Title  “A Very Fine Azteck Manuscript”: Latter-day Saint Readings of Codex Boturini

Author  Christopher James Blythe


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Abstract  Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints looked for support for Book of Mormon history in recent publications on Mesoamerican antiquity. Their reading instructed them on ruins, artifacts, and most importantly for this article, codices. This article focuses on the Latter-day Saint discovery of Codex Boturini—a sixteenth-century Mexica (i.e., Aztec) pictorial manuscript depicting the migration from Aztlan to Tenochtitlan—in John Delafield’s *An Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America*. As individual Saints became aware of this roughly twenty-foot reproduction of the manuscript over time, they each approached it by drawing from the pages of the Book of Mormon, concluding that both documents—Codex Boturini and the Book of Mormon—relayed the same sacred history. Thus, LDS interpreters disregarded indigenous contexts to understand Codex Boturini and instead attempted to line up the pictographs with various Book of Mormon timelines.

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“A Very Fine Azteck Manuscript”: Latter-day Saint Readings of Codex Boturini

Christopher James Blythe

The Book of Mormon presented itself as a history of previously unidentified New World civilizations with origins in the ancient Near East. To defend its claims of historicity, believers pointed to the work’s correspondence with the Bible and their own spiritual witnesses. They also insisted that, independent of their supernatural access to this ancient world, archaeological discoveries had authenticated and would continue to authenticate the book’s historical claims. This article documents the all-but-forgotten Latter-day Saint use of Codex Boturini—a sixteenth-century Mesoamerican codex depicting the Mexica (i.e., Aztec) migration from their mythical homeland Atzlan to Tenochtitlan, the seat of the empire’s government—as physical evidence for Book of Mormon history. In the perspective of these Saints, the pictorial manuscript was an independent record of the Book of Mormon. For decades, Mormons published images from Codex Boturini (or described them) alongside commentary that translated the pictographs through a Mormon lens. As late as 1897, one Latter-day

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Saint scholar of the Book of Mormon, George Reynolds, enthusiastically juxtaposed a scene from the manuscript with one from the Book of Mormon and asked: “Could any testimony be stronger than this?”¹

Yet, finding parallels between ancient Mesoamerican codices and the Book of Mormon required interpretation if not interpretive leaps. This article documents different interpretations posited for Codex Boturini. In most cases, these interpretations are similar insomuch that they identify migration scenes with the Book of Mormon, positing which chapter and verse was illustrated by which image. Yet, each version differed in detail—sometimes drastically so. These divergent interpretations reveal the extent of nineteenth-century Mormonism’s passion for finding the sacred narrative of the Book of Mormon in American antiquity. Joseph Smith had already pointed to Native American remains and Egyptian papyri as evidences of a holy past, but he was not alone. The number of Mormons who independently discovered Codex Boturini and recorded their “reading” of the manuscript suggests that identifying artifacts and ancient hieroglyphic texts with the Book of Mormon was a collective project (fig. 1). In fact, Mormons on the geographic periphery of the faith, with less access to the church’s leadership, seem to have made the most significant contributions.

Mesoamerican codices in the United States

Americans became familiar with ancient Mesoamerica through archaeological literature published after Mexican independence in 1821. New writers reproduced the findings of scarce older works and even traveled to Latin America to produce their own studies of American antiquities.² The era’s most significant volumes on Mesoamerica were those produced by John Lloyd Stephens and artist Frederick Catherwood. The two recorded their personal observations examining archaeological sites in


Like many Americans, Mormons relished in Stephens’s verbal descriptions and Catherwood’s visual depictions of ancient ruins and lost cities. In September 1841, John Bernhisel, a Mormon from New
York City, sent a copy of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* to Joseph Smith. Smith was impressed and declared “it unfolds and develops many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon.” *Incidents of Travel* was “the most correct luminous & comprehensive” of all “histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country.”4 Word of Stephens’s and Catherwood’s work disseminated among the Saints through the church’s Nauvoo newspaper *Times and Seasons*, which published a series of articles highlighting their discoveries.5

Interest in Stephens’s and Catherwood’s *Incidents* volumes overshadowed other books on American antiquities, even while Latter-day Saints still occasionally referenced them. Eight years before the publication of *Incidents*, Mormons embraced Josiah Priest’s *American Antiquities and Discoveries in the West*, which included descriptions of ruins, artifacts, and hieroglyphics, under the claim that they demonstrated the “strong probability” that several ancient civilizations had colonized the New World throughout its history. Historian Terryl Givens counted five *Times and Seasons* articles referencing Priest’s work in defense of Book of Mormon history.6

Another work Latter-day Saints referenced frequently in the 1840s, John Delafield’s *An Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America*, has been virtually forgotten to Mormon history. *An Inquiry*, like Priest’s *American Antiquities*, argued that archaeological evidence suggested Old

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World colonization was widespread through the Americas. Delafield’s volume set itself apart from the others by its inclusion of full-page and often full-color reproductions of Mesoamerican codices. Most significantly *An Inquiry* included an eighteen-foot-long reproduction of Codex Boturini.

