



BOOK OF MORMON CENTRAL

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The Land and the Peoples

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Author(s): John L. Sorenson

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The Land

Mesoamerica

The highest civilization in the Western Hemisphere before the arrival of the European conquerors was in the area we know today as central and southern Mexico and Guatemala. Until the middle of the twentieth century vague or awkward terms—like *Middle America*—were used to distinguish this civilized area between the North and South American continents. In 1943 anthropologist Paul Kirchoff identified more than a dozen features—for example, writing systems, sacred temple towers, tribute-collecting governments, and bloody sacrifice—that were shared by cultures throughout this area. He proposed that the area where those features occurred be called Mesoamerica (“in-between America”).¹² Most scholars liked the clarity of his definition and soon adopted the name.

The term *civilized* clearly applies to this area. Only in the Andean zone of South America was there a possible New World rival, but the lack of clear evidence for writing (one of the usual diagnostic traits of civilization) in that zone has left its civilized status questionable. All other areas in the Americas were inhabited by less complex societies. During several time periods Mesoamerican culture strongly influenced both North and South America. To some degree, too, actual population movements spread Mesoamerican genes over those continental territories.

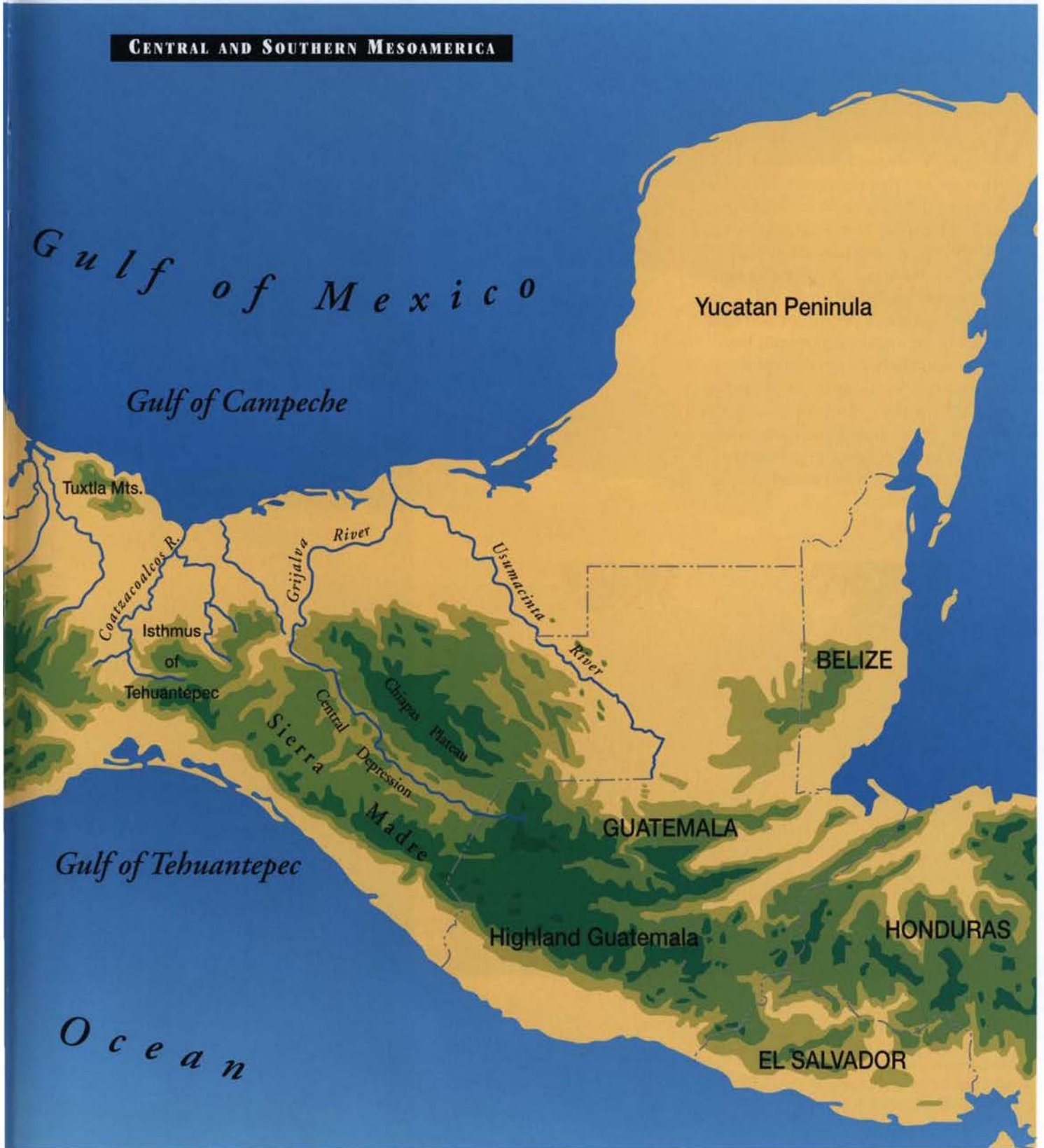


VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Research on the text of the Book of Mormon over the past half century has made a convincing case that the New World events involving the Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites of that record took place in Mesoamerica. The geographic, climatic, and cultural characteristics of the Nephite and Lamanite “land of promise” (1 Nephi 2:20) laid out in the Nephite record demonstrate that only a limited territory a few hundred miles in extent was involved in their history and that what the text says about that setting fits very well in central and southern Mexico and Guatemala.¹³



