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FOR RELIGIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

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Author(s) William J. Hamblin

Reference *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 161-97.

ISSN 1065-9366 (print), 2168-3158 (online)

Abstract Anti-Mormon criticisms of the Book of Mormon are frequently based on a questionable set of assumptions concerning the nature of historical and archaeological evidence, the role of governing presuppositions, and the nature of historical proof. Using arguments found in a recent anti-Mormon critique by Luke Wilson as a foundation, this article analyzes difficulties of reconstructing ancient geographies, problems with the discontinuity of Mesoamerican toponyms, the historical development of the idea of a limited geography model, and challenges of textual and artifactual interpretation when trying to relate the Book of Mormon to archaeological remains.

Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon

William J. Hamblin

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Most anti-Mormon attacks on the authenticity of the Book of Mormon suffer from several severe logical flaws. The authors are inadequately informed about Latter-day Saint history, doctrine, and scripture; they have not read the text of the Book of Mormon carefully; they distort both what the text of the Book of Mormon says and the variety of Latter-day Saint interpretations of the text; they attempt to make all Latter-day Saint scholars responsible for the private opinions of some Latter-day Saint authors or General Authorities; and they frequently argue solely from the authority of selected authors or scholars, rather than providing evidence, analysis, and argumentation to support their case. They seldom advance the discussion by dealing with current Latter-day Saint thinking on the matter, being content instead to rely on an *ad nauseam* repetition of anti-Mormon arguments, many of which have been around—and have had adequate Latter-day Saint responses—for over a century.

Luke P. Wilson's recent review of Book of Mormon archaeology suffers from many of these flaws.¹ His major advance over most previous anti-Mormon assaults is that the tone of his writing is neither hysterically antagonistic nor arrogantly condescending. Nonetheless, I found only one statement in his entire article with which I could wholeheartedly agree, "there are limits to what archaeology can investigate" (2a). Unfortunately, Mr. Wilson does not seem to have borne this important principle in mind while writing his article. Although this article will address the main issues that Wilson raises, the general discussion is relevant to many anti-Mormon criticisms.

Geographical Issues

The Problem of Reconstructing Ancient Geographies

Wilson first strives to discredit the Book of Mormon by unfavorably comparing the present state of knowledge about ancient Nephite sites with the state of knowledge about biblical sites. He begins his discussion of Book of Mormon geography by proclaiming that "one might expect that determining the geographical setting of the Book of Mormon lands would be a fairly simple undertaking" (2a). He provides no evidence or analysis to indicate why this dubious assumption should be accepted. In fact, quite the opposite is true. There are several notable examples where precise reconstruction of archaic geographies has proven difficult if not impossible.

The Bible itself is a case in point. For example, modern sites for only 55 per cent of the place names mentioned in the Bible have been identified²—and this from the most carefully

¹ Luke P. Wilson, "The Scientific Search for Nephite Remains," *Heart and Mind: The Newsletter of Gospel Truths Ministries* (Fall 1992): 2, 3, and 5. Hereafter references to this article are given in parentheses in the text by page number and column letter: i.e. (2b) = page 2, column b. I would like to thank Janet Carpenter for research assistance, and John Sorenson, John Welch, and Stephen Ricks for useful comments.

² Yohanan Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography*, trans. A. F. Rainey, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1979), 129. Although I am in complete disagreement with his conclusions, the ambiguities of biblical geography are such that Kamal Salibi has been able to propose that the events of the Bible occurred not in Palestine, but in

scrutinized and studied book in the world. For example, where is Mt. Sinai? There are over twenty candidates.³ What is the route taken by the Israelites in the Exodus? Again, there are many different theories.⁴ These and many other issues of biblical geography are all hotly disputed. Furthermore, the fact that there is widespread agreement on many questions of geography is simply an indication that scholarly consensus has been achieved but not necessarily that the consensus is correct.

The reconstruction of ancient western Anatolian geography also faces problems. “The geography of western Anatolia in the second millennium B.C. has for long been a subject of considerable dispute.”⁵ The two major alternatives, as shown in the maps provided by Macqueen, have the same regions and locations over three hundred kilometers apart and are directionally skewed.⁶ Furthermore, the region where the province of Arzawa is frequently thought to have been, “so far show[s] no sign at all of settled occupation during the Hittite period.”⁷ Thus, despite a hundred and twenty years of archaeological and philological investigation, no certain geography for western Anatolia during this period can be determined, and archaeological evidence cannot be fully reconciled with Hittite textual data.⁸

While all scholars now agree that the Norsemen did indeed discover and temporarily colonize North America in the eleventh

Arabia! Kamal S. Salibi, *The Bible Came from Arabia* (London: Cape, 1985), and *Secrets of the Bible People* (London: Saqi Books, 1988).

³ Anati Emmanuel, *The Mountain of God: Har Karkom* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), 161. He provides a brief survey of the theories, with references, on 161–66; Graham I. Davies, “Sinai, Mount,” in David Noel Freedman, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992, hereafter ABD), 6:48.

⁴ Summarized in Menashe Har-El, *Sinai Journeys: The Route of the Exodus*, 2d ed. (Los Angeles: Ridgefield, 1983); Graham I. Davies, “Wilderness Wanderings,” in ABD 6:913.

⁵ James G. Macqueen, *The Hittites and Their Contemporaries in Asia Minor*, 2d ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 37. A substantially different interpretation of Hittite geography than Macqueen’s is presented by Oliver R. Gurney in *The Hittites*, 4th ed. (New York: Penguin, 1990).

⁶ Macqueen, *The Hittites*, 38–39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁸ The existence of the Hittites of Anatolia was first recognized in the 1870s; see Gurney, *The Hittites*, 1–11, for a brief survey of their “discovery.”

century, the precise location of the “Vinland” of the sagas is hotly disputed with nearly a dozen candidates ranging between “Hudson Bay and the state of Florida.”⁹ If precise geographical unanimity cannot be reached by scholars in these and many other areas, why should the analysis of Book of Mormon geography be “a fairly simple matter”?

In fact, comparing the current state of geographical knowledge of the Book of Mormon and the Bible is a false analogy. As Professor Aharoni tells us:

In the final analysis the most certain identifications [of biblical place names] are still those dependent upon preservation of the ancient name, albeit with careful examination of written sources and archaeological data. Out of the approximately 475 place names mentioned in the Bible only about 262 have been identified with any degree of certainty, i.e., 55 per cent. Of these 190 are based upon preservation of the name, viz. 40 per cent of the over-all total. . . . Only 72 places (15 per cent of the over-all total) have been identified in situations where the ancient name is not to be found somewhere in the vicinity, of which only about half carry a degree of certainty, the remainder being more or less conjectural.¹⁰

In other words, without the continuity of place names between biblical and modern times, only about 36 of the 475 biblical place names could be identified with certainty. But in fact those 36 are identifiable largely because it is possible to triangulate their relationship to known sites, moving from the known to the unknown. It is only because there are numerous biblical sites known with certainty through the continuity of place names that these other 36 sites can be located.

The situation in ancient Mesopotamia is precisely the same. “The inscriptions and administrative documents from Presargonic Lagash have left us hundreds of place names and names of watercourses, yet only a small number can be identified

⁹ Gwyn Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford, 1986), 128. References to the various theories are found on pages 128–29. For another excellent synthesis of the current state of knowledge concerning the Norse discovery of North America, see Erik Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986).

¹⁰ Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 128–29.

with precision. Others can be put in the general vicinity of some known place, but the vast majority remain only vaguely situated at best.”¹¹

In addition to using the Bible, however, archaeologists attempting to reconstruct biblical geography have the resources of toponyms (place names) from Egyptian inscriptions, papyri, and Mesopotamian documents.¹² Furthermore, the invaluable *Onomasticon* of Eusebius (A.D. 260–340) preserves a detailed list of place names of the Holy Land along with distances between cities.¹³ This allows historians to focus within a few kilometers of where an ancient site must have been. In addition, the biblical toponyms of the Holy Land exhibit linguistic continuity between the three related Semitic languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic. There is no reason to assume that Maya languages, for instance, and Nephite languages were linguistically related. This further disrupts the continuity of toponyms in the New World.

As an example of shifts in the names of cities based on conquest and linguistic changes, we need look no further than Jerusalem. From the Canaanite *u-ru-sa-lim*¹⁴ derived the Hebrew Yerushalem or Yerushalayim. The city was also frequently called the City of David, and Zion, giving four common names for Jerusalem in the Old Testament alone. The Greeks called the city both Ierousalem and Hierosolyma; the Latins retained Hierosolyma. However, following the Roman conquest in A.D. 135, the emperor Hadrian changed the name to Aelia Capitolina.¹⁵ It retained its identity as Jerusalem only because

¹¹ Jerrold S. Cooper, “Reconstructing History from Ancient Inscriptions: The Lagash-Umma Border Conflict,” *Sources from the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2, fasc. 1 (Malibu: Undena, 1983), 18.

¹² Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 92–101.

¹³ Eusebius, *Onomastikon*, ed. E. Klostermann, *Das Onomastikon der biblischer Ortsnamen* (Berlin: n.p., 1904).