Codex Boturini, also known as *Tira de la Peregrinacion*, was initially part of a large collection of Mesoamerican documents gathered by early eighteenth-century Italian antiquarian Lorenzo Boturini Benaduci, from whom it derived its name. The originals were confiscated and preserved in Mexico City. The pictorial manuscript consisted of black-and-white images on one sheet of amate bark paper folded into 22 pages. The migration of the Mexica is depicted through a series of scenes linked together by footprints informing the audience of the “direction and sequence” of the story.7

Mesoamerican codices were largely indecipherable to nonindigenous readers. To translate pictorial histories requires the “interpreter [to be] somewhat familiar with the general story” being expressed.8 While contemporary Mexica possessing the intended cultural context would be able to understand what was meant to be conveyed in the pictograph, other would-be interpreters had to provide their own context in an effort to decipher the manuscript’s meaning. To the culturally illiterate, a pictograph still hints—it points to figures, actions, and events. To decipher their mystery, would-be interpreters depend on a cultural imaginary. There was often wide slippage between authorial intent and colonial reception. Western observers often (though not exclusively) “read” Mesoamerican codices through a biblical logic. The world’s population had descended through the three sons of Noah—Japheth, Shem, and Ham—and dispersed into distinct cultures and languages in the wake of the Tower of Babel. When encountering Mesoamerican


ruins, codices, or mythologies, these Bible believers expected to find survivals of ancient Near East culture.

Boturini himself declared that Native people possessed “a living memory of the Tower of Babel,” which he detected in the “imposing buildings” and throughout their codices. He was also a major proponent for the belief that the apostle Thomas had introduced Christianity to the Americas after Jesus’s death and resurrection.9 This explained how signs of an ancient Judaism and Christianity remained in the New World. Mormons would have read similar ideas in Priest’s American Antiquities and seen how such a lens could be applied to interpreting Mesoamerican codices in Delafield’s work. Most significantly, Delafield printed an image from Codex Vaticanus (fig. 2), another Mexica codex, positing that it depicted Eve speaking to a serpent, two altars for sacrifice, and Cain murdering his brother, Abel.10


As should be apparent, the purpose of this essay is not to present the Mexica understanding of Codex Boturini. However, one problem with my approach is that by not presenting readings that take seriously the Mexica understanding of their own pictographs, readers could be left with the idea that these manuscripts did not possess culturally indigenous interpretations. To alleviate this problem, I have included Mexican historian Orozco y Berra’s interpretations of the codex in captions accompanying some of the images.

Vignettes and codices in Kirtland and Nauvoo

The practice of interpreting pictorial narratives had an immediate antecedent in the Mormon community’s fascination with Egypt. After Joseph Smith purchased four mummies accompanied with Egyptian papyri in 1835, the Saints had ample opportunity to interact with the scrolls. Such interaction led to the development of an Egyptian Alphabet and Grammar and the translation of the Book of Abraham, as well as the interpretation of several vignettes that appeared on the papyri. These illustrations were identified as biblical scenes. While deciphering the scrolls’ hieroglyphics was a labor-intensive project, positing a vignette’s meaning was relatively simple. In December 1835, the Messenger and Advocate, the church’s newspaper in Kirtland, Ohio, published an article by Oliver Cowdery detailing the vignettes. He enthusiastically described four scenes, including what he saw as depictions of the Christian godhead, the temptation of Eve (fig. 3), “Enoch’s pillar as mentioned by Josephus,” and the last judgment. In 1842, the Times and Seasons published three vignettes alongside the first portion of the Book of Abraham. Individuals also encountered the vignettes on display

11. The Book of Abraham was a scriptural text revealed by Joseph Smith and eventually canonized by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints as part of the Pearl of Great Price in 1880.

in Kirtland and Nauvoo, several of whom left accounts of the interpretation they were provided during their tour.  

When a reproduction of Codex Boturini (almost certainly taken from Delafield’s An Inquiry) arrived in Nauvoo sometime before May 1841, the Saints were aware that such documents need not be considered indecipherable. William Appleby, a recent Mormon convert, visited  

Nauvoo in May and recalled seeing the codex, which he described as “a representation of the travels of ‘Lehi’ and family from Jerusalem, (as recorded in the Book of Mormon, when he came to this continent) represented by Hieroglyphics, containing near twenty feet in length, and one foot in breadth, Their footsteps are particularly laid down, the productions of the soil represented, where they traveled through, the places of their encampments, and the Boat in crossing the ‘large waters’ Their landing on this continent, Lehi’s circumcising his sons. &c.”

He inaccurately stated that the hieroglyphics had been “found engraved on Rock in South America,” perhaps conflating the codex’s origins with petroglyphs mentioned in Stephens’s work.

Appleby did not recall who showed him the copy. His only explanation for the document’s presence in Nauvoo was that it was “presented to Joseph Smith by a gentleman of New York City.” For Smith to have received such presents was not unusual during the 1840s. The Mormon prophet had already demonstrated his interest in ancient artifacts with the purchase of the Egyptian mummies in 1835. In 1840, Brigham Young and Willard Richards wrote Smith to see if he was interested in receiving a transcription of “many ancient and curious characters” engraved on a mummy’s headstone at a London museum. “Shall we copy them & send them to you for translation?” Young asked. In 1843, Smith was presented with six brass plates allegedly discovered in a burial site in Kinderhook, Illinois. One critic even claimed to have brought Smith a Greek psalter in 1842 under the pretense that he was unaware of the book’s contents.

