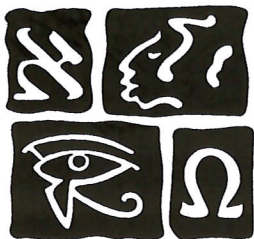




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Transcript

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Daniel C. Peterson

A Scholar Looks at the Evidences for the Book of Mormon

Summary:

Daniel Peterson discusses recent research that supports a spiritual witness for the Book of Mormon, including the following: Joseph Smith's lack of schooling, his supposed misnaming of Jesus' birthplace, the translation process, studies of chiasmus, possible locations for Book of Mormon events, and ancient manuscripts that are consistent with Book of Mormon accounts about document practices and beliefs of past civilizations.

Transcript
Book of Mormon, Answers to Criticisms

FARMS
Brigham Young University
P.O. Box 7113
University Station
Provo, UT 84602
1-800-327-6715
(801) 373-5111
www.farmsresearch.com

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A Scholar Looks at the Evidences for the Book of Mormon

Daniel C. Peterson

I'd like to speak with you today about some of the evidences for the Book of Mormon. I think the primary evidence for the Book of Mormon will always be what it always has been: mainly the spiritual witness that people receive when they pray sincerely and in faith about the Book of Mormon. But there are other things that can be said about it, and I'd like to talk about some of the more recent evidences and interesting scholarly developments on the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon, it seems to me also, is one of the chief evidences of the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith, perhaps with the temple. There is a great deal that is happening with Book of Mormon studies right now that I think is of interest, or should be of interest, to members of the Church and those investigating the Church.

One thing that needs to be said about the Book of Mormon from the beginning is that the very existence of the book is an astonishing thing. The sheer speed with which it was produced is a miracle. Many probably already know that it was produced in a little over two months. Now that may not seem as impressive to some people as it actually is. A few years ago, I was invited to prepare a book for a company that wanted a book on the Near East. They wanted it fairly quickly; in fact, they wanted it remarkably quickly. I asked them how much time I would have to produce the book if I accepted the offer, and they said a little over two months. Well, I accepted. One of the reasons I accepted was because I wanted to see if I could actually do that. Well, I did. I produced a book of about 140,000 words in a little over two months. I was pretty pleased with myself, and other people commented that I wrote very rapidly and so on.

But then I began thinking about it. The Book of Mormon is about 250,000 words long, and it was produced in about the same amount of time. But remember, it was dictated without any revisions. I had a word processor and a very sophisticated computer that could transfer things around, and I had been working on this for

some time, since this particular subject, Near Eastern studies, is my specialty. Joseph Smith dictated the Book of Mormon, never made any serious changes, and produced a book much longer and, I would say, much more impressive than mine, in about the same amount of time. Some people would say, "Oh yes, his imagination simply overflowed." I challenge them to produce a book like that. The very existence of the book, produced under the circumstances under which it was, is a remarkable thing—especially considering the fact that the men involved were not well educated. Joseph Smith was barely educated at all. He was always very ill at ease about his writing skills and his abilities. He always preferred to dictate to a scribe because he was embarrassed. Some of his own writings have survived, and it's obvious that he was not well educated. His wife, Emma, who knew him extremely well, said it was simply beyond his capacity to have produced the Book of Mormon. And yet, the book exists, and that right there is a prime challenge to the world of how to explain this book. It's one thing to talk easily about it being there and being produced by Joseph Smith. It's another to see how that could have happened.

Well, it's not only the speed of the book's production that I think is impressive, it's also the plausibility of the book as history. I spend a lot of my time reading ancient and medieval history by ancient and medieval writers, and this book reads plausibly as history. The people in it behave the way historical people did. The societies and civilizations in the Book of Mormon behave in the way ancient societies and civilizations did behave. This is impressive. This is something that I think was beyond the capacity of someone like Joseph Smith to prepare. I'll try to give you some examples of that as we go on.

I would also say that the details of the Book of Mormon, the complexity of the book, are also impressive. John Sorenson published what I think is a classic book a few years ago called *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* in which he produces plausible correlations for the Book of Mormon with features and locations in Mesoamerica. That is, I think, impressive, and I'm struck by many of

the correlations he adduces. I would go beyond that and say that the first and primary impressive thing about that is the fact that a plausible and coherent geography can be deduced from the book that was produced so rapidly—so plausible and coherent that a little tiny town mentioned at one point in the Book of Mormon would show up two hundred pages later in the same place. Now this is beyond the capacity of my students to do. It's beyond my capacity to do in two months without a lot of aid and assistance from electronic gadgets and so on.

The only book that I could think of that may even resemble it in some way (some people have pointed this out) is something like J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. But we need to remember that *Lord of the Rings* was produced over a period of about thirty years by a man with a doctorate who taught at Cambridge and Oxford Universities. It's quite a different thing than a book that was produced in about two months. So the very existence of the book is an astonishing thing. It was not something that could just be produced by an upstate New York farm boy just off the top of his head. There are other things I'll mention in passing.

The witnesses to the Book of Mormon have always been extremely impressive to me. Some people seem to deal with them by simply waving them aside. This can't be done. Richard Anderson's work on the three witnesses and the eight witnesses demonstrates conclusively that these were sincere, competent, honorable people who believed that they had seen what they claimed to see. More recently, Lyndon Cook has published a collection of interviews with David Whitmer, who was the last survivor of the three witnesses. There are almost ninety interviews there and what is impressive about it is the sheer monotony of the interviews, the monotony of the story that he tells—because it is the same story over and over and over again. David Whitmer, you will remember, left the Church and never came back and at times, felt some hostility towards the Church and some dissatisfaction with the direction it had gone. But that is irrelevant; those are just his opinions. Where he is important is as a witness. He was given many opportunities to step back from his

witness, to say, "Well, I might have been mistaken" or "Joseph Smith fooled me" or something like that. He never availed himself of that opportunity. He always stood by his witness. In fact, he did more than stand by it—he insisted on it. He had his testimony of the Book of Mormon placed on his tombstone. That, I think, is striking.

