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Author(s): Brant Gardner

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The Case for Historicity: Discerning the Book of Mormon's Production Culture



Brant Gardner

As an article of faith, Latter-day Saints affirm that “We...believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” (8th Article of Faith). The book itself declares that it is “it is an abridgment of the record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites.” (Title Page of the Book of Mormon). While it is possible for the word of God to not be a history, most Latter-day Saints understand that it is not possible for this book to be the word of God if it is not the history it claims to be. As Kent P. Jackson declared: “[The] historicity [of the Book of Mormon] is fundamental to what it is and what it intends to accomplish.”¹ The acceptance or rejection of the Book of Mormon as scripture often hinges on the acceptance or rejection of the Book of Mormon as history.

Lou Midgley described the basic lines of the historical debate: “There is nothing in the Book of Mormon...that suggests that it should be read as anything other than historical fact. On the other hand, critics of the Book of Mormon have always insisted that it is a product of the nineteenth century—that it reflects the thinking and the world of Joseph Smith (or one of his contemporaries) immediately prior to its publication.”² In keeping with the dichotomous appraisal of the prophet Joseph Smith by believer and critic, both believers and critics tend to approach the question of when the text was written as an either/or proposition. For the critics this is essential, for any indication of authentic antiquity would appear to validate its historicity and therefore Joseph Smith’s claim that it represents a translation of an ancient document. For the believer, however, the faithful declaration of antiquity has led to such a focus on the ancient world that the rather obvious aspects of modern production receive little attention.

Believers seldom recognize that it really is undeniable that the conditions of the American Northeast left their imprint on the text. For instance, it was published in English, not French. Had Joseph Smith lived not too much farther northeast, “adieu” would never have been controversial.³ A slightly different set of political pressures in England in the 1600s would have kept the Geneva Bible as the standard for the English language, and the Book of Mormon would never have so clearly imitated the style of the King James Bible.⁴

The problem for the historian is that the Book of Mormon declares a dual creation. The plate text is declared to be ancient. The translation, however, is inextricably associated with Joseph Smith. This dual production complicates the issue, but not beyond similar efforts to understand the historicity of the Bible. The Bible, in English, is also a translation. It also faces a difference between a known history and a textually asserted history. It proposes similar issues about whether the textually asserted history might reflect actual events or only literature or myth. Historian Baruch Halpern provides an interesting analogy that he created to describe approaches to the Bible. It is appropriate to our discussion of the historicity of the Book of Mormon:

The image of the map clarifies [the various approaches to the Bible as history]. The map, say of Europe, includes cities and highways of the tenth century, of the eleventh century and so on, continuing into our own time. In effect the confessionalist maintains that all those cities were on the map from the start, that God created Europe, and the map, in the tenth century. Critical study divulges that this is not so, that some of the cities and highways appeared later, and it is the job of the historian to determine when each town, highway, and so on, was added. Negative fundamentalists, however, date the whole map by its latest elements. Because the map reflects a view from the twentieth century, they argue, it cannot be used to get at earlier times.⁵

Just as does the Bible, the Book of Mormon has its confessionalists who accept the text uncritically. It is also susceptible to what Halpern calls “negative fundamentalists” precisely because it has a history that is demonstrably related to the nineteenth century American Northeast. The historian’s task for the Book of Mormon is one of analyzing the various roads in its map and discerning the time period in which they were created.

Our task would be infinitely easier if we had (and could read) the original plates of Mormon. Lacking those plates makes our task more difficult, but not impossible. There are ways that we can use the modern text to examine its possible relationship to a different and ancient culture. In archaeology, contextual clues can help date the various roads of the European map to determine when

they were laid down. Textual archaeology similarly requires contextual clues to determine the time and culture that created the text. We are looking for what may be termed the production culture of each “road” in the text; that is, the conditions and assumptions prevalent when the text was produced.

