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response to the Book of Mormon is a rare kind of grace. It provides a response from an otherwise unavailable space. It is, quite literally, a gift we cannot give ourselves. We are fortunate, then, and I am grateful, to have readings like Thomas's that enact both the charity and the clarity the text needs to do its own work.

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Reviewed by Matthew Roper

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TRADITIONS OF THE FATHERS: THE BOOK OF MORMON AS HISTORY is Brant Gardner's most recent contribution to Book of Mormon studies. His earlier works include a six-volume series, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (2007), and *The Gift and Power of God: Translating the Book of Mormon* (2011). This most recent volume provides selections from his commentary as well as new material from his research subsequent to 2007. Readers of *Traditions of the Fathers* will still find those earlier volumes useful as they contain much research that is not included in this most recent work.

As signaled by the title, Gardner's work touches on some popular "traditions" or readings of the Book of Mormon that are or may be

erroneous (Mosiah 1:5). These include the old assumptions that the narrative covered both North and South America (p. 16), that Book of Mormon migrants encountered an empty land of promise (p. 153), and that the final battlefield of the Jaredites and Nephites was in New York (pp. 375–79). The author also rejects some correlations that readers have made between the Aztec god Quetzalcoatl and the resurrected Jesus in the Book of Mormon (pp. 353–65).¹

Gardner provides a useful methodological discussion detailing problems with the uncritical use of parallels made by both critics and defenders of the Book of Mormon. His approach, which he distinguishes from the other approaches previously mentioned, centers on what he sees as interlocking convergences of significant sets of evidence in time and location that can potentially increase understanding of the text (pp. 25–54). The book is organized more or less chronologically with an examination of the world of Lehi's Jerusalem, the family's journey through the wilderness (pp. 55–117), the geography of the Book of Mormon in light of Mesoamerican conceptions of direction and the cosmos (pp. 119–50), the Lehite arrival in and acculturation into a Mesoamerican setting (pp. 151–280), the Lamanite culture (pp. 281–310), the warfare (p. 311–23), the Gadianton robbers in a Mesoamerican context (pp. 325–42), the destruction in 3 Nephi (pp. 343–51), the final Nephite destruction in the fourth century AD (pp. 368–79), and the Jaredites (pp. 381–400). In his concluding chapter he summarizes key convergences, “which not only create a connection between the text and a time and place, but which actually use that time and place to make the text more understandable” (p. 408).

Gardner cites an article I wrote on the history of early interpretations of Book of Mormon geography.² I had argued that, contrary to

1. For a more expanded discussion of his arguments, see Brant A. Gardner, “Quetzalcoatl: A Malleable Mythology,” in Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Kofford Books, 2007), 5:353–95; and Gardner, “The Christianization of Quetzalcoatl: A History of Metamorphosis,” *Sunstone* 10/11 (1986): 6–10.

2. Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 225–75.

popular assumption, there was no authoritative doctrine on the location of specific Book of Mormon lands and that this was underscored by the diversity of views expressed by nineteenth-century readers. While he agrees that there was no authoritative position, he questions whether these nineteenth-century interpretations actually constitute different geographical “models” (p. 15). By 1890, however, President George Q. Cannon, surveying past efforts, referred to many “suggestive maps” (for the most part, alas, no longer extant) and drastically contradictory views that had been and were being vigorously advocated by individuals who wanted church approval. Readers were “not united in their conclusions. No two of them, so far as we have learned, are agreed on all points, and in many cases the variations amount to tens of thousands of miles. . . . One student places a certain city at the Isthmus of Panama, a second in Venezuela, and a third in Guiana or northern Brazil.”³ These could be characterized as undeveloped or perhaps precritical, but whether one uses “model” or some other term, they clearly do in at least some cases represent significant differences of interpretation, not infrequently on *key* points of Book of Mormon geography. These include the location of Lehi’s landing, the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla, the narrow neck of land, and the land of Desolation. When one writer places the final battlefield of the Jaredites in New York, while another has it in Honduras, we are clearly dealing with significant differences of opinion among some nineteenth-century readers of the text.

