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Book of Mormon Peoples and History

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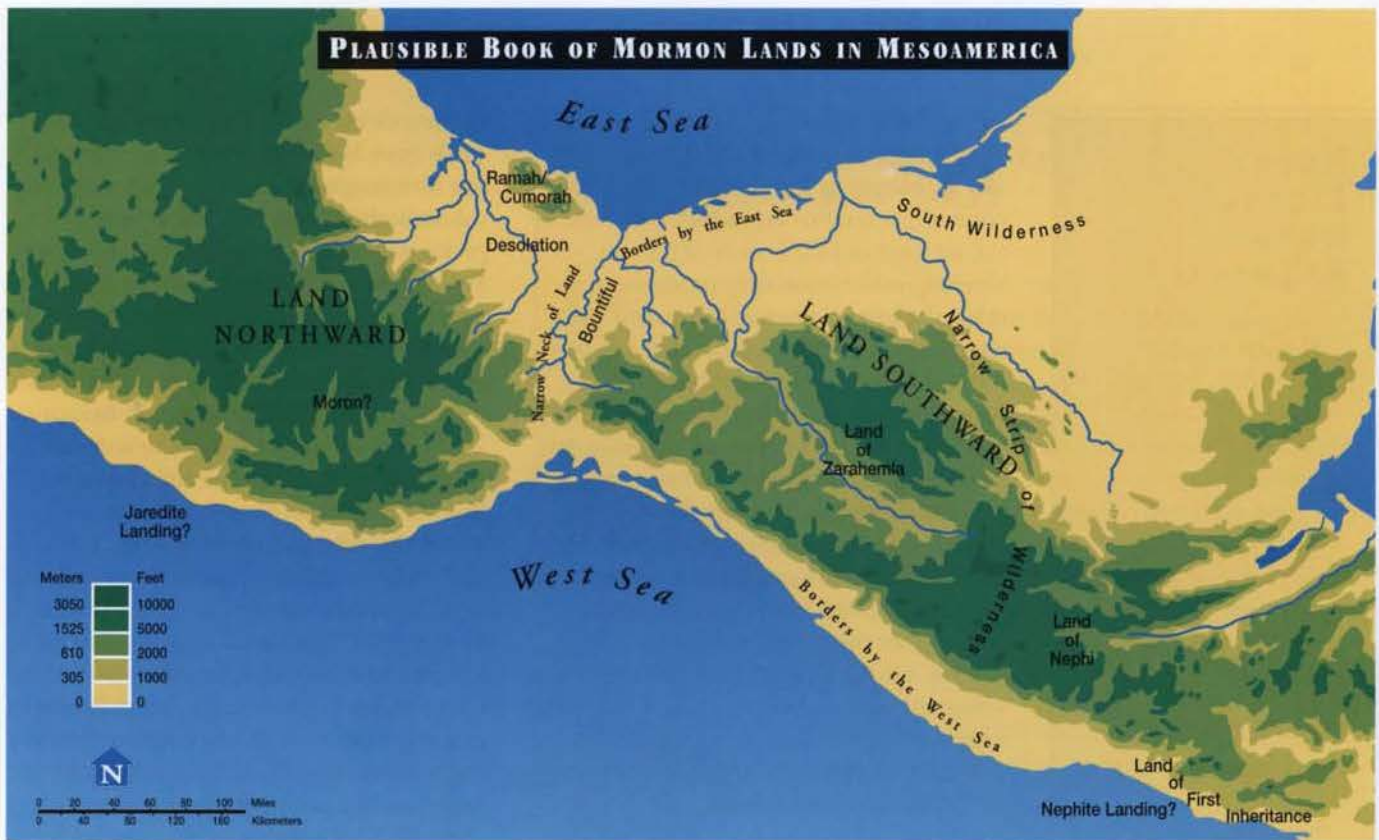
The first part of this book related information on Book of Mormon peoples and cultures to their Mesoamerican setting, topic by topic. While that approach has value in being systematic, it leaves issues of history and geography in limbo. What follows will connect the Nephite story to the Mesoamerican scene in terms of the broader topics of times and places.



Mormon's Map in Relation to Mesoamerica

Mesoamerica is the only part of the western hemisphere that qualifies as the Nephites' "land of promise." Just where were the Nephites located within Mesoamerica? Only when we have an idea of that can we know which historical traditions or archaeological sequences can be compared most usefully with Mormon's text. The internal consistency of the geographical statements in the Book of Mormon referred to earlier must be accounted for by assuming that the primary author and editor of the Book of Mormon, the fourth-century A.D. prophet-general Mormon, had a definite mental map in mind. (This consistency cannot be accounted for in terms of Joseph Smith, for his translation of the volume was dictated at such a pace and published with so little revision of content that he could not have accurately crafted the picture of spatial relations involved in the complex story.)¹⁷⁵ The brief biographical material on Mormon included in his account tells us that he personally traveled throughout most of Nephite territory (see Mormon chapters 1–6). The consistency exhibited by his geographical statements must have come primarily from his own experience with the landscape.

The map on this page shows what we can discern of Mormon's picture of spatial relations in what the Nephites called the land of promise.¹⁷⁶ The territory it encompassed, as indicated by statements in the scriptural text, was on the order of five or six hundred miles long and a couple of hundred miles wide. The major contrast was between a "land southward" and a "land northward," (Alma 22:32), which were connected by an isthmus, a narrow neck of land. The southerly territory was in turn divided in two: a general "land of Nephi" consisted of mainly mountainous terrain distinctly set off in topography from the lower-lying "land of Zarahemla," which lay in a northerly direction (Alma 22:32). Only one major river is noted, the Sidon (Alma 22:29), whose basin constituted most of the land of Zarahemla. The climate was tropical or semitropical, although areas of higher elevation would necessarily have been cooler.



Characteristics of the civilization in which the Nephites participated are often mentioned or implied but are not reported in much specific detail. Mormon's record pictures his people having an agrarian economic base, a population in the millions, many cities, extensive commerce, numerous books written in more than one script, elaborate religious institutions, intensive warfare, and many luxury goods.

When Mormon's geography and the characteristics of the civilization involved are compared with possible scenes in the Americas, only one area fits consistently: Mesoamerica, that is, central and southern Mexico and northern Central America. Only in this one area do we find the required combination of uplands and lowlands, an isthmus and river system, a warm climate, and an advanced, literate civilization.

The map on this page displays the most likely specific correlation between "Mormon's map" and Mesoamerican territory. The lands of the Nephites, it turns out, probably comprised highland Guatemala (although that land was possessed much of the time by the Lamanite faction), Chiapas, and areas to the north and west of Chiapas extending to central Veracruz. (Some Latter-day Saint students of Nephite geography have differed from this

schema on important details.)¹⁷⁷

Identifying on today's map where the Nephites and other peoples of the Book of Mormon story lived opens up important new sources of information on them. On the basis of this correlation, we can tap into the information that scientists and scholars have been accumulating about Mesoamerica for a hundred years.

The conjunction of scriptural information with the facts from scholarly study of Mesoamerica sheds new light on the Book of Mormon in two ways. First, obscure portions of the Book of Mormon text may be clarified. For example, Mosiah 19:24 speaks of a "ceremony" in connection with the slaying of king Noah by his rebellious subjects, but there is no hint of the nature or purpose of that ceremony. Much information is available on Mesoamerican ceremonial practices involving death and sacrifice, and it may clarify the mystery of the strange ritual. Second, identification of the area as the scene of Book of Mormon events can bring to readers a sense of realism hitherto missing in their studies.

But before Nephite events can be compared usefully and accurately with Mesoamerican history, qualifications about the data on both sides of the prospective equation need to be recognized.

Nephite History

NEPHI LINEAGE RECORD KEEPERS

Nephi

Jacob*

Enos

Jarom

Omni

Chemish*

Abinadom

Amaleki

Mosiah*

Benjamin

Mosiah

Alma*

Alma

Helaman

Nephi

Nephi

Nephi

Amos

Amos

Ammaron*

Mormon*

Moroni

* record not passed
from father to son
italic sacred record
bold king

Readers have often erred in expecting the Book of Mormon to be a history in the sense of that word common among us nowadays. Nowhere in the writings of Mormon or of his son, Moroni₂, is the book they produced termed a history; instead it is called “an abridgement of the record of the people of Nephi” and an “account” (see title page). *History* is a label that comes from modern thought; we typically suppose that a history presents a more or less continuous and thorough account of what happened—of all the important events—within a certain area over a certain period. With rare, partial exceptions, the ancients had neither the access to adequate information nor the desire to produce such a systematic discussion. We should not expect of their record what it does not intend. What Mormon meant to do was teach readers certain moral lessons by citing selected episodes from events that occurred among his people, not to tell their whole story.

