

Interpreter

**A Journal of Latter-day Saint
Faith and Scholarship**



A Scientific Evaluation of the Zeph Revelation

Jerry D. Grover Jr.

Article Print

Pages 49–60

© 2026 The Interpreter Foundation. A 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution — NonCommercial — NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

ISSN 2372-1227 (print)
ISSN 2372-126X (online)

Mission Statement

Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.

The Interpreter Foundation supports the Church in the following ways:

- **Promotion:** We provide tools to encourage and facilitate personal learning by study and faith, and disseminate accurate information to the public about the Church.
- **Explanation:** We make the results of relevant scholarship more accessible to non-specialists.
- **Defense:** We respond to misunderstandings and criticisms of Church beliefs, policies, and practices.
- **Faithfulness:** Our leadership, staff, and associates strive to follow Jesus Christ and be true to the teachings of His Church.
- **Scholarship:** Our leadership, staff, and associates incorporate standards of scholarship appropriate to their academic disciplines.

The Interpreter Foundation is an independent organization that supports but is not owned, controlled by, or affiliated with The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The material published by the Interpreter Foundation is the sole responsibility of the respective authors and should not be interpreted as representing the views of The Interpreter Foundation or of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

This journal compiles weekly publications. Visit us online at InterpreterFoundation.org

A Scientific Evaluation of the Zelph Revelation

Jerry D. Grover Jr.

Abstract: *Members of the 1834 Zion's Camp expedition inspected a large mound along the Illinois River where a skeleton was uncovered and Joseph Smith had a revelatory experience identifying the individual as Zelph. Recent archeological excavations place the revelation in a chronological and ancient cultural context that now allows additional verification and interpretation of this revelatory event. In addition, with this new information, it is possible to determine whether the individual and location can be interpreted as being a part of the Book of Mormon culture and geography.*

On 3 June 1834, Joseph Smith and others in the Zion's Camp expedition stopped at a large mound in Illinois one mile south of the current Valley City along the Illinois River. In inspecting and digging into the mound, human bones and an arrowhead were encountered at a shallow depth below the surface. These remains were the catalyst for an apparent revelation by Joseph Smith of the past relating to the person whose remains were found, with the vision identifying him as Zelph.

Record of the Zelph Vision

Six people recounted a vision apparently received at that time by Joseph Smith regarding the individual found buried in the mound, which mound is now identified as Naples-Russell Mound Number 8, Pike County (see figure 1).¹ These are the only known primary sources,

1. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29, no. 2 (1989): 31,



Figure 1. The Naples-Russell Mound Number 8. (Wikimedia Commons, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Naples-Russel_Mound_8.jpg.)

upon which other later recountings are based. Kenneth Godfrey² notes that the experience of historians and experiments of psychologists have established that precise recall of details about an event fades rapidly, so it is important to base a reconstruction of an event on primary sources, although the primary sources also suffer some inconsistencies between them.

The purpose of this inquiry is not to recount all the historical particulars but to evaluate whether the vision that Joseph Smith was indicated to have had is consistent with the known archeological and scientific information currently available. As is typical with separate accounts of a historical event, no two accounts of what occurred and what Joseph Smith purportedly said are exactly the same, and some have contradictory details. Godfrey³ provided an analysis of the different historical sources for the vision and organized each account, along with their differences, into a comparative matrix. Because not all details in these narratives are relevant to evaluating the event

scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol29/iss2/3/.

2. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 46.

3. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 49–52.

scientifically, the discussion here focuses only on the elements that matter, following Godfrey's descriptions of each account.

A summary of each account of the members of the Zion's Camp group is as follows, in chronological order:

- **Reuben McBride.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary, and may have been the first one recorded, possibly written on the day the find occurred.
- **Moses Martin.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary.
- **Wilford Woodruff.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry, it does not appear that he was with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zelph. Wilford Woodruff made later reports, but none conflicted with his original diary entries.
- **Levi Hancock.** This report is considered a primary source, as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry, he was not with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zelph but saw the bones and arrowpoint that were brought back to camp. Hancock indicates that "Onendagus [sic] was the king and . . . in that mound did he bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there [sic] dirt and covered them."⁴
- **Heber C. Kimball.** An account of the discovery of Zelph was published in 1845 in the *Times and Seasons* under the title "Extracts from H. C. Kimball's Journal." An identical unedited account is found in the autobiography Kimball dictated to James Sloan after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. Although not a "direct" journal entry, based on the corroboration of both accounts, this would be considered equivalent to a primary source. Heber C. Kimball was also present on the mound.
- **George A. Smith.** George A. Smith was present on the mound, and in a history written in 1857, he included a very brief amount of information regarding the Zelph incident.