¹⁴ Amarna Letters, Tablets 287:25 = “the land of the city of Jerusalem (*[a-]mur mat u-ru-sa-lim an-n[i-]ta*)”; transliteration and translation can be found in Samuel A. B. Mercer, *The Tell el-Amarna Tablets* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1939). See Hendricus J. Franken, “Jerusalem in the Bronze Age, 3000–1000 B.C.” in K. J. Asali, *Jerusalem in History* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1990), 17–20, for a discussion of the early names of Jerusalem.

¹⁵ Dio Cassius, *History* LXIX, 12; John Wilkinson, “Jerusalem under Rome and Byzantium, 63 B.C.–637 A.D.,” in Asali, *Jerusalem in History*, 88–93.

Christians eventually came to dominate the Roman Empire and changed the name back. Following the Muslim conquests, however, the city was called Aliya (from the Roman Aelia), Bayt al-Maqdis, or al-Quds, as it still is by Palestinians today. If Christianity had been exterminated rather than becoming the dominant religion of the Roman empire, what linguistic evidence would we have that al-Quds of today was the ancient Jerusalem?

Major conquests and cultural or ideological changes could result in the complete transformation of place names. The Greeks renamed all of the major Egyptian cities with Greek names. For example, the Egyptian Nekhen became the Greek Hierakonopolis, Waset became Thebes or Diospolis Magna, Khmun became Hermopolis, and Iunu became Heliopolis. Although some of these names represent translations of Egyptian names, in almost no cases is there a phonetic relationship.¹⁶

Other similar examples abound. Classical Greek Byzantium became Constantinople in the fourth century A.D., and eventually Istanbul in the fifteenth century. The imperial capital district in the region of modern Baghdad has been known successively as Kish (Sumerian, early third millennium B.C.), Agade (Akkadian, late third millennium B.C.), Babylon (Babylonian, second and first millennia B.C.), Seleucia (Greek, 312 B.C.–A.D. 164), Ctesiphon or Mada'in (Persian, A.D. 165–636), and, following the Arab conquest (A.D. 640), Da'r al-Sala'm, and Baghdad.¹⁷

Thus, discontinuity of toponyms is a common historical occurrence, especially in periods of major cultural, linguistic, and political transformations, similar to those described in the Book of Mormon itself. We can see just this phenomenon in the Book of Mormon, where the Jaredite hill Ramah is later called the hill Cumorah by the Nephites (Ether 15:11; Mormon 6:6).

Where continuity of place names, references to biblical toponyms in nonbiblical sources, and detailed geographical descriptions such as those of Eusebius and later Christian, Jewish, and Muslim pilgrims are lacking, attempts to re-create ancient geographies are often plagued with precisely the problems facing western Anatolian geography, with alternative models locating the

¹⁶ The various names for Egyptian sites can be found in the appropriate sections and index of John Baines and Jaromir Malek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Facts on File, 1980).

¹⁷ Joan Oates, *Babylon*, 2d ed. (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 10–11.

same sites hundreds of kilometers apart. Should we be surprised to find that this is precisely the problem facing the geographer of the Book of Mormon?

A serious problem facing Book of Mormon geography is the severe discontinuity of Mesoamerican toponyms between the Pre-Classic (before c. A.D. 300), the Post-Classic (after A.D. 900), and the Colonial Age (after A.D. 1520). For example, what were the original Pre-Classic Mesoamerican names for sites currently bearing Spanish colonial names such as Monte Alban, San Lorenzo, La Venta, or El Mirador? These and many other Mesoamerican sites bear only Spanish names, dating from no earlier than the sixteenth century. On the other hand, we occasionally learn from historical sources of Mesoamerican toponyms that we cannot precisely correlate with modern sites. For example, the original site of the seventeenth-century Itza Maya town of Tayasal is still disputed between Lake Yaxha and Lake Peten, despite the existence of much Spanish colonial ethnohistorical information on this location.¹⁸

Additional problems arise even for those sites that can be located, and for which we have surviving Mesoamerican toponyms. Most of the indigenous toponymic material for Mesoamerica comes from four languages: Aztec (Nahuatl), Mixtec, Zapotec, and various dialects of Maya. For each of these languages, the vast majority of toponyms were recorded only in the sixteenth century, over a thousand years after the Book of Mormon period.¹⁹ Although there is clearly some continuity of place names between Colonial and Pre-Classic times, it is usually very sparsely documented. For example, of the fifty known Pre-Classic Zapotec toponym glyphs at Monte Alban II, only “four . . . closely resemble the glyphs for places in the state of Oaxaca given in the [sixteenth-century] Codex Mendoza.”²⁰

¹⁸ Arlen F. Chase, “Con manos arriba: Tayasal and archaeology,” *American Antiquity*, 47/1 (1982): 167–71. I would like to thank John Sorenson for providing me with this reference.

¹⁹ Joyce Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing Systems: Propaganda, Myth, and History in Four Ancient Civilizations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992). Marcus’s chapter 6, pages 153–89, is an excellent introduction to Mesoamerican toponyms. Her study includes references to the major primary sources, which are mainly “from the early Colonial period” (157).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

Furthermore, Pre-Classic Mesoamerican inscriptions are relatively rare. Whereas several thousand inscriptions exist from Classic Mesoamerica (A.D. 300–900), Pre-Classic inscriptions (i.e., from Book of Mormon times) are limited to a few dozen.²¹ In addition, the earliest “simple phonetic spelling developed c. A.D. 400” in Mesoamerica.²² This means that all Mesoamerican inscriptions from Book of Mormon times are logograms. All surviving inscriptional toponyms from Book of Mormon times are therefore basically symbolic rather than phonetic, making it very difficult, if not impossible, to know how they were pronounced.

The result is that of the hundreds, if not thousands of Pre-Classic Mesoamerican sites, only a handful can be associated with Pre-Classic Mesoamerican names. Of these, most are identified by symbolic glyph names rather than phonetic names. “Of the fifty places depicted [on Building J at Monte Alban II, dating from 150 B.C. to A.D. 150] perhaps twenty can be ‘read’ in the sense that we know what the hill [place name glyph] was named. . . . Perhaps ten can be matched with actual places known today.”²³

The problem is further complicated by the fact that Mesoamerican toponyms were often translated between languages rather than transliterated phonetically. Thus, “in Nahuatl [Aztec] . . . ‘Hill of the Bird’ is Tototepec (*tototl* = bird + *tepetl* = hill) and ‘Hill of the Jaguar’ is Ocelotepec (*ocelotl* + *tepetl*). . . . ‘Hill of the Bird’ in Mixtec would be Yucu Dzaa, from *yucu* (hill) + *dzaa* (bird); ‘Hill of the Jaguar’ in Zapotec would be Tani Guebeche, from *tani* (hill) + *guebeche* (fierce carnivore).”²⁴ Therefore, even for those few sites for which a phonetic reading can be determined, the pronunciation of the glyphs seems to have been language-dependent. A Zapotec speaker would pronounce the glyph for the place-name of the same site differently than a Mixtec, and both would be different

21 John S. Justeson, “The Origin of Writing Systems: Preclassic Mesoamerica,” *World Archaeology* 17/3 (1986): 446–47.

22 *Ibid.*, 452.

23 Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing*, 176.

24 *Ibid.*, 168; different examples of the “hill of the bird” glyph can be found on 154.

from Nephite pronunciation, even though all three could theoretically be written with variations of the same glyph.²⁵

Problems in determining the ancient pronunciation for Classic Maya toponyms are different, but equally intractable. City names were represented in Maya hieroglyphic inscriptions by “emblem glyphs.” Although these generally include a phonetic component, *ahaw* (“lord”), the city-name itself was basically symbolic. Indeed, there is a dispute as to whether the glyphs symbolize the city-name proper, the ruling dynasty of the city, or the patron god of the city.²⁶ The names of most Classic Maya sites are simply not preserved. Only “approximately 40 Maya sites (out of the hundreds known) had their own emblem glyphs.”²⁷ Of these, although some permit tentative phonetic reconstruction, “others are very abstract conventions, making it more difficult to suggest origins, meanings, and phonetic readings.”²⁸ Of those few that can be given tentative phonetic readings, many do not match the sixteenth-century Maya names. “Some places . . . have kept the same name for 1,500 years, while others . . . have lost their prehispanic names.”²⁹

The modern site of Copan may have been pronounced Sutstun or Sutsku in Classic times.³⁰ The emblem glyph for the modern site of Yaxchilan is called “split-sky” by modern epigraphers. Its phonetic value is uncertain, but “may have been pronounced *caan*, ‘sky’ or *caan-na*, ‘sky-house.’ ”³¹ “The phonetic reading for . . . [the] emblem glyphs at Palenque may be Bak or Bakan, ‘Place of Bones.’ ”³² Despite the fact that

25 In this regard, Mesoamerican writing parallels Chinese, where characters can be understood and read, even though they will be pronounced differently in the various dialects of Chinese. Chinese writing can even be read, understood, and pronounced in Korean or Japanese.

26 Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing*, 182–83; Linda Schele, *Notebook for the Maya Hieroglyphic Writing Workshop at Texas* (Austin: University of Texas at Austin, 1988), 36–39. Michael Coe, *Breaking the Maya Code* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 177–78, 205.