It is virtually impossible for a text to be without some trace of its production culture. Orson Scott Card described the problem this way: “[Joseph Smith’s] work should proclaim itself to be a phony on every page today. This is because every storyteller, no matter how careful he is, will inadvertently confess his own character and the society he lives in. He can make every conscious effort, he can be the best educated scholar you could possibly find, but if he tries to write something that is not of his own culture he will give himself away with every unconscious choice he makes. Yet he’ll never know he’s doing it because it won’t occur to him that it could be any other way.”⁶

A similar explanation from a social-historian’s perspective comes from Bruce J. Malina, professor of theology at Creighton University, and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, professor of religious studies at Lewis and Clark College: “Readers and writers always participate in a social system that provides the clues for filling in between the lines. Meanings are embedded in a social system that is shared and understood by all participants in any communication process.”⁷ When both the reader and the writer share the same social system, meaning may be communicated with reasonable clarity because the shared social system provides common ground for understanding. When the writer leaves spaces between the lines, the shared social system fills them in. The problem with historical texts is that what was written anciently was written not only *in* a different time, but *for* a different time. The production culture is different from the reading culture.

Malina and Rohrbaugh explain the resulting problem: “Although meanings not rooted in a shared social system can sometimes be communicated, such communication inevitably requires extended explanation because a writer cannot depend on the reader to conjure up the proper sets of related images or concepts needed to complete the text.”⁸

In Orson Scott Card’s world there is a great deal of extended explanation. This is not simply the nature of the literary effort. It is the nature of an attempt to explain the unusual—that which is not shared with the contemporary reader. Science fiction as a genre frequently demands both the creation of the unusual and extended descriptions that make the unusual understandable. One of the differences between the Book of Mormon and imaginative literature is precisely in this missing level of detail. It claims to be a representative of the unusual, but it rarely explains why or how it is unusual. The historical question is whether this lack of explanation is because there are no unusual features, or

because the text was written in a time and place when they were not unusual and therefore did not need explanation.

The Reader vs. the Writer

As we begin to dig into the Book of Mormon's historical layers there is an important distinction that should be made in the type of data we analyze. Malina and Rohrbaugh reminded us that there are two participants in the text; both writer and reader. There is great danger that a reader's culture will influence the perception of the writer's culture. They explain: "We have...suggested that each time a text is read by a new reader, the fields of reference tend to shift and multiply because of the reader's cultural location. Among some literary theorists this latter phenomenon is called 'recontextualization.' This term refers to the multiple ways different readers may 'complete' a text as a result of reading it over against their different social contexts."⁹

They describe this process using the Lukan story of the inn at Bethlehem:

Consciously or unconsciously we have often used mental images or scenarios drawn from modern American experience to fill in the unwritten pictures that complete the text. Thus, when Luke tells us that the family of Jesus could find no room in the inn at Bethlehem, it is not difficult for most Americans to construct the scene. We do it from our modern experience of overbooked hotels or motels in crowded locations. That such a "scenario" is completely inappropriate, however, never dawns on many American readers. They simply do not know that ancient Bethlehem had no hotels, that advance reservations were an unknown phenomenon and, more important, that room in any village lodging was based on kinship or social rank rather than offered on a first-come-first-served basis.¹⁰

The result is that: "Meanings realized in reading texts inevitably derive from a social system. Reading is always a social act. If both reader and writer share the same social system and the same experience, adequate communication is highly probable. But if either reader or writer comes from a different social system, then, as a rule, nonunderstanding—or at best misunderstanding—will be the result."¹¹

The problem of misunderstanding based on the reader's culture is immediately applicable to understanding the Book of Mormon. The text does not explicitly declare its geographic location and so the reader must supply some external understanding in order to locate the action in time and place. With no other available context, the original response to the Book of Mormon was built from the reader's environment. Books such as Ethan Smith's *View of the Hebrews* and Josiah Priest's *American*

*Antiquities*¹² were influential in their own right, but probably represented a codification and expansion of popular opinion that formed part of the information environment of the early Saints. Not surprisingly, those Saints read the Book of Mormon against that background.¹³

It has proven overwhelmingly tempting, for some, to assume that this reader's context necessarily informs the text's production culture. Doing so, however, creates the possibility that the analysis demonstrates the recontextualization rather than the original text. We must be careful to examine the writer's production culture, not the reader's. Fortunately, scholarship both in and outside of the Church has developed to the point where we no longer need supply a nebulous nineteenth-century understanding to our reading of the Book of Mormon. Examination of the textual clues to geography has led to a new context in which it may be placed. The current best Latter-day Saint scholarship suggests that the Book of Mormon took place in a limited area of the region known as Mesoamerica.¹⁴

The explosion of secular scholarship concerning Mesoamerican cultures in the last fifty years has created a newly available historical picture. The Book of Mormon may now be compared to two different and reasonably well-known potential production cultures: the American Northeast of the nineteenth century and Mesoamerica from the times claimed by the Book of Mormon.