Gardner’s discussion of recent controversies over the question of DNA and the Book of Mormon is well informed (pp. 170–75). It is worth noting that the issue of DNA as a Book of Mormon problem is really an old scarecrow dressed up in more recent clothing.⁴ Several decades ago, one heard criticisms based on blood type or physiological features thought to be exclusively Mongoloid, and the argument that

3. George Q. Cannon, “The Book of Mormon Geography,” *Juvenile Instructor* 25/1 (January 1, 1890): 18.

4. John Sorenson’s cautionary comments more than sixteen years ago seem appropriate. See “New Light: The Problematic Role of DNA Testing in Unraveling Human History,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 9/2 (2000): 66–68.

Asiatic origins of Amerindian groups must preclude the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon story go back to the mid-nineteenth century. For several generations now, Latter-day Saint leaders, educators, and scholars have cautioned that the “record of the people of Nephi” does not purport to contain a history of *all* the Americas, or of all, or even most, native American ancestors. That is why controversies about population genetics, which are now dated Book of Mormon criticisms, are a poor club to beat believers over the head with and for some of the same reasons. Book of Mormon colonists from the Old World were relatively small groups in a sea of pre-Columbian peoples, likely leaving little genetic trace of their Old World origins, even if we could decide what their genome should look like. Most of the genetic information that our ancestors possessed is changed or lost through the process of time, making it highly unlikely that we could identify the genes of Lehi or any other founding migrant mentioned in the Book of Mormon even if we wanted to. As Gardner notes, “The genetic data tell us about what survived, but not what once existed” (p. 174).

Equally misguided have been attempts by some Latter-day Saints to marshal DNA evidence as proof *for* the Book of Mormon. Advocates of this approach cite studies suggesting that Haplotype X2a had its origins in Eurasia and possibly the Middle East rather than northeastern Siberia. As Gardner indicates, one serious problem with this approach is that Haplotype X2a dates thousands of years before the time of the Book of Mormon. In order to make it fit into a Book of Mormon scenario, these advocates have to dismiss currently accepted scientific methods of genetic dating as erroneous. “This approach,” notes Gardner, “creates an interesting conflict between accepting evolutionary science when it discovers mtDNA connections to Europe or Western Asia but then denying it entirely with respect to timing” (p. 174). Additionally, more recent genetic studies indicate that earlier enthusiasm over a possible Eurasian migration via the Atlantic may have been premature. As Jennifer Raff and Deborah Bolnick conclude in a recent study:

X2a has not been found anywhere in Eurasia, and phylo-geography gives us no compelling reason to think it is more likely to come

from Europe than from Siberia. Furthermore, analysis of the complete genome of Kennewick Man, who belongs to the most basal lineage of X2a yet identified, gives no indication of recent European ancestry and moves the location of the deepest branch of X2a to the West Coast, consistent with X2a belonging to the same ancestral population as the other founder mitochondrial haplogroups.⁵

If the Book of Mormon is an account of a people who knew about Christ in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, why do we not find archaeological evidence of pre-Columbian Christianity? Gardner reasons, “The problem is less in the absence of evidence than in the expectation of what evidence should be found” (p. 192). He notes that Christianity in the Old World emerged in the Greco-Roman culture and adopted the iconography and art styles of the surrounding people to which Christians applied their own interpretations. Early art depicting Jesus was based on representations of the Greek god Apollo and the Roman cross, a horrific method of execution with connotations of shame that was subsequently reinterpreted by Christians into a symbol of Christ’s power and divinity; however, these depictions were each rooted in a Greco-Roman context. Hence, argues Gardner, “The absence of Old World Christian iconography is not evidence of the absence of Book of Mormon Christianity” in the New World (p. 195).