It seems to me that it is very, very difficult for critics to dismiss the testimony of the witnesses to the Book of Mormon. I remember something that B. H. Roberts said, which I think is very true. He said that, taken together, the testimonies of the three witnesses and the eight witnesses are exceptionally strong. Why? Because you could say that the three witnesses, with their story of an angelic visitor and a supernatural environment, were hallucinating. I don't believe you can say that, but if someone wanted to, that is an approach that can be taken. On the other hand, you have the eight witnesses, who had no supernatural manifestation. They were in a grove of trees in a little clearing in the woods a little after noon. And they saw the plates in a very matter-of-fact way. You have two very different experiences here that reinforce one another. You could say in the case of the one, "Well, there was some kind of charlatantry or fraud going on there. Joseph Smith or someone put together the plates and placed them there on that log out there in the clearing." That might explain the eight witnesses, though I don't really see how it could. Where did a poor boy like Joseph Smith get sixty to eighty pounds of gold, for one thing? But taken with the miraculous elements in the testimony of the three witnesses, you have two very different accounts that reinforce one another because they are so different. It's striking and it's strong.

Now, I want to get into some other things that have been brought forth more recently. I want to talk about the accuracy of things in the Book of Mormon that Joseph Smith could not have known about or that it is extremely unlikely that he would have known about. Remember, this is a man (or a boy really) with very little formal education, who lived not exactly in a great center of culture, Palmyra, New

York. Much of the translation was done in Harmony, Pennsylvania, which is such a nothing place in some ways that it really has ceased to exist. There were no great libraries there, no sophisticated people to whom he could have gone for advice. And yet he came up with a book, produced a book in a way that he described as miraculous. But in many ways, it hits the target. It describes the ancient world in ways that he could not have known about, that nobody knew about in those days. Not the most learned person in the early nineteenth century could have known. He hit a target that he probably didn't even know he was aiming at.

One of the things that Hugh Nibley has talked about at some length in his book *Since Cumorah* is the volcanic and earthquake activities described in 3 Nephi, which is so detailed and accurate in so many ways that I think one has to conclude that it was written by an eyewitness, or by someone who had access to eyewitness accounts. Joseph Smith had no such access. Joseph Smith had never seen an earthquake or volcano, so far as we know.

There are other things to consider. Many of you probably already know about chiasmus, which was discovered in the Book of Mormon years ago by Jack Welch. I think classic examples include the Alma 41 discussion of the term *restoration*, or Alma 36 with its Christ-centered chiasmus focusing on Alma's experience in the depths of despair when he remembers the name of Christ and turns himself over to Christ and is redeemed. These are spectacular instances in ancient writing. They are spectacular examples of chiasmus structures that Joseph Smith knew nothing about, that really nobody knew anything about in his day. They have only been discovered in ancient writings in this century. I know of one person at UCLA, a very distinguished Eastern European scholar of Semitic languages, who read a book that Jack Welch put together called *Chiasmus in Antiquity*. He was talking about it to his class—he didn't know that there was anyone in the class who was LDS—and in a very thoughtful voice, he said, "Well, it is a very interesting book. This chapter on the Book of Mormon is remarkable. I don't know what to make of it." That I think

has been the response of critics for a long, long time. They just don't know what to make of it and it is a remarkable thing.

There is more that can be said. My good friend William Hamblin in just the past few months has produced an article (and there is on-going research) on the question of metal plates. When Joseph Smith first announced the claim that he had found metal plates, interestingly enough a lot of the people in his own neighborhood believed him. But the early critics said, "This is ridiculous, writing on gold plates? How absurd." Now the argument seems to be turning in a different direction. People are saying that with so much evidence for gold plates in antiquity, this is something that Joseph Smith must have picked up in his environment. What was once seen as an absurdity and used against Joseph Smith now is viewed as just a commonplace thing that everybody knew about, and so it is also used against Joseph Smith. But that doesn't work either. It turns out, as William Hamblin indicates, that the idea of gold plates seems to have been especially prominent in the area of Syria and Palestine at almost exactly the time Lehi and his family left Jerusalem. From that area it spread to other areas, for example, Greece. But this is again striking because Joseph Smith produced a book that reflects in specific, detailed ways things that we are only now beginning to realize about the ancient Near East, the area from where the Book of Mormon purports to come.

There is more that can be said. One area that I have worked on is the Gadianton robbers. They are some of my very favorite people in the Book of Mormon, a cheery lot, who did a great deal for Nephite and Lamanite history. One of the disreputable hobbies that I had as a teenager in high school is that I was very interested in guerrilla warfare. I don't know why. But I began reading a great deal about it. The foremost theorists of guerrilla warfare in the twentieth century, which is the only time anyone has actually written about the theory of guerrilla warfare, have been Marxists: Mao Tse-tung in China, Vo Nguyen Giap in North Vietnam, and Che Guevara in Cuba, who is associated with Castro. I certainly don't endorse their

political views, but on guerrilla warfare they were authorities, because they'd practiced it successfully and they wrote about it. And so, I spent a fair amount of time reading their books about guerrilla warfare theory, for no particular purpose. Years later it clicked for me, though. I was teaching a Gospel Doctrine class in the Jerusalem branch in Israel, and we were reading Helaman and 3 Nephi. Suddenly, I realized that what I was seeing there in the Gadianton robbers was a textbook instance of both success and failure according to the rules that Giap, and Guevara, and Mao Tse-tung had outlined.