The Nineteenth Century Production Culture and the Translation Layer

Apart from the obvious nineteenth-century elements of language and imitative style, other features strongly suggest that the nineteenth century Northeast was their production culture. Mark Thomas discusses the similarity of certain phrases in the Book of Mormon to the evangelical vocabulary recorded in documents contemporary to Joseph Smith: "In addition to biblical phrases, evangelicals had their own conventional phrases or formulas for describing conversion: 'redeeming love,' 'to taste redeeming love,' 'to hear the shouts of redeeming love,' and 'to sing the song of redeeming love,' a phrase that also appears in the Book of Mormon (Alma 5:26)."¹⁵

Both the specificity of the phrase and the theological context in which it appears locate this phrase in Joseph Smith's cultural background. Although not proof, it is strong evidence suggesting that the phrase "to sing the song of redeeming love," as found in Alma 5:26, comes from a nineteenth-century production culture.

If our English text were claimed to be an original ancient document, the presence of this phrase (and others like it), which may be localized in both time and space to Joseph Smith's era, would be

strong evidence that the production culture of the entire work was modern, not ancient. Similarly, phrases that obviously copy or echo the King James Version New Testament would be strong indications of anachronism—if the English text were considered to be the original text.

Such anachronisms of vocabulary, however, may be indictments of the translation and not necessarily the underlying text. For instance, the King James Bible speaks of candles. In the ancient Mediterranean, candles would be an anachronism as oil lamps provided most light. Although technically incorrect, the anachronistic term “candle” may be confidently ascribed to the translator, not the original text. The textual road itself was laid down much earlier. It is the translation “road” that was laid down at a later time and reflects concepts appropriate to the time of translation rather than the time of the original.

Of course the Book of Mormon presents a problem because we do not have the original text in the original language. We do not have the ability to consult the original language to confidently separate vocabulary issues into text or translation. Nevertheless, because it claims to be a translation, we must treat the English text as the translation layer, not the original. When we find phrases or vocabulary that reflect a nineteenth-century production culture, we cannot tell immediately whether they are artifacts of the underlying text or of the translation.

William Clements, a professor in the Department of English, Philosophy, and Languages at Arkansas State University, points out this very problem in a nineteenth-century translation of a Native American document. Rufus Sage translated a Brulé narrative into English in 1846. Similar to the Book of Mormon, the original is no longer available. Similar to the Book of Mormon, aspects of the translation indicate the time period in which that translation was made.

Several elements of this text probably derive more from Sage than from the oral narrator. For instance, the scenic description (the “silvery spring overhung by drags and shaded by cottonwoods”) must reflect the romantic literary esthetic of Sage’s time. The careful pacing of the narrative with each phase of its progress fully explained and related to earlier phrases suggests the hand of the textmaker, as does the attention to detail in the dialogue, especially the story-within-the-story. Throughout the text, the language strikes twentieth-century ears as too formal for a story of this sort—a personal anecdote devoid of apparent ritual associations. And one must wonder to what extent the English words Sage has employed in his text represent what the narrator actually said. For example, Sage uses the English terms “conflict,” then “fray,” and then “fight.” Are these translations of the same Lakota word? If Sage’s three words in fact reflect real variations in the narrator’s diction, do they catch the different shadings of the original Lakota vocabulary? The mixture of somewhat formal, “literary”

English usages (for instance, “a face suffused in blood”) with stereotypical “Indianisms” (“Three moons sped”) also raises questions about the tonal level of the text. Yet Sage did not see himself as being unfaithful to his originals.

Regarding another text he made from a Brulè story, he wrote, “In penning the above I was guided solely by the leading incidents as related in my hearing.” In truth, though, he was also guided by his sense of the literary—of what was necessary to make a good tale in a written European language.¹⁶

Sage’s attempt at a faithful translation of a Native American document shows evidence of its production culture, just as we would expect. There are phrases and themes that almost certainly derive from the translator’s culture rather than the culture of the original narrator. Quite apart from the text being translated, the English version places the translation’s production culture in the 1800s.