In ancient cultures a people was most often defined in terms of descent from a claimed ancestor. On the title page of the Book of Mormon, Moroni₂, its last custodian, spoke of “the people of Nephi.” It is not clear what he meant in regard to ancestry and descent when he used this expression. The phrases *the people of Nephi* and *the Nephites* are used in the book with more than one meaning. On the face of it, we might think they referred to those literally descended from Nephi₁, the son of Lehi₁. That proves an oversimplification. Most often the label *Nephites* is applied to all those who acknowledged the sovereignty of Nephi₁’s descendants, even though the subjects had no genetic connection with the founding ancestor,

Nephi₁, or his family. Legitimate rulers came from Nephi₁’s direct descendants, but diverse groups came under their political umbrella by a kind of adoption process well-known in the ancient world. Meanwhile dissenters—although sometimes literal descendants of Nephi₁—opted out of the political system and were no longer counted as Nephites. Examples demonstrate the pattern: certain Lamanites “took upon themselves the name of Nephi, that they might be called the children of Nephi and be numbered among those who were called Nephites” (Mosiah 25:12); however, the Zoramite faction went the other direction—they changed from the sociopolitical category of Nephite to that of Lamanite by secession (see Alma 43:4). Other cases could be cited. Furthermore, the Book of Mormon quietly lets us know that other people, not just those from Lehi’s initial party, were on the scene.¹⁷⁸ Those inhabitants willing to be subject to the ruler, the descendant of Nephi₁, were also included among the Nephites.

The Book of Mormon proves to be a record of only selected events that particularly affected the royal line. Much that went on among the diverse groups under the Nephite rulers is given short shrift or no mention at all. Moreover, ethnic, linguistic, and cultural variety could also be expected among those under Lamanite rulers. Thus the book is not a history in the modern sense. This is to be expected in the light of ancient record-keeping practices. For example, the Old Testament, a version of which the Nephites possessed and which served them as a model for recording their past, relates only a limited range of events about the patriarch Jacob’s descendants, with strong emphasis on

the royal line through Judah. In short, Mormon's record is a lineage history, the typical kind of account of the past that was produced in most societies before European historians developed a broadened view of their task a few centuries ago. Many events that we moderns may be curious about were omitted because a lineage's writers did not consider them relevant to their aims.

In Mesoamerica virtually all traditional histories were by and about lineages (using the term broadly),¹⁷⁹ as was true in the Near East. The records were about the ruling groups, not the commoners. For instance, the historical portions of the *Popol Vuh* tell of a small group of foreigners (of Mexican extraction) who invaded Guatemala a few centuries before the Spaniards and gained military control over the resident Mayan-speaking population. In the course of a number of generations, those elite intruders were culturally absorbed by their subjects, but the document fails to make that clear.

What we know about the record from which the Book of Mormon was translated by Joseph Smith indicates that it was one of the class of Mesoamerican lineage histories recorded in the form of a codex.¹⁸⁰ The Book of Mormon talks chiefly about the elite stratum of society, and it was rulers or their kin who kept the Nephite records. Naturally enough, they give us little information about the commoner majority whom they ruled. The scribes themselves emphasize how selective they had to be in deciding what to include (see, for example, Jacob 3:13; Words of Mormon 1:5; and Helaman 3:14). Because the record is silent on whole topics, it, like the *Popol Vuh*, can be compared only with difficulty with the archaeological and inscriptional record of ancient Mesoamerican life.

DID THE MESOAMERICANS WRITE REAL HISTORY?

Questions are sometimes raised whether the Mesoamerican scribes had developed historical writing in anything like our modern sense. Some scholars suspect that myth or ideological interpretations played such a big role that we do not really get any reliable reports of historical events in the ancient sources. Despite some coloring of accounts, it appears that it was possible, in some cases at least, for native historians to report events in an informative, sequential manner. That is illustrated in an excerpt from the *Annals of the Cakchiquels*, a sixteenth-century account from highland Guatemala of an event that happened not long before the Spanish Conquest and that had no doubt been transmitted via a hieroglyphic text down to Colonial times, when it was written in Spanish script.



When the sun appeared on the horizon and its light fell on the mountain, the outcry and shouts of war broke forth, banners were unfurled, and the big flutes, drums, and conch shells resounded. It was indeed terrible when the Quichés arrived. But with great speed they [the Cakchiquels] went down to surround them, concealing themselves so as to form a circle; and arriving at the foot of the hill, they went close to the banks of the river, cutting off the river houses from the servants of the kings Tepépul and Ixtáyul who were accompanying their god. Immediately was the encounter. Truly the contest was terrible. The outcries resounded, the shouts of war, the flutes, the drums, and the conch shells; then the warriors performed their acts of magic. Quickly the Quichés were defeated; they ceased to fight and were dispersed, annihilated and dead. It was impossible to count the dead. . . .

Recinos 1950

Book of Mormon Peoples in Terms of Mesoamerica

The peoples, cultures, or ruling lineages known to scholars who study Mesoamerica are called, especially in popular books, by names like *Aztecs*, *Zapotecs*, *Mayas*, and *Olmecs*. None of them are known to have been called Nephites. (Keep in mind that since “none other people knoweth our language,” according to Moroni₂ in Mormon 9:34, we have no linguistic clue to what the term translated to English as “Nephites” might have been in any Mesoamerican language.) Were the Nephites in any sense ancestors of the Aztecs? Were the Toltecs of Mesoamerican tradition descended from the Nephites? Were the Mayas Lamanites in Mormon’s terms? To provide useful answers to questions like these, we must be aware that archaeologists cannot directly answer questions about the identity of the peoples whose remains they investigate. New World excavators never find inscriptions that proclaim, “We are the people named such and such.”

The whole topic of ethnic identification is a confused one in scholarly studies on Mesoamerica. Rarely is a people’s own name for themselves used in either scholarly or popular literature. Well-known terms like *Toltec* have no settled historical

meaning but are unclear catchalls. Other ethnic labels like *Aztec* and *Chichimec*, let alone *Olmec*, are equally murky.¹⁸¹ In many cases archaeologists use labels they have coined to denote mere pottery complexes as if they represented peoples, which they surely do not.

In the absence of crucial information as just indicated, any attempt to compare Mormon’s account with the findings of archaeology and related fields is bound to be ambiguous. Nobody can say at this time who the scriptural Nephites were in Mesoamerican terms. Yet we may approximate a relationship if we can correctly identify the time and place where they lived.

The probability is that the Nephite and Lamanite ruling lineages whom we read about in Mormon’s book represented portions of societies that were found in highland Guatemala and the Mexican state of Chiapas during at least the first and second centuries B.C. From that time to the middle of the fourth century A.D., there is evidence that these possible Nephites expanded into the states of Veracruz and perhaps parts of Oaxaca, Mexico. They probably gathered in southern Veracruz to make their last stand near A.D. 380.

A striking bowl from the lowland Maya area dating to the Classic shows a dignitary with a Jewish-looking profile. We catch only occasional glimpses like this of a Near Eastern component in the Mesoamerican peoples, who are typically called, oversimply, Maya or the like.



CHRONOLOGY OF NEPHITE EVENTS COMPARED WITH MESOAMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY

Date	Book of Mormon		Mesoamerica		Period
	Land Northward	Land Southward	North of Isthmus	South of Isthmus	
600	Prophetic view: wars, "abominations"		Various States	"Classic Maya"	LATE CLASSIC
500			Teotihuacan influence declines	Maya stelae cease	
400	Wars continue among non-Nephites		Teotihuacan groups spread widely		EARLY CLASSIC
300	Nephites exterminated Nephites retreat north		Militarism increasing; cults abound	Chiapas abandoned	
200	War, turmoil spread Widespread trade Cults, priests flourish Dynamic, prosperous society Classes reappear			Peak in cultural creativity Priests flourish Surge in class symbols, trade	PROTO-CLASSIC
100	Classless, theocracy-led society		Stable socioeconomic growth		
A.D. 1	Great natural, social catastrophe Class distinctions, state rule Migrations northward Expansion of Nephite & Lamanite lineages and influence			Hesitation in growth Volcanic action Precursors of Classic at Tikal, Monte Alban, Cuicuilco, etc.	LATE PRE-CLASSIC
100 B.C.			Izapan influences go north		
200					MIDDLE PRE-CLASSIC
300					
400			Small sociopolitical chiefdoms		
500					
600	Approximate extermination of Jaredite lineages		Approximate end of Olmec civilization		

The Early Nephites in the Land of Nephi

The party led by Lehi₁ and his son Nephi₁ arrived by boat on the Pacific coast of Guatemala or El Salvador around 575 B.C. The aged father died soon afterward. Before long the antagonisms between Nephi₁ on the one hand and his older brothers Laman₁ and Lemuel on the other caused the little colony to split. Nephi₁ and a handful of followers moved inland to the highlands, which thereafter were always said to be “up” in relation to surrounding areas. In what must have been an extensive mountain valley, they laid out a small city named after their leader, and he became their first king. They called themselves Nephites or the people of Nephi. They immediately constructed a temple, said to be modeled after the temple that Nephi₁ had known in Jerusalem. Before long, their rivals, the Lamanites, reencountered them and armed conflict began between them that continued through most of the next six hundred years.