CENTRAL AND SOUTHERN MESOAMERICA



The Variety within Mesoamerica

Environments

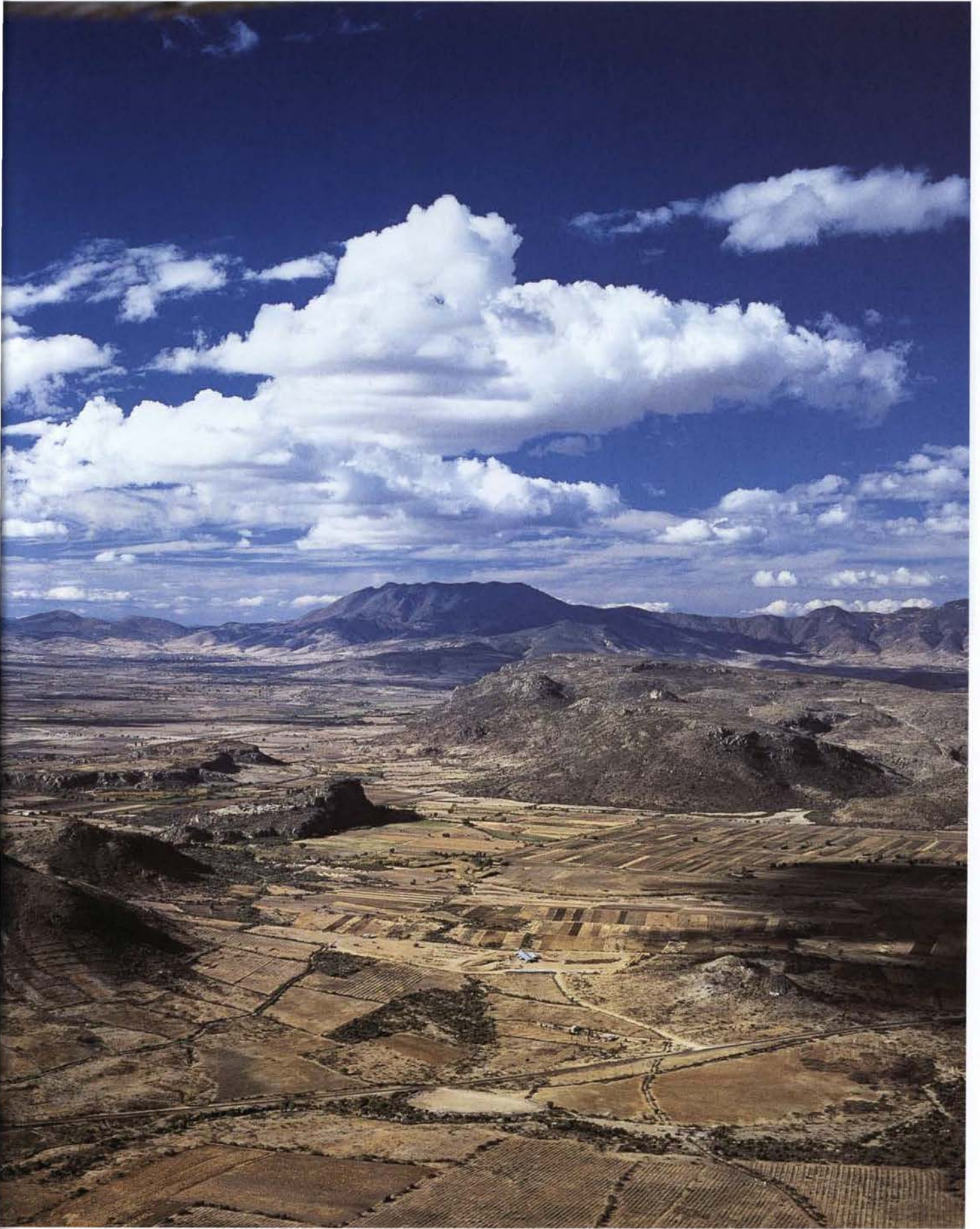
While certain features were found throughout Mesoamerica, each region showed peculiarities based on the fact that the people of each locality faced differing environmental conditions and had their own local histories as guides. The history and cultural development of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica overall was complex and had varied local effects. For example, a people located near the center of the civilization typically borrowed ideas and behavior from their neighbors much sooner than people located out on the margin. Also, populous territories were more likely to generate specialists who could develop, exploit, and pass on advanced skills and knowledge.



Undisturbed tropical forest is no longer extensive, as it was in the lowlands long ago, but less lofty, second growth jungle like this in the Tuxtla Mountains zone of Veracruz is common. It illustrates the bountiful vegetation found in much of the hot lowlands, or *tierra caliente*.

A large segment of the state of Oaxaca, seen here, displays wildly broken terrain. Only a few favorable settlement spots appear amidst predominant wilderness. One observer has described the topography of Mesoamerica as being "like a piece of crumpled paper."







Uplands like these near Chimaltenango, Guatemala, were also agriculturally rich and the high elevation made for a pleasant climate. A sizable ancient population lived here, although the irregular topography discouraged the growth of large cities.



A few valleys and plateau areas with a temperate climate (*tierra templada*) offer sizable settlement areas where agriculture could support considerable numbers of inhabitants. The wide, flat Cintalapa River valley of western Chiapas was one such area. Its strategic position made it a major route for travelers headed northward to the isthmus, and so it remains today.



In some lowland areas extensive boggy wetlands are common. However, small elevations in the midst of the swamps provide excellent soil for cultivation and settlement, such as at the site of La Venta, Tabasco, an islet from which this photo was taken.

Mesoamerica constituted a more complex mosaic of environments and cultures than many other culture areas. China, for example, was characterized anciently by comparative cultural unity, as conquerors or rulers in that huge territory imposed similar ways of doing things in whatever parts they controlled. But probably no such politically dominant empire ever existed in Mesoamerica; conquests by or contacts between localities tended to be relatively temporary and to produce only modest changes in the territories affected. In fact most Mesoamericans lived out their lives acquainted only with the miniculture of their locality—ways of life whose details were shared in a single valley or limited tribal area. The mass of people who lived as little as fifty miles, let alone three hundred, from another group rarely encountered any of them.

The fragmented physical environment discouraged uniformity among the peoples and their cultures. Far more of the territory consisted of hard-to-traverse mountains or jungle than of lands readily usable for settlement and cultivation. Rivers were short or segmented by nature so they were of little use as aids to travel. Nowhere in Mesoamerica do we find an equivalent of, for example, Egypt's Nile River, whose agriculturally rich floodplain stretched continuously for hundreds of miles and whose smooth course favored communication by boat. Mesoamerica could more appropriately be compared to a scattered archipelago, its smallish "islands" of culture and settlement separated by a difficult "sea" of wilderness.

The physical environment in Mesoamerica that most impresses visitors from temperate lands is tropical forest, or jungle. There are large areas of this heavy vegetation in the eastern portions of the area. Winds coming inland from the Gulf of Mexico or Caribbean Sea produce abundant rains there as the moist air is raised and cooled when it encounters inland mountains. The result is giant trees and thick undergrowth that make cultivating the soil difficult. The heavy rain also washes many nutrients from the soil; thus only a thin layer of productive soil remains after the heavy plant growth has been cleared off. Building up large, stable populations and settlements in this setting was a real challenge. The discomfort of high



humidity and temperature still imposes obstacles to the development of stable civilized life there, as it did anciently.

Spots within the mountainous areas provided more favorable environments for settlement. Certain areas in elevated valleys and on plateaus permitted intensive settlement, but the extent of those favored territories was limited. In many mountain zones the climate was drier and more temperate than in the wet lowlands, with more marked seasonal variation in the rains. People in the Mesoamerican area typically speak of three types of environment, basing their classification on temperature, which usually relates to elevation: hot lands (essentially the flat lowland), temperate lands (mostly intermediate in elevation), and cold lands (high elevations). Of course, crops and cultivation techniques as well as building materials and house forms tended to differ from zone to zone. Because of the mountainous nature of the terrain, two or even all three of the temperature/land types could exist within a few miles of each other.