And let me just tell you something about those rules. Particularly if you look at the end of Helaman and the beginning of 3 Nephi, you see very clearly, the very kinds of things that the theorists were talking about. When the Gadianton robbers start off, they start off as an urban terrorist group really, involved in assassinations. But they eventually have to flee into the mountains and this is typical of guerrilla groups in our own century. And they'll talk at length about how the best places to work are in cities, where you can hide among the urban masses. Or if that doesn't work—as it didn't work for the Gadianton robbers—they then flee into inaccessible territory, almost always mountains. It was, in all three cases (in China, Vietnam, and Cuba), the mountains into which the guerrillas fled. Then they make lightning raids out of the mountains to attack settled civilizations. But they choose only those times when they can win. They can make a lightning strike, do some damage, then get away. This, of course, irritates the authorities no end. And the authorities then will send troops into the mountains after the guerrillas, but the mountains are the guerrilla's native territory. The guerrilla then chooses the place to fight from. He ambushes the regular troops that come after him. He causes them immense casualties.

In the Book of Mormon you read that the commanders come back and report overwhelming numbers of Gadianton robbers. Well, this is probably not true; the very reason they were hiding in the mountains is that they didn't have

overwhelming numbers. But they wanted to seem like overwhelming numbers, a little bit the way some of our own LDS ancestors behaved during the Utah war when they were trying to slow down the advance of the federal columns. They hid out in the mountains and masqueraded as having many more people than they had, in order to give the federal troops something to think about. This is a time-honored practice.

Now, fortunately, the Latter-day Saints weren't actually shooting anybody; they were just trying to slow things down for negotiations. The Gadiantons were not quite so nice. They caused great casualties to the Nephite troops. Eventually the point comes when a guerrilla army needs to start to hold territory though, and this is the really sensitive time in any guerrilla war. Mao Tse-tung called it *regularization*, turning a guerrilla army into a regular army, one that holds territory. Guerrillas don't hold territory; they'll strike and then flee. The object is not to have any casualties or to keep them to a minimum. They want to harass and demoralize, but not to hold territory yet. When they feel themselves strong enough, then they decide to occupy cities, to occupy territory and hold it. But that, of course, exposes them to direct attack. It means that they can't retreat and withdraw; they can't maneuver quite as freely. Here's a problem now identified as "premature regularization," which is when a commander too soon thinks that he's ready to stand up to a regular army. He makes the transition too soon. This can be disastrous, and it was in the case of the Gadianton robbers.

At a certain point (you read this in the Book of Mormon in 3 Nephi 4), the Gadianton robbers come down out of the mountains; they issue an ultimatum to the leaders of the Nephites and tell them to surrender, but the Nephites don't surrender. What they do, under the leadership of a governor named Lachoneus, is withdraw into their cities. They declare a kind of "scorched earth" policy. They destroy or carry away all of the food down in the agricultural areas and they take it and hole up in their fortified cities.

This actually reverses the situation, which is what guerrillas should not allow themselves to be trapped into. What happens now is that the Nephites are in their strongholds. It's the guerrillas, the Gadianton robbers in this case, who are out exposed on the plain, and they can't find any food because none has been left and the crops have been destroyed. So they are forced, at times that are not suitable to them, to attack the Nephites to try to get food, or they are forced to disperse themselves to look for game. But every time they disperse or scatter themselves, the Nephites make lightning raids out of the fortress, out of the city, and attack them. The Nephites now choose the time of attack. What they've done is reversed the situation so the Nephites become, in effect, the guerrillas, and the Gadianton robbers are trying to hold territory. It's a disaster for the Gadianton robbers, and they lose.

And this all behaves (I've tried to show this in some detail in a published article) as a textbook illustration. You could not pick a better illustration of the virtues, if you will, and the problems of a guerrilla army—the mistakes they can make and the successes they can have.

All this was written by a young man, supposedly, as critics would say, who knew nothing about guerrilla warfare and whose idea of military activity was, at least later on in his life, to get on his black horse Charley and parade in a nice uniform, romanticizing the wars of American history: the Revolutionary War, the War of 1812. This would have been typical of his period. I think many people had these same attitudes. What's striking about the Book of Mormon is how utterly absent those attitudes are. From the account given of the Gadianton robbers, or indeed of the Nephite wars that take place in the Book of Mormon and are recorded there, there's no dressing up in fancy uniforms, there are no parades, there are no reviews of the troops, or anything like that. It's a very different atmosphere, and guerrilla warfare, particularly, is rather unromantic. This is something that Mao and others had to defend themselves against. Some people fighting in their forces were a little bit disappointed with this idea of hitting and running; it wasn't heroic, it wasn't

romantic. But it was extremely effective, and it's effective for the Gadianton robbers too, as long as they obey those rules that were first formulated really in this century—but rules that we now know went back into the ancient world. So it's very striking to me how very foreign the Book of Mormon accounts are from what we would expect if Joseph Smith had written the book. It's a quite different world indeed.

There are other things that Joseph Smith could not have known. One of the most impressive things that I first remember encountering about the Book of Mormon happened years ago, again when I was living in Jerusalem. I ran across an unpublished paper at that point by John Tvedtnes (who's now living in Salt Lake City but at that time was living in Jerusalem) in which he identified a feast of tabernacles celebration going on as sort of a background to King Benjamin's speech in the book of Mosiah. Now, having read that, I have never been able to read that account again without seeing the feast of tabernacles there. It's absolutely clear once you recognize it. But until then no one had recognized it, so far as I know. It's one of those things that I think Joseph Smith didn't know about. He could not have boasted about putting a feast of tabernacles into his Book of Mormon because he didn't know it was there. And yet it's an authentic mark of an ancient document. If a fraud had pulled this off, if I had pulled this off, I would have been very proud of it. I would have pointed to it and said, "See how clever I am that I put this in." But no one recognized it until just a few years ago really, and yet it's there—again, another authentic ancient detail.