Topographical and other information in the Book of Mormon record neatly supports the proposition that the city of Nephi was located in the Valley of Guatemala. The preeminent archaeological site in that area, located in a suburb of the capital, Guatemala City, was one of the most important in Mesoamerica in the

centuries just before the advent of Christ. It has been named Kaminaljuyu (pronounced kah-mee-nahl-hu-yu, often called KJ for short) by archaeologists, but they have no idea what the name was anciently. The first substantial inhabitation of the site has been found to date between 600 and 500 B.C. Meanwhile, the people whom the Nephites called the Lamanites dwelt in the coastal lowlands and foothill zone a few miles away to the south of Nephi₁'s settlement. Quite surely, descendants of Jaredite-era groups were then occupying portions of that lowland wilderness, and it looks as if some of them were incorporated under the rule of the Lamanite immigrants.

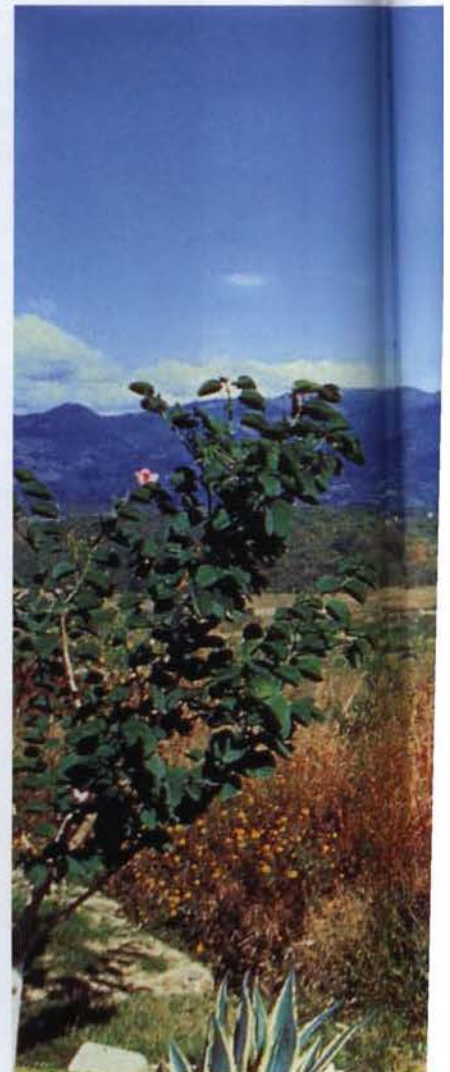
The highlands of Guatemala enjoyed a temperate climate and vegetation; the area has been called the land of eternal spring. In contrast, the coastal territory was oppressively hot and humid and much of it was covered with tropical forest.

The historical information covering the first three centuries in the Nephite record is exceptionally fragmentary (see the books of Jacob, Enos, and Jarom). There is no hint that their occupation extended outside the valley first settled and named by founder Nephi₁, and their numbers would have been limited to no more than a few thousand.

The valley seen here, where Guatemala City lies, has been identified by a number of students of Book of Mormon geography as the immediate land of Nephi, the first area settled by Nephi, and his party after separating from the Lamanite faction. The view from the vantage point of the photographer of this scene is the same as that Ammon₁ and his group would have had when they came into the land and paused “at a hill, which is north of the land of Shilom” (Mosiah 7:5). From there “they went down into the land of Nephi,” where they met King Limhi (Mosiah 7:6).



From any part of the strip of wilderness near the Pacific coast, the lands along the west sea in southern Guatemala, the mountains are visible, beckoning with a promise of cooler climate.





This view is of the lower portion of the Valley of Guatemala. It meets the textual requirements to have been the land of Shilom of the Nephites. This section occupies several square miles and lies only about ten miles from Nephi, thought to have been at Kaminaljuyu. At the city of Nephi, King Noah climbed on a tower or pyramid where he could "overlook the land of Shilom" (Mosiah 11:12).

The Land of Zarahemla

In the third century B.C., Mosiah₁ was divinely instructed to lead a party out of the decadent Nephite society in the land of Nephi to a settlement called Zarahemla. Those left behind disappear from the history, presumably being exterminated or incorporated by the Lamanites. The account speaks of the course the refugees took as “down” (Omni 1:13), that is, out of the highlands of Nephi, across the narrow strip of wilderness, which seems to have been a mountainous watershed, and into the basin of the Sidon River. There they discovered a people more numerous than they, and Mosiah₁ became king over the combined Nephite migrants and the resident “people of Zarahemla” (Omni 1:19; see 1:12–4, 17; compare Alma 2:27–8).

The people of Zarahemla, or at least their leaders, were of Jewish extraction, but they apparently included in their culture customs and knowledge transmitted down through time among remnant groups left after the earlier Jaredite dynasties had destroyed themselves.

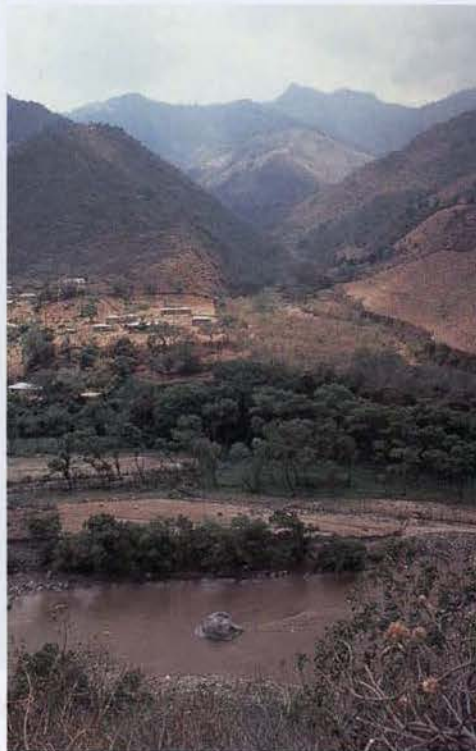
The most plausible geographical scene for Zarahemla is on the Grijalva River in

the Central Depression of Chiapas, probably centered at what is known as the archaeological site of Santa Rosa.

The Central Depression is a major geological feature of southern Mexico. At its southern end the land rises abruptly to a towering strip of mountains along the present border between Guatemala and Mexico. The great valley constitutes the upper drainage area of the Grijalva. Rimmed by mountains on three sides and a great plateau on the fourth, the depression is something of a world unto itself. Shielded from sea winds by mountains, it receives far less rain than surrounding zones; land within the basin is not forested heavily as in the wetter portions of Mesoamerica. This valley constitutes the “heart” of isthmian Mesoamerica, “surrounded by security” (Alma 60:19). It is relatively hot compared with the highlands but not oppressive like the nearby areas close to sea level.

No marked regional style of art or culture has yet been identified that uniquely distinguishes the culture of the Central Depression in Book of Mormon times. Rather the area was something of a mixing zone or crossroads (as was Palestine, incidentally). Maya people and culture from both the lowlands and Guatemalan highlands intruded into the area at various times without ever clearly dominating it. It occupied a central position within the broader area encompassed by the Izapan style of art, which ranged from coastal southern Guatemala through Chiapas into southern and central Veracruz state. The peak Izapan development dated between the second century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. This Izapan style is, so far, the best hint of the presence of Nephites, although the association is based on inference from time and space factors. The exact relationship of a Nephite presence to the Izapan area remains unclear and uncertain. Beginning in the late fourth century A.D., when the Nephite demise came, most cities in Chiapas were abandoned and the population dropped markedly. The area never again became a significant player in the ongoing course of Mesoamerican civilization.