27 Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing*, 183.

28 *Ibid.*, 184.

29 *Ibid.*, 186.

30 *Ibid.*, 185.

31 *Ibid.*, 188.

32 *Ibid.*, 186. Given the tendency of Mesoamericans to translate toponyms rather than transliterate, it is interesting to speculate about a possible relationship between Palenque/Bakan/“Place of Bones” and “the land

these sites were three of the most important in the Classic Maya period, none of the sixteenth-century names is related to the proposed phonetic reading of the Classic emblem glyphs.³³

Taken together, all of these problems mean that we will most likely never be able to learn the Pre-Classic names for most ancient Mesoamerican sites. Barring further discoveries, we will therefore never learn from inscriptional evidence how the names of Mesoamerican cities were pronounced in Book of Mormon times.

The reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography thus faces several difficulties not found in biblical geography. In Mesoamerica there is a discontinuity of toponyms, whereas there is strong continuity in Palestine; inscriptional evidence from Mesoamerica uses symbolic glyphs for cities rather than phonetic transcriptions of the names, whereas inscriptional evidence in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Palestine usually contains a phonetic component; and finally, there is no Pre-Classic onomasticon (place-name list) for Mesoamerica, whereas Palestine has Eusebius's detailed *Onomasticon*, as well as those of later pilgrims. These items allow historians to create a map grid based both on names and distances between sites for key biblical toponyms. As noted above, a more accurate comparison to Book of Mormon geography is that for Bronze Age western Anatolia, where similar problems of reconstruction exist. Thus, while Wilson's point that biblical geography is better documented than Book of Mormon geography is readily conceded, that point by no means proves that the Book of Mormon is ahistorical, as Wilson concludes.

Is There an Official Latter-day Saint Geography of the Book of Mormon?

Having falsely asserted—without any evidence or analysis—that the question of the precise location of Book of Mormon geography should be an easy matter to resolve, Wilson next goes on to misrepresent the history of the debate in the Latter-day Saint community concerning Book of Mormon geography. He pits the “traditional teaching of the LDS Church”

which they called Desolation . . . of whose bones we have spoken” (Alma 22:31), “a land which was covered with bones of men” (Mosiah 8:8).

³³ Of the possible phonetic readings of the four emblem glyphs discussed in detail by Marcus (pages 184–88), only one was related to the sixteenth-century name of the site.

against the “theories of modern Mormon scholars” (2a), but he fails to demonstrate either that there is an official Latter-day Saint position on Book of Mormon geography, or that there ever was a unanimously accepted “traditional” position.

Wilson’s slipshod and inadequate approach to the study of Book of Mormon geography is demonstrated by his failure to utilize three of the four most important recent Latter-day Saint works on Book of Mormon geography—John Sorenson’s *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (1990), John Clark’s “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies” (1989), and David Palmer’s *In Search of Cumorah* (1981), despite the fact that all of these works had been available for at least two years before the publication of Wilson’s article.³⁴ The result is that Wilson’s description is not only seriously flawed but fundamentally inaccurate.³⁵

As Sorenson has demonstrated, there have been two major models for the macrogeography of the Book of Mormon.³⁶ The Hemispheric Geography Model places the “narrow neck of land” at the isthmus of Panama, with the “land northward” being North America and the “land southward” being South America. The Limited Geography Model places the “narrow neck of land” at the isthmus of Teohuantepec, with the “land northward” being central Mexico and the “land southward” being generally Guatemala and southeastern Mexico.³⁷ Neither

³⁴ John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, rev. ed. (Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1990, 1992). I will be quoting from the revised edition. John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20–70; David Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981). Wilson does refer to John Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985).

³⁵ Such unwillingness to come to grips with substantial Latter-day Saint scholarship on the Book of Mormon is typical of most anti-Mormon writings. Is it any wonder that knowledgeable Latter-day Saints do not take such endeavors seriously and frequently find anti-Mormon writings pathetically amusing?

³⁶ By macrogeography I refer to the broad regional setting for Book of Mormon events. This is in distinction to microgeography, the identification of specific Book of Mormon toponyms with New World archaeological sites.

³⁷ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 7–35, presents a historical study of the development of thinking on Book of Mormon

of these theories is put forward as revelation or official doctrine. “The Church has not taken an official position with regard to location of geographical places [of the Book of Mormon].”³⁸ This has been true for at least a century. George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency, wrote in 1890, “The First Presidency have often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared even to suggest.”³⁹

Origin of the Hemispheric Geography Model

While it is true that the Hemispheric Geography Model was predominant in the minds of most Latter-day Saints during the early decades of the Church,⁴⁰ Wilson’s presentation of the issue is distorted.

Wilson attempts to make Joseph Smith responsible for the Hemispheric Geography Model by claiming that he “located the Hill Cumorah . . . in Palmyra, New York” (2a), an assertion for which Wilson, once again, provides no evidence.⁴¹ In fact, the earliest explicit correlation of the hill in New York where Joseph Smith found the golden plates and the Hill Cumorah mentioned in the Book of Mormon comes not from Joseph Smith, but from Oliver Cowdery.⁴² Joseph Smith simply describes “a hill of

geography; pages 38–206 present a summary of every major model of Book of Mormon geography. Sorenson’s *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* is required reading for anyone wishing to deal with Book of Mormon geography.

³⁸ John E. Clark, “Book of Mormon Geography,” in Daniel H. Ludlow, ed., *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 4 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 1:178.

³⁹ *The Instructor* 73 (April 1890): 160, quoted in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 385.

⁴⁰ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 9–15.

⁴¹ Wilson’s repeatedly sloppy handling of details is annoying; Joseph Smith identified the hill where he found the plates as being near Manchester, not Palmyra (JS–H 1:51).

⁴² Oliver Cowdery, *Latter Day Saint’s Messenger and Advocate* (July 1835): 158–59; see Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 372, for the text and additional references. The original manuscript has been edited by Dean C. Jessee, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 1:78–81.

considerable size”); no name is given.⁴³ But even though Joseph Smith may have accepted this identification, it was never put forward as revelation, and, as will be discussed below, Joseph also supported a version of the Limited Geography Model.

It is interesting to note that this identification contradicts a statement in the Book of Mormon itself. Mormon wrote, “having been commanded of the Lord that I should not suffer the records which had been handed down by our fathers, which were sacred, to fall into the hands of the Lamanites (for the Lamanites would destroy them) therefore I made this record [the Book of Mormon] out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, *save it were these few plates* [the Book of Mormon] which I gave unto my son Moroni” (Mormon 6:6). In other words, the Book of Mormon explicitly states that the records hidden in the Mesoamerican Cumorah were *not* the plates of the Book of Mormon, but were the other records of the Nephites. The Book of Mormon itself provides no name for the hill in which the golden plates found by Joseph Smith were buried.

This issue poses an interesting dilemma for critics of the Book of Mormon. We are expected to believe that, on the one hand, Joseph consciously forged the Book of Mormon, while, on the other hand, he personally identified the hill in which the golden plates were buried as the Hill Cumorah—the only hill in the world in which the Book of Mormon explicitly states the plates were *not* buried! This is another manifestation of what I call the “Idiot Savant” theory of the origin of the Book of Mormon. Anti-Mormons typically hold that Joseph was an incompetent country bumpkin who was so illiterate regarding the Bible that he was unaware that Christ was born in Bethlehem, and yet at the same time he is supposed to be capable of forging a complex document exhibiting hundreds of intricate and significant parallels with the ancient Near East and Mesoamerica. Critics of the Book of Mormon simply can’t have it both ways.

⁴³ JS-H 1:51 = HC 1:15 = Jesse, *The Papers of Joseph Smith*, 1:281 n. 1; according to this note, this phrase was inserted in the original manuscript by Joseph Smith to clarify the location. Joseph Smith’s *History* was written in 1838 (JS-H 1:2), three years after Oliver Cowdery’s identification of the hill in New York with Cumorah. If this identification originated with Joseph Smith, or was accepted by him as authoritative, why does it not appear in his *History*?

They must be able to construct a consistent model which can explain all of the known data concerning the origin and text of the Book of Mormon. It is not sufficient simply to invent a haphazard collection of contradictory and inconsistent explanations for individual features of the text. As has been demonstrated in detail, the Book of Mormon is completely consistent internally in presenting a limited geography.⁴⁴ Such a discontinuity between what the text of the Book of Mormon actually says and what Joseph personally may have believed about the geography and antiquities of the Book of Mormon is very illuminating. If Joseph Smith is the originator of, or a believer in, the Hemispheric Geography Model as the anti-Mormons claim, he could not consistently be the author of the Book of Mormon.

