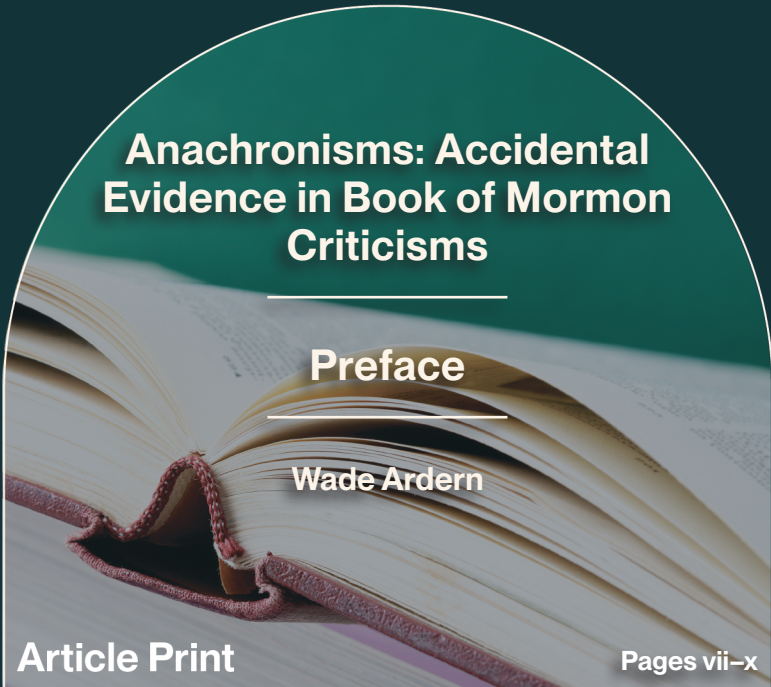


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Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms

Preface

Wade Ardern

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Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms

Matthew Roper

[Editor's Note: *We are pleased to present the preface from a book entitled Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms. It is presented in serialized form in this volume of Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship.*]

Preface

When the Book of Mormon came off the press on 27 March 1830, it opened itself to textual scrutiny. Was evidence of the amazing world of the Book of Mormon—with highways, written language, cement buildings, towers, temples, elephants, and kingdoms—observable in what the 1830 reader knew about the ancient American world? For many, it wasn't. The prevailing prejudice in nineteenth-century America was that Amerindian peoples were rude savages, so the historical and cultural assumptions evident in the Book of Mormon seemed too fantastic. Obvious anachronisms abounded. In 1830, everybody knew there were no swords or cement buildings in ancient America, and the ancient inhabitants certainly did not know how to read and write.

In 1841 John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood published *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*¹ and, suddenly, some presumed “facts” about the ancient Americas changed.² This record of their expedition offered detailed descriptions and illustrations of forty-four sites and showed that at least some ancient Amerindians were sophisticated, contrary to popular opinion.

By 1842 excerpts from *Incidents of Travel* were being published in the Church's newspaper, *Times and Seasons*, and the editor noted that "It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens' ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon: light cleaves to light, and facts are supported by facts."³

As expeditions, archaeological discoveries, and the field of anthropology progressed, more became known about the ancient Americas and her peoples. Slowly, what were previously judged as anachronisms in the Book of Mormon became evidences, supported by what was learned about the past—the book was right about cement buildings, towers, kingdoms, and many other things.

In May 2005 the Library of Congress hosted a symposium on "The Worlds of Joseph Smith,"⁴ timed to commemorate the bicentennial anniversary of Joseph's birth. I had recently completed a master's degree in anthropology at Brigham Young University, chaired by Professor John E. Clark. He was asked to speak at the symposium and took me on as a research associate. Part of his focus was to demonstrate that the list of anachronisms claimed for the Book of Mormon in 1830 was dwindling as more of the past was revealed. I went to work reading and annotating everything I could find, published between 1830 and 1900, that criticized the Book of Mormon. My task was to identify every criticism that could be tested archaeologically. Matthew Roper already had a handle on all of this material and graciously opened his trove of research to me.

Research continued after the Library of Congress symposium in preparation for the 2005 FAIR Conference. Professor Clark invited Matt and me to work with him and present at the conference together.⁵ That was an exciting time for me, and I felt I was the proverbial mule at the Kentucky Derby—I had no place being there, but I enjoyed the company it let me keep.⁶

Of course, Matt's research in this area began long before the 2005 FAIR Conference and has continued in the twenty years since. His meticulous work has yielded a bounty of correlations, gleaned from both the dustiest books and the latest scientific research. It is that bounty that he shares in this book.

Matt would be the first to tell you that the real and intended purpose of the Book of Mormon is to convince the world that Jesus is the Christ. While the work presented in this book substantiates historical, geographical, and cultural claims of the Book of Mormon, the author

is, in fact, converted to the truth of the Book of Mormon by the power of the Holy Ghost.

—Wade Ardern
May 2025



Wade Ardern is originally from New Zealand. He earned his bachelor's degree in history from the University of Waikato. He received a Nibley Fellowship while pursuing graduate studies in archaeology at Brigham Young University, where he completed a master's degree in anthropology. Wade served as a research assistant for John L. Sorenson at FARMS, worked with the New World Archaeological Foundation, and was a research associate for John E. Clark at BYU. Since 2003, he has taught for Seminaries and Institutes, including at the Church College of New Zealand and various locations in Cache Valley, Utah. Since 2018, he has been an instructor at the Logan Institute of Religion at Utah State University. Wade married Jessica Chandler in the Portland Oregon Temple, and they have five children.

Notes

1. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1841), archive.org/details/IncidentsOfTravelInCentralAmericaChiapasAndYucatanVol.21841Stephens/Incidents%20of%20Travel%20in%20Central%20America%2C%20Chiapas%2C%20and%20Yucatan%20Vol.%201%20%281841%29%20Stephens/mode/2up.
2. Other publicationsexisted. For example, Juan Galindo, considered the first Maya archaeologist, published his exploration of Palenque in London as early as 1831. Galindo's work was the inspiration for the expedition later undertaken by Stephens and Catherwood. See Juan Galindo, "Ruins of Panenque," *The London Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c.* 769 (15 October 1831): 665–66, archive.org/details/B-001-003-446/page/669/mode/2up.
3. "Zarahemla," *Times and Seasons* 3, no. 23 (1 October 1842): 927, archive.org/details/per_utah-and-the-mormons_times-and-seasons_1842-10-01_3_23.
4. The Worlds of Joseph Smith: A Bicentennial Conference at the Library of Congress, 6–7 May 2005, loc.gov/item/prn-05-038/.
5. John E. Clark, Wade Ardern, and Matthew Roper, "Debating the Foundations of Mormonism: The Book of Mormon and Archaeology" (presentation, 7th Annual FAIR Conference, Sandy, UT, 4 August 2005), fairlatterdaysaints.org/conference/august-2005/debating-the-foundations-of-mormonism-the-book-of-mormon-and-archaeology.
6. This is a paraphrase of a statement made by Jeffrey R. Holland when, as President of Brigham Young University, he spoke during the priesthood session of the April 1983 General Conference. See Jeffrey R. Holland, "Within the Clasp of Your Arms," *Ensign*, May 1983, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/05/within-the-clasp-of-your-arms](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1983/05/within-the-clasp-of-your-arms).

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