to the Nephite record, was to provide instruction to children and youth through frequent use of formal moral discourse.
3. Polygynous marriage was practiced on a limited basis in Mesoamerican as well as among some Book of Mormon societies.

4. Full-fledged social class structures prevailed in many Mesoamerican societies. The primary distinction was between nobles and commoners, according to both the scripture and native history. Moreover social classes among the Nephites were important during two particular periods, the first and second centuries BC and the third and fourth centuries AD, both times when Mesoamerican classes were highly visible.

5. Sociopolitical factions anxious to gain power and privilege were endemic in Book of Mormon societies. Their jostling caused most of the sociopolitical stress the scripture reports. Mesoamerican factionalism was equally pronounced and disruptive.

6. Religion was an important basis for differentiating social groups according to both secular and Book of Mormon sources. Groups usually held a dominant deity as their integrator and protector.

**Material Culture**

1. Cultivation and transport, according to both the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican sources, were virtually without the use of animal power.

2. “Wine” referred to in the Book of Mormon could have been prepared using several plants, including the same grape as in the Old World; but distilled liquors were not known. When the Spaniards arrived, they invariably called native intoxicants “wine,” and they spoke of plots containing maguey plants (the source of the intoxicant pulque) as “vineyards,” a term used in the Book of Mormon for plantings that yielded “wine.”

3. The single Jaredite mention of “elephants” (in the third millennium BC) corresponds with paleontological discoveries that mastodons survived in certain environments in the Americas as late as 2000 BC or even later, long past the supposed date of extinction of those animals.

4. A dearth of timber is reported by Nephite colonists of “the land northward” in the first century BC; it is said that “cement” then became their preferred building material. North and west of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec archaeology shows the extensive use of cement began about the first century BC.

5. Sacred “towers” were constructed by the Nephites that were similar in form and function to Mesoamerican “towers” or pyramidal substructures. All such constructions had a primarily religious purpose. Moreover the one instance, in the book of Helaman, when a private tower was used as a site for personal prayer and religious discourse has Mesoamerican parallels.

6. The model for Nephite “temples” was specifically the “temple of Solomon,” which featured two non-structural pillars standing at either side of the doors of the temple. Some Mesoamerican temples displayed similar structurally unnecessary pillars.

7. “Silk” and “linen” are mentioned in the Book of Mormon as fabrics utilized by its people. At least five fabrics specified as “silk like” were reported from native Mexico by the Spaniards. Henequen, a widely used Mesoamerican fiber, made a fabric that was the equivalent of linen.

8. Hundreds of miles of roads were constructed in Mesoamerica as early as the time of Christ. At that time the Book of Mormon speaks of both roads and “highways” that were “cast up.” Mesoamerican highways were often “cast up,” that is, constructed of raised fill that was then smooth-surfaced.
Government

All of the correspondences in this list are documented by both Mesoamerican sources and in the Book of Mormon.

1. Central to ancient governance was the idea that kings (or at lesser levels, lords or nobles) could be divinely designated (or were themselves considered divine) rulers with powers conferred on them “by right.” (This of course was contrary to ideas in New England where the Book of Mormon was first published.)

2. Governments were evidently fragile; factionalism in the ruling stratum was endemic.

3. Political schisms or fissions often resulted in dissident social elements fleeing in order to establish independent kingdoms or cultures.

4. Election or ratification of a new ruler by “vote” of his subjects was sometimes customary.

5. Major rulers occupied a “palace”; residences of lesser rulers were not considered “palaces.”

6. A new (younger) king was sometimes installed before the death of the previous ruler, who then served out his lifespan as “emeritus” king.

7. The judicial function required a corps of judges who served under the nominal chief judgeship of the monarch; several levels of judicature existed, difficult cases being referred to a higher-level.

Warfare

1. Warfare was of major significance in the culture history of both Mesoamerica and Book of Mormon peoples. Recognition of its significance represents a major change in archaeological thought in recent decades; that area’s recognized war practices now align more directly with those described in Mormon’s book.

2. Wars in Mesoamerica were typically fought during the time of year when they did not interfere with agricultural activities, society’s greatest priority. The same timing is reflected in Book of Mormon accounts of warfare.