All essentially agree (or some were silent) on the following points:

- The individual was named Zelph

4. Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 37.

- Zelph was a warrior
- Zelph was a captain
- Zelph was a man of God
- Zelph was a prophet
- Zelph was a white Lamanite
- Zelph fought under Onandagus (some spelling differences)
- There were great battles and Zelph was killed by an arrow in battle
- Onandagus was a king, good man, leader, and prophet
- Onandagus was known from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Sea or Hill Cumorah
- The mound was built by ancient inhabitants of this country; specifically, Onandagus had the mound constructed

Some differences in the various accounts may be related to attempts to align the vision with the Book of Mormon text involving periods of warfare and geography, introducing some uncertainty to the details of the vision:

- Four primary witnesses to the event do not indicate the nature of the death other than by an arrow. Reuben McBride wrote in his journal contemporaneous to the event that Zelph “was killed in battle.”⁵ Heber C. Kimball records nine years after the event that Zelph was killed “in the last destruction among the Lamanites.” George A. Smith, twenty-three years after the event, indicates it was “a last struggle with the Nephites and Lamanites.”⁶
- Reuben Hancock’s near contemporaneous accounting of the event indicated that Joseph Smith, after returning to camp, later recounted to Sylvester Smith, a troublemaker in the camp, that “this land was called the land of desolation.”⁷ No other witness recounts this.
- Reuben McBride indicated that it was Zelph (as opposed to Onandagus) that was known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains.

After Joseph Smith had identified the location where digging was to take place, Kimball and the others then dug into the side of the mound,

5. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 34.

6. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 38.

7. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 37.

having previously sent for a shovel and a hoe. Kimball describes what was discovered:

At about one foot deep we discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire; and between two of his ribs we found an Indian arrow, which had evidently been the cause of his death. We took the leg and thigh bones and carried them along with us to Clay county. All four appeared sound.⁸

The Vision as Revelation

Not every statement or comment by Joseph Smith has been canonized as revelation. For example, Doctrine and Covenants 121, 122, and 123 are extracts from a letter Joseph Smith wrote while imprisoned in Liberty Jail. This letter was addressed to the Saints in Illinois and elsewhere, as well as to Bishop Edward Partridge, and was dictated between 20 and 25 March 1839. These sections were not included in the Doctrine and Covenants until 1876 when they were added by Orson Pratt under the direction of President Brigham Young. The rest of Joseph Smith's letter from Liberty Jail contains further words of advice and inspiration, but only excerpts have been canonized and recognized as official revelation by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Of course, others outside of the Church structure likely have different points of view in regard to Joseph Smith's comments and qualifying revelatory criteria.

In the case of Zelfh, unlike advice or even doctrinal commentary, the evidence of witnesses is that Joseph Smith had a vision, which by its nature, if accurate and factual, requires a revelatory experience. It has not been canonized by the Church, but others consider it to be a revelation, as it was recorded as such. Of course, some visions may be instructive or representative as opposed to the observation of actual events, such as Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life found in the Book of Mormon. Given the specificity of individuals and locations and given the fact that there is essentially no doctrinal or allegorical information included, the Zelfh vision is classified as a vision of actual historical persons, places, and events and is not in the nature of an allegory, commentary, or opinion by Joseph Smith.

8. Godfrey, "Zelfh Story," 38.

Consistency of the Vision with Known Archeology

The vision has some consistencies with what is known of the Hopewell culture, which is known to have existed in that area anciently from approximately 100 BC to AD 400. The Hopewell Interaction Sphere consisted of the long-distance sharing of certain artifact styles and raw materials. The center of the Hopewell tradition is found in Ohio, and items found there include fossilized shark's teeth from the Gulf Coast (east sea), copper and silver from the Great Lakes region, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and spear points made of obsidian from the Montana portion of Yellowstone National Park (see figure 2).

Hopewell archeologists indicate that these big earthwork centers in Ohio were probably widely known. They were built over a period of hundreds of years and are significant structures, so people knew about them. Bret Ruby, an archaeologist at Hopewell Culture National Historic Park in Chillicothe, Ohio, indicates that some of the trade going on consisted of direct trade (meaning the traders traveled all the way to Ohio from the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and the Rocky Mountains) and also likely consisted of pilgrims from distant places, coming to Ohio to visit these great religious centers and bringing objects with them.⁹ Brad Lepper, curator of archaeology at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, stated, "I think that during the Hopewell era in the Middle Woodland period (100 BC to AD 400), Ohio was this nexus, this cultural center for much of eastern North America."¹⁰

This does allow the possibility that Onandagus, if considered a significant leader among one of the Hopewell groups, especially if present in Ohio at some point, could have been known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, as indicated in the vision, by virtue of trade or a centralized pilgrimage of people from various locations.