This is precisely the problem with have with the Book of Mormon. We have evidence of the modern production culture precisely at the level of the vocabulary of the English text. When we see parallels of phrases that are similar to other documents we may suspect that the translation layer is contaminated with the culture that produced those phrases. What we cannot say for certain, however, is whether or not such contaminations that make the Book of Mormon read as “a good tale in a written European language” have any relationship to the underlying text.

Assessing the Production Culture of Structural Elements

In order to more accurately assess the production culture of the Book of Mormon, we must move beyond items that are based on vocabulary. One place where the subconscious production culture should be most evident is in the event structures: those places where we see a concept being employed in the text rather than being explained in the text.

A feature that is often argued to point toward a modern production culture for the Book of Mormon is the text’s description of political sentiment. Richard L. Bushman describes one such claim: “The late Thomas O’Dea, a sympathetic but critical scholar, thought that ‘American sentiments permeate the work.’ ‘In it are found the democratic, the republican, the anti-monarchical, and the egalitarian doctrines that pervaded the climate of opinion in which it was conceived and that enter into the expressions and the concerns of its Nephite kings, prophets, and priests as naturally as they later come from the mouths of Mormon leaders preaching to the people in Utah.’”¹⁷

Evidence for O’Dea’s position would come from seeing the text’s insistence on the “voice of the people” as evidence of a democratic urge and Mosiah’s condemnation of monarchies as reflective of

republican sentiment. Those features certainly reflect a modern vocabulary. The question is whether they behave in modern ways when we see those principles operating in the text.

Bushman elsewhere described his attempt to discover the democratic and republican features of the Book of Mormon:

When I was asked to give some talks in Utah during the bicentennial of the American Revolution, I decided to examine the political principles embodied in the Book of Mormon and make some application to our Revolution and Constitution. I thought this would be simple enough because of the switch from monarchy to a republic during the reign of Mosiah. I was sure that somewhere in Mosiah's statements I would find ideas relevant to the modern world. With that in mind, I accepted the invitation to talk, but not until a few months before I was to appear did I get down to work. To my dismay I could not find what I was looking for. Everything seemed just off the point, confused and baffling. I could not find the directions for a sound republic that I had expected.¹⁸

Along with O'Dea, Bushman apparently believed that the democratic vocabulary of the translation layer would be reproduced in the event structures of the text. He continues, describing the result of his confrontation with the evidence of actions rather than vocabulary:

I long ago learned that it is better to flow with the evidence than to compel compliance with one's preformed ideas. So I asked, instead, what does the Book of Mormon say about politics? To my surprise, I discovered it was quite an unrepublican book. Not only was Nephi a king, and monarchy presented as the ideal government in an ideal world, but the supposedly republican government instituted under Mosiah did not function that way at all. There was no elected legislature, and the chief judges usually inherited their office rather than being chosen for it.¹⁹

At this point in our analysis we have a connection to nineteenth-century politics that can be seen on the translation layer, but which cannot be confirmed on the event-structure layer. The lack of textual confirmation of vocabulary cautions us against positing a nineteenth-century production culture but it does not necessarily exclude it. Perhaps the differences were related to Joseph's imagination, although it seems unlikely that he would use obvious terms for the inobvious structures—and leave them unexplained.

Until relatively recently, this was the end of the question. Doubt could be cast on the nineteenth-century production culture, but lacking a non-nineteenth-century culture against which comparisons

could be made, there was no clear way to develop a more compelling argument. In the terms Malina and Rohrbaugh used, we had only the modern recontextualization, and not necessarily the original context.

The recognition of Mesoamerica as a plausible location for the Book of Mormon, however, gives us the opportunity to compare the text's political structures against a different culture. The ability to read Maya texts yields a reasonable picture of Maya politics. While it has long been understood that kings reigned over the Maya cities, it is now apparent that those kings did not rule autocratically. They ruled with the assistance of a council formed from leaders of important lineages.²⁰ Political power was held by balancing the tensions among these lineages. This is most dramatically attested in the reign of Yax Pasaj near the final years of Copán where he acts on monumental sculpture in company with important nobles, rather than majestically alone as most kings are represented on the monuments.²¹ These lineages or councils operated in buildings designated as *popol nah* or 'mat houses.' The mat was the symbol of ruling power, and these buildings are therefore locations associated with the political system. They might be attached to the state, but also were present in some smaller communities. The various *popol nah* functioned for the debate of policy as well as centers for instruction in ritual dance.²²

The great houses, or lineages, formed a governmental layer that functioned just below the monarchy and which was integral to the political process. Even under the monarchy there were political structures similar to the Nephite judges. In fact, John Pohl notes that in one of the later Mixtec codices: "The four priests...specifically conform to descriptions in the *Relaciôn de Tilantongo* and elsewhere of a body of judges who administered the realm for the king."²³

In the course of history, some Mesoamerican communities appear to have followed the same political path as did the Nephites. They disposed of the position of the king. When they did so, these previous structures remained in place but were elevated to perform the centralized ruling function. There is some evidence that this took place at Teotihuacan.²⁴ It is much more certain that a council of lineage heads ruled in Chichèn Itza.²⁵ While all of these examples post-date the Book of Mormon, there is no reason to believe that the essential political structures were significantly different in earlier times.

The Book of Mormon describes the "voice of the people" as a function of monarchy as well as of the later reign of the judges. When Mosiah declares eligible sons to become king, he seeks the voice of the people concerning which son might become king. (Mosiah 29:1-2) When Limhi becomes king, he does so according to the voice of the people. (Mosiah 7:9) The Book of Mormon represents this political feature as a continuation from the days of the monarchy, but applied to the new conditions. That

continuity is evidenced in the Mesoamerican examples where the monarch has been eliminated. Descriptions of the ways the voice of the people functioned are rare, but fit better with discussions in the *popol nah* than as a democratic vote. (See Alma 2:3-7)

When the Book of Mormon describes a reign of judges that retains features of the monarchy, it is completely at home in a Mesoamerican setting. The shift from a king to judges is not only understandable in Mesoamerican politics, Mesoamerican political structures show us how the Nephite system plausibly moved from monarchy to judgship. The change declared by Mosiah was not a wholesale alteration of political systems, but rather a modification of a system that elevated existing structures to new functions.

What do Book of Mormon political structures tell us about the production culture of the Book of Mormon? They tell us that the strongest evidence for a nineteenth-century production environment is limited to the translation layer; it is vocabulary based. When we attempt to see that vocabulary enacted in the text, it behaves differently from modern expectations, but in ways consonant with the plausible historical production culture. As Orson Scott Card suggested, it is in the unconscious and inobvious aspects that the text ought to show its true production culture. That is precisely the level at which the antiquity of the text's political descriptions are most strongly attested.

The Test of Productivity

Of course an examination of political structures is only one element. The ultimate case for the historicity of the Book of Mormon will depend upon multiple similar examples. However, we have not yet finished with the ways in which the political data in the Book of Mormon may be related to a particular production environment.

Malina and Rohrbaugh pointed out that modern readers frequently recontextualize an ancient document because their social referents differ from those of the text. When the correct context is restored for the modern reader, the text takes on new vistas of meaning. For example, the book of Judges contains the story of the murder of the Moabite king Eglon by Ehud. The story begins: "But when the children of Israel cried unto the Lord, the Lord raised them up a deliverer, Ehud the son of Gera, a Benjamite, a man lefthanded." (Judges 3:15) The text tosses in a description of Ehud as "a man lefthanded" without any explanation or reason for telling us why this might have been important to the story. As Baruch Halpern explains:

Ehud is not "lefthanded" rather, "his right hand was *'itter*." This adjective comes from a root meaning "to bind," and suggests that the use of the hand was somehow impeded (v. 15; cf. Ps.

69:16)... In all three texts [using “his right hand was *‘itter*”] the lefthanders are Benjamites. In no other text does handedness figure. The logical inference is that Benjamin was known for producing southpaws. They could have done so as, until recently, the Maori did, by binding the right arms of young children—hence “bound as to his right hand”—and inculcating dexterity with the left. On this supposition Ehud was not, as the translations have it, “a man lefthanded.” He was one of a breed of men schooled in the use of the left hand for war.²⁶

In this example, cultural data is packed into a term that is left unexplained. Read from a modern perspective, being lefthanded is a bit of non-essential data. In the cultural context that produced the description, however, it was a very important clue to Ehud’s deadly nature.

Such information is not simply nice to know. It is essential to the correct understanding of the motivations and events of the text. Given a text without context, as the Book of Mormon has been, events float unrelated and unexplained on an unknown ocean. If, however, we find the correct production culture, we should be able to supply the missing context and retrieve sense from near nonsense. If we find the correct environment, it should improve our comprehension of the text.