From the extreme southerly limit of the Central Depression (or Zarahemla area) the great strip of mountainous wilderness looms; beyond it lay the highland zone of southern Guatemala—the likely land of Nephi.





The site of Santa Rosa, in the upper Central Depression, qualifies in important ways as the city of Zarahemla. Part of the archaeological site is seen in the foreground of this aerial view, with the Grijalva River adjacent. Alma, and his Nephites likely fought their way across this river at a ford not far upstream from this spot as they battled against Amlicites and Lamanites (see Alma 2:26–37).



An area a few miles from Santa Rosa shows the relatively open, unforested landscape, in contrast to the jungle-type vegetation of many lowland areas. These two photos at the top of the page are over forty years old. For the past quarter century the area has been covered by the waters of a lake impounded by a major dam built thirty miles downstream.



The barrier hemming in the Central Depression on the north and east is formed by the Chiapas highlands, a forested wilderness zone that was only lightly populated in ancient times. When Lamanite armies were foiled at Jershon, toward the east sea, or Gulf of Mexico, they "took their journey round about in the wilderness" (Alma 43:22) to attack the Manti area. In their strategic redeployment, they likely skirted or cut through the far part of the vast tangle of jungled mountains shown here.

The Lamanite Land of Nephi

A good deal of detail about the highland area known as the land of Nephi is included in Mormon's account thanks to two historical episodes on which he dwells. The first concerns the Zeniffites, a party of Nephites who returned to Nephi after Mosiah₁ had fled from there with his group. They dwelt in the land of Nephi under Lamanite dominance in the early half of the second century B.C. The second account relates the activities and movements of the sons of Mosiah₂ when they and companions missionized among the Lamanites in the land of Nephi between about 80 and 65 B.C.

The geographical centerpiece of the area was always the original valley where three distinct local lands, Nephi, Shilom, and Shemlon, lay adjacent to each other. From Nephi, the highest in elevation, one could "overlook" the other two lands (Mosiah 11:12.) Other named lands were "round about" (Alma 24:1; see 23:1–12;), chiefly in a northward direction. One place, the city of Jerusalem, lay beside a sizable lake (see Alma 21:1–2; 3 Nephi 9:7), and the Mormon area probably lay next to the same body of water. Extensive uninhabited areas separated the settled lands; groups could become lost trying to move between lands (see Mosiah 23:30–7). All this scene is "up" (Mosiah 10:8) in the highland zone. The primary settlements must have been in valleys amidst hills or mountains (compare Mosiah 7:5; 10:7–8).

The relationships of the lands to each other and to natural features that are mentioned in the record fit nicely with the actual geography of highland Guatemala. Archaeological materials of appropriate age (the Late Pre-Classical period) and type also appear in these indicated areas.

This delta of the little Panajachel River at the northeast corner of Lake Atitlan could be where Alma hid from the armies of King Noah in a "thicket of small trees" (Mosiah 18:5).



The near shore of Lake Amatitlan seen in this photograph qualifies as the Lamanite land of Shemlon. What could be the land of Shilom lies above the bluffs across the lake. According to Mosiah chapters 11 and 19 through 22, Lamanite forces consistently went "up" (roughly five hundred feet in elevation here) from Shemlon through Shilom to attack Nephi.

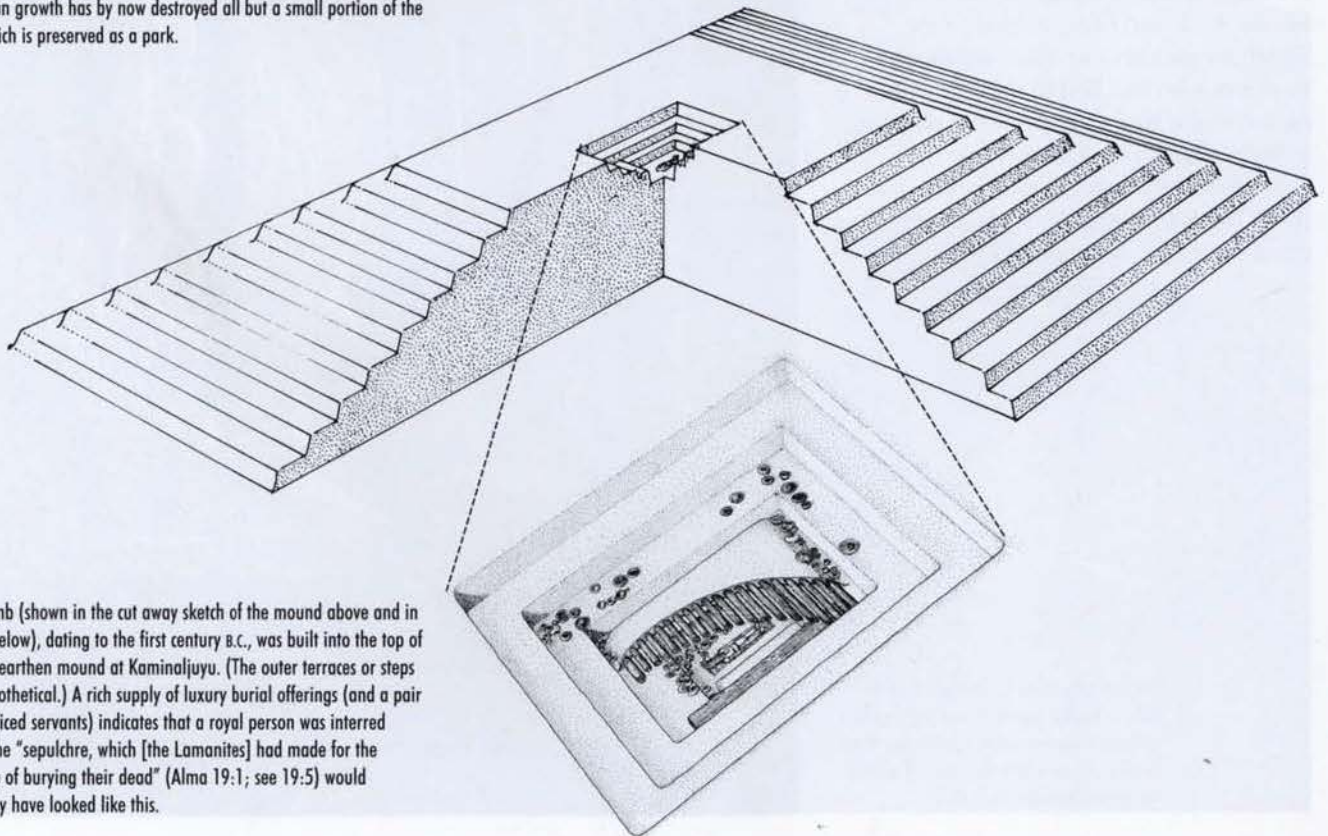


The beauty of "the waters of Mormon" deeply impressed Alma, and his companions (Mosiah 18:30). Lake Atitlan, west of Guatemala City, fits the scriptural text's characterization of the "fountain of pure water" (Mosiah 18:5) adjacent to Mormon.





The great city at Kaminaljuyu was once at least a mile square and contained hundreds of major buildings. This photograph only hints at the former extent and the density of public structures. Encroaching suburban growth has by now destroyed all but a small portion of the site, which is preserved as a park.



This tomb (shown in the cut away sketch of the mound above and in detail below), dating to the first century B.C., was built into the top of a huge earthen mound at Kaminaljuyu. (The outer terraces or steps are hypothetical.) A rich supply of luxury burial offerings (and a pair of sacrificed servants) indicates that a royal person was interred here. The "sepulchre, which [the Lamanites] had made for the purpose of burying their dead" (Alma 19:1; see 19:5) would probably have looked like this.

The Land Southward at the Time of the Great War

The greatest detail about the land of Zarahemla is given in the books of Alma and Helaman, covering approximately 90 to 30 B.C. The account of wars during that period contains significant details about relationships among landmarks and the movements of individuals and armies.

Nephite political and military control had by this time been extended from the original center, the city of Zarahemla on the upper Sidon River, plausibly identified above with the site of Santa Rosa on the Grijalva, throughout the entire river basin and beyond. That included the lowland “borders by the east sea” (Alma 52:13), a hot plain that would have encompassed the delta of the Sidon, and the adjacent land of Bountiful (see Alma 50:7–11, 32). Bountiful occupied the southerly side of the immediate isthmus zone, or “small neck of land” (Alma 22:32; see 22:27–34) that connected to the land northward.