3. Religion played a major role in warfare and was sometimes the primary cause of conflict, according to both sources. For both Mesoamerican culture and the Book of Mormon all the following military features correspond:

4. Guidance was sought through priestly oracles in planning and conducting military operations.

5. Violent feuds between contending peoples could last for generations.

6. Armed forces were composed of geographically based militia “armies”; there were no large standing armies. Mass hand-to-hand combat was the normal fighting mode.

7. The heads of local “armies” were called “captains,” (“chief captains,” etc.) who held rank according to a hierarchical pattern.

8. Companies of warriors were sometimes called “sons” by their captains.

9. Some Mesoamerican armies were composed of units of 10,000 men, as were Nephite units at the time of their final war.

10. The most widespread form of fortification was made by excavating a dry moat, throwing the soil up on the inner bank against a timber palisade and building another line of erect timbers atop it.
11. At least five types of weapons said to be used by Book of Mormon armies correspond to
with those used in Mesoamerica.

12. Moroni1 carried a flag or virtual battle standard while rallying his force. In Mexico a
standard on a pole was strapped to a commander’s back as he led his men into battle.

13. Mesoamerican wars sometimes continued until the victorious commander was able to
“drink the blood” of the enemy leader. A Lamanite leader made that very threat against a
Nephite captain.

**Ideology and Religion**

1. A complex of 355 cultural patterns having to do with religion and ideology was present
both in the civilizations of the ancient Near East in the second and first millennia BC and
in Mesoamerican civilization. Those detailed correspondences can only be explained by
calling on transoceanic voyaging, plausibly including voyages reported in the Book of
Mormon.

2. At least 62 of the 355 features are documented in or implied by the Book of Mormon.

3. Mortality was viewed, by at least some Mesoamerican thinkers as well as by Nephite
prophets, as a test of a person’s conformity to a set of moral standards, the degree to be a
matter for divine judgment.

4. Some Book of Mormon peoples as much as certain Mesoamericans anticipated a post-
mortal residence in “paradise” and ultimately a “resurrection.”

5. Spiritual renewal was symbolized by a seed or plant growing from the visceral organs of
human bodies.

6. In certain times and cultures a Mesoamerican cult of salvation appeared that promised
immortality to observant persons. The same was true of Book of Mormon believers.

7. A Mesoamerican myth of the “fall” of the “first couple” as a result of disobedience to the
creator’s command matches in important respects the story of Adam and Eve in the
Garden of Eden as repeated in the Book of Mormon.

8. The practice described by Nephite historians as “priestcraft”—exploitation of devotees for
priestly economic gain--is documented in the Book of Mormon and is supposed by
scholars to have been a common feature of Mesoamerican religious life.

9. Prophets, both legitimate and “false,” and “seers” who gazed into sacred, oracular stones,
were shared further features of religious life.

10. A form of ritual washing termed “baptism” was also shared.

11. Sacrifice was extensively practiced in the Mesoamerica and among the Nephites. The
commonest type was the shedding of the blood of an animal, although offerings of other
substances were also made.

12. A form of communion was practiced both by Mesoamericans and Nephites in which food
emblems representing the body of a savior deity were eaten.

13. Legends in Mesoamerica tell of the disappearance of special persons said to have been
taken away without suffering death; some persons are characterized in the same manner
in the Book of Mormon.

14. A pattern of ritual and belief (that is, elements of the cult referred to above that had
arrived anciently from the Near East) was abruptly terminated in the first century AD, at
least in southern Mesoamerica. This change corresponds in time, place, and in part in nature to that reported in the Book of Mormon at the time of Christ’s command to the people of the Book of Mormon that they cease performing rites of the law of Moses.

**Archaeology and History: Before 600 BC**

1. The book of Ether pictures early Jaredite demography to make clear inferentially that an indigenous population already occupied the land where they arrived. That fact agrees with the scientific picture of multi-ethnic Mexico in the third millennium BC.
2. The first tradition of civilization (“Olmec”) in Mexico was followed later by a variant “theocratic” tradition” that continued up to the arrival of the Spaniards. Much the same picture is encompassed over the same time frame by the histories of the Jaredites followed by the Nephites/Mulekites/Lamanites as civilizations.
3. A decline of the society in which the Jaredites lived took place over a period of several centuries before their extinction around 600 BC. The Olmec cultural tradition declined and disappeared from the culture history of Mexico at the same time.
4. The archaeological site at San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a preeminent Olmec city, coincided in time and place with the “great city” built by Jaredite king Lib at a spot “by the narrow neck of land.”
5. The Jaredites used at least one writing system that their founders had brought from Mesopotamia. From three to perhaps five (still poorly known) systems of writing were employed in Mesoamerica by the end of the Jaredite era.