There is something else that particularly interests me as an Arabist (that's my particular field). I work in mediaeval Arabic studies. In 1975 Lynn and Hope Hilton of Salt Lake City, who were living in the Middle East off and on, made a trip down the coast of Arabia over what we know as the ancient frankincense trail, which we also believe, many of us, was the ancient trail that Lehi followed. They were able to confirm many of the details recorded in 1 Nephi, following as led by Hugh Nibley

some years earlier in his classic book *Lehi in the Desert*, in which Brother Nibley proposed a course, a path, for that journey of Nephi and Lehi from Jerusalem down to the Arabian Sea. That has now been built upon by later writers and explorers.

I am particularly pleased and indebted to Warren and Michaela Aston of Australia, who have, I think, performed one of the most interesting services to Book of Mormon scholarship in recent years. They have managed to identify two plausible Book of Mormon sites—again, far beyond the capacity of Joseph Smith to have known anything about. In fact, Eugene England some years ago in 1982 published an article in which he demonstrated that nobody knew anything really about Arabia in the days of Joseph Smith. Even if Joseph Smith had lived in an area with a fabulous public library or university library, he could not have learned very much from it about the geography of Arabia. What's more interesting is that the things he could have learned about it would have been for the most part wrong. But in fact, 1 Nephi gives a very accurate depiction, right down to the details of where the trail turns and so on, of a trip through ancient Arabia.

The Astons have actually been to some of these places and have taken other people to them, culminating so far in a couple of 1993 expeditions to the area. They have found a place or located a place in the modern country of Yemen, right down there in South Eastern Arabia, which is called Nahem. And Nahem seems very like the ancient word Nahom, which appears in the Book of Mormon as the place where Ishmael was buried. Now it's an important name for many reasons. First of all, the account in the Book of Mormon usually tells of Lehi naming a place, giving a certain name to a certain place; he's naming it himself. In this case, the name is already there. Ishmael was buried at the place which was called Nahom. Now Nahom and Nahem are virtually the same word. Anyone who knows anything about Arabic or Hebrew or ancient Semitic languages knows that it's the consonants that are important. The vowels can shift and change. So these names are virtually indistinguishable. And what does the root *NHM* mean? It can mean things like to

cry out in grief, to sigh, to mourn, to console; it's a perfect name for an ancient graveyard. And it turns out that in this place Nahem, which is in exactly the right location, there is an ancient graveyard going back to we don't know how long ago, because archaeological excavations have not been permitted there yet and may never be. But in any event, there is an ancient graveyard there, and the place is in exactly the right position on that trail where it ought to be.

But Nahem does not stand alone, and this, I think, is one of the most impressive things about it. What you have here is a complex of not one site alone, but of two sites that reinforce one another. In the Book of Mormon account, Lehi and his party traveled due east from the place where they buried Ishmael and went over to the place that they called Bountiful, on the coast of Arabia. Now, critics for one hundred and sixty years have made fun of this, because everyone knows there is no place "Bountiful" in Arabia. There is no place that has that kind of timber, that kind of greenery. Arabia is a vast empty desert, a place that makes the Mojave Desert look like a tropical rain forest. And that's true, by and large. But in fact there are a few places on the coast of Arabia (most of them weren't known until very recently) where you do have fairly lush, green areas and timber. Now, in fact very recently, a critic of the Church wrote to me and said, "I know for a fact that there exists no such place as this Bountiful on the coast of Arabia." And I could write back to him, "I know that such places exist; in fact, as I'm writing to you, right above my computer I have a poster picture of the very place, or a place very much like it." Well, he can't really refute that because, of course, one picture is worth a thousand words, and I have a picture of it. It is true that places like this exist.

Now if you go due east from Nahem, from the place that has been identified tentatively as Nahom in the Book of Mormon, you arrive at a place called Wadi Sayq. It's very hard to get to, except probably by camel caravan down a very narrow wadi, an intermittent river valley. But when you reach the place, you find trees that are large enough to produce timber for a boat. You find a beach, you find greenery,

you find fresh water. It's a remarkable thing, and it's in exactly the place where the Book of Mormon says it should be. And it's in exactly the same relationship to Nahem or Nahom that the Book of Mormon says it should be in. And again, places like this in Joseph Smith's day were thought not to exist. Everyone could have told Joseph if he had asked for advice while he was concocting some yarn about ancient Arabia and Ancient America, "Don't waste your time. There is no such place." And yet it is there. It's been seen, it's been examined, and it's still under investigation. That, I think, is a remarkable thing, a shot in the dark that hits the target, a target that Joseph didn't even know he was aiming at. Once again he's vindicated by developments that came about after his career had ended, long after his life ended.

I think maybe one of the most intriguing ways to look at Joseph Smith is to look at some of the "mistakes" he made and see how he's been vindicated by them. There are two that I think of in connection with the Book of Mormon. One that I'm particularly fond of is the personal name Alma. Now, we know the name Alma. It's been a woman's name in the West for quite some time. You find it in phrases like *alma mater*. It's a Latin-based woman's name not given to men. Critics of the Church for a long time have made fun of Latter-day Saints because they say it's only among the Mormons that you will find men with the name Alma. How ridiculous. This is not an ancient Semitic man's name; this is a relatively modern Latin woman's name. So Joseph Smith clearly made a mistake. Well, it's here I think that his performance is most impressive, because if Joseph Smith had ever heard the name Alma before, that's exactly how he would have heard it, as a woman's name.

So how is it applied to a man in the Book of Mormon? Well, it is, to at least two prominent people in the Book of Mormon. And it's only been recently that discoveries have come forth that have vindicated that name as an ancient Semitic man's name. The discovery was made not by a Latter-day Saint, but by Yigael Yadin, probably the most prominent of all Israeli archeologists in this century, a man who went on to become deputy prime minister of Israel. He was chief of staff of the

Israeli military in the 1948 war of independence. His is a very impressive man and a great scholar. While investigating a cave down by the Dead Sea, he found a document that bore the name Alma son of Judah. It is unmistakably written A-L-M-A in everything Yadin published about that excavation. It's a remarkable thing. Again, Joseph Smith probably, had he sought guidance from people around him on what to come up with as a masculine name for his Book of Mormon character, would have made a mistake. It turns out that a seeming mistake is not a mistake at all, but a powerful vindication of Joseph Smith's prophetic claims. And yet you will still see articles written ridiculing that name by people who should know better. In fact, in one case people that I happen to know do know better go on making the claim, repeating the old tired argument as if it were true, which it's not. *Alma* is a vindication of the Book of Mormon.

There is another one that's currently fashionable among critics of the Book of Mormon. And that is the claim of Alma 7:10 that Jesus Christ would be born (it's yet future for Alma) at Jerusalem, which is the land of our fathers. Now critics of the Book of Mormon have even produced bumper stickers that say, "Mormonism or Christianity, Jerusalem or Bethlehem." And quite often they'll exclaim in mock disbelief, "Oh come on, every school child knows that Jesus was born at Bethlehem," but that of course is precisely the point. Every school child does know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Joseph Smith certainly knew that Jesus was born at Bethlehem. Imagine the situation here—you have a man who, if you believe the critics, was clever enough to produce this book, which foreshadows so many things that we only now are learning about the Middle East, that quotes from the Bible in so many complex ways, that plays on biblical themes and so on in sophisticated ways. And yet he can't get the birthplace of Jesus right, one thing that's known to absolutely the simplest student of the Bible. But in fact once again, we find that the Book of Mormon is right and the critics are wrong.

It wasn't that long ago that we found the so-called Amarna letters and in them is

a reference to a place that W. F. Albright, probably the greatest American archeologist of the twentieth century, has identified as Bethlehem. And it's referred to as being in what?—in the land of Jerusalem. So here's a reference to Bethlehem as being in the land of Jerusalem, just as the Book of Mormon describes it. Now the Amarna letters date back to 1400 B.C., and some people have said, "Well, that's too early." Well, Okay, let's give them that, although I don't find that a plausible counterargument. We can look at other things. The Bible in fact repeatedly talks about cities having the lands around them named after the cities. It's true that there is no reference in the Bible to the land of Jerusalem—it gets very close a couple of times. But we know of the land of Damascus, we know of the land of Samaria, we know of probably twenty lands named after their cities. And it's probably only chance that the actual phrase *land of Jerusalem* doesn't occur in the Bible. But it does occur in the Book of Mormon. The real place to look for the usage of this phrase is in the Book of Mormon, which routinely talks about the city of Zarahemla and the land of Zarahemla, the city of Bountiful and the land of Bountiful. This is the kind of linguistic pattern that shows up in the Book of Mormon, and Alma, of course, is writing several centuries after his people have left Jerusalem. So it's really the Book of Mormon style that should be the measure here for how that phrase is used. And Bethlehem, which is only five or six miles out of Jerusalem, is clearly within the land of Jerusalem, which is a much bigger city and was always the capitol, the seat of the king, and so on and so forth.

But even more interesting is that, just very recently a new document has been published from the Dead Sea Scrolls, which have taken so long to be published. This is something called 4Q385 or Pseudo-Jeremiah, and it claims to go back to precisely the period of Lehi. And what does it do? It talks about the land of Jerusalem. While we are talking about the Dead Sea Scrolls, I'd like to say something just generally about them. When the Book of Mormon was published the whole idea of an ancient civilization that would deliberately bury its records to come forward at a

later time seemed silly. And yet now we know that there was a group in the ancient Near East that did precisely that and that's the dead sea scrolls community, probably based at Qumran. We know that their scrolls were hidden up probably at the time of the Roman attack on Judea in the first Jewish revolt, somewhere around A.D. 70. And so you can imagine the situation: As the Roman troops, fresh from their conquest of Jerusalem, move down the Dead Sea valley, they come down somewhere around Jericho and begin moving southward toward the final place of Jewish resistance at Masada. Well, in order to get to Masada, they're going to have to run right over the community of Qumran, which realizes that its days are numbered and begins to make preparations to abandon its site—which has remained abandoned until it was found of course only very recently. And what they do is they begin placing their most important documents in caves. And you can actually see the process by which they were doing it. At first they are doing it very carefully. In fact, one of their documents actually gives instructions on how to preserve a document for this kind of burial. The documents are put in caves very carefully, and then toward the end, you can see they are running out of time. Maybe the Romans are actually visible coming down the valley. And they begin throwing things into the caves. It gets much more hurried.

But what you see here is a community that has fled from Jerusalem, because Jerusalem was not righteous enough for it, and was calling down judgments upon Jerusalem—very much in the same way that Lehi had left Jerusalem. Then when destruction is coming upon them, they fear it. They take their documents and they seal them up to come forward at a later time, some other time when things will be better, when there will be more righteousness, whatever the circumstances will be. And those documents are eventually found and become in many ways a witness to some of the very things the Book of Mormon talks about. Now that's a pattern that recurs in the Book of Mormon that seemed implausible to people for a long time, but that we now know actually occurs in the ancient Near East. One of those

documents of course was the so-called Copper Scroll, writing on metal just the way that the Book of Mormon describes it. So it's a remarkable set of parallels there.