Lamanite is a generic name, as indicated by Jacob 1:13–14, where it is used as a collective term as opposed to a tribal term.¹¹ Native Americans of the Hopewell culture may thus qualify as Lamanites under Book of Mormon terminology, regardless of genetic lineage or the geography in which they are located. The Book of Mormon describes northward migrations from its core region, with some

9. Stuart Thornton, "Intriguing Interactions," *National Geographic*, education. nationalgeographic.org/resource/intriguing-interactions.

10. Thornton, "Intriguing Interactions."

11. Brant A. Gardner, *Second Witness: Analytical and Contextual Commentary on the Book of Mormon, Volume Two, Second Nephi through Jacob* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2007), 478.



Figure 2. Hopewell Exotic Materials. (National Park Service, nps.gov/hocu/learn/historyculture/hopewell-exotic-materials.htm.)

groups never heard from again. Although the Hopewell culture is not known to have originated from Mesoamerican peoples, it could have absorbed migrants from the south. If so, there may have been integration of some Lamanite persons from Mesoamerica.

The vision also indicated that King Onandagus built the burial mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound) for the burial of "his dead," which could either mean his family or more broadly for at least some of his subjects. The archeological investigation of the Napoleon Hollow sites determined that the mortuary facilities likely served the occupants of numerous Middle Woodland hamlets located away from the mortuary precinct from a large area along twelve miles of the river and up into tributary valleys, so is consistent with this portion of the vision.¹²

Analysis of Issues Related to Book of Mormon Geography

It is noteworthy that a prophet as prominent as Onandagus (and Zelfh) would likely have been mentioned by Mormon or Moroni if he had

12. Kenneth B. Farnsworth and Karen A. Atwell, *Excavations at the Blue Island and Naples-Russell Mounds and Related Hopewellian Sites in the Lower Illinois Valley* (Champaign: Illinois State Archaeological Survey, 2015), 185.

lived within their geographic sphere. Their silence suggests that he was not residing in the core lands described in the Book of Mormon during their era. Also, if Zelph and Onandagus existed at the time of the final battles between the Lamanites and Nephites, as some have suggested, it becomes difficult to reconcile their supposed righteousness with Mormon's statements that no righteous Nephites remained except himself and Moroni (Mormon 1:17, 3:3, 4:10-12, 5:2; Moroni 9:3-5, 18-19). Because Zelph is described as a Lamanite fighting on behalf of the Nephites under the direction of Onandagus as part of the vision, it is reasonably inferred that Onandagus was a Nephite.

The Church on its official website has recognized the Zelph vision as a revelatory "open vision."¹³ With regard to the position of the Church on the location for Book of Mormon geography being revealed, it has formally stated that "the Church's only position is that the events the Book of Mormon describes took place in the ancient Americas" and "the Church does not take a position on the specific geographic locations of Book of Mormon events in the ancient Americas."¹⁴

Since the Church has recognized the Zelph revelation as an "open vision," and considering that there is no recognized revelation from the Church involving the specific location of the Book of Mormon, it is a reasonable inference that the Zelph revelation is not considered to involve Book of Mormon locations. Of course, there are other churches, organizations, and individuals that retain a belief in the Book of Mormon that are not part of the Church who may see things differently.

The Naples-Russell Mound 8 is part of the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District, which consists of twenty-six burial mounds and two possible burial knolls known collectively as the Russell Mound Group (see figure 3).

In 1990, the Naples-Russell Mound Number 8 underwent an archeological investigation. It was determined that Mound 8 was constructed atop an earthen platform supporting two ramped log tombs—presumably for processing the dead—that had been capped by an "earthen saddle." Burial 1 Skeleton 1 (QL-4904) was

13. Church Educational System, "Zion's Camp," in *Church History in the Fulness of Times: Student Manual, Religion 341 through 343* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2025), 145, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/church-history-in-the-fulness-of-times/chapter-twelve](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/church-history-in-the-fulness-of-times/chapter-twelve).

14. "Book of Mormon Geography," Topics and Questions, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, [churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography](https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/book-of-mormon-geography).