**Archaeology and History: 600 BC to about 1 BC**

(citing only 13 of 79 correspondences)

1. Soon after their arrival in their promised land (presumably in Guatemala), the Nephites moved up to nearby highlands where they became farmers. Lamanites remained in the lowlands where they lived by hunting and took on darker skins. Guatemalan Pacific lowlanders at the time of the Spanish conquest had notably darker skins than highlanders, perhaps for environmental reasons.
2. Small clay figurines from the Valley of Guatemala dated about 300 BC have (skin) surfaces shaded white (figurines from Old World Jerusalem dated when Lehi’s party left there were white). Other figurines from Guatemala show skins that are shaded reddish-brown. These differences of course agree with those between “fair” Nephites and “dark” Lamanites. But about 200 BC the light-complexioned figurines ceased being made in highland Guatemala, about when Mosiah1 led his Nephites away to Zarahemla.
3. Near the time when Mosiah1’s party left, some evidence of warfare is found in the archaeology of the valley of Guatemala along with a decrease in population that may mirror the Mosiah1 group’s departure.
4. A 22-feet high earthen “Great Wall,” so named by archaeologists, protected at least a portion of the ancient ruined city now called Kaminaljuyu, in suburban Guatemala City (only limited parts of the site are accessible now to be excavated), dating around the sixth to third centuries BC. In concept, scale and date it was apparently similar to the wall built by the Nephites around the city of Nephi.
5. At Kaminaljuyu, the oldest “great city” in southern Mesoamerica, rapid urbanization from about 600 to 200 BC compared with what the Book of Mormon pictures for the city of Nephi. The scale of public works erected then is impressive.
6. Writing (found only on scattered monuments) was in use at Kaminaljuyu from 500 to 200 BC and perhaps also later, confirming the early status of “civilization” at the place. The Book of Mormon reports literacy at the city of Nephi between ca. 575 and 200 BC as well as among the Zeniffites and some Lamanites later located there.

7. An early pyramid at Kaminaljuyu suggested by archaeologists to have functioned in part as a military watch-tower agrees in time, place, and function with a Book of Mormon description of such a structure in the second century BC.

8. A major source for obsidian used to make weapons and tools is located near Guatemala City; it meets in essential respects the requirements for “the place of arms” spoken of in Alma chapter 47.

9. After the general collapse of Olmec society around 600 BC, a modified version of that tradition continued around the site of La Venta in the Isthmus. Art representations there are interpreted by some archaeologists as showing local leadership being taken over by immigrants who look like Jews. This hybrid culture site came to an end by 450 BC. In Book of Mormon terms the end of Jaredite society near 600 BC was followed by a period when some survivors of the earlier people must have combined with the tiny party of Mulekite colonists in or around the Nephite “city of Mulek.” The use of Jaredite personal and other names among the Nephites/Mulekites confirms the same phenomenon.

10. A conflict zone has been detected by scholars that extended across southern Mesoamerica where speakers of Mixe-Zoquean tongues near the isthmus confronted northward-expanding populations of Maya-language speakers. Correspondingly the combined Nephites and Mulekites in the narrow neck zone were under constant expansive pressure by Lamanites of the land of Nephi on the south along a corresponding border.

11. Ceramic and linguistic comparisons indicate that some people from highland Guatemala arrived in central Chiapas on the order of 200 BC, approximately when Mosiah1 led his Nephite party from the land of Nephi to settle in Zarahemla.

12. At the ruined ancient city at Santa Rosa on the upper Grijalva river, which qualifies as Zarahemla, a major ceremonial structure was erected in BC times in two distinct halves by different segments of the population. That social duality is confirmed by the presence of two residential zones. Plausibly the Nephite population built the one half structure and lived in one of he zones while “the people of Zarahemla” occupied the other.