I think there are other parallels that could be found, although some people have gone too far with them. But I think it's fair to say that the Book of Mormon peoples behave in certain ways, much the way that the people of Qumran and of the Dead Sea Scrolls do. In fact there is an Austrian writer who said years ago in German that a good name for the people of the Dead Sea Scrolls, since they anticipated the coming of the Messiah and the last times, would be to call them Latter-day Saints; but he said that unfortunately this name has already been taken over by a sect in America. Well, there are some interesting parallels here.

There are other things that could be said about how the ancient world has now begun to produce evidence for the Book of Mormon in remarkable ways. One of the most remarkable, from my point of view, is Lehi's vision of the Council in Heaven. It's recorded in the very first chapter of 1 Nephi. In that vision it says that Lehi "thought he saw God sitting upon his throne, surrounded with numberless concourses of angels" (1 Nephi 1:8). Lehi is entrusted with a message of judgment and of destruction that he is to deliver to the city of Jerusalem. Now, this idea of a prophet having access to the Council in Heaven is a very old one. It's certainly biblical. You find it in Isaiah 6, in Jeremiah, in Zecharia, and elsewhere in the Bible and beyond the Bible. But it's a very important notion, and the importance of it has only begun to be recognized probably in the latter part of this century. Basically, the notion is that the Council of the Gods (depending on the religion) or the Council of God and his angels (as you see in Job, for instance, in the Bible) is closed to the public, obviously. It's something that not everyone has access to, but the prophet has access to it. He overhears the secrets and the decrees of the Council, and because of that, he's able to bring that knowledge back to his fellow human beings upon the earth. And this constitutes a great deal of his authority. It's a very powerful notion that we have now begun to recognize runs through many of the writings from the

ancient and even early medieval Near East.

I remember a few years ago when a colleague of mine and I presented a paper on the idea of the throne theophany vision, or the Council in Heaven vision, in Boston. We included a whole list of about twenty-five cases of this particular motif. One of them was 1 Nephi. Now, of all those cases, 1 Nephi is probably, or possibly, one of the best. There are about twenty or so specific elements of the motif that can be isolated and have been isolated by scholars. Not any one of those particular instances has all of the twenty characteristics, but the one, in my experience, that comes closest to being a textbook case is precisely this instance from the first chapter of 1 Nephi. It's a remarkable thing, and it's something that I doubt very much that Joseph Smith could have done from his own fairly limited reading in the Bible.

Now, a related notion to that is the notion of the heavenly book. The idea of an angel delivering a book to a young man has been mocked by many people. One critic of the Book of Mormon said, "You don't get books from angels. It's just that simple." Well, it's not at all that simple. This turns out to be an extraordinarily common idea throughout the ancient Near East. Geo Widengren, who is a very important Swedish historian of religions and a specialist on ancient Iran and the ancient Middle East, has said, "Few religious ideas in the ancient East have played a more important role than the notion of the heavenly tablets or the heavenly books, which are handed over to a mortal in an interview with a heavenly being." Now, the idea is certainly biblical. You find it in Exodus, in Jeremiah, in Ezekiel, in the Revelation of John, which is a particularly good example, and also, I would say, in more detail in nonbiblical books. Think of *1 Enoch*, for example. I think one of the very best cases of it is in the Muslim book known as the Qur'ān, the holy book of Islam, which is brought by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad. Now, whatever you think about the true origins of the Qur'ān, that's a remarkable instance of a very ancient Near Eastern idea. And it is, by no means, the latest instance. That's the early seventh century A.D. It's a very clear case of a book being delivered by an angel.

Now, the pattern that has been isolated by scholars basically has four features. First of all, a divine being gives a book to a mortal. The mortal is then commanded to read the book, number two. Number three, he's told to copy the book or do something like that with the book. Sometimes he's told, actually to ingest the book, to eat it, to show that he has totally digested the contents of the book. Number four, he's told to preach the book's message to other mortals. There's a very good instance of that in the Book of Mormon. Think of the case of Lehi, again, from the very first chapters of the Book of Mormon, who is given a vision of a divine book. He's told of the judgments that will fall upon Israel. He's commanded to take that message to the people around him in Jerusalem, which of course subjects him to a great deal of danger and risk. But there's also the case of Joseph Smith himself. So here once again we see not only in the Book of Mormon, but in the story of the Book of Mormon—the nineteenth century events surrounding it—a textbook instance of this ancient notion of a heavenly book, a transcript from the heavenly records that is brought down and delivered to mortal men, or mortal human beings, and then distributed among them. It's a very good instance.

In fact, in one early case that I can think of, a very early Christian book known as the *Visions of Hermas*, an angel—a female angel in this case, or a female personage—offers the book to Hermas, and Hermas at the end wants to take the book with him. But the messenger tells him he has to return the book to her; he can't just take it with him. It's very much like the much-mocked and derided aspect of the Joseph Smith story, which is that after he gets the book and does with the book what he's supposed to do—transcribes it, translates it—he is then told to give it back to the heavenly messenger.

There are other features from the ancient Near East that I think it's very doubtful Joseph Smith could possibly have known. One remarkable thing fairly recently discovered is the idea of the figure of the Moshiah. (That's not to be confused with the Messiah; it's probably from a different root.) Now, recent scholarship has

identified this term—which occurs in the Hebrew of the Old Testament but never shows up in the English of the King James Version, so Joseph Smith could not have gotten it from reading his King James Bible—they’ve identified this term *Moshiah* as referring to a champion of justice in a situation of controversy, battle, or oppression. He’s a kind of savior figure. And there are again four factors, or four aspects, of this personage known as the Moshiah that are worth keeping in mind: (1) he’s appointed by God; (2) he liberates a chosen people from oppression, from a controversy, from injustice after they cry out for help; (3) their deliverance—and I think this is striking—their deliverance is usually accomplished by nonviolent means, usually by escape or by negotiation; and (4) the people return to a state of justice where each person has access to and control over his or her own rightful property, the things that belong to that person.