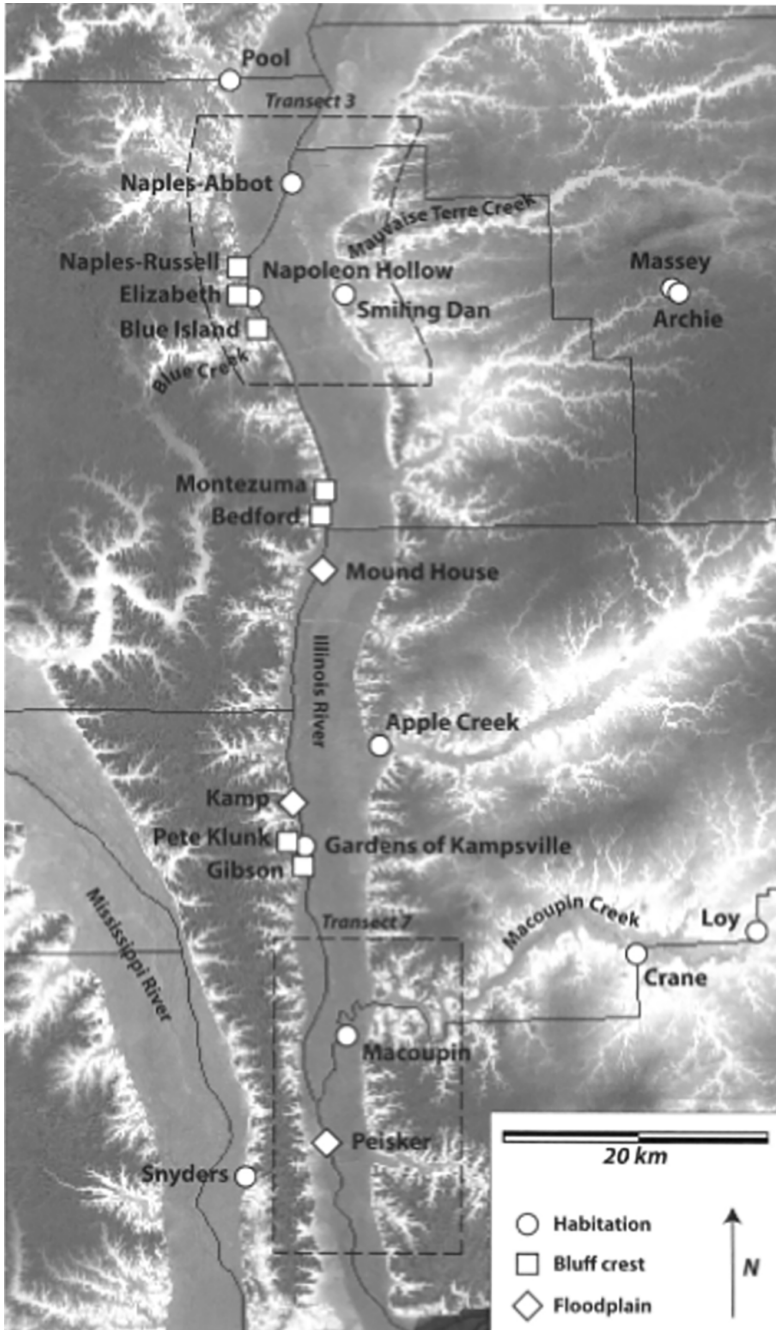


Figure 3. The Napoleon Hollow Archeological District and Illinois Valley Archeological Sites. (King, Buikstra, and Charles, *Time and Archaeological Traditions*, 501.)

interred on the upper west side of the tumulus and was one of the last burials in the mound. QL-4904 was thus determined to represent the end use of the structure. Using radiometric dating, it was determined that QL-4904 was interred in AD 91 (Calibrated Range (2 σ) AD 58–127).¹⁵ No intrusive burials (burials after completion of the mound) were observed by archeologists investigating the mound.¹⁶ During the 1990 archeological excavation of the mound, two areas about halfway down the hill were noted as having looter disturbance, with either location consistent with the 1834 description of the digging¹⁷ (see figure 4).

Occupation and burials in the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District existed from 50 BC to AD 100, as determined by extensive radiometric dating.¹⁸

Heber C. Kimball, in a later recollection written in 1843 and published in 1845, indicated that several of the group, along with Joseph Smith, walked first to the top of the mound. Kimball states, “On the top of this mound there was the appearance of three altars, which had been built of stone, one above another, according to the ancient order; and the ground was strewn over with human bones.”¹⁹

Wilford Woodruff similarly indicated that they had gone to the top of the mound and then, while descending, halfway down the mound, Joseph Smith pointed to a location that was then excavated where the Zelph skeleton was then found.²⁰

The Zelph skeleton was located further down the hill, indicative of an earlier or middle time frame (circa AD 25), and so could not be a candidate to be involved in any final battle of the Nephites and Lamanites, which according to the Book of Mormon, occurred much later, in the late fourth century AD.