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In each of these cases, the expectation was that Smith would translate and bring forth new information about an unknown past. Therefore, that some would expect him to provide a partial interpretation of a Mesoamerican codex is reasonable. However, Appleby did not specify whether Smith had showed him the manuscript—even if he claimed it was owned by Smith—or who had identified it as a depiction of the Nephite migration narrative. It is possible that another Latter-day Saint had interpreted the codex, just like W. W. Phelps and Oliver Cowdery had provided interpretive ideas about the Egyptian papyri. If Joseph Smith was involved in interpreting Codex Boturini, it does not seem to have been publicized outside of Nauvoo. When the first known interpreters wrote about the codex, they made it clear they did so without Smith’s prophetic guidance.

That being said, they produced their interpretations in reference to Smith’s work on the Egyptian papyri. Latter-day Saints saw the pictographic Codex Boturini and Joseph Smith’s Egyptian papyri as similar in style, but valued them differently. As historian Samuel Brown has argued, the Saints, like other Americans, expected to find “the mysteries of human origin and religion” in Egyptian hieroglyphics. Those manuscripts possessed untold stories and secrets about the creation of the universe. There were, according to Smith’s translation, portions so sacred that they could not be revealed outside the temple itself. While vignettes were believed to relate biblical stories, they also contained new accounts that needed to be integrated into the Latter-day Saints’ understanding of the sacred past.

This was in stark contrast with the way Mormon interpreters approached Codex Boturini. They certainly viewed it as an impressive manuscript. Yet, if Latter-day Saints expected that ancient Egypt could contain sacred truths to be discovered, they did not seem to hold the same beliefs about Mesoamerica. It was the Book of Mormon that held the secrets to unlock Codex Boturini. As one commentator argued, “The most valuable discoveries in American Antiquity must appeal to

the Book of Mormon for interpretation.” Codex Boturini was never offered as new scripture. Thus, while the translation of the Book of Abraham provided new doctrine and new narrative of the ancient past, interpreting Codex Boturini only validated what the Saints already believed. This was likely why interpreters outside the church’s hierarchy were willing to circulate their interpretations of the manuscript, while at the same time the production of revelatory writings had been condemned. It was another category of writing altogether.

John E. Page

In the summer of 1841, while on a mission to the eastern states, the apostle John E. Page purchased a copy of Stephens’s and Catherwood’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. On September 1, 1841, he wrote Joseph Smith in part to announce that he had developed “a new course of argument” for defending the Book of Mormon. Page’s strategy was to compare Catherwood’s seventy illustrations of Mesoamerican antiquities with the Book of Mormon. This approach, he claimed, “so completely proves the truth and divinity of the Book of Mormon there is not a gentile dog left to stir a tongue in an attempt to put down the collateral testimony which those records afford me in proof of the Book of Mormon.”

Two years later, still eager to amass archaeological proofs with recent publications describing Mesoamerican discoveries, Page purchased Delafield’s *An Inquiry into the Origin of the Antiquities of America* in Boston. He was captivated by what he called the “curious hieroglyphic map” that came with each volume. Page recalled being “strongly impressed with the idea that if the map could be truly

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interpreted it would divulge something directly either for or against the Book of Mormon.”

Not many days passed until I was sitting on a sofa in the city of Boston taking a review of the “curious map,” my eyes became heavy with sleep; I reclined my length on the sofa and, as I suppose without doubt, fell into a sleep, and dreamed I was reviewing the map, still anxious to know where to apply it; of a sudden there appeared the face of a personage before me, apparently far advanced in years, and says, “Read and compare with the Book of Ether,” and then disappeared; and I suddenly awoke and did accordingly; and gave it a critical comparing with the book I assure you, and to my great satisfaction I find that the collateral corroboration of the map with the history of the Jaradites as found in the book of Ether of the Book of Mormon that one is the other in point of history.  

After this revelation, Page removed the reproduction of Codex Boturini from Delafield's book and attached it to a white muslin cloth, which would serve as a visual aid for his lectures on correlations between the book of Ether and Boturini. He “suspended it across [Boston's] Boylston hall” where he first explained his new insights to an audience of over one thousand. In 1934, Page's son, Justin E. Page, discovered the banner among his father’s possessions. He described it as “a canvas about 20 feet long and 20 inches wide, but doubled so it shows a 10 inch surface and to which is nicely stitched a fine silken paper or apparently so; and the whole length of the canvas is covered with engravings much like those on the disks of the Book of Abraham.” That this canvas was designed by fastening Delafield's reproduction of Codex Boturini is suggested by its dimensions, as well as by a notation

25. Justin E. Page to M. Wilford Poulson, October 1, 1934, M. Wilford Poulson Papers, MSS 823, Box 5, Folder 8, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. I would like to express appreciation to Robin Jensen for pointing out this source.
that identified the copy as originating in Cincinnati, Ohio, which also appeared on the reproduction included with *An Inquiry*.