Wilson also claims that “Joseph Smith identified the coast of Chile as the place where Lehi’s party arrived in the New World” (2a). In fact, this statement is based not on the writings of Joseph Smith, but on Frederick G. Williams’s interpretation of an anonymous manuscript, which Williams believed derived from Joseph Smith; this statement did not appear in print until 1882. Much of the subsequent attribution of the Hemispheric Geography Model to Joseph Smith—and thereby the acceptance of that model by Latter-day Saints—comes from the mistaken assumption that the Chile interpretation represents a *revelation* to Joseph Smith. A careful examination of the manuscripts and development of this idea, however, has demonstrated that there is no reason to attribute this idea to Joseph Smith, and it certainly was never put forward as a revelation.⁴⁵ Indeed, questions concerning the authenticity of the attribution of this statement to Joseph Smith were raised by B. H. Roberts and others as early as 1909.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 209–367, esp. 329–53; Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 1–48; cf. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, and Clark, “Key for Evaluating.”

⁴⁵ Frederick G. Williams III, “Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement,” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1988; John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1992), 57–61.

⁴⁶ *New Witness for God: II. The Book of Mormon*, vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 501–2, quoted in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 386.

The “Zelph” story is another piece of evidence that is frequently used to associate Joseph Smith with the Hemispheric Geography Model. It is claimed that Joseph Smith had a revelation concerning the discovery of some bones in Illinois during the Zion’s Camp march in 1834.⁴⁷ However, the version of the story that appeared in the *Documentary History of the Church*,⁴⁸ although editorially couched in the first person, does not in fact represent Joseph Smith’s own written account of the event, nor a revelation, nor was it editorially approved by Joseph Smith. Rather, it is an editorial compilation by Willard Richards written in manuscript between 1842 and 1843.⁴⁹ It was not published until 1846, after the death of Joseph Smith, and so could not have had his final editorial approval. In the printed version, editorial deletions and changes in the original manuscript (which might have represented Joseph Smith’s work) were mistakenly ignored.⁵⁰

The complex textual history of the story is fully documented by Kenneth Godfrey and need not be repeated here. What is important is that many significant qualifiers were left out of the printed version. Thus, whereas Wilford Woodruff’s journal account mentions that the ruins and bones were “*probably* [related to] the Nephites and Lamanites,” the printed version left out the “probably,” and implied that it was a certainty. Godfrey examines several similar shifts in meaning from the original manuscripts to the printed version. “The mere ‘arrow’ of the three earliest accounts became an ‘Indian Arrow’ (as in Kimball), and finally a ‘Lamanitish Arrow.’ The phrase ‘known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountain,’ as in the McBride diary, became ‘known from the Hill Cumorah’ (stricken out) or ‘eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains.’”⁵¹ The point here is that there are many difficulties that make it nearly impossible for us to know exactly what Joseph Smith said in 1834 as he reflected on the ruins his group encountered in Illinois.

47 For an excellent analysis of the development of the story, see Kenneth W. Godfrey, “The Zelph Story,” *BYU Studies* 29/2 (1989): 32–56. A reprint of this article, including photocopies of the original manuscripts, is available from F.A.R.M.S., GDF–89. My references are to the *BYU Studies* article.

48 *HC* 2:79.

49 Godfrey, “The Zelph Story,” 42–46.

50 *Ibid.*, 43.

51 *Ibid.*, 44.

The Origin of the Limited Geography Model

Whatever the source of the traditional identification of the hill in which Joseph Smith found the plates with the Hill Cumorah, it is true that the New York Cumorah and the Hemispheric Geography Model became a widespread tradition among Latter-day Saints for several decades. However, it was by no means universally accepted. Far from being the “teaching of the Church’s spiritual leaders, unquestioned for a hundred years” (2b), as Wilson claims, the Hemispheric Geography Model was rivaled by an early version of the Limited Geography Model within twelve years of the publication of the Book of Mormon. Indeed, Joseph Smith himself was either the originator of, or was closely associated with, the development of the core idea of the Limited Geography Model.

In 1841 John Lloyd Stephens published volume one of his *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, the first accessible English-language account of the Maya ruins.⁵² It was enthusiastically received by the early Mormons, who saw it both as a validation of the Book of Mormon and as a source to help understand Book of Mormon geography. An editorial reviewing this book in the *Times and Seasons* was written either by Joseph Smith or John Taylor.⁵³ The editorial speculated that the city of Zarahemla was to be found in modern Guatemala north of the Isthmus of Panama (called Darien in the early nineteenth century).⁵⁴ Since the internal geography of the Book of Mormon places Zarahemla south of the narrow neck of land,⁵⁵ the editorial implies that the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, rather than Panama, was the Book of Mormon narrow neck of

⁵² John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841; repr. New York: Dover, 1963).

⁵³ The editorials were unsigned; Joseph Smith was supervising editor, while John Taylor was managing editor. But even if John Taylor wrote the actual words, the ideas clearly reflect Joseph Smith’s view, as can be seen in his letter to John Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, reproduced in Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1984), 502.

⁵⁴ *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (15 September 1842), and 3/23 (1 October 1842); see Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 11–13, for a discussion, and 374–75 for the relevant passages.

⁵⁵ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 7–8, and Clark, “Key for Evaluating.”

land. Thus Joseph Smith, rather than insisting only on the validity of the Hemispheric Geography Model, both advocated an early form of the Limited Geography Model and encouraged the modification of geographical interpretations of the Book of Mormon based on the discovery of new evidence.⁵⁶ The important thing to note is that the core concept of the Limited Geography Model was in existence in 1842, with the approval and possible authorship of Joseph Smith himself.

Two Cumorahs?

This issue has been dealt with by Latter-day Saint writers;⁵⁷ it is unfortunate that Wilson is unwilling or unable to come to grips with the reality of current Latter-day Saint thought on the subject, relying instead on old discredited anti-Mormon arguments. Actually, the Limited Geography Model does not insist that there were two Cumorahs. Rather, there was one Cumorah in Mesoamerica, which is always the hill referred to in the Book of Mormon. Thereafter, beginning with Oliver Cowdery (possibly based on a misreading of Mormon 6:6), early Mormons began to associate the Book of Mormon Cumorah with the hill in New York where Joseph Smith found the plates. The Book of Mormon itself is internally consistent on the issue. It seems to have been early nineteenth-century Latter-day Saint interpretation of the text of the Book of Mormon which has caused the confusion on this point. Thus, advocates of the Limited Geography Model are required only to show that their interpretations are consistent with the text of the Book of Mormon itself, not with any nineteenth-century interpretation of the Book of Mormon.

The question of how the golden plates could have been carried from Mesoamerica to New York (3b) has also been answered by Sorenson.⁵⁸ Once again Wilson has misread the Book of Mormon, claiming that the Limited Geography Model forces Moroni to transport “the entire Nephite library over two

⁵⁶ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 11–13.

⁵⁷ See discussions in Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 25–27, and Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 44–45. David A. Palmer, “Cumorah,” in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1:346–47, discusses both the New York and Mesoamerican theories, concluding that there is no official Latter-day Saint position on the matter.

⁵⁸ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 44–45.

thousand miles to the New York Cumorah” (3b). In fact, Mormon 6:6 specifically states that all the Nephite records, *except* the Book of Mormon plates, were buried in the hill Cumorah near the narrow neck of land by Mormon, not Moroni. Nowhere in the Book of Mormon does it state where the Book of Mormon plates were finally buried.

An examination of a map of North America shows that it is possible to sail along the coast of Mexico, up the Mississippi River, and then up the Ohio River to within less than one hundred miles of the New York hill where the plates were buried. Trails and waterways along these major rivers have existed for several thousand years. Sorenson provides a sixteenth-century example of someone walking a similar route in less than a year;⁵⁹ Moroni had thirty-five years between the final battles of the Nephites and when he buried the plates.⁶⁰ Thus, the plates could have been transported by canoe to New York, along well-used waterways of the Hopewell Indians (who flourished c. 200 B.C. to A.D. 400).⁶¹

Wilson claims that the location of Cumorah in Mesoamerica “conflicts with the Book of Mormon description of Cumorah as ‘an exceeding great distance’ from the narrow neck into the ‘land northward’ (Helaman 3:3,4)” (3a). It is difficult to believe that Wilson has really read the text he claims supports his argument. Helaman 3:3–4 reads: “And it came to pass in the forty and sixth [year], yea, there was much contention and many dissensions; in the which there were an exceedingly great many who departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth unto the land northward to inherit the land. And they did travel to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers.” Where in these verses does it

⁵⁹ Ibid., 45.

⁶⁰ The final battles were 384 years after the birth of Christ (Mormon 6:4), while Moroni buried the plates 420 years after the birth of Christ (Moroni 10:1).

⁶¹ For a map of American Indian civilizations in the Mississippi River valley at the time of Moroni, see Michael Coe, Dean Snow, and Elizabeth Benson, *Atlas of Ancient America* (New York: Facts on File, 1986), 51, where it shows that the Hopewell archaeological complex extended from Louisiana to New York along the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. Analysis of various artifacts has demonstrated that there was extensive trade along these river systems in the fifth century A.D.; Brian M. Fagan, *Ancient North America: The Archaeology of a Continent* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 366–67, 370–76, 392–94.

mention Cumorah? It doesn't. It simply says that a group of people migrated "an exceedingly great distance" to the north; they probably went past the Hill Cumorah. Wilson himself adds a nonexistent reference to Cumorah to this text, and then attempts to create a nonexistent contradiction (a common anti-Mormon tactic).