Furthermore, around AD 91—approximately year 85 in the Book of Mormon calendar—the text indicates that there were no Nephites or Lamanites and it was a period of peace. From the time of Christ’s

15. Jason L. King, Jane E. Buikstra, and Douglas K. Charles, “Time and Archaeological Traditions in the Lower Illinois Valley,” *American Antiquity* 76, no. 3 (2011): 502, 508.

16. Kenneth B. Farnsworth, “Lamanitish Arrows and Eagles with Lead Eyes: Tales of the First Recorded Explorations in an Illinois Valley Hopewell Mound,” *Illinois Archeology* 22, no. 1 (2010): 36.

17. Farnsworth and Atwell, *Hopewellian Sites*, 125–6.

18. Farnsworth and Atwell, *Hopewellian Sites*, 13–14.

19. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 44.

20. Godfrey, “Zelph Story,” 41.

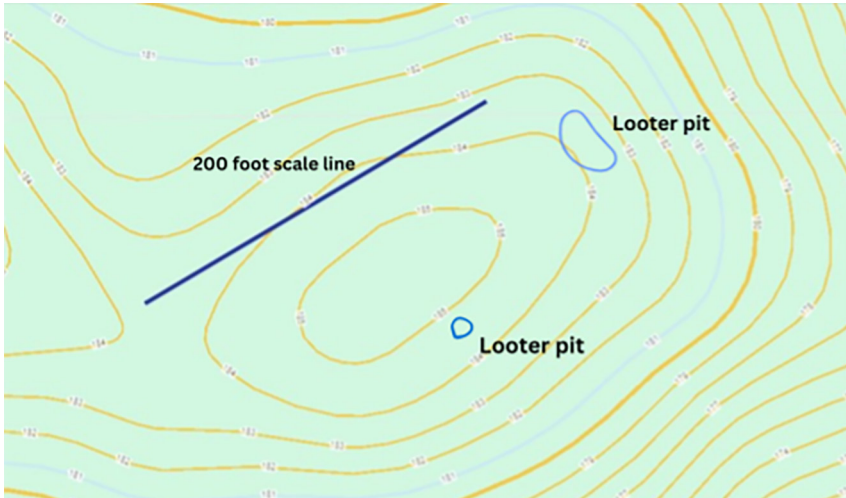


Figure 4. Two areas of historic looter disturbance on Naples-Russel Mound 8 observed in 1990. (Illustration by the author on a Google Earth Pro template, 2025 Airbus.)

appearance (circa AD 29–33) onward, the record states that there was “no contention among all the people, in all the land” (4 Nephi 1:13). According to the Book of Mormon, there were no Lamanites or “-ites” of any kind from AD 29–104 (110th year; 4 Nephi 1:17). Sometime, apparently toward the end of the period between AD 104 and AD 188, a small part of the people left the Church and took upon themselves the name Lamanite (4 Nephi 1:20). No battles started until year 321 (approximately AD 315; Mormon 1:6). Assuming that Mormon didn’t ignore wars when he declared that there was peace, the warrior Zelfh who was killed in battle and the mound he was buried in cannot be a part of Book of Mormon lands. As the archeologists determined there were no later burials in the mound (or any other mounds in the district) after its completion, there is no scientific support for a later Zelfh burial.

Further, part of the vision indicates that Onandagus (under whom Zelfh served) was the one who directed the construction of the mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound), which does not allow for Zelfh to be buried long after the mound was completed. Even if Zelfh died later than Onandagus, Zelfh’s burial could not be later than approximately 50 years after completion of the mound. Even if one uses the latest radiometric date within the date range of

AD 127, the latest date for Zelph would be AD 177, centuries short of the final Nephite/Lamanite battles.

Thus, based on all of the various avenues of independent evidence, it is not possible that any Lamanite, let alone a warrior captain/prophet named Zelph, serving a larger leader named Onandagus, could have existed in Book of Mormon lands in the archeological time frame specified.



Jerry D. Grover Jr. *is a licensed professional structural and civil engineer and a licensed professional geologist. He has an undergraduate degree in Geological Engineering from BYU and a Master's Degree in Civil Engineering from the University of Utah. He speaks Italian and Chinese and has worked as a freelance translator off and on for the past twenty-five years. He is the author of books related to scientific and linguistic research of the Book of Mormon, including Translation of the "Caractors" Document: Revised and Updated, Calendars and Chronology of the Book of Mormon, The Swords of Shule, