Richardson Benedict Gill’s book *The Great Maya Droughts: Water, Life, and Death* provides substantial evidence of the natural physical events that occurred in Mesoamerica. These events are comparable to events recorded in the Book of Mormon.
Volcanic and Ice Dating in the New World

One of the key concerns in interpreting history is accurate correlation of natural physical events with those recorded in documents or traditions. A remarkable new book contains a wide array of data on natural events that affected ancient prosperity and population in what are usually considered the central Book of Mormon lands. The volume is Richardson Benedict Gill’s *The Great Maya Droughts: Water, Life, and Death* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000). Any attempt by a reader of the Book of Mormon to relate its historical happenings in the New World to the course of nature should from now on depend considerably on this crucial source.

While the reading in the book is not easy, generally educated people can still gain valuable ideas and data from it. In fact, the scope of the information it taps would make it difficult even for most scientists to appreciate all it contains (the technical bibliography alone occupies 55 pages), yet, again, there is much to be gained by the attempt.

Earth scientists and climatologists in recent decades have vastly increased what is known about changes in climate over the course of human history. Their facts and theories provide Gill with tools for trying to understand how certain natural events seem to have been key turning points in the archaeological history of not only Mesoamerica but also other parts of the earth. Volcanic eruptions were central to most crisis events. The extensive body of data collected by drilling through the miles-thick ice in Greenland is especially significant. Even more clearly than tree rings, layered ice cores give us a year-by-year count of climatic events recorded in each year’s snowfall. This record goes back tens of thousands of years. Volcanic eruptions are thus datable to the year if they can be detected in the ice record, although it can be difficult identifying which specific volcano may have been the cause. Gill does a commendable job in pointing out the cautions to be observed in using this information, including problems in fitting ice, tree-ring, and history data together.

In general the author (who is, of course, dependent on the huge store of data provided by thousands of scientists) is able to demonstrate persuasively that periods of cultural growth, economic prosperity, and population peaks in Mesoamerica coincided with favorable climatic conditions for agriculture. By the use of sophisticated models that relate all the variables, a sort of prosperity-and-disaster scheme is being worked out. Peaks and troughs in the history of the Maya, the Mexicans, and other populations prove to correlate in very instructive ways with extreme climate changes. Would not the same be true of the Nephites and Lamanites? (see relevant information in “Last-Ditch Warfare in Ancient Mesoamerica Recalls the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 [2000]: 44–53, especially p. 50).

One more value of the Gill book is the author’s demonstration that dating the crucial natural events still may be subject to some uncertainty. So if any archaeologist claims that “we already know” all the dates of major events in Mesoamerican history, as we work to correlate the archaeological and Book of Mormon historical sequences, we do well to doubt that the dates are yet definitely cut-and-dried.\(^1\)
14. How all of these things can be included together (see Ephesians 1:9–10). Many records have been kept and predicted a sufficient language, one might reasonably expect to am un

"When the translation of these valuable records which are ancient" that he Joseph and Oliver. There may be other Jaredite records in this paper, other than to note that the question will remain unanswered, they are all speculative, and so not answered in the Book of Mormon. Upon just 24 plates is a question that is


10. Menachem Haran, "The Lord may have thought of the Book of Mormon plates (Joseph Smith—History 1:34–54). Limhi's people found the gold plates of the Jaredites (see Ether 1:2; Mosiah 21:27, 28:11) that Ether had hidden in a manner that they might be found (see Ether 15:33). Wasn't the Lord involved in their finding those plates? We can expect that the Lord, in his own due time, will lead someone of his choosing to find the 24 plates.

13. While Joseph the Prophet was translating the Bible, the information on Enoch was revealed to him (November–December 1830). Several years later he recorded more information about Adam's blessing his posterity three years before his death (see Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, 26–40).