In March 1844, Page repeated the lecture, using the same banner, in Washington, DC. That year he also published a short pamphlet that included a statement signed by three people who were printers in the area. While they did not profess to be believers in the Book of Mormon, they argued that the missionaries’ beliefs “merit a fair, candid, and impartial examination.” They had reportedly come to this conclusion after attending “a recent lecture, given by Mr. Page” in which they “were struck with the extraordinary character of the evidence adduced to sustain the claims of the Book of Mormon.” Apparently they left fully convinced by Page’s basic argument. In their words:

> If we are to rely upon the veracity of men standing in high public estimation, and Government favor, Messrs. Delafield, Priest, Stephens and Catherwood, whose recent important discoveries of ancient antiquities of America, have astounded all, under whose supervision their statements in relation thereto have come, then must their evidence remove, in a great degree, the doubts at present existing in the public mind, in relation to the character of this book; the plates of which, if we are to rely upon the statements made, were found some seventeen years previous to the discoveries made by the gentlemen named above.27

The affidavit was later used to raise funds for a publication on the Book of Mormon and American antiquities.

Three years later, Page, now affiliated with a sect of Mormonism led by schismatic prophet James J. Strang, had such a book foremost on his mind. During the October 1847 general conference held in Voree, Wisconsin, Strang announced his support of “the publication of a new work on the evidences of the Book of Mormon as derived from a very full development of American Antiquities, by John E. Page.” The

conference followed suit and voted to “recommend the publication . . . and commend the work to the saints and all men.” On July 6, 1848, Page published a lengthy article in Voree’s Gospel Herald on the book project, which he then envisioned as a two-volume set, to be entitled The Collateral and Positive Evidences of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon. Page was convinced that by presenting “indisputable evidence,” the book would “do more to convince the honest in heart of the truth of the faith of the Latter Day Saints than all the elders can do without it.”

Page explained that he would “seek principally to confine [himself] to such items as have been developed since the Book of Mormon was published.” His intended project revealed one of the major appeals of Codex Boturini and other Mesoamerican evidences for the Book of Mormon. While in the 1830s Latter-day Saints had defended the book’s historicity with archaeological and geographical arguments, these arguments were less convincing, namely because they were based on evidences that could have been available to an author in 1830. When Mormons pointed to discoveries that were only available to residents of the United States after 1830, such as Delafield’s An Inquiry and Stephens’s Incidents of Travel, they demonstrated the book’s apparent knowledge of Mesoamerica independent of such discoveries.

Page’s book was never published, although he had clearly begun working on the text. The Gospel Herald published five installments of a column entitled “Collateral Testimony of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon.” The articles focused on evidences drawn from Stephens and Catherwood or from newspaper articles documenting archaeological finds in America. Unfortunately, perhaps for want of space, Page did not present his interpretation of Codex Boturini in those pages. In fact, he did not so much as reference Delafield’s work.

28. “Conference of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, at Voree.”
31. Page cited an article announcing the discovery of ancient copper tools from the Buffalo Express and an account of Stephens and Catherwood in the Beloit Journal.
Only the brief reference he included in his July 6, 1848, essay, as well as a report of a lecture Page preached before a Strangite audience later that month in Voree, helps reconstruct Page’s interpretation. In the first instance, Page noted that “the map begins with a hieroglyphic representing the tower of Babel, where the book of Ether begins its account of the Jaredites (see fig. 4), and ends with the hieroglyphic representation of two men with sword in hand (see fig. 5), where the Book of Ether terminates the account of the Jaredites, with the combat between Coriantumr and Shiz, the two last commanding generals of that nation.”32 Thus, Page provided a direct reading of elements in the first and last page of the manuscript (based on the folds of Delafield’s reproduction of the codex).

The relevant description of the July 1848 sermon from the Gospel Herald reads:

It was indeed astonishing to read the book of Ether (part of the Book of Mormon) published in 1830, by Joseph Smith, and lay by the side of it the great picture of M. Bottarini found in the ancient halls of the Montezumas, a relic of the Aztec archives, published some years after the Book of Mormon, and then behold the almost speaking picture of all the same events recorded in that book distributed in the same order, beginning with the same fact and ending with the same. So perfect is the concord that no man can think otherwise than that they are chronicles of the same facts. Even the chronology is marked on the ancient pictures by points corresponding with the years in the book of Ether. The numbers of persons in the various scenes correspond. The number of barges used in crossing various waters is the same. The feasts, the coronation of kings, the battles and the mourning for the slain are found painted and sculptured on the ancient ruins of Yucatan, Chiapas and Central America precisely as Joseph Smith had written them in the Book of Mormon years before the world knew that those countries contained any ruins.33

32. Page, “Book of Mormon.”
Because the report does not point to specific portions of the manuscript, the reader cannot be sure just where Page believed these events were portrayed.