As a final test of the production environment for Book of Mormon politics, I will examine one of the popular stories from the Book of Mormon. The account of Ammon at the waters of Sebus is both well-known and entirely misunderstood. If we strip the story of its faith-inspiring aspects it becomes nearly nonsensical. Allow me to retell the story in a way that highlights its anomalous aspects.

- Ammon, a traditional enemy, volunteers to be a servant for a Lamanite king. Instead of killing or jailing this enemy, the king immediately offers one of his daughters in marriage.
- The Lamanite king has an ongoing problem with his flocks at the waters of Sebus. Several times a band of men has scattered the flocks. (See Alma 17:28.) In spite of the repeated scatterings, it never occurs to the king to send armed guards to protect them. He could have done so, because in the aftermath of these events, he suggests that armies could protect Ammon (Alma 18:21). Strangely enough, however, they couldn’t protect the flocks.
- Mormon indicates that it is thieves who are after the flocks, but they pick a particularly difficult target. The text specifically mentions that the flocks “scattered...insomuch that they fled many ways” (Alma 17:27).
- Ammon suggests that he and servants round up the flocks. It does not appear that this has ever occurred to anyone before. That they were successful (Alma 17:32) confirms that the so-called thieves did not get anything for their effort. We must assume that other servants

could have gathered the flocks. However, they preferred to lose their lives rather than track down the errant animals.

- Apparently only after the flocks are scattered do the servants give Ammon the bad news: “Now the king will slay us, as he has our brethren because their flocks were scattered by the wickedness of these men.” (Alma 17:28). First the king offers him a daughter, then he sends Ammon into a situation where it is virtually certain he will be executed.
- Ammon seems to be the only one to whom it occurred to fight back. Just as the king never supplied armed guards, there is no record of any other servant resisting. None of Ammon’s companion servants joined in the fight.
- In the spiritual aftermath, the king and queen are lying as though dead. When the servant Abish gathers people to see the miracle, several of those who come are relatives of those who scattered the flocks, including the brother of a man who was slain. (Alma 19:21-22) The text doesn’t tell us why the king lives among thieves.

Of course the spiritual message is the same in spite of all of these oddities. However, in a historical document we expect that the actions of the participants in the events would make some kind of sense. This is where the lack of cultural context for this tale becomes dramatically obvious. Everything that we ought to know to fill in these blanks of nonsense is missing. The motivations and reasons are not clearly explained as they would be in a science fiction story that attempted to create an unusual situation. This story is either the result of a very poor writer, or of unexplained cultural context.

Mesoamerican political tensions supply the missing content. Maya kings balanced their own power base against competing lineages. The translated texts tell of some instances that appear to indicate a change in the power balance, with a new lineage assuming the throne and creating a new dynasty. Historian David Drew describes the problem for the Maya kings:

Increasingly recognized today...is the likelihood of a constant, dynamic tension between the ruler, along with the family group, the royal lineage that surrounded him, and other powerful and long-established lineages within a city state. The centralizing success of royal dynasties almost certainly obscures the extent to which kings depended upon and negotiated with other political factions. For each dynasty of the Classic period had in earlier centuries been merely one among many such patrilineages or kin-groups. It is impossible to know with any precision how ruling lines established themselves at the end of the Preclassic period—as war-leaders, perhaps, or as mediators in local disputes. However they came by their authority, they could only have maintained it through consent and co-operation, despite the impression of absolute power that their monuments create. From the eighth century, at Copán in particular, there is

some evidence of the negotiation that must have gone on behind the scenes. There is little reason to believe that this kind of jostling was not seen in earlier centuries too.²⁷

All aspects of the story of Ammon at the waters of Sebus make perfect sense against the backdrop of a Mesoamerican king struggling with competition from a powerful rival lineage. Note that when the king is discussing the incident with Ammon he asks: “tell me by what power ye slew and smote off the arms of *my brethren* that scattered my flocks” (Alma 18:20, emphasis added). While it is possible that the phrase “my brethren” is extremely generic, it would be very unusual to presume robbers as “brothers” of a king, and equally as unusual to include anyone outside of the city as one’s “brothers.” These thieves really are “brethren,” and that is the whole reason for the trouble. Now let me retell the story against the backdrop of political tensions with Lamoni’s “brethren.”