Nephites and Lamanites—at least the leaders—were broadly aware of the general configuration of the lands south of the narrow neck and even beyond to the north. Amalickiah and other dissident Nephites who had fled to the Lamanite capital in the land of Nephi were planning military strategy on a grand scale that extended all the way into the land northward. Nephite counterstrategy was on an equal scale (see Alma 48–51).

This lord pictured on Kaminaljuyu Stela 11 dates to the first century B.C. His richly symbolic garb could represent approximately how King Amalickiah would have been dressed when in full regalia (compare Alma 49:10).





This key Olmec site, La Venta, is located on a segment of dry land surrounded by swamp in southern Veracruz state. It was an impressive city for centuries until about 600–400 B.C. when it seems to have been abandoned. Archaeologists have found that later a smaller, very different group resettled part of it.

Here is where the great Stela 3 was found (see page 121). It shows, according to a prominent scholar, “figures represent[ing] two racially distinct groups of people,” one of whom is Semitic or Jewish in appearance.¹⁰² This is intriguing since in geographical details La Venta meets the requirements to have been the city of Mulek, named for the prince of Judah of the Nephite record who arrived by sea in the sixth century B.C. The city was later occupied by the Nephites, at one point was captured by a Lamanite army, then was recaptured by Moroni, and Teancum (see Alma 52:22–6).



When Amalickiah’s Lamanite invaders “marched to the borders of the land Bountiful” (Alma 51:28) and camped “on the beach by the seashore” (Alma 51:32), the scene would have been like this.



The narrow strip of wilderness consisted chiefly of rugged mountains that appear to coincide with the deeply canyoned chain that forms the headwaters of the Grijalva. These mountains separate Guatemala and Chiapas. An extension of wilderness reached toward the Gulf of Mexico through the Chiapas highland wilderness. Seen here is the western anchor of the narrow strip. It includes Tacaná volcano, Central America’s highest peak (extreme left in the picture). Helaman’s expedition that lured the Lamanite army out of the garrison city of Antiparah would have headed through a pass (to the left in the picture) down toward a lowland city “in the borders by the seashore” (to the right of the picture) (Alma 56:31; see 56:30–6).

Into the Land Northward

The Nephites had been curious about the land beyond the narrow neck for generations (see Omni 1:20–2 and Mosiah 28:12). Rebel Morianton wanted to set up rule there, and Moroni¹ saw how vital the area was to the Nephites' future (see Alma 50:29, 32). No doubt adventurous merchants had already penetrated the land northward for trade, but it was not until the end of the Amalickiahite war that systematic moves were made to control parts of the land by colonizing them (see Alma 63:4–10).

A generation later Nephite presence there was substantial (see Helaman 6:6, 10, 12). By the time the risen Jesus Christ appeared at Bountiful, the Nephite demographic center of gravity had already shifted northward from Zarahemla, for all twelve of the chosen disciples were already residing in the Bountiful area. By the time Mormon opens the curtain of history on events in his own lifetime, after A.D. 300, the official Nephite records had long since been moved to the land northward, and he was a native of that area.

The main lands settled by the migrants from the south lay toward the east sea side of the land northward, the same territory on which we have the most information from the Jaredite account (although neither record gives us geographical information in the depth we should like). In the final Nephite-Lamanite wars, which took place in that area, Mormon's hilly homeland was the source of his people's greatest strength in manpower and provisions.¹⁸³

Lago de Catemaco in the Tuxtlas Mountains of southern Veracruz qualifies as part of the complex of "many waters, rivers, and fountains" in the area of Cumorah (Mormon 6:4).



The position and nature of the Coatzacoalcas River qualifies it to have constituted "the line" that, practically and conceptually, marked the separation between the lands of Bountiful and Desolation (3 Nephi 3:23; see Alma 22:32). Through the wetlands of this river's basin there was only one "narrow pass" by which the journey northward could be made (Alma 50:34).¹⁸⁴



These mounds in the isthmus area at Tatocapan, Veracruz (age unknown), are typical of many vegetation-covered sites that King Limhi's exploring party could have encountered when they passed through this area on their way to discover the Jaredite record (see Mosiah 8:7–10). Sites like these could not have been dated by them any more than by today's tourists; thus they could conclude logically enough that they had found ruined Zarahemla (see Mosiah 21:25; compare 8:8).





The part of the land northward toward the west sea was evidently drier than the land toward the east. Little is said in the Nephite record about the west sea side. The aridity visible in this scene in southern Oaxaca suggests why colonies planted by Hagoth's voyagers on the west coast lacked timber for building construction (see Alma 63:5–8; Helaman 3:5–10).



This ruined city at Dainzu, Oaxaca, dates to the Monte Alban II period, between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. In this period there is specific evidence for cultural intrusions from Chiapas in parts of Oaxaca, including Dainzu (possibly reflecting the migrations noted in Helaman 3:8–9).¹⁰ The pair of pillars at the doorway of the temple structure, which are structurally unnecessary, reminds us of the symbolic columns built at the entry to the Temple of Solomon (see 1 Kings 7:21).

The Crucifixion Catastrophe

Unparalleled destruction struck the Nephite land of promise at the time when Jesus Christ was crucified at Jerusalem. The event may be reflected in archaeological remains already discovered in Mesoamerica, but there is uncertainty about this for two reasons. The first is that the scriptural record of the event leaves us unclear about details. It is obvious enough from the descriptions in 3 Nephi 8 and 9 that a major earthquake and volcanism were involved and that there was also an array of intense storms. Similar events have occurred in the area in recent centuries, although not on the scale reported in the Nephite account. But if the rubble of quake-destroyed buildings was later removed and new structures were erected, the destruction might not be obvious to archaeologists. The second problem is that our methods of dating material remains still leave uncertainty about the exact time to be assigned to the excavated remains. Furthermore, relatively little excavation has been done in Mesoamerica that can be approximately set at the Christian era. Still there are a few interesting indicators of what might have been

This dramatic photograph shows the first stage of the 1974 eruption of the Volcan de Fuego, in Guatemala. Simultaneous eruptions from several volcanoes could have produced the "thick darkness" (3 Nephi 8:20) mentioned by the Nephite reporters.



Ash from volcanoes could have smothered crops, animals, and humans over wide areas. The type of desolation resulting is illustrated by this scene near the volcano El Chichón in highland Chiapas in 1982.¹⁶

this disastrous event (for example, a layer of volcanic ash at the great city of Teotihuacan dates to near A.D. 30), and they may be augmented by future findings.¹⁸⁷

Certainly the *types* of natural disasters known historically for Mesoamerica fit what the scriptures portray: volcanic eruptions and ashfalls, earthquakes, hurricane winds, landslides, torrential downpours. The question yet to be answered is whether a unique, monumental combination of such forces can be documented for the right historical moment.

Also according to the Book of Mormon, a major consequence of the great disaster was a huge loss of life. Great social changes must have resulted from the changes in nature and the massive casualties, in addition to the new social teachings by the Savior when he appeared among the Nephites (for example, no social classes and having "all things common"; 4 Nephi 1:3). Certain archaeological data gives indications of at least a pause or historical hiccup in populational and social development in about the first century A.D. that might signal a destruction like that reported in 3 Nephi.¹⁸⁸

An artist has reconstructed the eruption of the volcano Xitle in the southern portion of the Valley of Mexico. Near the time of Christ it covered most of the city now called Cuicuilco. (Could this site have been the city of Jacobugath mentioned in 3 Nephi 7:9–14; 9:9?)



The leading geographical correlation of Book of Mormon lands with the modern map puts the city of Jerusalem, built by the Lamanites and Nephite dissenters (see Alma 21:2), at this location in southern Guatemala, near the village of Santiago Atitlan.¹⁸⁹ Third Nephi 9:7 reports that the city was destroyed by waters that did "come up in the stead thereof." Lake Atitlan is prone to sharp rises and falls in its level due to the volcanic geology of its environs.



The site of Copilco in the Valley of Mexico, near Cuicuilco, suffered from a major lava flow that covered remains that probably dated in the first century A.D.





The god Quetzalcoatl was still important to the Aztecs at the time the Spaniards arrived, although by then his identity had been confounded with later figures. This representation combines feathered and serpentine symbols of him with a humanlike face.

This reconstruction of what the original Temple of Quetzalcoatl at Teotihuacan looked like (in the second century A.D.) is based on information gleaned by a competent archaeologist-architect.