Another source may provide additional details about Page’s views. Page’s interpretation of the codex was set apart by his use of the book of Ether rather than 1 Nephi. Only one other known interpreter, Isaac Sheen, would follow Page’s lead in a series of articles entitled,
“Antiquarian Evidences of the Truth of the Book of Mormon,” published in the *Latter Day Saints’ Herald* between 1866 and 1868. In two of the sixteen installments of this series, Sheen pointed to evidences from Codex Boturini, following closely to what is known of Page’s interpretations. He also saw the manuscript beginning with the Tower of Babel and ending with the depiction of Coriantumr and Shiz. Referring to the eight figures shown toward the right of figure 1, Sheen explained that “these eight houses probably represent eight families which constituted Jared’s company” mentioned in the text of Ether. This detail likely corresponded to the *Gospel Herald’s* reference to Page citing the “number of barges.” Sheen described other scenes that he believed related to the text. “A tree cut off a short distance from the ground” represented the Jaredites constructing barges. “A representation of a person shedding tears on a high place, probably a mountain,” correlated to a passage in Ether 2:14 where God reprimands the brother of Jared for not praying. Sheen reasoned, “The chastening of the Lord often makes men shed tears.” Finally, Sheen pointed to an image of “a serpent with its fang protruding from its mouth immediately behind four men” (fig. 6). This pictograph, according to Sheen, illustrated a scene from Ether, in which “there came forth poisonous serpents also upon the face of the land, and did poison many people” (Ether 9:31).

Sheen does not explain how he learned about the manuscript or how he developed the interpretation he used. A possibility is that he learned of it through Page or through reading Page’s writings. Sheen also interacted with those heterodox communities that did not follow Brigham Young and as such was in a position to become familiar with Page’s interpretations.

Returning to Page, by the summer of 1849, he had denounced Strang’s movement. Later that year, he aligned with another Mormon sect affiliated

35. Sheen referred to the image toward the right of figure 11, on page 208 herein.
36. “Antiquarian Evidences of the Truth of the Book of Mormon, No. 6.”
with the visionary James Collins Brewster. Page had not given up the hope of completing his book project. In October 1851, the majority of his 1848 fundraising letter was republished in the Brewsterite newspaper, The Olive Branch. This was the last time the book was mentioned in the press. Page was never able to see the two-volume The Collateral and Positive Evidences of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon in print. Whether he knew it or not, other Latter-day Saints had already begun publishing portions of Codex Boturini as early as 1845.

The Prophet

Beginning on March 1, 1845, The Prophet, a New York–based Mormon newspaper, serialized “detached portions” of Codex Boturini, accompanied by interpretive captions and intermittent commentary, in five sequential issues. Each issue reproduced a portion of the manuscript under the paper’s header, leaving approximately 1/3 to 1/2 of the page for columned text. Perhaps The Prophet’s editor, Samuel Brannan, intended for the issues to resemble the March 1842 issue of the Times

and Seasons that published “a facsimile from the Book of Abraham” and offered Joseph Smith’s interpretation of the first Abraham vignette (see figs. 7 and 8). A caption identified the images as “The Journey of Lehi and his family from Jerusalem to the continent of America, in the first year of the reign of Zedekiah King of Judeah, previous to the Babylonish captivity,” the central narrative of 1 Nephi. Brannan’s views on Codex Boturini may have stemmed from the interpretation already circulating in Nauvoo in 1841. Each of the identifications recorded in Appleby’s journal appeared in The Prophet’s serialized interpretation, and Appleby himself spent time in New York City a month previous to the serialization, where he could have been in a position to influence the publication.

In the premier issue to feature the reproductions, Brannan expressed his expectation that for Latter-day Saints those “familiar with the Book of Mormon, can at once discover, the harmony existing between the two records.” Indeed, recognizing similarities between the two manuscripts was reasonable based on the scriptural lens Mormons wielded. However, holding this position does not explain the relationship between the documents. Rather than alleging the Book of Mormon was a source text for Codex Boturini, Brannan believed they were two civilizations’ perspectives on one common history. The Book of Mormon was “kept by the more enlightened part of the aborigines (the Nephites),” and Codex Boturini was “kept by the less enlightened (the Lamanites).” The idea that the codex was a Lamanite Book of Mormon reflected the view of many Americans that pictorial texts were less sophisticated and thus they were evidence of a more primitive society than those who used a phonetic alphabet system. Brannan may have also been influenced by a reading of the Book of Mormon that held that Lamanites were illiterate.

40. Untitled, The Prophet, March 1, 1845.
41. Recently, Deanna Draper Buck has argued for the prominence of literacy throughout Book of Mormon peoples, but her argument is the exception that proves the rule when it comes to previous scholars’ perceptions of the state of literacy in the
Figure 7. The Prophet, March 1, 1845.
Figure 8. *Times and Seasons*, March 1, 1842.
Brannan shared Page’s initial hesitance with interpreting the vignettes without the aid of revelation. “We do not wish to lay down our own opinion as being the only standard for the explanation of these glyphs, for this would not be liberal, but when God speaks we will keep silent.” Yet, some interpretations seemed self-evident. For example, referring to the facsimile, he wrote, “It must be admitted that the above is a very striking representation of some things that are recorded in the Book of Mormon.” Except for the caption that appeared under each image, the first, third, and fifth installments did not include any specific interpretive comments. In the case of the first facsimile, this may have been because the general caption seemed sufficient for readers to understand that Brannan was suggesting that the nautical migration vignette should be seen as the journey to the new continent. In the cases of the last two installments, it may be that no parallel with 1 Nephi was apparent.