Lamanites and Native Americans

Wilson next maintains that the Latter-day Saints believe that *all* Native Americans are genetically descended *only* from the Lamanites. It is quite true that the Latter-day Saints claim some type of genealogical relationship between modern Native Americans and the Lamanites of the Book of Mormon.⁶² But Wilson once again significantly distorts the Latter-day Saint position. Indeed, the source Wilson quotes to support his contention in fact says just the opposite. Wilson claims, "The LDS Church continues to teach that native Americans are the direct descendants of Book of Mormon peoples. For example, the 'Introduction' in current editions of the Book of Mormon (since 1981), describes the Lamanites as 'the principal ancestors of the American Indians' " (2b).⁶³ It is difficult to see how this substantiates Wilson's claim that the Latter-day Saints believe that all Native Americans are descended only from Book of Mormon peoples. If the Lamanites are the *principal* ancestors, this implies that they are not the *only* ancestors of the Native Americans.⁶⁴ Indeed, a careful reading of the Book of Mormon text indicates that there must have been other, non-Book of Mormon peoples

⁶² Bruce A. Chadwick and Thomas Garrow, "Native Americans" in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 3:981–85.

⁶³ Likewise, Wilson claims that the Church teaches that "native populations of the vast North and South American continents are the descendants of two tiny groups of transoceanic Semitic immigrants (the Jaredites) . . . and the Nephites and Mulekites" (2c). Wilson's ability to misread the text of the Book of Mormon is somewhat overwhelming. First, the Jaredites are not said to be Semitic in the Book of Mormon. More importantly, however, the Book of Mormon discusses three migrations—Jaredite, Nephite, and Mulekite—not just two.

⁶⁴ This is explicitly stated in Chadwick and Garrow, "Native Americans," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 3:981: "Peoples of other [non-Book of Mormon] extraction also migrated there [to the New World]."

in the land.⁶⁵ Thus, the alleged problems of population levels, genetics, and languages of modern Native Americans are largely irrelevant, since the Book of Mormon allows for, and in many ways insists upon, the existence of other inhabitants of the Americas.

Latter-day Saint General Authorities and the Limited Geography Model

Wilson also distorts the opinions of Latter-day Saint General Authorities on the issue of Book of Mormon geography. “The limited geography theory has been repeatedly condemned by LDS leaders, including Joseph Fielding Smith, Jr. (10th President), Harold B. Lee (11th President), and Bruce R. McConkie” (3b). There are problems with this assertion.

First, Wilson does not provide complete references to the statements of these Church leaders, so it is difficult to evaluate his claims as to what these Latter-day Saint leaders taught. For example, the only source provided for Bruce R. McConkie’s opinion is *Doctrines of Salvation*, which in fact contains the writings of Joseph Fielding Smith as *compiled* by Bruce R. McConkie.

Wilson also distorts the contents of Harold B. Lee’s statement, which reads, “from the writings of the Prophet Joseph Smith, and of other inspired men, it *seems* all are in agreement that the followers of Lehi came to the western shores of South America. . . . I *believe* we are (today) not far from the place where the history of the people of Lehi commenced in western America.”⁶⁶ Elder Lee is not condemning the Limited Geography Model, as Wilson claims. Rather, he is simply stating his opinion (“I believe,” “it seems”) that South America was the site of the landing of Lehi. Elder Lee’s views were probably based on the Frederick G. Williams statement erroneously attributed to Joseph Smith, as discussed above.

By emphasizing the fact that Joseph Fielding Smith and Harold B. Lee were presidents of the Church, Wilson implies that their opinions should carry some type of official sanction. In

⁶⁵ See John L. Sorenson, “When Lehi’s Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (Fall 1992): 1–34.

⁶⁶ Quoted in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 390 (emphasis added).

fact, the statement by Joseph Fielding Smith was made in 1938, and that by Harold B. Lee in 1959, before either became president of the Church.⁶⁷ Their statements no doubt represented their opinions on the matter at the time they were written, but cannot be seen as representing the official position of the Church. When a Church leader becomes president of the Church it does not retroactively make his previous opinions or statements official Church doctrine.

Finally, Wilson does not mention the fact that the Latter-day Saint Church has no official position on Book of Mormon geography,⁶⁸ or that other Latter-day Saint General Authorities have advised caution in theorizing about Book of Mormon geography.⁶⁹ Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency of the Church, has recently clarified the Church's position on Book of Mormon geography.

The Church emphasizes the doctrinal and historical value of the Book of Mormon, not its geography. While some Latter-day Saints have looked for possible locations and explanations [for Book of Mormon geography] because the New York Hill Cumorah does not readily fit the Book of Mormon description of Cumorah, there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site.⁷⁰

Wilson also ignores the fact that versions of the Limited Geography Model have been published in *The Ensign*, the Church's official magazine; while Sorenson's *An Ancient American Setting* was published by Deseret Book.⁷¹ It should

⁶⁷ Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:232–34, quoted by Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 388–89.

⁶⁸ See nn. 38–39 above.

⁶⁹ George Q. Cannon, 1890, in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 384–85; B. H. Roberts, 1909, in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 386–387; John A. Widtsoe, “Is the Book of Mormon Geography Known?” *Improvement Era* 53/7 (July 1950): 547, 596–97, quoted in Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 389–90.

⁷⁰ Correspondence from Michael Watson, Office of the First Presidency, 23 April 1993.

⁷¹ Sorenson's “Digging into the Book of Mormon: Our Changing Understanding of Ancient America and Its Scripture,” which summarizes the

be clear that the official Latter-day Saint position on the Limited Geography Model is not antagonistic. Some Latter-day Saint leaders have disagreed with the model. Others, however, support it.

The Real Issue

Contrary to the authoritarian and fundamentalist presuppositions of most anti-Mormons, the real question is not which General Authority or Latter-day Saint scholar believes which model (no geographical correlation has ever been put forward as revelation), but which model best matches the geographical data contained in the Book of Mormon. While a superficial reading of the Book of Mormon may seem to point vaguely to a Hemispheric Geography Model, a careful reading substantiates the Limited Geography Model at many different levels.⁷² In recent decades the overwhelming trend among both Latter-day Saint scholars and leaders of the Church has been increasingly to adopt some version of the Limited Geography Model.⁷³ This is a clear indication—contrary to the assertions of Wilson—that the Limited Geography Model is in no way contradictory to Church teachings on Book of Mormon geography. While this does not imply an official Church endorsement of the Limited Geography Model, it does show that the leaders of the Church are not officially opposed to that model.

Thus, Wilson's claim that "In order to remove these inherent improbabilities and protect the credibility of the Book of Mormon as authentic history, a number of Latter-day Saint scholars have proposed a new approach to Book of Mormon

Limited Geography Model, appeared in the *Ensign* 14 (September 1984): 26–37.

⁷² The basic geographic data in the Book of Mormon has been synthesized and cataloged by Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 215–367; see also the important analysis by Clark, "Key for Evaluating." Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, and Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, provide detailed correlations to the Limited Geography Model; see n. 34 for complete references to these sources.

⁷³ A quick glance at Sorenson's chart in *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 32, summarizing the key characteristics of all Book of Mormon geographical theories in chronological order shows a clear shift from the Hemispheric to the Limited theories since 1904. See also Clark, "Book of Mormon Geography," in Ludlow, *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* 1:176–79.

geography called the ‘limited geography theory’ ” (3a) is wrong on several levels. As noted above, this is not a “new approach.” Its basic concept can be traced back to 1842; it was further amplified by 1887, with the first full presentation of the Limited Geography Model appearing no later than 1917.⁷⁴ The driving force behind these developments was by no means an attempt to “remove these inherent improbabilities and protect the credibility of the Book of Mormon as authentic history” as Wilson asserts (again without any evidence), but because a careful reading of the internal geographical data in the Book of Mormon requires such an interpretation.

Archaeological Issues

Wilson claims that there are “serious” problems with the Limited Geography Model. He provides only three: first, “it conflicts with details in the Book of Mormon”; second, it “contradicts the teaching of a long line of Latter-day Saint presidents and apostles”; and third, it “cannot produce a single piece of archaeological evidence that can be identified as Nephite or Jaredite” (3a). The first two of the “problems” have been discussed above. Wilson raises seven objections related to archaeology.

The Problem of Archaeological Proof

As noted above, Wilson’s basic approach is to test the historicity of the Book of Mormon by comparing the state of current archaeological knowledge of the Bible to the state of archaeological knowledge of the Book of Mormon. In the same publication it is claimed by Joel Groat that the Bible has been “verif[ied]” by archaeology,⁷⁵ while Wilson maintains that the Book of Mormon has not. Therefore, the Bible is true revelation (4c), while the Book of Mormon is not. Unfortunately, this basic paradigm demonstrates a very naive understanding of the nature of archaeological evidence and proof and the implications thereof.

⁷⁴ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 31–33, 87–89, 135–37, 188–89.

⁷⁵ Joel B. Groat, “Bones, Stones and the Scriptures: Has Archaeology Helped or Hurt the Bible?” *Heart and Mind: The Newsletter of Gospel Truths Ministries* (Fall 1992): 1 and 4.