The Golden Age

Many myths and traditions tell about Quetzalcoatl, "precious serpent," one of the most important of all Mesoamerican deities.¹⁹⁰ Some scholarly interpreters of the traditions have claimed that he was not a god at all but just a historical personage who lived at the famous city of Tula in central Mexico in the eleventh century A.D. He departed abruptly from there for the Gulf Coast, where he was said to have disappeared miraculously (incidentally, from precisely the region identified above as the Nephite land Bountiful, where Jesus disappeared into the heavens) after promising to return someday. When Cortez arrived in Mexico in A.D. 1519, Montezuma took him to be this returning Quetzalcoatl and handed power over to him.

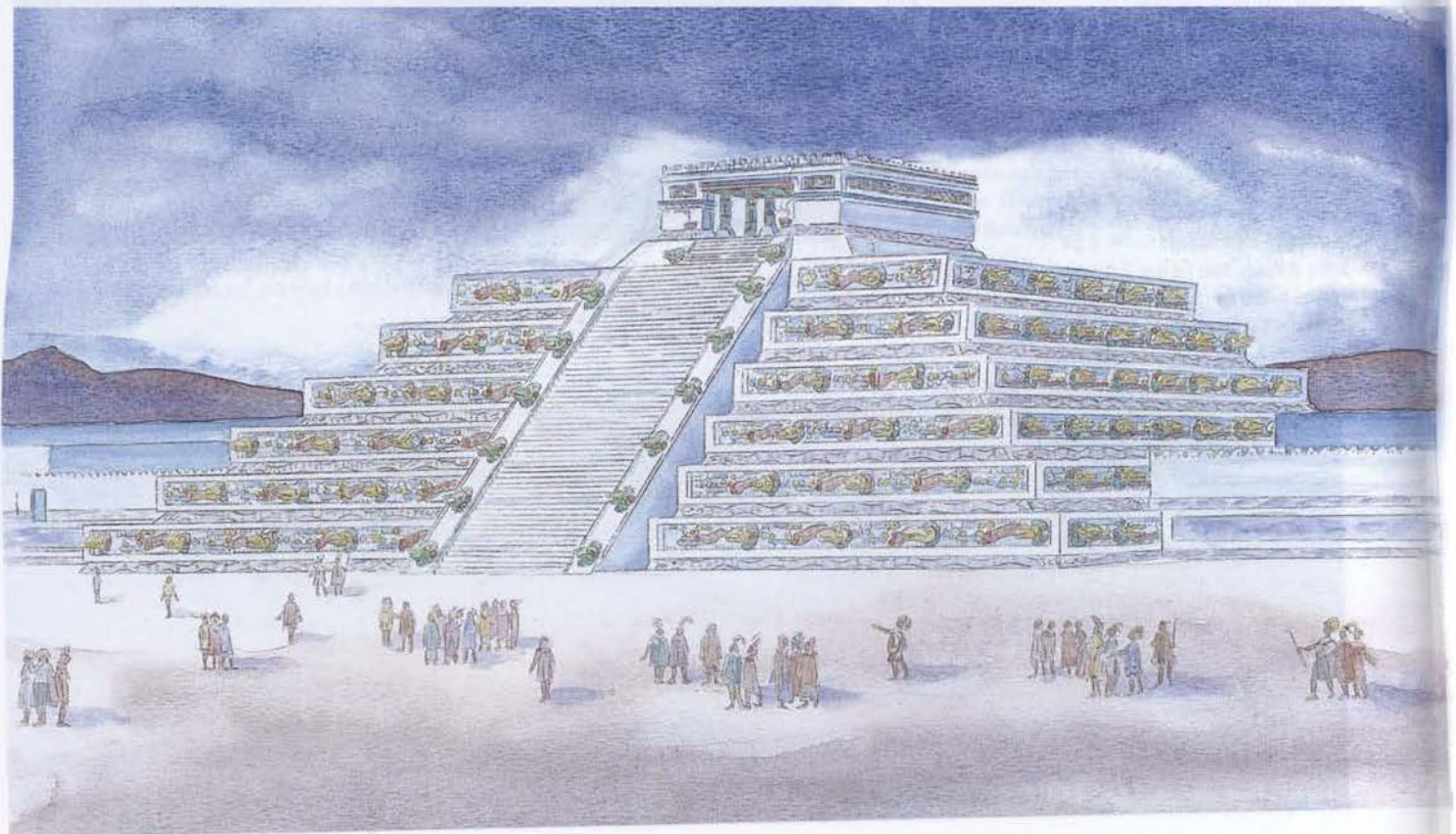
However, symbols associated in the traditions with the deity have been found in archaeological materials that date long before the day of the priest from Tula. Confusion has arisen because the name *Quetzalcoatl* was adopted as a personal name or title by various Mexican priests from at least the eighth through the

The Crucifixion Catastrophe

eleventh centuries. Some scholars recognize the "fundamental historicity" of the original man-god behind the traditions, although that status can be discerned only "through a dense screen of mythical, legendary, and folkloristic accretion."¹⁹¹ The distinguished Mexican scholar Miguel Leon-Portilla confidently calls the first Quetzalcoatl the founder of an "elevated spiritualism, a vision of the world that led to ancient Mexico's greatest cultural achievements" a millennium before his namesake dwelt at Tula.¹⁹²

Some Latter-day Saint writers have assumed, perhaps too confidently, that the Quetzalcoatl god figure is to be identified with the resurrected Jesus Christ reported in the Book of Mormon. The historical and archaeological data are not clear enough to establish that relationship decisively; nevertheless, a reasonable case can be made in support of the proposition.¹⁹³

Following the visit to the Nephites in Bountiful by the risen Jesus, from around A.D. 30 to near A.D. 200, according to the very abbreviated account in 4 Nephi, a classless society existed in the lands occupied by the Nephites and Lamanites.



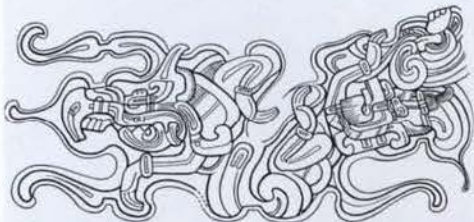
Ethnic distinctions were erased, and governmental functions were in the hands of local priests.

Features of the cultural history of central Mesoamerica in the first two centuries A.D. fit with this picture.¹⁹⁴ One phenomenon that is of interest is visible at the metropolis of Teotihuacan. The second century A.D. saw construction of the huge Pyramid of the Sun (so called by the later Aztecs), an act that would only have been carried out on the basis of some powerful belief system.¹⁹⁵ In the same period the beautiful Temple of Quetzalcoatl was completed.

Around A.D. 200–300, 4 Nephi reports the renewal of social class differences among the Christians, the creation of rival churches or cults, and the reemergence of a group “called Lamanites” (4 Nephi 1:38). At the same historical moment, the old Temple of Quetzalcoatl was enclosed by a new structure characterized by a strikingly different theology and set of symbols.¹⁹⁶ The coincidence is provocative, although we cannot confidently place Nephite believers at the site.



The reptile on the Teotihuacan temple has feathers, which signify “descending from heaven” or “elevated,” as well as a sense of preciousness that beautiful (probably green, for water) feathers connoted. This calls to mind the serpent image that Moses “did raise up” (2 Nephi 25:20) for the Israelites to look upon to be healed. According to Nephite belief, it represented Jesus Christ/Jehovah (see Helaman 8:14–5). The shell symbol on the same facade signified resurrection.¹⁹⁷



The figure engraved on this bone, which was excavated at Chiapa de Corzo by the BYU New World Archaeological Foundation, shows a feathered serpent thought to represent the god Quetzalcoatl. (The sketch at left clarifies the design.) Its date, probably in the first century B.C., is not much earlier than when Nephi, prophesied about the coming of the Savior, symbolized by “the brazen serpent” (Helaman 8:14). (Nephi, in 2 Nephi 25:20, and Alma, in Alma 33:19, had, of course, used the same symbolism earlier.)





A stela from the Late Classic site of Piedras Negras shows a sacrificial scene that may recall a distorted version of the Book of Mormon image of the gospel seed sprouting from the human heart (see Alma 32:28).

Apostasy

Archaeological and art remains dating from the period A.D. 200–400 in Mesoamerica display a surge of construction and innovation as the area enters the Early Classic period. Priests were the prime movers in this process. Formerly, experts supposed that the Classic (conventionally put at A.D. 300–900) marked a climax in the elaboration of culture unique in the history of Mesoamerica, but in recent decades it has become apparent that most of the characteristics of the Classic had already been developed (previewed, as it

were) several centuries before at sites like El Mirador, Tikal, Kaminaljuyu, Teotihuacan, and Monte Alban. Near A.D. 200 there erupted an almost frantic pace in the development of cities, cults, and art. Interchange of ideas was spurred by extensive trade. By A.D. 300 every section of Mesoamerica had followed suit.