13. Book of Mormon statements dating to the middle of the first century BC tell of the migration of colonists from the land southward to the land northward. Significant populations moved from south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the north around that time as documented by archaeology in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz.

Archaeology and History: about AD 1 to 200

1. The transition of the culture into the so-called Classic era near AD 200 is often represented by archaeologists as an abrupt shift from a condition before civilization arose to one where civilization became evident. But that picture now seems greatly oversimplified. Now we know that in the so-called Pre-Classic full-fledged civilization was already present in Mesoamerica. That agrees with the Book of Mormon.

2. Areas in Mesoamerica suffered nearly simultaneous natural disasters—at least from volcanic eruptions and earthquakes—in the first half of the first century AD. These phenomena caused sudden population declines, cultural disruptions, and other elements of discontinuity. Corresponding natural disasters occurred at some point between AD 25 and 30 as reported in the Book of Mormon.
3. As part of that natural disaster Mormon’s record reports the destruction of the city of Jerusalem in the land of Nephi resulting from its being “covered with water.” Submerged ruins dating to about the time of Christ have been discovered beneath the waters of Lake Atitlán in Guatemala, where our geographical correlation places the city of Jerusalem.

4. No later than the second century AD archaeological evidence suggests the presence of the developed cult of the Feathered Serpent or Quetzalcoatl in Mesoamerica. Some scholars consider this cult to have been based on the teachings of a “man/god” as reported in Mexican traditions. The Book of Mormon tells of the appearance of the resurrected Christ among the Nephites in similar terms.

5. A new pattern of society that resulted from acceptance of Christ’s teachings was characterized by a localized, communalist economy and a classless social structure. In some parts of Mesoamerica archaeologists have used language to describe social conditions at this period that are congruent with these features. For example, burial customs tend to show that tombs were no longer used, nor were any rich burial offerings made, indicating an unranked society.

Archaeology and History: AD 200 to 400

1. In this period the cult of the Feathered Serpent was melded or syncretized with variant cults. The Book of Mormon reports that in the third century “the church” of Jesus Christ lost its dominance among the Nephites as rival belief systems arose.

2. Wealth expanded dramatically in step with a rise in trade and population in this period, both in Mesoamerica and according to the Nephite record.

3. The rise of factions, probably based on ethnic and cult differences, complicated governance and distinguished regions from each other in much of Mesoamerica at this time. Ethnic/tribal rivalries were renewed among Book of Mormon groups at the same time; no unified, widespread government existed.

4. Militaristic imagery became common in art, and fortifications indicate that warfare now became a major feature of Mesoamerican cultures. In the third century mass warfare became general between the Nephites and Lamanites across the old conflict zone between their traditional territories.

5. AD 350 the Central Depression of Chiapas was depopulated almost totally due to war instigated by invaders from Guatemala. At that very time the land of Zarahemla of the Nephites was largely emptied of its population when the Nephites retreated northward due to a Lamanite invasion from the south.

6. Nephites and Lamanites made a calendrical appointment in setting up their climactic battle in the land of Cumorah. Mesoamerican commanders made such appointments for battle on an astrological basis.

7. Human sacrifice appears in the archaeological record at least by the fifth century AD; the Nephite historian reports its appearance among Lamanites in the fourth century.

8. Genocidal war, as in the case of the Lamanites who exterminated Nephite society near AD 400, is the ultimate end of conflict according to the Book of Mormon. The Mesoamerican record of the Terminal Classic era in the Maya area a few centuries later shows just such a type of genocide.

9. Moroni, the last record keeper, reported continuing warfare among Lamanite factions and “robbers” in the early fifth century, years after the destruction of the Nephites. Mesoamerican wars continued during the same period.
Conclusion

The intent of this book is to demonstrate that the Book of Mormon exhibits characteristics one could expect (only) in a Mesoamerican historical document. The material mustered shows that what scholars have discovered about that civilization and what the Nephite record says are plainly related, often in specific details.

It is not rational to suppose that mere coincidence can account for correspondences of this scale. The parallels are much too striking and too sweeping to allow that casual explanation.