Wilson and Groat grossly overstate both the strength of the generally accepted archaeological understanding of the Bible and the implications of the archaeological questions surrounding the Book of Mormon. For example, Groat claims that “excavations done at the site [of Jericho] . . . support this biblical story” (1b). He then goes on to quote Bryant G. Wood’s analysis of the destruction of Jericho.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, Groat fails to inform us that Wood’s model functions only if the Exodus is dated to c. 1400 B.C. As Wood himself admits, “One major problem remains: the date, 1400 B.C.E. Most scholars will reject the possibility that the Israelites destroyed Jericho in about 1400 B.C.E. because of their belief that Israel did not emerge in Canaan until about 150 to 200 years later, at the end of the Late Bronze II period.”⁷⁷ And scholars have excellent reasons for dating the Exodus to the thirteenth century, since a fifteenth-century Exodus creates more problems in the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan than it solves.⁷⁸ Be that as it may, the point here is not when or how Jericho fell, but the fact that Groat’s so-called “support” for the Bible is highly controversial.⁷⁹ Many scholars reject the idea that Jericho even existed as a city at the time of Joshua, while others reject the idea that there was an Israelite conquest of Canaan at all.

⁷⁶ Bryant G. Wood, “Did the Israelites Conquer Jericho? A New Look at the Archaeological Evidence,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16/2 (1990): 44–59.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁷⁸ The only way Wood’s theory works is if you redate the end of the Middle Bronze Age from c. 1550 to c. 1400 B.C., and then redate the Exodus from c. 1250 to c. 1450 B.C., a total shifting of standard chronology of 350 years. Imagine what the anti-Mormon response would be if Latter-day Saint scholars attempted to move the fall of Maya civilization back 450 years so that it coincided with the fall of the Nephites c. A.D. 400. Needless to say we would be accused (and rightly so) of gross special pleading.

⁷⁹ For an analysis of the problems of the redating the Exodus to the fifteenth century, see the extended discussion in the following: John J. Bimson and David Livingstone, “Redating the Exodus,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (September/October 1987): 40–53, 66–68; Baruch Halpern, “Radical Exodus Redating Fatally Flawed,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (November/December 1987): 56–61; John Bimson, “A Reply to Baruch Halpern,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July/August 1988): 52–55; Manfred Bietak, “Contra Bimson,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* (July/August 1988): 54–55.

Groat has the temerity to quote William G. Dever as lending “support for the authenticity and accuracy of the biblical record” (4a), while failing to make reference to Dever’s full views on the historical authenticity of the Bible.⁸⁰ Does Dever believe that archaeology “supports” the Bible?

The Bible . . . has its limitations as a historical document. . . . The myths of Genesis 1–11, comprising the “primeval history,” which deal with the creation, the flood and the distant origins of the family of man, can be read today as deeply moving literature, with profound moral implications. They inform us about the thought-world of ancient Israel, but they can hardly be read in the literal or modern sense as history.⁸¹

And the situation is not improved for the later chapters of Genesis and the Pentateuch in his view. “After a century of modern research,” Dever notes, “neither Biblical scholars nor archaeologists have been able to document as historical any of the events, much less the personalities, of the patriarchal or Mosaic eras.”⁸² Archaeology, Dever says, “has not brought to light any direct evidence to substantiate the story that an Abraham lived, that he migrated from Mesopotamia to Canaan or that there was a Joseph who found his way to Egypt and rose to power there. . . . The tradition is made up of legends that still may be regarded as containing moral truths, but until now they must be regarded as of uncertain historical provenance.”⁸³

And what of Moses and the spectacular events of the Exodus from Egypt? “Absolutely no trace of Moses, or indeed of an Israelite presence in Egypt, has ever turned up. Of the Exodus and the wandering in the wilderness . . . we have no evidence whatsoever.”⁸⁴ As an example, Dever cites “recent Israeli excavations at Kadesh-Barnea, the Sinai oasis where the

80 William G. Dever, “Archaeology and the Bible: Understanding Their Special Relationship,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 16/3 (May/June 1990): 52–58, 62. Dever is well known for his strenuous rejection of the term “biblical archaeology.” I would like to thank Daniel C. Peterson for his assistance on this section.

81 *Ibid.*, 52.

82 *Ibid.*

83 *Ibid.*, 54–55.

84 *Ibid.*, 55.

Israelites are said to have encamped for 38 years.”⁸⁵ Surely such a lengthy stay by such a large group, somewhere during or prior to 1200 B.C., would leave considerable evidence. And, indeed, the Israeli excavations at Kadesh-Barnea “have revealed an extensive settlement, but not so much as a potsherd earlier than the tenth century B.C.”⁸⁶

Moving forward in history to the settlement of the Israelites in Palestine, Dever notes once again that “the evidence is largely negative. In particular, the ‘conquest model,’ derived principally from the Book of Joshua, has been largely discredited. That Israel did emerge in Canaan in the early Iron Age is beyond doubt. But archaeology has not shown that the settlement followed a series of destructions, miraculous or otherwise.”⁸⁷ Professor Dever’s verdict is straightforward: “The Bible cannot simply be read at face value as history.”⁸⁸

Even some conservative Bible scholars concur with Dever’s basic position on the lack of archaeological confirmation of much of the Bible. John Bright insists that, “It cannot be stressed too strongly that in spite of all the light that it has cast on the patriarchal age, in spite of all that it has done to vindicate the antiquity and authenticity of the tradition, archaeology has not proved that the stories of the patriarchs happened just as the Bible tells them. In the nature of the case it cannot do so.”⁸⁹

I do not reproduce such comments because I necessarily agree with Professor Dever, or because—as some anti-Mormons like to imagine—Latter-day Saints enjoy demeaning the Bible. Mormons, although not fundamentalist inerrantists, believe in the basic historicity of biblical events. But I do want to draw attention to the limitations of archaeology for “proving” historical texts or religious beliefs. Even if every historical event in the Bible were to be archaeologically verified, it still would not prove that God exists or that Jesus is the Christ any more than the discovery of archaeological sites mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad* has proven that Zeus is the King of Heaven.⁹⁰

85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 Ibid.

88 Ibid., 53.

89 John Bright, *A History of Israel*, 3d ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 75.

90 See W. Waite Willis, Jr., “The Archaeology of Palestine and the Archaeology of Faith,” in James H. Charlesworth and Walter P. Weaver,

On the other hand, acceptance of the historicity of the Book of Mormon logically necessitates acceptance of both the prophetic mission of Joseph Smith and the claims of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Many refuse even to consider the possibility of the historicity of the Book of Mormon because of their *a priori* rejection of the possibility of modern revelation—whether based on fundamentalist or secularist presuppositions.

More importantly, Groat's and Wilson's contrast between a Bible that is archaeologically "proven" and a Book of Mormon that is archaeologically "disproven" is fallacious. It rests on a misrepresentation of what biblical archaeology actually demonstrates. And it relies, as will be discussed below, on a persistent refusal to look at what Latter-day Saint scholars are actually saying about the Book of Mormon. There are still numerous disputes and unanswered questions concerning archaeology and the historicity of the Bible, despite the fact that the Bible has been studied by literally thousands of professional historians and archaeologists for over a century and a half. Why, then, should we not expect similar disagreements and questions concerning the Book of Mormon, which has been seriously studied by only a few dozen professionals for only a few decades?

Pre-Columbian Contacts

Wilson's claim that "There is no solid evidence for the immigration via other routes involving long sea voyages . . . as proposed by the Book of Mormon" (2c–3a) once again is not consistent with current developments in the field. Sorenson and Raish have recently published an award-winning bibliography listing and summarizing thousands of articles by non-Mormons that examine the possibility of pre-Columbian contacts between the Old and New Worlds.⁹¹ It is true that this issue (like most

eds., *What Has Archaeology to Do with Faith?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 105–6. For a readable introduction to Homeric archaeology for the nonspecialist, see Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (New York: New American Library, 1985). Oddly, although Wilson and Groat seem to recognize this principle (1c, 2a, 5c), Groat nonetheless falls into the trap of assuming that archaeological evidence provides spiritual confirmation (4c).

⁹¹ John L. Sorenson and Martin H. Raish, *Pre-Columbian Contact with the Americas across the Oceans: An Annotated Bibliography*, 2 vols. (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1990).

complex issues) continues to be debated in academic circles. Nonetheless, in light of the numerous examples of pre-Columbian transoceanic contacts which are receiving increasing acceptance among non-Mormon scholars (as collected in Sorenson's and Raish's bibliography), how can Wilson claim there is "no solid evidence?"⁹²

The Question of Compass Directions

The issue of directions has been fully dealt with by Sorenson and Hamblin,⁹³ discussions which Wilson does not acknowledge or respond to. Thus, in typical anti-Mormon fashion, Wilson raises a problem which has already been plausibly solved by Latter-day Saint scholars, then declares victory without even acknowledging that an alternative viewpoint exists. He ignores the Latter-day Saint explanations and appears to have nothing to add to the discussion.