This surge coincides remarkably with the characterization that Mormon, who was born around A.D. 300, gave of Nephite society in his day: “The people had . . . spread upon all the face of the land, and . . . had become exceedingly rich. . . . [Some] were lifted up in pride, such as the wearing of costly apparel . . . and of the fine things of the world. . . . And they began to be divided into classes; and they began to build up churches unto themselves” (4 Nephi 1:23–6). These they adorned “with all manner of precious things” (4 Nephi 1:41) while they “did traffic in all manner of traffic [i.e., commerce]” (4 Nephi 1:46).

In subsequent centuries, in the elaborate religious art of Mesoamerican civilization and in customs among surviving peoples, we see beliefs and practices (such as baptism, communion, and confession) that some observers have considered distortions of teachings given to his believers by the resurrected Savior. For example, a form of baptism¹⁹⁸ (with the meaning “to be born again”) was widespread at the time the Spaniards arrived.



Archaeologist-artist Pierre Agrinier has given us an imaginative picture of cult practices of the fifth century A.D. at the site of Mirador, Chiapas. (Mirador may have been the city of Ammonihah that was destroyed in Alma’s day.) All the objects and activities in the scene are based upon actual finds by archaeologists of the Brigham Young University New World Archaeological Foundation.

Elaborate religious symbolism, like this hybrid eagle, became the rule at later Teotihuacan, in contrast to the relative simplicity of the former Quetzalcoatl belief system.





A magnificent Late Classic sculpture from the Maya city of Yaxchilan on the Usumacinta River shows a noblewoman, Lady Xoc, offering a sacrifice of blood from her tongue. This form of self-mutilation was a very common ritual practice up to the time of the Spanish invasion. Could Alma have been arguing against an early version of this practice in Alma 34:11: "There is not any man that can sacrifice his own blood which will atone for . . . sins"?

The Nephites' Fall

Scholars long claimed that it was only late in Mesoamerican history when warfare began. In the last twenty-five years, however, overwhelming evidence has appeared to the contrary. Conflict, violence, and battle are now believed to have long been a part of life in ancient Mexico and Central America, exactly as they were in Europe and Asia.

For the fourth century A.D., Mormon's and Moroni's day, there is plenty of evidence that conquest and armed violence were commonplace in Mesoamerica. One of the chief evidences is the remains of fortifications.¹⁹⁹ There is less possibility of finding material evidence of actual battles, for their locations could have been on some undistinguished spot of ground that archaeologists might never have reason to examine.

One of the strongest evidences so far for the destruction of the Nephites by the Lamanites comes from the widespread abandonment of cities in the late fourth century in Chiapas, the area considered here to have been the land of Zarahemla. The

To visualize an actual battle, we have to depend on the art and historical accounts of later peoples, but likely the basic forms of war had not changed a great deal over the intervening centuries. This well-documented artist's reconstruction of a defeated Aztec army suggests the despair of the doomed Nephites (compare Mormon 6:7–9).



roughly two centuries after A.D. 200 saw a spectacular flowering of public life and religious or cult structures, as discussed above. But at Mirador in western Chiapas, for example, the period was ended "by an intense fire that totally destroyed" the largest sacred building, set either by those who abandoned it or by invaders who occupied the place around A.D. 400–450. They partly rebuilt the site with "shoddier construction." Furthermore, the new culture was related to highland Guatemala.²⁰⁰ As we have seen, that was likely the land of Nephi, from which came the Lamanites who expelled the Nephites from their Zarahemla homeland. For the next century and more, most of the old cities in central Chiapas remained abandoned.²⁰¹ The picture derived from archaeology thus agrees basically with the Book of Mormon story of the Nephites' retreat.

Archaeological research around the Cumorah area, thought to be in the Tuxtla Mountains of southern Veracruz state, could shed further light on the end of the Nephites. Unfortunately, very little excavation has been done thereabouts for the correct time period.



The land of Cumorah was an area with many streams and lakes, like this zone at the foot of Cerro El Vigia in south-central Veracruz state.



The information in Mormon's record about the final battle area matches in detail the characteristics of this hill, Cerro El Vigia, in southern Veracruz state and the region around it. This view of 2600-foot El Vigia is from the plains to its southwest, where the final battle likely took place.



This view from the top of Cerro El Vigia looks down on the plains to the west. If this is the correct hill, Mormon and the handful of survivors with him had this same view on the morning after their climactic battle, with hundreds of thousands of the dead and dying in their view (see Mormon 6:11–5).

Nephites, Lamanites, and Successor Peoples



The Aztecs carried the earlier, occasional rituals of human sacrifice and cannibalism to levels of depravity never equaled. Nephi, had seen in vision his brother's descendants as a "loathsome, and a filthy people, full of . . . all manner of abominations" (1 Nephi 12:23).

THE AZTECS
 HUMAN SACRIFICE

Sacrificial blood stains the steps at Aztec Malinalco.

In the eleven centuries that passed between Moroni's termination of the Nephite record and the arrival of the Spaniards in Mexico, rulers and their peoples rose and fell in restless sequence. In the south-central Mexico area that constituted the land northward of the Nephite record, most cultures after A.D. 400 lived off cultural capital from the past. At the huge city of Teotihuacan, far to the north of our Cumorah, for example, no major building projects were carried out after the fourth century.²⁰² The population at the place remained sizable after A.D. 400, but the creative juice of the culture had dried up. Similarly, at Monte Alban, Oaxaca, the dominant view after about A.D. 400 was toward the past, as jostling regional kings strove to reconstruct the brilliance of earlier centuries.



Tikal, in the central Maya lowlands of Guatemala, became a huge and famous center of cultural activity in the Classic (mainly in the post-Cumorah period). If this site was outside the area directly involving the Nephite group, then the Maya may have flourished in part because they built up trade networks to their own advantage in the wake of the Nephites' destruction. This reconstruction scene dates around A.D. 700.



Some old cities in Mesoamerica did get reconstructed, brilliantly, and new ones were built. Craftsmen, architects, and other experts went on using and in some cases elaborating on the old cultural ways, as Byzantium did after the fall of Rome. But warfare became endemic. Population may have grown to outpace resources. Exploitation of the underclasses by elites could have become excessive to the point of stirring local social revolts.

The Classic era as characterized a few decades ago was supposed to have been led by noble philosopher types who spent their time peacefully making complicated calendrical calculations and patronizing the arts. Now it turns out that these people were not that admirable and surely not peaceful.²⁰³ Even the Maya culture at impressive sites like Tikal, we see from recently deciphered monuments, was marked by continual cycles of aggression among regional rivals led by lords who were somewhat mafialike in their aims and methods. They also displayed some unusual customs, such as ritual enemas perhaps involving hallucinogenic drugs. Human sacrifice and even cannibalism (compare Mormon 4:14–5, 21; Moroni 9:8–10) came to be practiced in many areas and eventually became dominating themes.



By bravery and audacity, the Spaniards defeated their opponents against vast odds. The Aztecs, used to certain cultural norms for the conduct of war, found they could not cope with the completely foreign Spanish practices and superior technology (especially their horses). After the Aztecs gave up, other Mesoamerican peoples put up relatively light resistance, suspecting that they could not succeed where Montezuma's feared forces had failed.



Diego Rivera's famed mural shows the Spaniards making slaves of Mexican Indians during the colonial era. Recall that Nephi, had prophetically seen "the seed of my brethren" being "scattered before the Gentiles and . . . smitten" (1 Nephi 13:14).



From a post-Olmec context comes this incense burner at the site of Monte Alban. The telltale drooped corners of the mouth reveal that the Olmec jaguar motif was the distant historical source for this piece.

The Jaredites

The brief historical summary of the earliest Book of Mormon people, the Jaredites, that is reported in the book of Ether appears almost at the end of Mormon's record. The account had been translated by Moroni², the final Nephite prophet-scribe, and he attached it as an appendix to the record of the people of Nephi that his father left in his custody. The account tells of one Jared and his unnamed brother who led their families and a number of friends and their families from Mesopotamia, the scene of the confusion of tongues and the great tower of Genesis 11:1-9. Traveling across Asia, probably, they reached the ocean (likely the North Pacific) where they embarked on barges they built. They reached America in the area known to the Nephites later as the land northward; the land they settled turns out to have been in south-central Mexico. The date can only be estimated; students of the text have suggested times ranging from 3200 to later than 2000 B.C.; however, in my view an arrival after 2500 B.C. is unlikely on the basis of the genealogies in the record.