When we look for New World Christians, for what do we look? Do we look for representations of Apollo? Do we look for any of the Greek-inspired icons of the Old World? Clearly we cannot. The conditions that inspired those borrowings occurred long after Book of Mormon peoples left the Old World. Based on the history of both Israel and early Christianity, we might expect the New World Israelites and Christians to do just as their Old World counterparts did—adapt the iconography of the surrounding cultures. (p. 194)

5. Jennifer A. Raff and Deborah A. Bolnick, “Does Mitochondrial Haplogroup X Indicate Ancient Trans-Atlantic Migration to the Americas? A Critical Re-Evaluation,” *PaleoAmerica* 1/4 (2015): 301.

Conceivably, ancient Mesoamerican art forms and iconography, such as the maize god, a deity who died and was resurrected, would have been adapted or reinterpreted as a Christian symbol for a group such as the Nephites, but without an interpretive key, such as a text, it would be impossible for archaeologists to tell if the icon portrayed was intended to have Christian meaning or not (pp. 195–96). In any case, examples of the disappearance or near extinction of even significant religious groups are known from antiquity and even the recent past.

The history, especially of Southeast Asia, shows how easily religions may disappear or be submerged in local cults. Among the Cham of Annam, Hinduism and Buddhism had been firmly established for almost a millennium and a half, from the second to the fifteenth century. Yet, Buddhism disappeared completely after the fall of the Cham kingdom in 1471 and Hinduism declined so rapidly that its influence at present is hardly recognizable. Amongst the non-Muslim Badui and Tenggerese of Java, traces of Hinduism and Buddhism are exceedingly slight, although these must have been the predominant religions as late as the sixteenth century. The Batak of Sumatra were under Buddhist and Hindu influences from probably the third to the fourteenth century, but in the nineteenth century they were pagans.⁶

Gardner discusses convergences between Mesoamerican volcanism and the events described in the text of 3 Nephi 8–10 at the death of Christ, which have been previously discussed by John Sorenson, Bart Kowallis, Jerry Grover, and others,⁷ although he surprisingly fails to cite Sorenson's most recent review of the evidence, which represents a significant revision and expansion of his earlier treatment (pp. 343–51).

6. D. P. Singhal, *India and World Civilization* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1969), 2:66–67.

7. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 129, 318–23; Bart J. Kowallis, "In the Thirty and Fourth Year: A Geologist's View of the Destruction in Third Nephi," *BYU Studies* 37/3 (1997–1998): 136–90; Jerry D. Grover Jr., *Geology of the Book of Mormon* (United States: by the author, 2004).

Sorenson cited a 1998 report of an eruption of the Popocatepetl volcano around the first century AD. Initial tests of available material dated the eruption to between 45 BC and AD 90.⁸ Archaeologists Patricia Plunket and Gabriela Uruñuela working at the site of Tetimpa in Puebla, Mexico, have subsequently published additional data and findings from their work that shed further light on that eruption.⁹ This volcanic event, a VEI-6 Plinian eruption, created a column of tephra 20 to 30 km high and is believed to have caused “an ecological disaster of unprecedented proportions” that significantly impacted the population and development of cultures in the region.¹⁰

The archaeology of the Basin of Mexico indicates that sometime between 100 BC and AD 100, the population in the region became concentrated around the site of Teotihuacan. Some had suggested that this may have been due to political pressure from that city. Plunket and Uruñuela suggest rather that this relocation northward was more likely due to necessity, resulting from volcanic destruction further south. The Popocatepetl eruption would have destroyed prime agricultural regions of the southern and eastern Basin of Mexico.

As pyroclastic materials fell on the forested slopes the ash would have suffocated wildlife. The hot pyroclastic flows with

8. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex* (Salt Lake City: Neal A. Maxwell Institute and Deseret Book, 2013), 642. See Patricia Plunket and Gabriela Uruñuela, “Preclassic Household Patterns Preserved under Volcanic Ash at Tetimpa, Puebla, Mexico,” *Latin American Antiquity* 9/4 (1998): 287–309.