The fundamental question involved here is that the Limited Geography Model requires that the directions "northward" and "southward" be considered slightly different from "true" north as recognized by today's geographers. As Sorenson and Hamblin have demonstrated, ancient peoples conceived of north and south based on orientations and landmarks which frequently do not coincide with modern geographical concepts. Since geographical orientation and terminology is a relative cultural matter, not a universal absolute, it is perfectly reasonable for ancient peoples to conceptualize their geography much differently from ours.⁹⁴

In this regard the Book of Mormon closely parallels Mesoamerican cultural norms. "It is clear that prehispanic

⁹² For an excellent article summarizing the wide range of possible pre-Columbian contacts between the Old and New Worlds by one of the leading advocates of such contacts (and a non-Mormon), see Stephen C. Jett, "Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Contacts," in Jesse D. Jennings, ed., *Ancient South Americans* (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983), 336–93.

⁹³ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 38–42; William J. Hamblin, "Directions in Hebrew, Egyptian, and Nephite Language," in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 183–86. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 399–415, provides a complete discussion of all the evidence and theories, with numerous additional references.

⁹⁴ Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 401–15. provides numerous examples of the cultural relativity of directional orientation based on anthropological studies.

people [of Mesoamerica] did not share our view of accurate geography. Only occasionally did their placement of toponyms [on their geographical diagrams] reflect true spatial relations in the sense that we demand of our maps. Mesoamerican cultures were unconcerned with the exact mileage between places and the exact placement of north and south.”⁹⁵

North and South Seas

Wilson also raises the question of how the sea north and sea south fit with the Limited Geography Model (3b), a matter which has been fully analyzed by John Clark.⁹⁶ The north and south seas are mentioned only twice (Helaman 3:8; Alma 22:32), in a vague general sense. Clark rightly attributes these references to common ancient macrogeographical world-views of the earth surrounded by the primordial “ocean.”⁹⁷ Thus the minor and vague mentions of the north and south seas refer to macrogeographical cosmic world-views of seas surrounding the entire landmass, rather than specific identifiable bodies of water.

Iron and Metals

In his discussion of metals, plants, and animals in the Book of Mormon, Wilson relies entirely on an unpublished talk given

⁹⁵ Marcus, *Mesoamerican Writing*, 189.

⁹⁶ Clark, “Key for Evaluating,” 63–67.

⁹⁷ On the Mesoamerican view of the world surrounded by oceans, see Miguel Leon-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), 31–61, esp. 32–33, 46–49, with an Aztec illustration on page 47. The Hebrews and other ancient Near Easterners held similar views; see Clifford M. Jones, *Old Testament Illustrations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 26–27, for illustrations of Hebrew, Babylonian, and Egyptian world-views, all of which have the landmass of the “world” surrounded by water. The famous Babylonian world map of c. 600 B.C. represents the world surrounded by water, Oates, *Babylon*, 34, and Georges Roux, *Ancient Iraq*, 3d ed. (New York: Penguin, 1992), 94. The Greeks also viewed *okeanos* (from which our word ocean derives) as a vast cosmic river or ocean encircling the earth, see N. G. L. Hammond, ed., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 744. See also Diane E. Wirth and Steven L. Olsen, “Four Quarters,” in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 145–49.

by Ray T. Matheny.⁹⁸ Unfortunately, Wilson was unaware that Matheny's presentation was given to demonstrate the kinds of arguments which *might* be used against the Book of Mormon by non-LDS archaeologists, and does not necessarily reflect Matheny's position. The following is a portion of a letter Professor Matheny wrote concerning Wilson's article.⁹⁹

I received a copy of *Heart and Mind* and a copy of a letter sent to you by Luke P. Wilson, Executive Director of Gospel Truths Ministries. From these items I feel some obligation to give you a little more information about what took place at the Sunstone symposium in 1984. . . .

I had no idea that I was being used by Gospel Truths Ministries to discredit the LDS Church in their publication. . . . In 1984 I was asked by Sunstone to give a talk, which I refused. They persisted by calling and asked if I would be willing to sit on a panel and comment on papers that would be given on archaeology at the upcoming symposium. To this request I consented. However, when I arrived for the symposium, much to my surprise I was listed as a speaker. I objected and said that I had not prepared a paper. The Sunstone people then handed me a card with a question on it and asked if I would comment on the question. The question dealt with how does a non-Mormon archaeologist evaluate the Book of Mormon in terms of its cultural content and claims. My answer to the question was an *ad hoc* response where I tried to put myself in a non-Mormon's professional shoes and talked about the nature of the problems that the Book of Mormon poses for the archaeologist. . . .

Gospel Truths Ministries is using my *ad hoc* response without my permission, without my knowledge, and in a pernicious way against the church, and against me. The letter sent to you said that a complete transcript of my response was forwarded to you. I don't know what GT Ministries means by a "complete" transcript. I forbade any publication of

⁹⁸ Given at the Sunstone Symposium, 25 August 1984, Salt Lake City, Utah.

⁹⁹ Dated 18 November 1992, quoted with permission.

my response by Sunstone or any one else, and did not authorize any tape recordings at the time.

This is thus another unfortunate, but typical example of anti-Mormons misrepresenting the Latter-day Saint position and taking Latter-day Saint writings out of context.

Wilson's first argument is that the mention of metals in the Book of Mormon is anachronistic. Unfortunately, his position is based on his personal interpretation that the Book of Mormon claims that there were large-scale metal "industries" among the Nephites. In fact, the Book of Mormon claims only that certain metals were known to the Nephites; it is not possible to determine from the record how widespread or universal the use of metals was or which metals they used at various times. Now it is true that Mesoamericans do not seem to have practiced extensive smelting of metals, remaining dependent instead on obsidian and other stones for most tools. Nonetheless, as John Sorenson has demonstrated, Pre-Classic Mesoamericans used a wide variety of metals.¹⁰⁰ Thus it is only Wilson's *interpretation* of the Book of Mormon claiming the existence of widespread iron *industries* in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica which cannot be reconciled with the archaeological record. Wilson's interpretation is not the only possible, nor even the preferred, reading of the Book of Mormon text. Be that as it may, metals were known and used in Pre-Classic Mesoamerica, as claimed in the Book of Mormon.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ John L. Sorenson, "Metals and Metallurgy Relating to the Book of Mormon," F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1992. It is worth noting that the Vikings introduced metal smelting into North America in the eleventh century, and yet it was never adopted by the surrounding Native Americans. See William J. Hamblin, "Vikings, Iron, and the Book of Mormon," *Insights* (January 1993): 2. Interestingly, the first archaeological evidence of Viking metal-working in North America was published beginning in the 1970s, over one hundred years after the archaeological search for Viking settlements in the New World had begun; Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 286, 294; Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America*, 18–24, 128–29.

¹⁰¹ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 278–88, offers a full discussion and analysis of metals in the Book of Mormon published in June 1985, nearly a year after Matheny's talk. Wilson was aware of this book, but refused to take into consideration any of Sorenson's evidence and analysis, preferring again to rehash arguments which had already met with a full response.

Plants

Wilson discusses the apparent absence of “wheat, barley, flax (linen), grapes, and olives” (5a) in the New World as undermining the credibility of the Book of Mormon, which mentions these plants. This issue has again been dealt with by Latter-day Saint scholars.

The Book of Mormon does not claim that grapes or olives existed or were cultivated in the New World. Rather, Nephi and Jacob—both of whom were born in the Old World—mention grapes and olives, either in reference to the Old World, or allegorically, based on Old World horticultural models.¹⁰² The Book of Mormon does mention the use of wine in the New World, but wine does not necessarily refer to the fermented juice of grapes. It can include the fermented liquid derived from a wide variety of fruits or plants, including, for example, dandelions.¹⁰³ Once again, it is Wilson’s *interpretation* of the Book of Mormon, rather than the Book of Mormon itself, which cannot be reconciled with New World archaeology.

It has long been objected that the mention of barley in the Book of Mormon is a hopeless anachronism. In 1983 archaeologists discovered that indeed a variety of barley was used by pre-Columbian Americans.¹⁰⁴ Despite this evidence, Wilson changes the basis of his objection by insisting that “the grain described was not a domesticated old world barley” (5a). But the Book of Mormon never claims that the Nephites used “domesticated old world barley.” It simply states they used barley; and archaeology has confirmed the use of barley in pre-Columbian

¹⁰² See the forthcoming *The Olive, The Bible, and Jacob 5*, ed. John W. Welch and Stephen D. Ricks.

¹⁰³ J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weinder, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 20:389c. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 186–87, discusses wine and its possible Mesoamerican referents. Intoxicating drinks were known in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, see Linda Schele and Mary E. Miller, *The Blood of Kings: Dynasty and Ritual in Maya Art* (New York: Braziller, 1986), 145, 155, 180, 192, 255. The question of what exactly is a grape and what is wine has similarly plagued studies of the Norse explorations of North America, see Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America*, 139–46, for a discussion.

¹⁰⁴ The discovery was reported in the December 1983 issue of *Science* 83, and summarized by John L. Sorenson and Robert F. Smith, in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 130–32.