Throughout Mesoamerica, distinct wet and dry seasons are experienced. In the summer months (May through September) the tropical sun heats the land, causing the air to rise. The rise pulls in moist air from neighboring oceans and that causes the rains already mentioned. While the moisture is essential for the growing crops, the damp, cloudy conditions result in cooler temperatures; thus "summer" feels like winter could be expected to feel. Furthermore, the rain impedes travel by making trails muddy and by flooding low areas. In the drier part of the year (November to April) first harvesting and later new planting take place, and obviously travel becomes easier then. Anciently wars were fought in the dry period.

The variety in local environments fostered variations in culture. In the most diverse areas, several ecological niches existed in close proximity to each other, which allowed different peoples to exist near each other without necessarily clashing over use of the same resources. For example, farmers who lived only a few

Because few large bodies of water or easily navigable rivers are found in Mesoamerica, boat transportation was little developed and fishing was not a major occupation. Beautiful Lake Atitlan in highland southern Guatemala is an exception; a network of villages at the few viable settlement spots along its steep shore still take advantage of this rich resource.

miles from the sea might have cared nothing about fishing but would have happily exchanged goods with coastal dwellers who exploited the maritime resources. The groups might even have spoken very different languages. Given how Mesoamerican territory is broken into many ecological zones, it is no surprise that at the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 1520s as many as two hundred languages were spoken in Mesoamerica, and many cultural details distinguished the peoples thus set off from each other. Yet local differences were bridged by a veneer of shared concepts and customs we call Mesoamerican civilization.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon pictures its peoples settled in a tropical area where travelers were regularly reported as moving up or down over broken terrain. Wilderness surrounded or abutted on settled areas. For instance, a Lamanite army only a few days from its homeland could not find the way back without guidance from its enemies (see Mosiah 23:30, 35–6); another party was lost for “many days” (Mosiah 8:8), wandering hundreds of miles without ever fully realizing where they had traveled (see Mosiah 8:7–11; 21:25–7); wilderness lairs afforded guerrilla outlaws safe haven, while authorities from nearby settled lands who sought to control them were unable to do so (see Helaman 11:25, 27–33).

THE GRIJALVA RIVER DEPRESSION

One major river system that played a significant role in the lives of ancient Mesoamericans was the Grijalva in the Mexican state of Chiapas. Its upper basin, called the Central Depression, begins where the river’s headwaters descend precipitously from the band of mountains in western Guatemala. Along the stream’s northwestward course through the enclosed, semiarid depression, the narrow strip of good soil laid down by the river’s flooding and the sure water supply furnished by the stream encouraged the building of towns and cities at such sites as those today called La Libertad, Santa Rosa, Chiapa de Corzo, and so on (nobody knows their ancient names).

A generation ago a hydroelectric dam was built that flooded the upper part of the Central Depression, including hundreds of archaeological sites.

At the northwest end of the Central Depression, the river has cut a spectacular canyon with nearly vertical walls. Through it the stream descends toward the coast in the state of Tabasco. There the river branches to form an immense, swampy delta before it reaches the Gulf of Mexico.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The only river mentioned in the Book of Mormon is the Sidon. Analysis of the extensive textual references to it and its relation to the land of Zarahemla shows that the land essentially constituted a major portion of the drainage basin of the river. For the Nephites the river took on its identity as the Sidon near its head, upstream from the land of Manti where it emerged from a narrow strip of wilderness (see Alma 22:29; 43:22, 24, 27, 31–5, 40–2). Tributaries obviously swelled the stream somewhat as it passed adjacent to the city and immediate land of Zarahemla (see Alma 2:1). No mention is made about the course of the river in the lowlands as it approaches the sea, which could have been because the river lost its identity as it forked into channels that formed a delta near the coast.



Upon reaching the flat Central Depression after emerging from the strip of mountains that separates Guatemala from Chiapas, the river is still only a small stream.



As tributaries swell the flow, the Grijalva becomes a full-fledged, impressive river. In some years heavy seasonal rains upstream caused damaging floods along its course through the basin. Major dams control the floods today.



At El Sumidero (The Drain) the stream runs three thousand feet below the crest of this canyon rim where the river exits the Central Depression. A modern dam downstream has now backed up lake waters through most of the canyon, stilling what used to be entirely impassable rapids.



The Central Depression of Chiapas

The Variety within Mesoamerica

Cultures

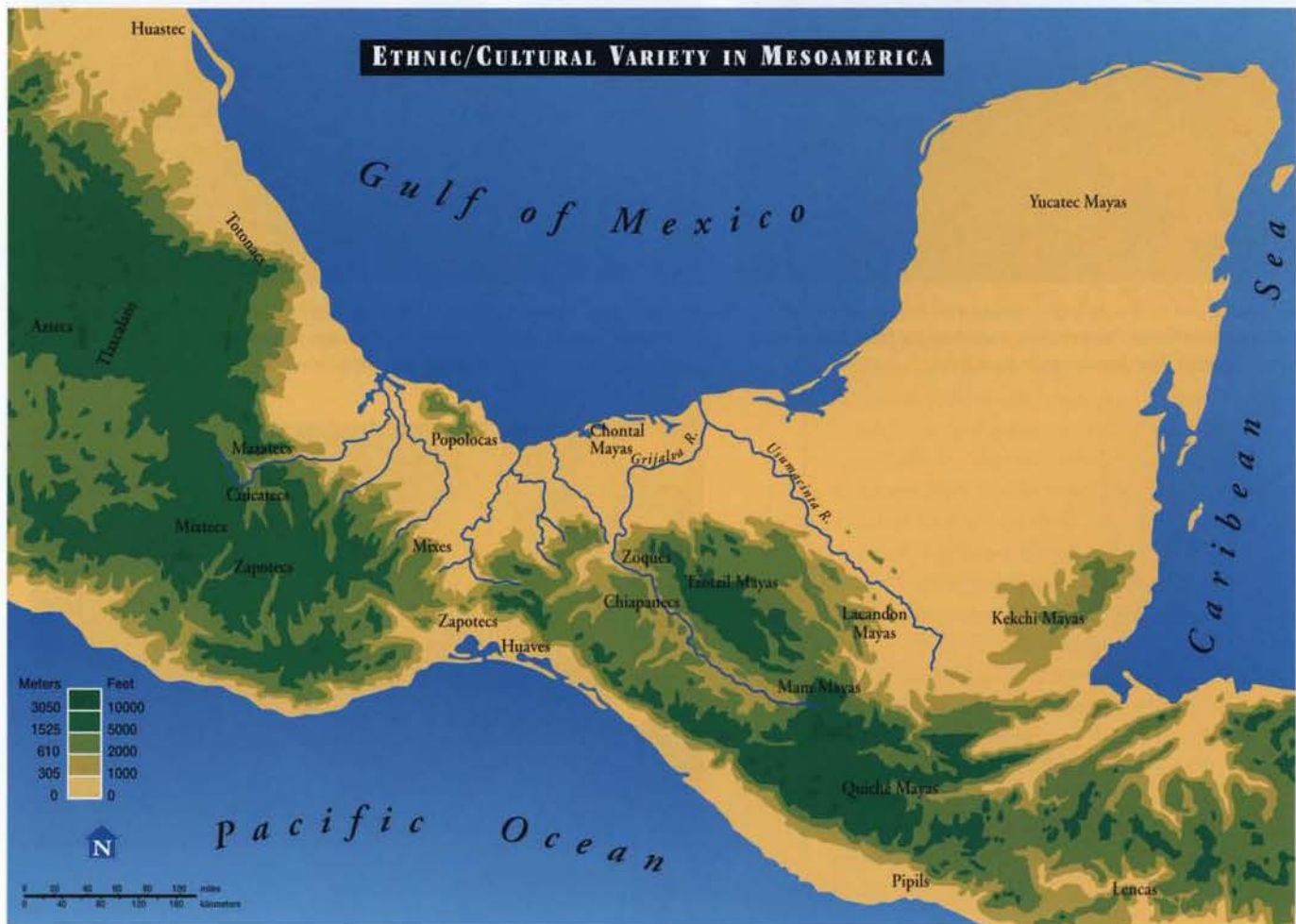
Most people have heard of the Aztecs, the Zapotecs, the Maya, and so on. Less is known about how much variety sometimes hid beneath such cultural labels. For example, the Aztec heartland, the Valley of Mexico and its environs, included dozens of languages and groups who were ruled by a multitribal combine (the Triple Alliance) settled in a metropolis, Tenochtitlan, that had once been three rival cities. Many of the inhabitants of this cosmopolitan area in central Mexico knew two, three, or four tongues. East of the metropolis lived the Tlaxcalans, whose boundary lay only thirty miles from the Aztec capital. The Tlaxcalans had maintained independence from their hated neighbors for centuries. Then on the west of the great capital lay the Tarascans; they too had never been conquered. Each of these peoples (and others not mentioned here) were as different from the others as the English from the French or the Germans from the Italians.

Cultural variety also prevailed in more distant Mesoamerican territories. For example, the Zapotecs in what is today the state of Oaxaca dwelt cheek by jowl with Mixtecs,

Amuzgos, Triques, Cuicatecs, etc. Meanwhile, "the Maya" so often spoken of in relation to Mesoamerica's history were speakers of at least thirty languages that were spread over eastern and southern Mesoamerica. Many differences in environmental settings, styles of art and architecture, religious systems, social arrangements, and governmental forms were manifest among these groups. So we need to be reminded frequently that what we for convenience term ancient Mesoamerican civilization was no more a uniform entity than was ancient Near Eastern civilization.

A good deal of the variation consisted of details on widely shared themes. It is because there were basic commonalities that we can speak of Mesoamerica as an overarching culture area. People of one group knew, for example, that a certain god or custom among their neighbors was more or less equivalent to one of their own. Knowledgeable individuals, such as merchants who had traveled about, were capable of making translations between their own cultural ideas and those of other groups on a "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" basis. Thus the pattern of life was somewhat similar for all groups, especially within a given region, and not startlingly different throughout the rest of Mesoamerica, despite the fact that locals had their own ways of acting and thinking.

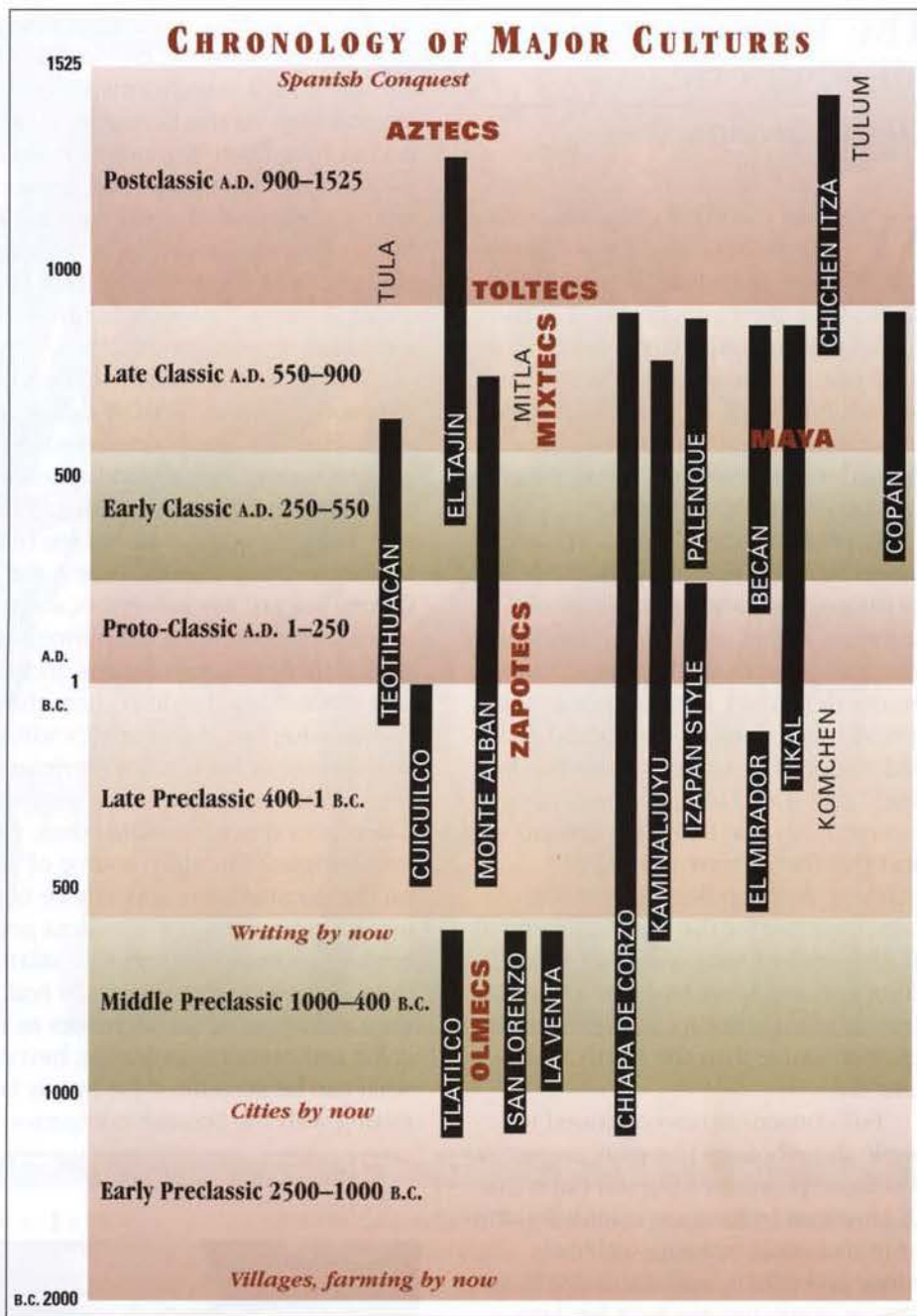
This fragmentation means that exceptions can always be pointed out whenever we try to generalize about