The question of who wrote the Book of Mormon has been answered by some critics by supposing that young Joseph Smith was a remarkably creative author who composed the volume himself. Literary critic Harold Bloom considered Smith a “religious genius,” as though that label explained how he was able to dictate this intricately plotted book of 270,000 words in less than 75 days without revising what he had dictated. Others have supposed that Smith melded together romantic notions about American Indians that were being bruited about on the New York frontier in the 1820s along with language borrowed from the Bible. Yet another explanation is that someone more literate than he created the manuscript of the Book of Mormon which Smith pirated.

The hundreds of Mesoamerican correspondences pointed out in Mormon’s Codex make any 19th-century New York origin for the book unbelievable. Furthermore correspondences to a local New York scene fall short. For instance would anyone writing a book based on that area fail to mention snow, ice or cold, even a single time, or tell about military action carried out in exhausting heat at new year’s?

No such facile interpretation can account for the abundance of Mesoamerican culture and history in the book. Even the best-educated scholar in the early 19th century, let alone a marginally literate young frontier farmer, could not possibly have produced a volume this rich in Mesoamericana. In fact even the best-informed scholar now in the 21st century would probably find it impossible to hew so closely and subtly to the picture of Mesoamerican civilization as does the Book of Mormon.

Young Smith could not have been acquainted with significant scholarly knowledge about antiquity; such knowledge simply did not exist. Smith’s had no scholarly knowledge whatever. His wife, Emma Hale Smith, said “Joseph Smith could neither write nor dictate a coherent and well-worded letter, let alone dictating a book like the Book of Mormon.”

Only one explanation for the Mesoamerican content shown by the Book of Mormon is plausible, that the text was written by a native person from southern Mexico who lived in the fourth century AD. That historian/editor had to have been an eyewitness of some of the events recorded and was intimately familiar with the exotic geographical setting where the actions took place. How his record reached New York state and got into Smith’s hands, and how he translated it, are questions nobody is able to answer objectively at this time, but they pale in comparison to the question of how the original work came to be.

The only format in which such a record could have been preserved from antiquity was as a native Mesoamerican book, called by scholars a codex. In fact some contemporary descriptions of the record Joseph Smith had in his hands make it sound like such a codex. The most detailed is from Charles Anthon, a professor at Columbia College in New York City. In 1828 as Smith was beginning to translate the record from the metal plates, he made a copy of “a considerable number” of the “characters” from the record. That copy was given to an associate, Martin Harris, who took the documents to Professor Anthon in New York City for confirmation of its antiquity and the accuracy of Smith’s translation. It is not entirely clear what the savant told Harris during their interview, but years later Smith’s critics asked Anthon for his version of what
transpired during Harris’s visit. An 1843 letter from him contains perhaps the best description we have of what Harris displayed:

The characters were arranged in columns, like the Chinese mode of writing . . . . Greek, Hebrew and all sorts of letters, more or less distorted, . . . were intermingled with sundry delineations of half moons, stars, and other natural objects, and the whole ended in a rude representation of the Mexican zodiac.

Such a description suggests what someone might say after a naïve look at a Mesoamerican codex—perpendicular columns of “singular characters,” “natural objects,” segmented circles, a Mexican calendar, etc.

The volume may be appropriately called Mormon’s Codex. Supposing it is authentic, it constitutes the oldest and most extensive Mesoamerican codex known. Scholars engaged in the study of that civilization have the possibility, and even the responsibility, of studying this unique document as such a codex.

Of course there are statements—lots of them—in Mormon’s Codex that are puzzling to Mesoamericanist scholars. The same is true of the Old Testament in relation to Syro-Palestinian archaeology, yet Dever, while granting that certain details in the biblical history of Israel cannot be squared with the current archaeological model for that area, insisted that “this [people] Israel, must not be written out of history.” Meanwhile the findings of modern archaeology continue to reduce the apparent disjunctions.

Archaeologist John Clark has pointed out a similar relationship between Mesoamerican archaeology and study of the Book of Mormon text: “The trend over the last 50 years is one of convergence between the Book of Mormon and Mesoamerican archaeology. Book of Mormon claims [have] remain[ed] unaltered since 1830, so all the accommodation has been on the archaeology side.”

Mormon’s Codex carries that process of convergence further, consequently I say, in the spirit of Professor Dever, “these Nephites must not be written out of Mesoamerican history.”

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