15. The Lord revealed to Oliver Cowdery that there were "engravings of old records which are ancient" that he Joseph Smith perceived it to be a great privilege to translate (see D&C 8:1, 11:9, 2:9). While the Book of Abraham was conceived as a part of those ancient records, the revelation given to Oliver refers to more than one record. Furthermore, the Book of Abraham was only partially translated. Oliver said concerning this record: "When the translation of these valuable documents will be completed, I am unable to say, neither can I give you a probable idea how large volumes they will make; but judging from their size, and the comprehensiveness of the language, one might reasonably expect to see a sufficient [sic] to develop much upon the mighty acts of the ancient record of God" (Quartermaster and Advocate, Dec. 1835, 236). The Lord may have also been referring to the ancient records of the Nephites and Jaredites in his promise to Oliver. Many records have been kept and preserved throughout the world for the dispensation of the fulness of time, when all things that Christ will be gathered together (see Ephesians 1:9–10). This article acknowledges these many other records, but it focuses only on those mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Lehi’s Altar and Sacrifice in the Wilderness

David Ralph Selby

1. Unfortunately there is very little information about the Nephite temples in the Book of Mormon. The most complete study of the Nephite temples to date is John W. Welch, “The Temple of the Lord: The Book of Mormon: The Temples at the Cities of Nephi, Zarahemla, and Butsantul,” in Temples of the Ancient World: Ritual and Symbolism, ed. Donald W. Parry (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1994).

2. For a brief discussion of some of the issues relating to the sacrifice of Lehi and the Nephites beyond the injunctivity in the Book of Lehi, see: John W. Welch, “The Temple in the Book of Mormon,” 320.

6. “As a prophet, Lehi held the Melchizedek Priesthood and by that authority offered sacrifice (Teachings, p. 181). The Book of Mormon witnesses no attempt to elaborate upon the nature or types of their offerings. The Aaronic Priesthood was the province of the tribe of Levi, and thus was not taken by the Nephites to America. It would appear, therefore, that the sacrifices performed by the Lehite colony were carried out under the direction of the higher priesthood, which comprehends all the duties and authorities of the lesser” (Joseph Fielding McKonie and Robert L. Millet, Doctrinal Commentary on the Book of Mormon [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1987], 1:31).

7. McKonie and Millet further explain: “A covenant-centered religion required a covenant sanctuary. The fact that the Nephites constructed a temple suggests that all remnants of Israel, wherever they had been scattered, if they possessed the priesthood would have done likewise” (ibid., 1:225).


13. The interpretation of Leviticus in terms of the so-called secular slaughter is much debated. See Tigay, Deuteronomy, 366 n. 43; and Baruch A. Levine, Leviticus: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New IPS Translation (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 112–13.

17. Minarchen Haran, Temples and Temples Service in Ancient Israel (Oxford: Clar- endon, 1978), 409–46. This commentary is highly recommended as a model presentation of biblical scholarship to an educated lay audience.

11. Ibid., 26–42.

12. This is the prevailing view among modern scholars. In the classic documentary hypothesis, the literary strand D—chiefly the book of Deuteronomy—is dated to the middle of the seventh century B.C.E. While most scholars hold this view agree that there is older material in Deuteronomy, they believe that the book in its present form was edited in the seventh century B.C.E. These laws were first applied in their entirety by King Josiah. For a balanced and recent presentation of this view, see Tigay, Deuteronomy, xiii–xxvi; and Moshe Weinfield, “Deuteronomy, Book of,” Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 268–83.


18. While the Book of Mormon was only partially translated, it would be misleading to say that there are different portions or derivatives of the temple Scroll. Tigay notes that which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but which the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood before they possessed the priesthood of Aaron. The Aaronic Priesthood was taken away when Moses died, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All Priesthood is Melchizedek Priesthood, but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but which brought the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained to it and himself” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1929), 1:378–79.

19. Lehi was a descendant of Manasseh and of Joseph 10:3.

20. The priesthood that Alma, held is described as “the high priesthood of the holy order of God” (Alma 4:20, compare 13:1–12, which describes the priesthood of the Nephites as the Melchizedek Priesthood). Responding to the question of whether the Melchizedek Priesthood was taken away when Moses died, the Prophet Joseph Smith taught: “All Priesthood is Melchizedek Priesthood, but there are different portions or degrees of it. That portion which brought Moses to speak with God face to face was taken away; but which brought the ministry of angels remained. All the prophets had the Melchizedek Priesthood and were ordained to it and himself” (Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1929), 1:378–79.


22. Criteria were used to help explain the fact that the Jews built temples in Egypt in Elephantine (destroyed in 410 B.C.E.) and Nefertopolis (shut down in A.D. 73) where sacrifice was offered. See Haran, Temples, 46–47. Shemesh cites Mishnah Menahot 13:10 and Babylonian Talmud Menahot 109a.

What’s in a Word?

Cynthia L. Hallen


6. For example, see the April 2001 issue of Insights, the FARMS newsletter, for observations about the limits of radiocar- bon dating even at its best.

Out of the Dust