Ether's record was a history of the ruling lineage, Jared's kin line, that reigned over the combined descendants of the immigrant party. It was written in about the sixth century B.C. by Ether, the last prophet among them. The story summarily documents the ups and downs of the Jaredite dynasty until they were exterminated in a civil war in the days of Ether; the last ruler lived briefly among the people of the Mulek party.

A limited amount of descriptive information is included in the book of Ether about the culture and society in which the Jaredite lineage participated. Cities, kings, trade, written records, metallurgy, large-scale wars, "spacious buildings" (Ether 10:5), and a population, at the end, in the low millions are among features reported. All of the historical events occurred in the land northward, not far from the narrow neck. In fact the place where the Jaredites were exterminated (the hill Ramah) was the same as for the Nephite finale (their hill Cumorah).

Significant cultural traces of the Jaredite people (for example, crop plants and

Oxotitlan Cave in the state of Guerrero in southwestern Mexico contains remnants of a fascinating mural of an Olmec-period ruler. An artist has here tried to restore its original appearance. Key features of this lord's regalia and throne are repeated much later in the Maya art style. Could that be due to a revival of the Jaredite-period secret society tradition at the end of Nephite history that continued into post-Book of Mormon times? (Compare 4 Nephi 1:46 and Mormon 8:9 with Ether 10:33; 13:18; and 3 Nephi 3:9.)





The Jaredites were deeply concerned about the power of snakes in connection with drought (see Ether 9:30–4; 10:19). Some priests or rulers may have considered themselves to be under the protection of serpents. This awesome Olmec rattlesnake is on Monument 19 at La Venta.

The Jaredites



Seventeen colossal heads have been discovered so far in the Gulf Coast Olmec heartland. Each is a portrait of an individual, although not necessarily a completely accurate one, considering the problem of sculpting the hard volcanic stone. They are thought to represent chiefs or kings wearing ball-game headgear. Serious effort was expended to deface most of them after they were completed.

personal and place names) cropped up centuries later among the Nephites.²⁰⁴ The most plausible explanation for this partial continuity is that, while the rulers killed each other off and the elite components of the civilization collapsed, small groups who succeeded in avoiding participation in the final wars of the Jaredite lineage lived on to become involved with the undocumented "Mulekites" and thus came unrecognized within the range of the Nephite record.

The Jaredite story is so brief that only cursory analysis of their geography and history can be made. Because of the overlapping locations pointed out in the Nephite record, we know that the Jaredites inhabited part of the Nephites'

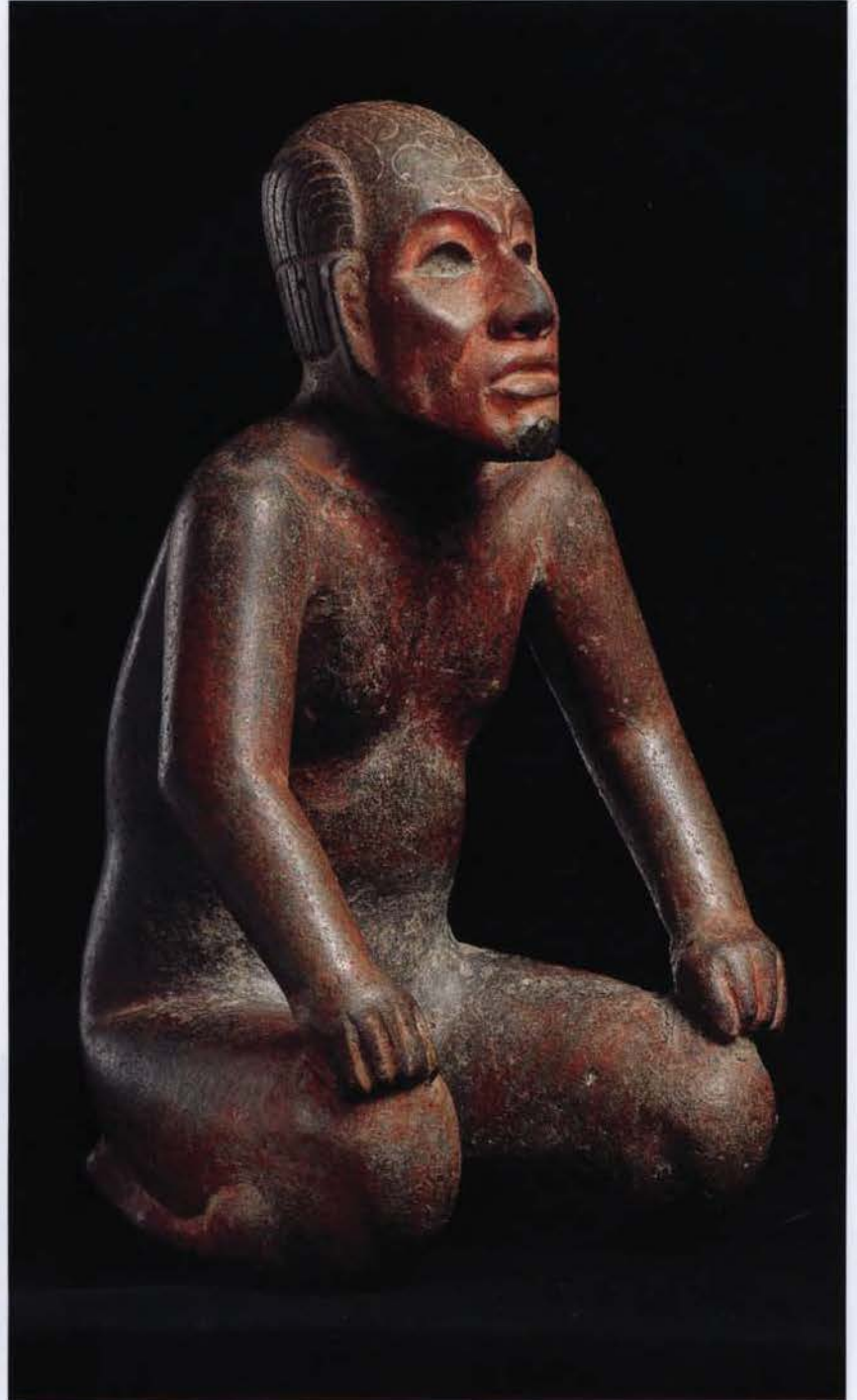
territory. Their scene appears to have been central or southern Mexico before and during the time of the Olmecs. But Ether's text implies that, as in the case of the Nephites, other peoples were present in addition to those descended from Jared and his family; presumably those others were "native" groups.²⁰⁵

The brief Jaredite history agrees broadly with what we know from archaeologists about Mesoamerica in the Early and Middle Pre-Classic periods (about 2000–500 B.C.). The climax Jaredite phase, which can be estimated on the basis of the genealogies to include the time range 1200–900 B.C., corresponds interestingly with the peak Olmec development in southern Veracruz during the same period. Several centuries of relative cultural turmoil followed, according to the account by Ether, and in the Olmec archaeological sequence a similar phenomenon can be observed. Finally, what had been Olmec-derived high culture in Mesoamerican term essentially terminated around the sixth century B.C., although certain elements of the old pattern continued down into the succeeding Late Pre-Classic era. The textual account of the violent end of the Jaredite line at about the same time as the Olmec demise, followed by Jaredite cultural influences springing up among the Nephites later on, corresponds quite closely with the picture from archaeology about the fate and influence of the Olmec. It is inescapable that a close relationship existed between Olmec civilization and the Jaredites; nevertheless, the text from Ether is too brief to permit saying that the Jaredites actually were the Olmecs.

Given the space limitations of the present book, it is impossible to provide more than brief hints here of how Olmec-era Mesoamerican materials could shed light on the Jaredite record. This short section can give only a glimpse of a few Olmec cultural elements that might have been involved in Jaredite life.



When the famous Olmec sculpture shown in the drawing above (see also page 185) was discovered by farmers at Las Limas, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, it quickly became the center of a modern cult. Locals even substituted it for the community's image of the fabled Virgin of Guadalupe "because it is older,"²⁰⁴ they said, and so was presumably more powerful. We can see from this event why some Olmec-period pieces have been found reused in later archaeological contexts, even dating to Aztec times.



Remarkable artistic sophistication is visible in this piece from the Olmec era. Tattooing seems indicated. Animal characteristics shown on this man suggest the *nawal*, or guardian spirit, concept.