America. Here is a classic example of creating an interpretation of the Book of Mormon text that is narrower than the text requires, insisting that this interpretation is the only acceptable one, and then demonstrating that this interpretation conflicts with archaeological data. Even when archaeology has confirmed the use of barley in the pre-Columbian New World, critics of the Book of Mormon insist on narrowly redefining what the Book of Mormon states in order to sustain their objections. Likewise, forms of “linen” and “silk”—although not exactly the same as their Old World counterparts—were known in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.¹⁰⁵

Animals

Wilson objects to the presence of certain animals mentioned in the Book of Mormon which are not thought to have existed in pre-Columbian America (5a–b). Once again, Wilson fails even to recognize that Latter-day Saint scholars have dealt with this issue extensively, although all the questions have not been completely answered.¹⁰⁶ Rather than acknowledging and engaging the informed Latter-day Saint position, Wilson chooses simply to ignore the current evidence, blithely proclaiming the demise of the Book of Mormon.

The range of possible Latter-day Saint explanations for seeming discrepancies between the animals of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon include:

1. A species may have existed only in small numbers—introduced by, and limited to the civilizations of the Nephites—which subsequently became extinct. The existence of small herds of animals in a limited region would likely leave no archaeological evidence. For example, we know that the Norsemen probably introduced the horse, cow, sheep, goat, and pig into North America in the eleventh century.¹⁰⁷ Nonetheless,

¹⁰⁵ John L. Sorenson, “Possible ‘Silk’ and ‘Linen’ in the Book of Mormon,” in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 162–64.

¹⁰⁶ The issue is dealt with in Sorenson’s *An Ancient American Setting*, 288–99, which Wilson claims to have read; John L. Sorenson, “Animals in the Book of Mormon: An Annotated Bibliography,” F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1992, contains a complete listing of all references to animals in the Book of Mormon, and a bibliography on possible Mesoamerican referents.

¹⁰⁷ Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 119; Wahlgren, *The Vikings and America*, 124.

these animals did not spread throughout the continent and have left no archaeological remains.¹⁰⁸

2. A species may have existed at the time of the Nephites, but archaeological evidence of its existence has not been discovered, or has not been properly interpreted. The horse is an excellent example of this possibility. Although generally thought to have been extinct by the end of Pre-Classic times (before A.D. 300), possible horse remains have been found in various locations in Mesoamerica, which seem to be from archaeological strata contemporary with pre-Colonial Mesoamerican civilizations.¹⁰⁹

The Huns of Central Asia and Eastern Europe were a nomadic people for whom horses represented both a major form of wealth and the basis of their military power. Estimates are that each Hun warrior may have had as many as ten horses.¹¹⁰ Nonetheless, "To quote S. Bokonyi, a foremost authority on the subject, 'We know very little of the Huns' horses. It is interesting that not a single usable horse bone has been found in the territory of the whole empire of the Huns.' "¹¹¹ During the two centuries of their domination of the western steppe, the Huns must have had hundreds of thousands of horses. If Hunnic horse bones are so rare despite their vast herds, why should we expect extensive evidence of the use of horses in Nephite Mesoamerica, especially considering the limited references to horses in the Book of Mormon text?¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Jones, *The Norse Atlantic Saga*, 129–30, discusses the lack of archaeological evidence of animal husbandry.

¹⁰⁹ The evidence is summarized with complete references by John L. Sorenson, "Once More: The Horse," in Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, 98–100.

¹¹⁰ Rudi P. Lindner, "Nomadism, Horse and Huns," *Past and Present* 92 (1981): 15.

¹¹¹ Denis Sinor, "The Hun Period," in Denis Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 203; cf. Lindner, "Nomadism, Horse and Huns," 13, for additional references.

¹¹² Horses are never said to have been ridden in the Book of Mormon. Chariots are mentioned in association with horses (only in one incident, Alma 18:9–12; 20:6). This may be another indication that the horse was uncommon, since in societies where horseback riding is known the use of chariots rapidly declines. Furthermore, cureloms and cumoms were thought to be more useful to man than horses (Ether 9:19), a clear

3. The Book of Mormon text may have used familiar Egyptian or Hebrew terms for new unknown types of animals which the Nephites discovered in the New World. This option has been frequently mocked by anti-Mormons who are apparently unaware of the nature of Pre-Modern naming ambiguities.¹¹³ When Pre-Modern peoples encountered new species for which they didn't have a name, they followed one of two possible courses of action: they either adopted a foreign name for that animal, or they transferred to the new animal the name of an animal with which they were familiar. For example, when the Greeks first encountered a new type of animal in the Nile Valley, they called it the "horse of the river," the *hippo-potamos*, or hippopotamus. Are we to assume that Greek civilization didn't exist at all because they chose to call the Nile hippopotamus a "horse," rather than adopting the Egyptian name *h[©]™bw*? When the Romans first encountered the elephant in the army of Pyrrhus of Epirus in 280 B.C., they called it the "*Lucca bos*, Lucanian cow."¹¹⁴ Likewise, the Maya called the horse a "deer,"¹¹⁵ while the Arabs call the turkey a *dik hindi*, or "Indian Rooster." Given this phenomenon in other civilizations, why is it preposterous for the Book of Mormon peoples to have called the Mesoamerican turkey—for which they had no name—a chicken, just as the Arabs called the Indian turkey?¹¹⁶ If such a linguistic phenomenon in the Book of Mormon is seen as evidence for discounting the very existence of Book of Mormon civilization, must we not also do away with the Greeks, Romans, Maya, and Arabs?

indication of the relative unimportance of the horse in Book of Mormon societies. Indeed, horses may have been used primarily for food.

¹¹³ Sorenson, "Animals," provides references to a number of articles on this topic in his index, 50–51.

¹¹⁴ After Lucania, the province in southern Italy where the elephant was first encountered in the army of Pyrrhus; Varro, *De Lingua Latina* VII, 389, 39.

¹¹⁵ Sorenson, "Once More: The Horse," 98.

¹¹⁶ Indeed, the English name turkey derives from just such a linguistic practice. The term turkey comes from the sixteenth-century "turkey-cock" referring to a type of fowl imported from Ottoman Turkish domains in North Africa, meaning basically "Turkish Rooster." This term was later applied both to the domesticated Mesoamerican *Meleagris gallopavo* in colonial Mexico, and later to the wild turkey of North America; cf. Simpson and Weinder, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 18:690c, 692a.

In summary, although important questions certainly remain, there are various ways in which the apparent anachronisms and ambiguities of the Book of Mormon text concerning metals, plants, and animals can be accounted for.

The Argument from Authority

Finally, Wilson raises the argument from authority. He claims that since eminent Mesoamerican archaeologists such as Michael Coe (5c) and important institutions such as the Smithsonian (2c) do not accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints must bow to the authority of outsiders and abandon their own beliefs. This argument leaves much to be desired.

In fact, both Coe's statement and the Smithsonian statement represent mere brief summaries of scholarly consensus, which are obvious to anyone familiar with the field. Neither makes the slightest attempt to deal in detail with the numerous technical arguments raised by Latter-day Saint scholars.¹¹⁷ When Michael Coe states, "there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is not a Mormon, who sees any scientific justification for believing [in the historicity of the Book of Mormon]," he is belaboring the obvious, not stating an important truth. It is rather like claiming that "there is not one professionally trained archaeologist, who is not a [Christian], who sees any scientific justification for believing [the New Testament accounts of the resurrection of Jesus]."

But the argument from scholarly authority cuts both ways. Just as anti-Mormons can marshal scholars who will proclaim, as does Michael Coe, that there is "absolutely nothing" supporting the historicity of the Book of Mormon, likewise, atheists could marshal the opinions of numerous scholars, such as William Dever, regarding the lack of archaeological proof of the historicity of the Bible. In both cases, scholars base their conclusions as much on their assumptions as they do on the evidence.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ For a detailed response to the Smithsonian statement, see John L. Sorenson, "An Evaluation of the Smithsonian Institution's 'Statement Regarding the Book of Mormon,'" F.A.R.M.S. paper, 1982.

¹¹⁸ For an introduction to the history of the idea of objectivity and the important role of presuppositions and assumptions in controlling historical data see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question"*

When Coe says that there is “absolutely nothing” in the archaeological record which supports the historicity of the Book of Mormon, what he is more accurately saying is that all of the archaeological evidence known to him can be adequately interpreted and accounted for based on the assumption that there were no Nephites. This is a very different proposition. Before the discovery of the Hittites or the Dead Sea Scroll community (to provide just two examples), ancient Near Eastern historians could also adequately explain the history of the ancient Near East without a single reference to either of those groups. Yet both of those groups existed whether or not scholars were able or willing to perceive their existence.

The important question is: why do non-Mormon scholars reject the Book of Mormon? The answer is complex, but two points should be emphasized. First, acceptance of the historicity of the Book of Mormon logically necessitates acceptance of Joseph Smith’s prophetic claims. Thus, any scholar who eventually came to accept the historicity of the Book of Mormon would be logically compelled to become a Latter-day Saint. He would thereby cease to be a non-Mormon who accepts the historicity of the Book of Mormon. Secondly, and more importantly, most non-Mormons do not take the Book of Mormon seriously enough even to read it, let alone give it the careful study required to make an informed judgment. They simply dismiss it out of hand. This has been the approach taken by anti-Mormons such as Wilson, and it is the reason why Wilson’s criticisms can also be dismissed out of hand.