The second facsimile of the codex (fig. 9) was identified as a portrayal of Lehi's significant dream depicting Lehi's sons and others traveling down a “strait and narrow path” through a mist of darkness (1 Nephi 8:20). Those who succeeded found their way by holding onto a rod of iron that led them to a special tree “whose fruit was desirable to make one happy” (1 Nephi 8:10). With the assistance of a vision of his own, Nephi explains that the tree represented “the love of God,” the rod represents “the word of God,” and the mist of darkness represented “the temptations of the devil” (1 Nephi 11:22, 25; 12:17). Brannan argued that the image depicted five figures surrounding the tree of life with the rod attached. However, in keeping with the narrative, only three of the five were shown eating fruit. In the Book of Mormon, he explained, Lehi had witnessed “his wife (Sarah) with his two sons (Nephi and Sam) partaking of the fruit, while the other two (Laman and Lemuel) did not.” This was an amazing fit, but in this case it was based on Delafield’s miscopying of the original codex, which shows each of the five figures holding a circular object (fig. 10).

Page looked forward in the narrative to explain why the tree was “represented as broken and falling, with a man’s arms clasped around the trunk of the tree.” He posited that the tree of life represented the “kingdom of god on earth” and that Codex Boturini’s author was depicting the eventual corruption of the church in America and an era when Moroni, “but one man that adhered to the commandments of God, … sought to sustain his kingdom on earth.” It was Moroni who was
“represented with his arms extended around the tree, at the very time the top is severed and falling to the ground.”

Concerning the third facsimile (fig. 11), Brannan again identified the four figures on the left of the facsimile as Lehi’s sons on their journey. He interpreted three figures lying backwards over cactus-like plants with a fourth reaching toward one of their bodies as “undoubtedly representing Lehi in the act of circumcision.” Above these figures, “Nephi is trying the strength of his wooden bow that he invented after they had broken their steal ones.” Finally, Brannan explained a final figure positioned on top of a large object as “the pillows of heaven or the firmament.”

In each of the first three facsimiles, there were visual elements that seemed germane to the Book of Mormon narrative—nautical travel, a tree, and in the third instance, a figure holding a bow. However, each page also contained elements that seem forced. Lehi

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circumcising his sons seemed particularly out of place because there was no corresponding passage in the Book of Mormon. Mexican historian Orozco y Berra identified the scene as a “representation of human sacrifice,” specifically, the “cutting out the heart of a victim.” However, the New World practice of circumcision was frequently cited as proof of Native American origins in Hebrew culture, which likely influenced the Latter-day Saint reading of the scene.

Initially Brannan hoped the serialized manuscript would attract new subscribers for The Prophet. A warning accompanied the March 1, 1845, issue that interested parties should subscribe so as to not miss out on the serialized codex. However, by the April 5, 1845, issue, it had been decided to forego printing additional excerpts in The Prophet and instead publish the manuscript in pamphlet form. The title never materialized.

Codex Boturini in Mexico and the American West (1879–1946)

Despite the enthusiasm for Codex Boturini in the 1840s, for three decades it was omitted from LDS defenses of the Book of Mormon. Of course, Mormons remained convinced that New World archaeology would continue to produce discoveries in favor of the scripture’s historicity. The first missionaries in Mexico City came with that mindset in place and viewed gathering information on Mesoamerican antiquities as an important part of their work. In November 1879, the newly arrived apostle Moses Thatcher recorded his desire to find “Aztec” records kept on maguey leaves, which detailed “in signs & symbols, the history of their migrations; about which I will try & secure some knowledge while in this strange land.”

44. The Prophet, April 5, 1845.
Only a few days later, on November 19, the missionaries paid the first of many visits to the National Museum of Mexico where the original Codex Boturini was on display. Thatcher wrote, “I visited the National Museum and was greatly interested, particularly in the collection of the introyer antiquities pertaining to Aztack.” He recorded the museum placard for the codex in his diary, “‘A very fine Azteck manuscript’ (of figures signs and symbols) on Maguey in 21 folds or leaves, on which are is depicted the imigrations migrations of that extraordinary people. It is considered in Mexico as the most perfect and valuable one extant.” While Thatcher did not then speculate on the codex’s meaning, he seems to have considered its potential religious significance. He noted “many very interesting figures and hieroglyphics, some remarkably resembling those contained in the Pearl of Great Price.” In other words, he recognized similarities between Codex Boturini and the Book of Abraham.

Strangely, this is the last explicit reference to Codex Boturini in the journals of the early missionaries to Mexico. They returned to the museum, established relationships with historically knowledgeable Mexicans, and acquired a nice collection of literature on the Mesoamerican past. They even purchased the full nine-volume set of Lord Kingsborough’s Antiquities of Mexico, of which the first seven volumes are devoted to reproducing codices. Codex Boturini appeared in the first volume. The missionaries made use of their newly obtained knowledge to champion antiquities-based arguments in favor of Book of Mormon historicity.