Ammon comes before the king and asks to be a servant. Ammon is a Nephite and therefore not only an outsider but an enemy. The king offers to make him family by marrying one of his daughters. If Ammon had accepted, he would also have accepted rule by the new family and therefore be under the king’s control. By refusing, Ammon continues to be an outsider and therefore potentially uncontrollable. The king decides to place Ammon in a position where this condition of being outside the city’s political intrigues might be advantageous: He sends him to water the flocks at Sebus.

The dumb thieves who don’t get much from their raids are actually getting everything they want. Key to understanding the story is that whatever ruse was employed to allow the fiction that they were robbers, the reality was that they were well-known to the servants and to the king. They were members of the rival lineage who were attempting to alter the balance of power. By scattering the king’s flocks they were embarrassing the king and therefore diminishing his appearance of total control. Because the rival lineage was sufficiently powerful, the king could not move against them directly without creating civil war. Therefore, the king could not send armed guards. If he killed the members of the competing lineage it would break whatever illusion of cooperation there was and instigate civil disorder. The guards cannot defend themselves for the same reason that the king could not send troops.

The king could not, however, allow the situation to completely embarrass him. Therefore the fiction of thievery is either created or allowed to remain. Because something had to be done to restore the king’s honor in the situation, the guards are punished for their “failure.” The king places the failure on the guards and executes them to demonstrate that he is still controlling the situation.

Along comes Ammon, who is an outsider to the political intrigue. Ammon is not a member of either lineage and as an outsider would be unaware of the identities of these “brethren” thieves or the delicate political situation; he is a wildcard in a high-stakes game. The king deliberately puts him into a situation where it is possible—even probable—that he will use his sword, where all other servants have held theirs. It is quite possible that the king expected Ammon to do some damage, but ultimately fail to protect the flocks. From the king’s perspective, any damage that Ammon did would improve the king’s standing in the political impasse by gaining more revenge without the political cost—because it was done by an outsider.

When Abish finds many relatives of the robbers as well as the brother of the slain “thief” close by, we have our confirmation that this is a delicate political dance. Only if the family is part of the royal court would so many relatives of outlaws be that close to the home compound of a king. That a family of a thief is that close to the king tells us that the thieves were also that close. The thieves at the waters of Sebus were not from another city. They were not miscreants ostracized from this city. They were of a family that was sufficiently prestigious that it spent time in close proximity to the king. It had to be a competing royal lineage.

This reinterpretation of the events against a Mesoamerican cultural background creates sense from the near nonsense of the contextless account. Our analysis of Book of Mormon politics tells us that not only do the structural elements trace more firmly to a Mesoamerican context, but that the Mesoamerican context provides needed information that fills in the gaps between the assumed understanding of the writer and the reader.

Conclusions

Because the Book of Mormon specifically claims to be a translation, we are obliged to examine it as a translated text. The examination of political data from the Book of Mormon highlights both the necessity and the functionality of making such an analytical separation in the way we understand our evidentiary task.

There are political terms that have an obvious similarity to the nineteenth-century production culture. However, since those similarities only exist on the level of vocabulary and cannot be seen in the way political concepts are worked out in the text, we may confidently ascribe the nineteenth-century similarities to the translation layer. It is really very easy to demonstrate that the translation layer was the result of a nineteenth-century production culture. Of course, that has never really been in question at all.

When we dive below the surface of the vocabulary of the translation and attempt to deal with the event structures of the text, the situation is dramatically different. Where the translation layer fits comfortably into the nineteenth century, the event structures are discordant with it. In the case of political structures, we find that they do not match with the expectations of vocabulary. They do, however, fit into the context of time and place that best fits the geographic features described in the text. This last type of evidence is particularly important because it comes directly from the unconscious and unwritten portions of the text.

The Book of Mormon makes complete sense as a historical document, but does so only when we place it in the correct historical context. Without the correct production culture, the text is anomalous and sometimes foreign to human experience—as in the contextless reading of Ammon at the waters of Sebus. Placed in the correct production culture where the unstated assumptions writer become explicit for the reader, the text authentically describes human motivations appropriate to that historical time and place.

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Notes

¹ Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Historicity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-Day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 124.