Now, if you look at the book of Mosiah—and the name is strikingly similar to Moshiah (the way the Hebrews usually render it is Mosiah or Moshiah)—if you look at the book of Mosiah, what do you find? You find a whole series of these deliverances, mostly nonviolent (e.g., by escape), under a chosen leader. Alma the Elder is a classic instance of this, but I think maybe the most striking instance, in fact, is a figure named Mosiah. That may actually be the name Moshiah. If you look in the book of Omni in the Book of Mormon, that very brief little book, you get an account of one of these people. Starting with verse 12 of the book of Omni:

Behold, I will speak unto you somewhat concerning Mosiah, who was made king of the land of Zarahemla; for behold, he being warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord should also depart out of the land with him, into the wilderness—

And it came to pass that he did according as the Lord had commanded him. And they departed out of the land into the wilderness, as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord; and they were led by many preachings and prophesyings. And they were admonished continually by the word of God; and they were led by the power of his arm, through the wilderness until they came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla. (Omni 1:12–13)

What do you have here? You have the deliverance of a people by nonviolent means by a figure whose name may well be connected with this idea of the ancient Hebrew deliverer from oppression. So, Mosiah then founds a line of kings, including another one named Mosiah, whose entire history is characterized by this idea of delivering people from oppression. It's a remarkable thing, I think.

There is another very strongly ancient Near Eastern aspect that I'd like to think about, and that is one on which a whole new book is available. That's the famous allegory of the olive tree in Jacob 5. Jacob 5 is a very extended story taken from a prophet named Zenos who is not known to the Bible; he probably comes from the northern kingdom of Israel sometime, obviously, preceding the time of Lehi. Zenos tells a long parable about the lord of a vineyard and his servant or servants and their care of an olive tree. Now, recently a symposium at BYU was held on Jacob 5, and it's remarkable how very much you can get out of one single chapter of the Book of Mormon. The book is almost infinitely rich. A very large book on that chapter was produced, and there were a number of very fascinating aspects to that. One is that a group of horticulturists (specialists in tree culture) looked at the account of olive culture and olive production in the Book of Mormon in Jacob 5 and found that in virtually every detail, it matches what we actually know about how olive trees are treated, how they are grown, cultivated, and cared for.

Now, it has to be understood that olive trees do not grow in New York State. Joseph Smith probably didn't ever see any. He certainly wouldn't have known much about olive trees and olive cultivation, and olive cultivation is very, very different from the kinds of trees he would have known. So where did he get this information from? It seems to me that the most conservative notion, the best explanation, is that whoever wrote the parable of the olive tree in Jacob 5 knew olive cultivation at first hand. He knew how it was done. It's a very detailed account, a very rich account, because of course it's an account of the history of the world (in the past and on into the future) using the olive tree as a metaphor for the

house of Israel. You have graftings in and cuttings off and the dispersion of branches of the olive tree into the farthest parts of the vineyard, and so on. And it's all accurate down to the last detail—with one notable exception. And that is that in the account in Jacob 5, it said that graftings from wild olive trees—or little pieces of wild olive trees—are grafted into the main olive tree, the domesticated olive tree, and then they produce tame fruit. Now, that doesn't happen. A wild olive branch, even if grafted into a tame olive tree, will still produce wild fruit. It will survive, but it won't produce tame fruit simply because it's grafted into a tame olive tree. So, is this an error on the part of the Book of Mormon? No, not really.

One of the articles—an article that I was involved with—in this book on Jacob 5 uncovered evidence that in the ancient Mediterranean world, they were aware of the possibility that miraculously, a wild olive branch grafted into a tame olive tree could produce tame fruit. It doesn't happen naturally, but it can happen miraculously. And the prophetic figures of the ancient Mediterranean, specifically Greek thinkers and so on, saw this as a sign from God. It was a miraculous intervention from God, something that contravened the normal laws of olive cultivation and production.

Well, what does it stand for in that account of the Book of Mormon? It stands for the conversion of Gentiles into people of the house of Israel. It's a miraculous transformation, exactly what the Book of Mormon would have it to be. And this is a remarkable thing. It's a very long, a seventy-seven-verse long, description of olive culture. This is certainly enough rope for Joseph Smith to have hanged himself if were making it up, but he didn't. He got it right, and on the one detail which seems to be wrong, it again has precedent in the ancient Near Eastern world and in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean. It's a remarkable thing, and I challenge critics of the Book of Mormon to come up with any counterexplanation of this idea that it was produced by someone who actually came from the area where olives were produced. And that is precisely the area Zenos and Lehi came from originally—the eastern

Mediterranean in general.

Once again, something else that I think is of great interest with regard to the Book of Mormon is this: In our usage today, we don't distinguish very rigorously between thieves and robbers. We kind of use the words interchangeably, and the King James Bible does that too—it talks about thieves, and it talks about robbers, and it doesn't distinguish them. But ancient Near Eastern law did distinguish between thieves and robbers very rigidly, and particularly, ancient Israelite law did. Thieves were thought to be local. They stole from their neighbors; they were common; they were a nuisance, but they weren't really a threat to society. So when they were caught, they were dealt with judicially, civilly, usually by their neighbors, their townspeople, and they weren't a big deal.