One of their oft-repeated arguments was based on the Spanish destruction of “Indian histories.” This was the New World counterpart to Mormon beliefs that volumes of Jewish and Christian scripture had been lost or corrupted. In a short article published in the Juvenile Instructor, James Z. Stewart, a missionary to Mexico, explained that “at the time of the conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards, in the fifteenth century, the Indians had their histories, complete. They had nearly all

that is contained in the Book of Mormon.” He argued that “had these books been preserved, the truth of the divine origin of the Book of Mormon would have been so clearly proven that no one could reasonably have doubted.” Yet, the Spaniards had not been able to “get them all.” Stewart referenced the “Aztec Museum” and his reading of “old Spanish histories of Mexico, Central and South America,” filled with “astonishing proofs of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon.” He believed the “time is not far distant when [mankind] will be compelled to accept it as true, or, if they condemn it, they will do it contrary to their own conviction.”

Stewart did not reference any specific manuscripts, promising that Thatcher would provide the evidence in future writings. When a series of articles appeared under Thatcher’s name, they made good use of the historical literature from Mexico but did not once reference Codex Boturini. Thatcher was more taken with the textual Popol Vuh, which he believed paralleled the book of Ether, than with any of the region’s pictographs. If the Mexico mission did not contribute significantly to the interpretive history of the codex, it revived Mormon interest in the Mexican past.

In 1888, George Reynolds’s *The Story of the Book of Mormon* came close to fulfilling Samuel Brannan’s and John E. Page’s vision of a full-length work featuring images from Codex Boturini. *Story* was a Book of Mormon paraphrase and commentary geared to be accessible to the church’s youth. More importantly, it was, as Reynolds noted, “the first attempt made to illustrate the Book of Mormon.”

Historian Paul Gutjahr recently observed that the volume’s “illustrations everywhere linked Mesoamerica

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to the Book of Mormon. In most cases, Reynolds commissioned artwork from LDS artists, but he also included five images from Codex Boturini. He highlighted these “Aztec historical charts” in the volume’s preface, claiming that all previous attempts to translate them “have been ineffectual, and in many cases ludicrous.” From his vantage point, “It required the publication of the Book of Mormon to turn on them the light of divine truth, when their intent at once became apparent.” That being said, Reynolds did not publish any images from Codex Boturini that had not been previously published in *The Prophet*. This leaves the possibility that Reynolds borrowed directly from *The Prophet* rather than from Delafield’s reproduction. His inclusion of the miscopied image of the five figures eating limits it to one of these two possibilities.

Reynolds’s interpretations were inserted as interesting asides to the larger narrative. In some cases, the readers were left to make their own assumptions about how Reynolds believed an image should be read. For example, the pictograph printed here as figure 1 appeared a page before Reynolds described Nephi decapitating Laban—perhaps suggesting a correlation between the two events. The middle figure may have appeared to Reynolds as a decapitated head. When describing the portion of the codex printed here as figure 9, Reynolds pointed to the same elements from Lehi’s dream of the tree of life as Brannan had before. However, Reynolds’s interpretation of the portion of the codex printed here as figure 11 differed from the 1841 and 1845 understanding. He omitted the reference to circumcision—an element that did not originate from the Book of Mormon text—reasoning instead that it “seems to shew some of the many attempts made by Nephi’s brethren to slay him, when they bound him to trees in the wilderness and otherwise abused him.”

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53. Reynolds, *Story of the Book of Mormon*, 47; Reynolds suggested an alternate reading that because “the faces of two of the men are painted black, it is not impossible that they may represent some persons who had been killed.”
Two other Latter-day Saint interpretations of Codex Boturini appeared in 1937 and 1946 respectively. Both included much more of the complete manuscript than either Brannan or Reynolds had provided. Josiah Hickman concluded his 1937 work, *The Romance of the Book of Mormon*, with a chapter entitled “Aztec Codices.” Whereas earlier interpreters were not as concerned with how the order of scenes matched up with the Book of Mormon narrative, Hickman was particularly concerned with the sequence of events. He paired Codex Boturini with other codices to narrate 1 Nephi. By reordering the images, Hickman could, for example, place the tree of life narrative after and not before what he believed was the central narrative of the codex—the story of Nephi, Sam, Laman, and Lemuel’s efforts to obtain the brass plates from Laban—thus keeping with the sequence of events in the Book of Mormon. Hickman’s reproduction of Codex Boturini included images that did not appear in *The Prophet* and also contained the copying mistake present in the copy of the codex contained in Delafield’s *An Inquiry*.

While some elements of Hickman’s interpretation mirrored earlier interpretations, it included various unique details not found previously. He pointed to images throughout the manuscript that, he alleged, depicted the four brothers bringing treasures to Laban, escaping his wrath, and then one brother sneaking back in to kill him. Hickman interpreted figure 12 as “a man of authority [i.e. Laban] left behind, but it indicates his head has been severed, for blood is coming from his mouth and nostrils.”

