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## The Cavity of the Rock

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# Chapter 22

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The last Jaredite prophet, Ether, lived in “the cavity of the rock” (Ether 13:13, 14, 18, 22) during the final phase of Jaredite history where he would venture out to observe and then return to record what was happening to his people. The phrase “cavity of the rock” is an Olmec cultural reference and is not necessarily a description of the cave itself. Many Mesoamerican religious beliefs are represented by caves and ceremonies related to or taking place in caves. In the situation of Ether, one would look specifically to the Olmec beliefs. In the Olmec, when rulers are depicted resting in a “cavity of the rock” it demonstrates their claims to rule, their divine status, and their origin from the Underworld:

About the same time as the Guerrero caves were in use on the Pacific coast of Mexico, several monumental, carved, stone “altars” from Olmec sites on the Gulf Coast depict elite individuals of this precocious society in a cave-like front cavity. These altar “niche figures,” surrounded by maize imagery, have been interpreted as representations of Olmec site rulers seated in the mouth of a cave. David C. Grove (1973:134) theorizes that the “emergence from the cave” was central to Olmec kingship, the ruler’s mythical Underworld origins, and claims to divine status. (Healy 2007)

These types of niches are also represented in Olmec monuments that show kings on their thrones in these type of niche caverns. Ether was the rightful heir to the Jaredite throne, and it is perfectly appropriate for him to use this phrase in describing his position. In Ether’s role as a scribe, his utilization of a cave is very Mesoamerican:

Scribes, a secondary tier of Maya nobility, also are potential candidates to have visited caves. They may have used cave pilgrimages as a “mechanism...to affirm their ongoing relationship with the supernatural” (Stone 2005:136, 144). Perhaps they visited these sacred places, as pilgrims, to acknowledge “the divine source of their craft, affirming their legitimacy and supporting their (elevated) social positions by doing so.” The cave texts at Naj Tunich, for example, include self-references to scribal visits, where they appear to have been trying to connect with the divine source of their offices. Landa (in Tozzer 1941:153) mentions that holy water, which likely came from a cave or cenote, was used in the purification rites for ancient Maya codices.

The authors examine several hieroglyphic texts from cave sites which, using the new translation for “cave,” seem to record “arrivals” of various visitors and refer to caves as “a pilgrimage or ritual center” (Vogt and Stuart 2005:160–162). Stuart’s earlier work with ancient Maya texts enabled him to decipher the Maya expression for “writing,” tz’ihb, and the phrase u-tz’ihb, “he writes” from one of the cave paintings of Naj Tunich (Stone 1995, 2005a:142). He went further to show that the subject of this clause was the name of an ancient Maya scribe, with a special title of itz’at, or “sage.” The hieroglyph suggests that the scribe in question, with two other protagonists, came “to see” Naj Tunich, which phrase might actually be a Maya metaphor for “pilgrimage”. All this fits nicely with the themes, discussed earlier, of caves as pilgrimage sites and meeting places, sometimes used by scribes. (Healy 2007)

The Book of Mormon only contains one other place where “the cavity of the rock” phrase is used:

1 Nephi 3:27–30

27 And it came to pass that we fled into the wilderness, and the servants of Laban did not overtake us, and we hid ourselves in the cavity of a rock.

28 And it came to pass that Laman was angry with me, and also with my father; and also was Lemuel, for he hearkened unto the words of Laman. Wherefore Laman and Lemuel did speak many hard words unto us, their younger brothers, and they did smite us even with a rod.

29 And it came to pass as they smote us with a rod, behold, an angel of the Lord came and stood before them, and he spake unto them, saying: Why do ye smite your younger brother with a rod? Know ye not that the Lord hath chosen him to be a ruler over you, and this because of your iniquities? Behold ye shall go up to Jerusalem again, and the Lord will deliver Laban into your hands.

30 And after the angel had spoken unto us, he departed.

Royal Skousen has found phrases similar to “cavity of the rock” in 1600–1800s English, and the meanings are consistent with the Olmec niche caverns (Skousen 2017).

One might then wonder what the Nephi reference would indicate since Nephi<sub>1</sub> is writing it. In reading that section of scripture, it is pretty clear why Nephi<sub>1</sub> included what happened in the cavity of a rock. No less than an angel of the Lord established that Nephi<sub>1</sub>, not Laman and Lemuel, was to be the divinely appointed leader identical to the Olmec cultural norm. In analyzing what partially motivated Nephi to write what he did in the Book of Mormon, Brant Gardner (2005) noted that one of the principal reasons was that “Nephi wrote to define himself as the king” (175–80). It is fairly certain that Nephi<sub>1</sub> arrived on the Pacific Coastal area of Guatemala/southern Mexico, and it is established that there had long been an Olmec presence in that area. It makes total sense that Nephi<sub>1</sub> would have used this phrase or illustration when addressing people of Olmec culture or at least Olmec cultural influence to help establish his right to divine rulership. In addition, Nephi<sub>1</sub> was a royal scribe.



Figure 96. Olmec royalty at La Venta emerging from niche cavity.