Robbers, on the other hand, were a very big deal. They were a threat to society. They were seen as outsiders, as brigands, as highwaymen. They would organize in groups, they would swear binding oaths; they would extort ransom from the people around them. And when they were caught, they were often caught by the military. This was a military thing, a kind of war. They were dealt with not civilly, but militarily, and they were subject to summary execution. They were quite a different thing [from thieves]. Now, it's notable that in the Book of Mormon, thieves and robbers are never confused, and robbers—specifically the Gadianton robbers—are dealt with as a military problem, just as they would have been under ancient Israelite law, but not necessarily the way we think of them today because we don't make that clear distinction. So the Book of Mormon is found to be in precise agreement with ancient Near Eastern—and specifically, Israelite—concepts and usage.

There is something else that I'd like to talk about and that is the presence of "simile curses," or symbolic actions. It's, again, only in this century that people are beginning to recognize this very, very important aspect of ancient behavior. Now, I'd like to read you a passage from Alma 46, starting with verse 21 (you remember

the story of Captain Moroni with his title of liberty, which itself is a very interesting thing):

And it came to pass that when Moroni had proclaimed these words, behold, the people came running together with their armor girded about their loins, rending their garments in token, or as a covenant, that they would not forsake the Lord their God; or, in other words, if they should transgress the commandments of God, or fall into transgression, and be ashamed to take upon them the name of Christ, the Lord should rend them even as they had rent their garments.

And then it goes on to say in verse 22:

Now, this was the covenant which they made, and they cast their garments at the feet of Moroni, saying: We covenant with our God, that we shall be destroyed, even as our brethren in the land northward, if we shall fall into transgression; yea, he may cast us at the feet of our enemies, even as we have cast our garments at thy feet to be trodden under foot, if we shall fall into transgression.

Now, the thing that needs to be pointed out in this context about this particular scripture is that in this century, people, scholars, have begun to note that this idea of what they call the “simile oath,” or “simile covenant,” is very common among the ancient Hebrews, among the ancient Hittites—the idea of using some physical object to demonstrate what should happen to you if you violate your oath. A friend of mine, for example, who is a specialist in the ancient Middle East and who is critical in many regards of the Book of Mormon (he doesn’t know it very well perhaps) has read those passages and has been very much impressed by them. He admits to me that he doesn’t really know what to do with them because it is so vintage ancient Near Eastern.

I teach Arabic about half -time at Brigham Young University, and one of the linguistic forms in Arabic that’s common in other Semitic language as well is something that’s called a “cognate accusative”—where you use a noun that’s related to a verb in a sentence. You say, “I hit him a great hitting” or, “I have dreamed a dream.” And the example that I often use to illustrate this, which is not naturally English, is one right out of 1 Nephi, where Lehi reports to his sons, “Behold I have

dreamed a dream, or in other words I have seen a vision." Now this "I have dreamed a dream" is a perfect cognate accusative, and when the students hear about this—the ones who know the Book of Mormon—they say, "Ah, yes! Now we understand," because this is an authentic example of the Arabic or Semitic construction.

Even the second part of the sentence (though we lose something in English) when Lehi says, "Behold I have dreamed a dream; or, in other words, I have seen a vision," (1 Nephi 8:2) demonstrates this. You have to remember that English is based on two different languages. English is a hybrid of a sort of Latin or French with a Germanic language—the Anglo-Saxons and then the Norman Conquest, of course. So you have two different words for many things, a sort of low Germanic word and a high Latin-style word. For example, a handbook: we also have the Latin word *manual* coming from the word *Manis* for "hand." They mean the same thing. Likewise, with the words "I have seen a vision"—what he's really saying is "I have seen a seeing." The Latin word *seeing* was related to the word for vision, and you have a related German word, *sehen*, or "I have seen a vision," using the Latin word. But in the original it was probably something like: "Behold I have dreamed a dream; or in other words, I have seen a seeing." So I use this verse in the Book of Mormon in my Arabic grammar class, just to make a point to the students. Now, I ask you how a nineteenth-century farm boy could have come up with something like that, which is a perfect illustration of an Arabic grammatical point. Probably he did a lot of his work in the graduate school there at Palmyra University—well, of course there wasn't such a place. And there was no such Joseph Smith. This came to him via another route, not through academic study.

There is something else that could be said linguistically, something that I work with a great deal. One of my specialties is Arabic philosophy, and one of the texts that we read quite commonly in that is a book by a very famous rabbi of the Middle Ages, probably the most famous of all Jewish rabbis of the Middle Ages, Moses

Maimonides, whose great philosophical work is a text called *Guide of the Perplexed*. That guide was written in something called Judeo-Arabic. Let me tell you what it is: Judeo-Arabic is simply Arabic, but written in Hebrew letters. What you have, in other words, is a kind of reformed Arabic, or reformed Hebrew if you will. And this leads me to an important point.

Some people have thought for a long time that the idea of writing one language in the script of another is crazy. That seems to be what we have in the Book of Mormon, a text in Hebrew written in some sort of Egyptian characters. But in fact it's not crazy at all, it's done all the time. It was done in the ancient world. We now have an example of one of the psalms that was written in much this way, using Egyptian characters. Maimonides used it in his great book, writing an Arabic text in Hebrew letters. We do it all the time even today. If you take a class in Chinese, usually you don't start off reading the Chinese characters. You begin learning it in romanization. What is that? That's reformed Chinese. That's Chinese written in roman letters. So there's nothing unusual here. But Joseph Smith was very unsophisticated linguistically. He barely had a handle on written English. He could not have possibly forecasted something like this or known about it. It simply was beyond his capacity.

I bear you my testimony that there is much more that can be said about this, many more scholarly evidences for the Book of Mormon. The most important evidence that can be received for the Book of Mormon, though, is the testimony of the Spirit. I bear you my testimony that the Book of Mormon is what it claims to be. It is truly an ancient work revealed through a prophet by the angel of God in these latter days for our guidance, a second witness to Jesus Christ.