² Louis Midgley, "No Middle Ground: The Debate Over the Authenticity of the Book of Mormon," in *Historicity and the Latter-Day Saint Scriptures*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2001), 149-150.

³ *How is It That the Book of Mormon Prophet Jacob Ends His Account with the French Word 'Adieu?'*. June 2004 (<http://farms.byu.edu/questionday.php?id=1>).

⁴ Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor Books, 2001). See especially chapters 5-7.

⁵ Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 4.

⁶ Orson Scott Card, *The Book of Mormon, Artifact or Artifice?* Adapted from a Speech Given at the BYU Symposium on Life, the Universe, and Everything, February 1993, June 2004 (<http://www.nauvoo.com/library/card-bookofmormon.html>).

⁷ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 04/06/24 1992), 10.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11.

¹¹ Ibid., 14.

¹² Ethan Smith, *View of the Hebrews or the Tribes of Israel in America*, 1825, 2d ed. (Colfax, Wisconsin: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2002) Josiah Priest, *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West*, 1834, 4th ed. (Colfax, Wisconsin: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, N.D.);

¹³ An interesting text is Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Tribes of the Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2001). Olive presents her evidence for a North American geography of the Book of Mormon by using the type of evidence that the early Saints would have used. While not convincing with modern data available, it is nevertheless an interesting example of the type of evidence that would have led the early Saints to their interpretation of the text.

¹⁴ See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Provo/Salt Lake City: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies/Deseret Book, 1985) Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, Utah: SA Publishers, 1989); F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon: Settlements and Routes in Ancient America* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company, 1989).

- ¹⁵ Mark D. Thomas, *Digging in Cumorah: Reclaiming Book of Mormon Narratives* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1999), 134.
- ¹⁶ William M. Clements, "'Tokens of Literary Faculty': Native American Literature and Euroamerican Translation in the Early Nineteenth Century," *On the Translation of Native American Literatures*, ed. Brian Swann (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 04/06/23 1992), 41-42.
- ¹⁷ Richard L. Bushman, "The Book of Mormon and the American Revolution," *BYU Studies* 17, no. 1 (Autumn 1978): 2-3.
- ¹⁸ Richard L. Bushman, "My Belief," *BYU Studies* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1985): 27.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ David Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 243.
- ²¹ Simon Martin and Nikolai Grube, *Chronicle of the Maya Kings and Queens* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).
- ²² Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 243. Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, *The Code of Kings: The Language of Seven Sacred Maya Temples and Tombs* (New York: Scribner, 04/06/24 1998), 44.
- ²³ John M. D. Pohl, "The Four Priests: Political Stability," 1994, in *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica: A Reader*, ed. Michael E. Smith and Marilyn A. Masson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 355-356.
- ²⁴ "Supreme Teo political authority may not always have been strongly concentrated in a single person or lineage. R. Millon suggested that Teo might have been an oligarchic republic. The case now seems stronger, though not yet overwhelming." George L. Cowgill, "State and Society at Teotihuacán, Mexico," 1997, in *The Ancient Civilizations of Mesoamerica: A Reader*, edited by Michael E. Smith and Marilyn A. Masson (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 04/06/23 2000), 315.
- ²⁵ The inscriptions amongst the buildings to the south of the city center help to explain how the political system at Chichèn Itza worked. They do not talk of dynastic rulers and their great deeds, as in previous centuries. Instead they mention a number of individuals, with names such as 'Kakupakal' or 'Kokom', in connection with the dedication of buildings and other ceremonies, often concerned with the maintenance of sacred fires and the drilling of 'new fire' on important occasions in the calendar. The glyph for sibling, *y-itah* is used to describe the relationship between these people, suggesting rule by "brothers." Some may indeed have been related in this way and Diego de Landa also talks of the tradition of "brothers" ruling at Chichèn Itza. But the phrase may best be interpreted to mean "companions" or individuals each of roughly equivalent status. They are accorded the title *ahaw*, but significantly none is termed *k'ul ahaw* or supreme, "divine lord." What this would seem to represent is rule by council, by the heads of different lineages. At the time of the Spanish Conquest

some small city states still used the term *multepal*, best rendered as “group rule,” to describe what was probably a very similar system Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 372.

²⁶ Halpern, *The First Historians*, 40-41.

²⁷ Drew, *The Lost Chronicles of the Maya Kings*, 324.