things Mesoamerican. All that can be done in the brief compass of this book is to make statements about what is more or less typical. Readers can understand the essential information without mastering all the intricacies of the diverse ancient scene.

It is also important to realize that some major patterns of Mesoamerican life did not change in their fundamentals over a period of two thousand or even three thousand years before the Spaniards arrived. Such comparative continuity means that when we look at clothing, houses, cultivation techniques, or customs of community cooperation in one period, we can gain valuable clues about how life went on in both earlier and later times as well.

The map on page 14 suggests some of the cultural groupings in Mesoamerica that are often referred to, although the details are impossible to show on a map.



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The groups who participated in Book of Mormon history were represented in that record as varying culturally in details even while a core of widely shared ideas and lifeways allowed them to interact with each other on a predictable basis. The social and physical isolation and separatism of groups we have seen in Mesoamerica was matched among Nephites and Lamanites. Within the land of Zarahemla, for instance, although a common government held control, in name at least, over all local lands, the people in the land of Ammonihah virtually thumbed their nose at the ruling powers in the nominal capital city (see Alma 8:11–3, 17). The Zoramites provide another case: we are first told of their

pursuing strange religious customs and holding weird beliefs (weird, that is, to someone from Zarahemla), and soon they went even further and seceded politically in order to join the Lamanites (see Alma 31:59; 31:1–4). Rebel groups sprang up repeatedly at no great distance from the Nephite capital city (see Alma 2:2, 13; 51:16–20; 61:3–5). Each saw themselves as significantly different from those who ruled them. One of the causes of this fragmentation was that geographical separation and travel difficulties resulted in poor communication; even the chief military commander of the Nephites, Moroni, did not learn for several years what had been going on with some of his forces at the borders of the nation just a few hundred miles away (see Alma 56:1–2; 58:8–9; 59:2; 60:1–3).

The Variety within Mesoamerica

Ethnic Groups

When the first Europeans arrived in the New World five centuries ago, they didn't write in much detail about the biological traits of the inhabitants, although some did refer to particular groups as having "white" or nearly white skins. Other groups were noticeably darker.¹⁴ Columbus himself claimed that there were "black" people in Central or South America.¹⁵

Physical anthropologists, who are concerned with humanity's biological variations, have argued the issue of American Indian unity or variation for over a century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the notion was widespread that a number of different races had migrated to America from the Old World, but soon the weak logic, data, and methods that had been used to support this theory were decisively attacked. Anthropologists generally came to argue for the basic similarity of all American Indians, although some European and Latin American experts found the evidence for a single ancestry less persuasive than the North Americans did.

Full consensus has continued to evade the scholars. The more numerous and more powerful wing still claim that all American Indians are essentially similar in biological makeup, with only minor exceptions, and that a single, very ancient origin (except for a few late-comers to northern North America via Alaska) is the explanation for the uniformity. A minority of competent specialists protest that the uniformitarian view is based on insufficient evidence and that it is too early to rule out the possibility that different groups arrived in the Americas to enter into the makeup of the American Indian.

For example, a conference held in 1990 still encountered the conflict. The argument for a straightforward origin of Amerindians via the Bering Strait was said to have been "undone" by certain archaeologists, linguists, and geneticists. One study reported at the meeting used the recently developed DNA technique to show "that there were at least 11 major lineages [or biological lines in the Americas], possibly more."¹⁶

The experts use three sources of data about ancient racial or ethnic features. First they study preserved skeletal material or tissue, but good specimens are scarce and interpretations can differ,¹⁷ even though a majority see relative uniformity.¹⁸ A second source is pre-Columbian art. Ancient artists sometimes showed striking differences in the appearance of human figures, including skin color. Were the differences they showed due just to the artist's whim? Was the use of body paint the reason for the different skin shades, or were the differences due to variable ethnic and racial origins? The third source of data on the question, the appearance of the living descendants of the ancient peoples, seems to some observers to confirm that the variations were biologically real, for they also show wide differences in skin color and overall appearance, beyond what can be accounted for by any late mixing with the Spanish conquerors.

Differences of degree of skin darkness may be manifest in this mural from Bonampak in the ninth century A.D., although some believe that body paint may explain the different hues represented. Yet it is reasonable that differences in skin pigmentation were present long ago when we consider the diverse ancient faces displayed in the next section.

About A.D. 1100 a mural painter at Chichen Itza in Yucatan plainly distinguished degrees of darkness of skin color on the men in this boat. The scene that includes this detail has been interpreted by some (non-Mormon) observers as showing a military defeat and ravaging of the light-skinned folks by the darker-skinned group.¹⁹





VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

Mormon's record gives only minimal information about what Nephites or Lamanites looked like. Statements about skin color are made at a couple of points. The earliest Nephites were said to have been "white" or "fair" (2 Nephi 5:21),²⁰ while Lamanites were stereotyped as "dark" (1 Nephi 12:23). Later, however, certain Lamanite descendants were considered white like the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 2:15–6), while no hint is given that the skins of the numerous Nephite dissenters who became Lamanites darkened. We cannot develop an objective picture from the subjective statements that are all the text gives us. That leaves the question of biological variety open and complicated.

Other peoples were evidently present in the area when Nephi's and Mulek's parties arrived.²¹ For all the text indicates, they could have included Mongoloid types. Very probably they involved unacknowledged descendants of the Jaredites, for personal names, plants, and cultural elements known among that earlier group show up among the Nephites without any historical explanation.²² We have no way to know the biology of those

Jaredite descendants. The numerous people of Zarahemla (commonly called "Mulekites" in LDS discourse, although not in the Book of Mormon text itself) shared the land of Zarahemla with the Nephites and became part of Nephite society. No facts about their biology are given in the text.

Throughout most if not all of Book of Mormon history, the terms *Lamanite* and *Nephite* signaled political and cultural affiliations, not biology. Skin color and other biological features within either faction could have varied considerably. Then, too, puzzling groups show up in Nephite history without adequate explanation. Who the Amalekites were and where they came from are questions never clarified; and the Amulonites in only a single generation are said to have become almost as numerous as the Nephites!²³ Obviously, much more was going on and more peoples and cultures were involved in Book of Mormon history than modern readers usually detect when reading Mormon's terse, one-sided account. Given such uncertainties, it is well to remember Hugh Nibley's caution, "There is not a word in the Book of Mormon to prevent the coming to this hemisphere of any number of people from any part of the world at any time."²⁴

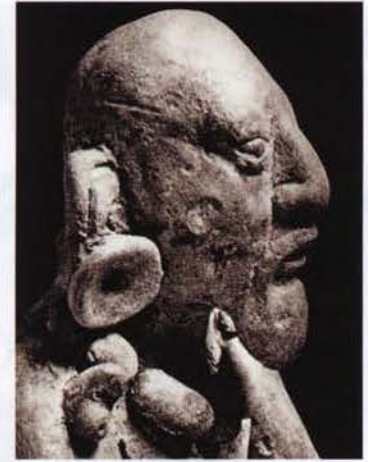
A Gallery of Ancient Faces

The faces shown here are not claimed to be representative of the population of Mesoamerica at any particular time. Collected art objects can never provide a satisfactory basis for establishing what was representative. Rather, these countenances have been selected to demonstrate that anciently a surprising variety of human types coexisted in the area. A different selection of figures would have to be made to support the claim, common among experts, that Mesoamericans had only northeast Asian ancestors. Certainly many early figures display Mongoloid characteristics (see especially many faces to be seen in other sections of this book). But the present point is that types of people from many other parts of the world were also present in Mesoamerica. Most of the faces shown here are portraits of such individuals, although their very presence in Mexico and Central America is ignored or denied by conventional physical anthropologists. Apparently the genes of those unexpected ancestors from other areas of the earth failed to survive on as wide a scale as those sprung from northeast Asian ancestry.

These ceramic heads are mainly specimens in private artifact collections in Mexico. The late Alexander von Wuthenau and other investigators have been struck with the variety of human types revealed by these objects and have drawn attention to this variety by photographic documentation.²⁵ They maintain that this is all the evidence needed to demonstrate that a wide variety of ethnic or racial types were present in Mexico and Central America.²⁶



A rare arrangement of facial hair is seen on this racially unclassifiable portrait.



From the Classic era comes this lowland Maya bearded face with a notable nose.

A powerful, perhaps arrogant Maya face is featured on this Jaina-style ceramic sculpture (ca. A.D. 700).

One of Palenque's greatest Classic rulers is shown in this magnificent plaster mask.





A Late Classic Maya (A.D. 600–900), from Guatemala.



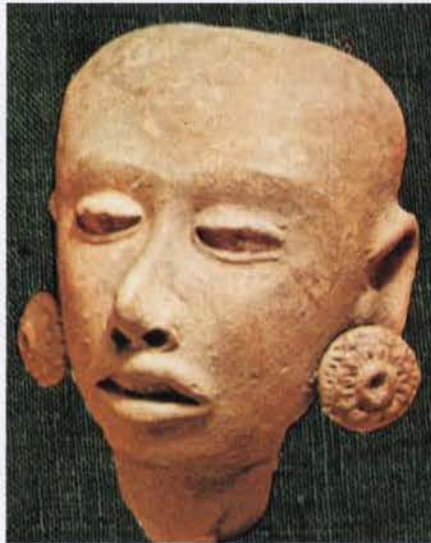
An African face, after A.D. 800, state of Oaxaca.



Another interesting visage, from Classic-era Veracruz.



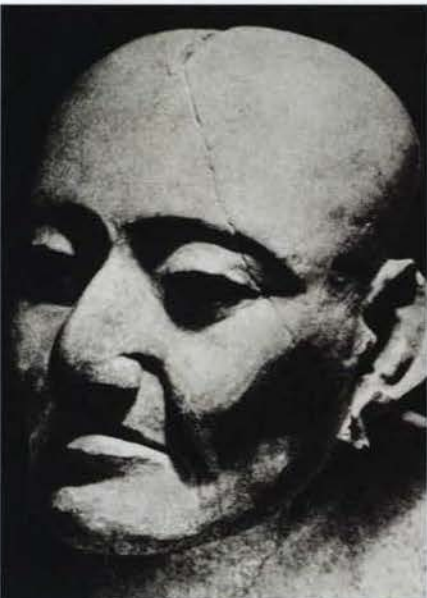
A man in Olmec style from Puebla, central Mexico.



A Teotihuacan-style face from Veracruz, ca. A.D. 400.



A Semitic face, highland Guatemala, before A.D. 300.



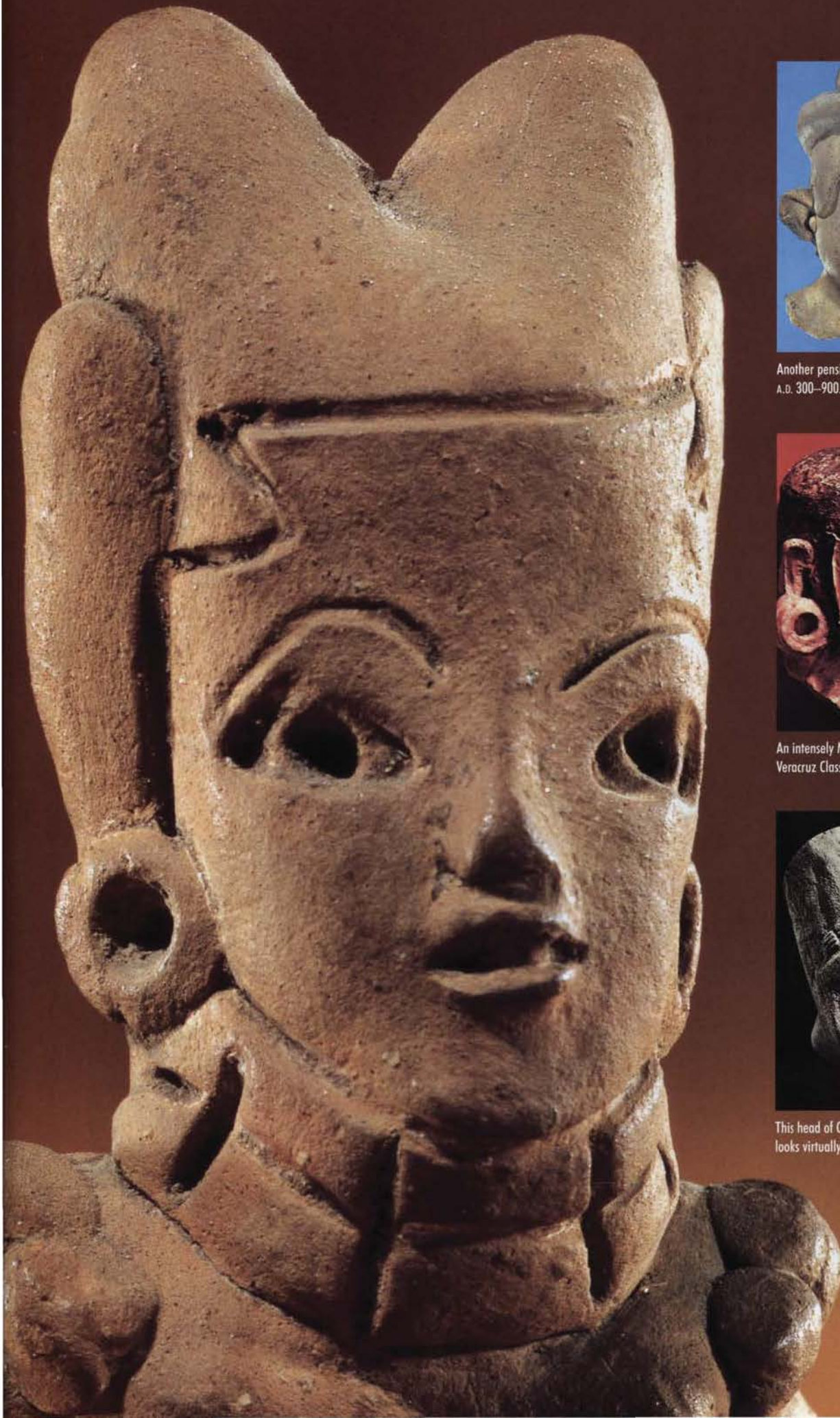
A clearly Mediterranean type of face from Veracruz, of Classic age.



An Olmec jade mask that might be matched in, say, Korea.



Another Classic-age head from Veracruz that is very Mediterranean.



Another pensive woman from central Veracruz, A.D. 300–900.



An intensely Mongoloid face from the Veracruz Classic.



This head of Classic date from central Veracruz looks virtually Southeast Asian.

This "pretty lady" type was common in central Mexico in the first millennium B.C.



Young Mixtec woman, northern Oaxaca



Cuicatec boy, western Oaxaca



Ixcatec girl, northern Oaxaca



Another young Cuicatec, western Oaxaca



Zoque matriarch, central Chiapas



Old Zoque man, central Chiapas



Ixcatec man, northern Oaxaca



Mazatec woman, northern Oaxaca

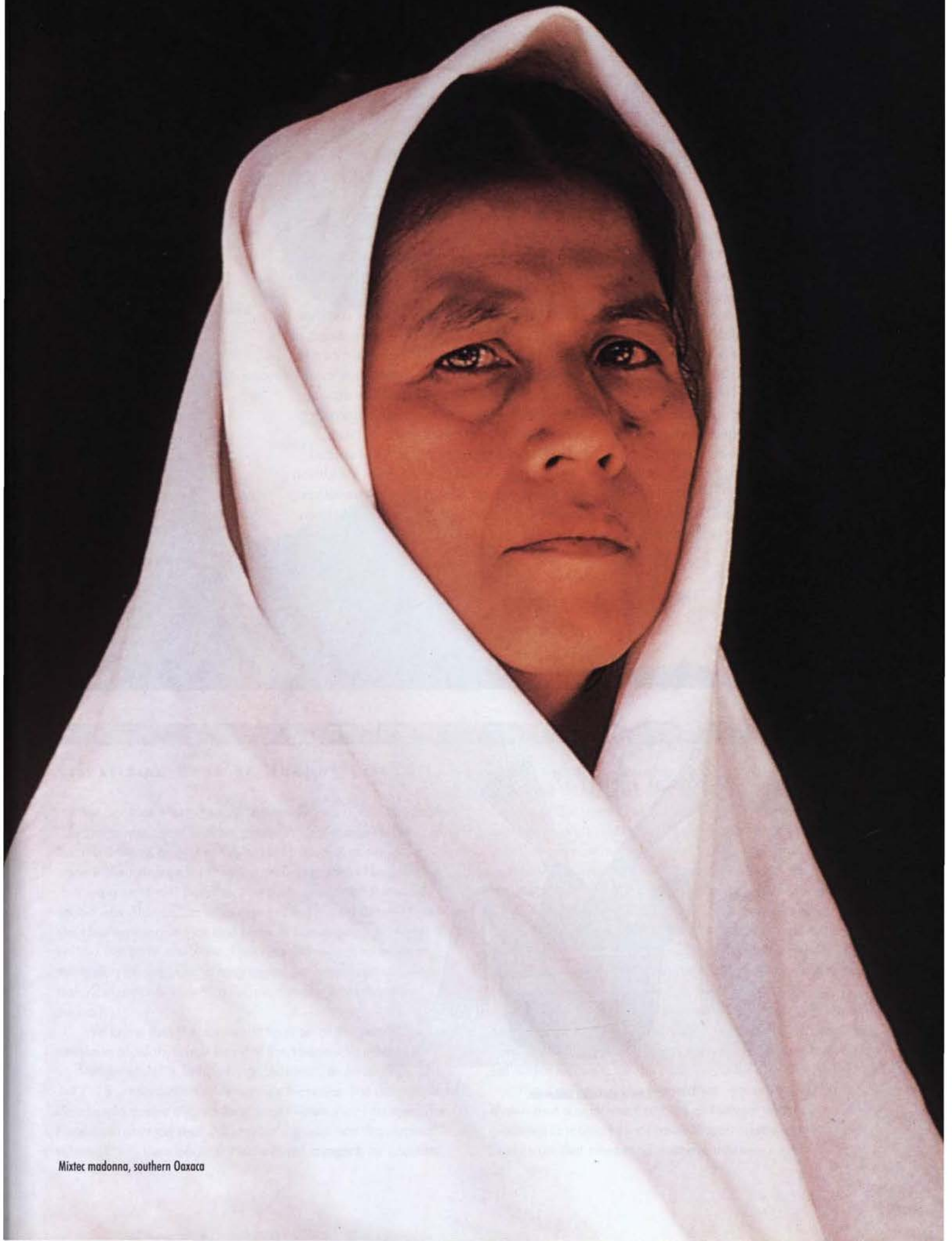
A Gallery of Modern Faces

With so much biological variety present anciently, we should expect that some of those varied genes were passed down to Mesoamerica's modern native peoples. They indeed show substantial diversity in appearance. Of course, many problems complicate any attempt to penetrate the matter. For example, because the Spaniards and their diseases destroyed many Indian groups, the remnants of native peoples now to be found in Mexico and Guatemala represent only a sample of the range of groups that once inhabited the area. And the wars conducted by the Aztecs and earlier conquerors no doubt long before greatly modified whatever genetic composition was present, say, two thousand years ago. Mixing with the European newcomers may have further obscured the picture. Nevertheless, we still find evidence in living Mesoamerican groups of some of the ethnic complexity that prevailed anciently.

The pictures in this section are of individuals who still identify with their Indian tribal groups. They live in relatively remote areas of Mexico where native peoples continue to have a strong social presence. It is possible, though not likely, that the appearance of some has been influenced by their having had an incidental Spanish progenitor.



Zapotec woman, Tehuantepec



Mixtec madonna, southern Oaxaca

The Variety within Mesoamerica

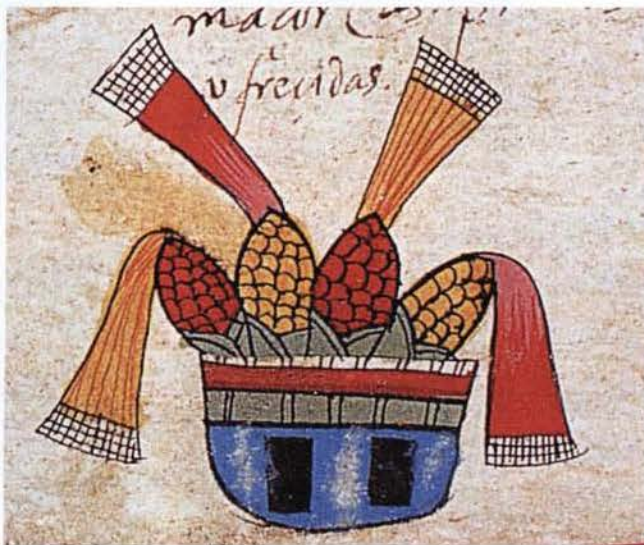
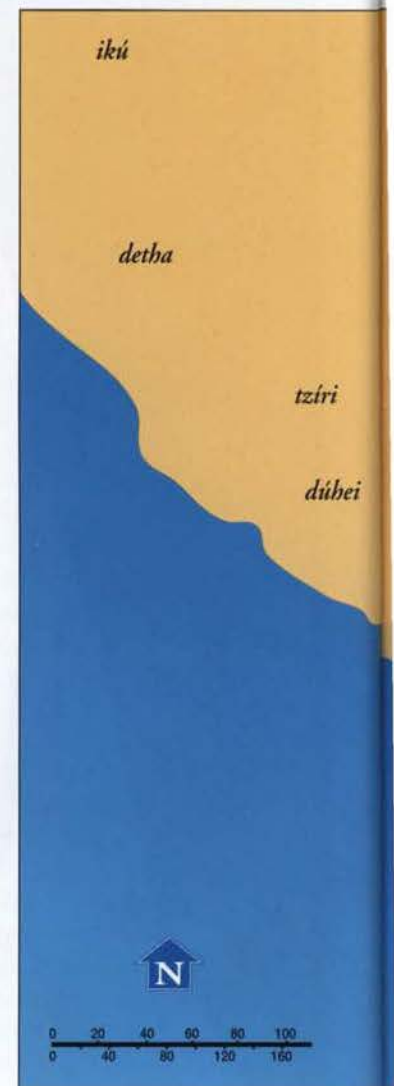
Languages

It is logical to expect that the array of environmental settings and the multiple peoples occupying them would be reflected in the number and distribution of languages spoken anciently in Mesoamerica. Around the world, the more broken the terrain, the more fragmented is the distribution of languages. It is impossible to know precisely how many tongues were used in Mesoamerica, but two hundred would not overstate the number. (These were distinct languages, each one unintelligible to speakers of other languages, not merely dialects.)

Linguists are far from united on how these tongues related to each other. Some reckon that five or six major, independent families were involved. Those families differ from each other as much as, say, the Semitic family (including Hebrew) differs

from the Indo-European family (including English and Latin). But other language experts are less willing to lump diverse languages into such gross families. The number of groupings they recognize is closer to two dozen, each seemingly independent from the others. Certain single languages have no apparent relatives at all in the area. No evidence hints that there was ever one dominant language or language family throughout Mesoamerica.

The accompanying map shows something of both the variety in and similarities among the languages of this area. On a map of Mesoamerica are plotted some of the words that mean "corn." Languages of the Mayan family, on the right side of the map, demonstrate how a particular early word (probably pronounced something like "eesh") ultimately varied from region to region as, over thousands of years, daughter languages split off and spread. The map also makes clear that in addition to the ancestral Mayan term, many other terms for corn were used, probably from early times.



Corn in the Codex Borbonicus

DISTRIBUTION OF MESOAMERICAN WORDS FOR CORN



VISUALIZING BOOK OF MORMON LIFE

The Book of Mormon says extremely little about its peoples' languages. Lehi and his group initially spoke Hebrew, of course, but the brevity of the record does not allow us to determine if their descendants made an unreported change. (Keep in mind a potential parallel. The daily speech of Jesus' day in Judea was Aramaic, a language related to, yet different from, the Hebrew tongue that had been in use in Lehi's time. Yet if we did not have nonbiblical sources with which to reconstruct the history of the Semitic languages, we would not know the historical process by which Aramaic replaced Hebrew in Judea.)

We know that the spoken language of the people of Zarahemla in Mosiah₁'s day was not the Hebrew that had been spoken by Mulek's father, King Zedekiah, in Jerusalem. Omni 1:17–18 emphasizes that Mosiah₁'s Nephites and the people of Zarahemla spoke distinct languages when they first met. The Nephites assumed that Zarahemla's group had "corrupted" (Omni 1:17) their original Hebrew, yet research by linguists

assures us that two branches from a common parent language would not change as rapidly as the Nephites supposed. The people of Zarahemla would still have been able to make recognizable sense of Nephite speech after only four hundred years of separation, if both had simply kept on using their own naturally evolving version of Hebrew. Instead, the Mulekites or the Nephites, or both, seem to have switched to a different tongue in those few centuries. Possibly they picked up a language spoken by survivors from the Jaredite era. And since the Mulekites greatly outnumbered their Nephite rulers, it is probable that the latter came to speak the majority tongue as the generations moved on.

The Book of Mormon gives no hint whether additional languages were used or not, though they might have been. Perhaps such a subtle matter was ignored in the very brief historical sketch we have for the early centuries of their history.

There is much to be learned yet. A few linguists have shown that a significant portion of Hebrew vocabulary and grammar is mixed into certain Mesoamerican languages.²⁷ Studies on that interesting matter continue.