9. Patricia Plunket and Gabriela Uruñuela, “The Archaeology of a Plinian Eruption of the Popocatepetl Volcano,” in *The Archaeology of Geological Catastrophes*, ed. W. J. McGuire, D. R. Griffiths, P. L. Hancock, I. S. Stewart (London: Geological Society of London, 2000), 195–203; Plunket and Uruñuela, “Recent Research in Puebla Prehistory,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 13/2 (June 2005): 89–127; Plunket and Uruñuela, “Social and Cultural Consequences of a Late Holocene Eruption of Popocatepetl in Central Mexico,” *Quaternary International* 151 (2006): 19–28; Plunket and Uruñuela, “Mountain of Sustenance, Mountain of Destruction: The Prehispanic Experience with Popocatepetl Volcano,” *Journal of Volcanology and Geothermal Research* 170 (2008): 111–20.

10. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Mountain of Sustenance, Mountain of Destruction,” 113, 118.

temperatures between 250 and 600 [degrees] C may have ignited multiple highly destructive forest fires that would have spread quickly through the Sierra Nevada during the dry season, and the melting glacier would have formed destructive lahars that rushed down the steep canyons into the Amecameca river and the Chalco area. . . . [D]estruction of important hunting and gathering areas would have been devastating, and the smoke from fires added to the ash could have caused significant short-term climatic changes as well, including frost and drought, that may have resulted in famine and consequent population relocation.¹¹

Plunket and Uruñuela explain, “Prior to 100 BC,” at the southern end of the Basin, “most of the population lived in towns and villages along the lakeshore between Cuicuilco and Chalco, but after AD 100 almost all of these settlements disappear.”¹² They estimate that as many as 20,000 people in the Basin of Mexico may have perished in the disaster, while as many as 50,000 relocated further north to Teotihuacan, swelling the size of its population and spurring its subsequent development.¹³ The eruption would have also caused similar disruptions on the eastern side of the mountains in western Puebla, where scholars estimate that the population was about 100,000 just prior to that time. “The large complex regional centers, close to the Sierra Nevada—Colotzingo, Coapan, Xochitecatl, and Tlalancaleca—were abandoned at that time.” Afterwards, as had happened at Teotihuacan, “population became concentrated at Cholula and a few other settlements but the total number of inhabitants appears to have diminished, perhaps by as much as 30%.”¹⁴

Earlier reports from the archaeological team tentatively placed the eruption toward the end of the first century AD.¹⁵ Now a total of 14

11. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Social and Cultural Consequences of a Late Holocene Eruption,” 23–24.

12. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Mountain of Sustenance, Mountain of Destruction,” 116.

13. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Social and Cultural Consequences of a Late Holocene Eruption,” 23–24.

14. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Social and Cultural Consequences of a Late Holocene Eruption,” 25–26.

15. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Preclassic Household Patterns,” 290.

radiocarbon dates have been obtained including an AMS (Accelerator Mass Spectrometer) date from a carbonized corn cob recovered from a sealed jar, which yielded a reading of 2010 +/- 40 BP (2 Sigma range of ca. 100 BC–AD 70). These dates, in addition to cultural materials retrieved from the ash-buried houses at Tetimpa, indicate that the eruption “probably took place during the first half of the first century AD.”¹⁶ Based on archaeological evidence from crops, seasonal cooking patterns found at the site, and wind studies, they “suggest that the most likely time [of the eruption] is late March or April.”¹⁷ The Basin of Mexico would be at approximately the northernmost extremity of most Mesoamerican models of Book of Mormon geography, but the apparent timing of the eruption is of potential interest in light of the death of Jesus at Jerusalem during Passover.¹⁸

Traditions of the Fathers is an important book on the question of historicity and the Book of Mormon. Careful readers of the Book of Mormon interested in understanding the Book of Mormon in a plausible pre-Columbian setting will be both challenged and deeply rewarded.

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16. Plunket and Uruñuela, “Mountain of Sustenance, Mountain of Destruction,” 114.

17. Plunket and Uruñuela, “The Archaeology of a Plinian Eruption of the Popocatepetl Volcano.” 201–2.

18. Jeffrey R. Chadwick, “Dating the Death of Jesus Christ,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 54/4 (2015): 135–91.