Hickman’s most interesting interpretation related to the three figures lying backwards over cactus plants, which Appleby’s journal and *The Prophet* had interpreted as an illustration of Lehi circumcising his sons but that Reynolds believed represented the multiple occasions Laman and Lemuel abused Nephi. Hickman posited a third possibility that the three figures “have their beds placed upon plants or brush, presumably to protect themselves from poisonous insects or reptiles;

or it may be to have softer beds to sleep upon.”55 The first two are portrayed “covered with a dark covering, which may suggest sleep.”56 The depiction of the third figure, whose eyes are visible but whose mouth is darkened, “may indicate that physically he is still asleep, though the open eyes would indicate an inner vision inspired by the divine messenger.”57 The messenger, according to Hickman, “bears the insignia of holiness.”58 This creative reading neatly placed the vision of Nephi after his father’s dream of the tree of life. Those familiar with the narrative will recognize Hickman’s identification of the “divine messenger” as a reference to one of two of Nephi’s divine guides in the narrative.59

Despite Hickman’s expanded interpretation, when compared to earlier renditions, his commentary was often more modest and less certain. He wrote of the “suggested relationship, if not a proof of a relationship between the narrative of the Aztec codices and the story of the Book of Mormon.”60 Hickman explained that “this chart could reasonably

55. Hickman, Romance of the Book of Mormon, 262.
56. Hickman, Romance of the Book of Mormon, 263.
57. Hickman, Romance of the Book of Mormon, 263.
58. Hickman, Romance of the Book of Mormon, 265.
59. Nephi’s vision begins in 1 Nephi 11:1 under the supervision of the Spirit of the Lord and is continued by an angelic messenger beginning in verse 14.
represent Lehi’s departure.”61 One subtitle even referenced “The Supposed First Effort of Lehi’s Sons to Get Record.”62 Yet, even if he used cautious modifiers when discussing the particulars of his interpretation, he clearly believed that when taken together there was little reason to doubt his position. “The wonder is that so much of this classic pictograph lends itself to the Book of Mormon story.”63

In 1946, James W. LeSueur published *The Guatemalan Petroglyphs: The Nephite Story or From Whence Came the Aztecs*, which included a reproduction of Codex Boturini in its entirety.64 LeSueur claimed to have come to the interpretation by revelatory means. While visiting the National Anthropology Museum in Mexico City, he saw Codex Boturini on display. He recognized it from Reynolds’s and Hickman’s books, but seeing the complete and original manuscript was a vastly different experience. “As I looked it over, the interpretation of it came to my mind.” LeSueur met with the curator to share his thoughts. The curator acknowledged the parallels as a “remarkable coincidence.” Unsatisfied, LeSueur pronounced it “more than a coincidence, it is a definite confirmation.”65

In most cases, LeSueur did not explain how each pictograph depicted a Book of Mormon scene; rather he printed a page of the codex and then a page of scriptural quotes or a summary of a chapter. The reader was then left to determine how the verses related to the scene. LeSueur believed that Codex Boturini represented almost the entirety of Book of Mormon history previous to the coming of Jesus Christ. He began his interpretation with the migration narrative, continuing through Lehi’s dream and the breaking of Nephi’s bow, following the history of the Nephites in the promised land, and quoting scripture in Mosiah, Alma,

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64. Like Appleby, LeSueur misidentified the codex as a petroglyph. His association of Codex Boturini with Guatemala was singular to him.
and Helaman. LeSueur saw the end of the codex as a depiction of the sons of Mosiah’s mission to the Lamanites.

LeSueur based his reproduction of Codex Boturini on a copy he purchased at the National Anthropology Museum, making the images in *The Guatemalan Petroglyphs* the only known LDS rendering of the codex that was not dependent on the Delafield copy. While the only major difference was the fact that all five figures believed to be surrounding the fruit of the tree of life had arms and were holding the fruit, LeSueur was able to interpret the scene almost identically to his predecessors. He pointed out that “Laman and Lemuel, refuse to eat holding it out.”

It is not clear how LeSueur interpreted the three figures lying backwards on the cactus-like plants; however, the verses he quoted to correspond with this image discussed the discovery of “fruit and food” in Bountiful. The majority of other interpretations in LeSueur’s *Guatemalan Petroglyphs* were more obscure, referring to the settlement of different lands.

**Conclusion**

Latter-day Saint interpreters of Codex Boturini were part of a larger collective project of “translating” Mesoamerican relics. There was already a history of well-meaning Christians who had disregarded indigenous contexts and interpreted hieroglyphics through their own worldview. The Latter-day Saint reception history of Codex Boturini demonstrates how early Mormons imbibed and adapted the popular archaeological literature of the early republic to their needs and desires. Their reading Codex Boturini through the lens of the Book of Mormon was not substantially different from John Delafield’s reading Codex Vaticanus through the lens of Genesis.

At the same time, this was very much a Latter-day Saint project. The appeal for these interpreters was in proving the story of Joseph Smith’s

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67. LeSueur, *Guatemalan Petroglyphs*, [36].
discovery of an ancient American record engraved on gold plates near his home in New York. Indeed, Latter-day Saints were inspired to read and ponder American antiquity not just from a popular culture still eager to find Near East roots in indigenous populations, but also from Joseph Smith’s own examples. Codex Boturini was a testament to the Book of Mormon and, to quote John E. Page, “the most valuable discoveries in American Antiquity must appeal to the Book of Mormon for interpretation.”

Christopher James Blythe is a historian at the Joseph Smith Papers. He received his PhD in American religious history from Florida State University in 2015 after completing degrees from Utah State University and Texas A&M University. His book manuscript Vernacular Mormonism: The Development of Christian Apocalypticism among Latter-day Saints is currently under review for publication. He is a proud member of the JSP Peripatetic Society.

68. Page, “Book of Mormon.”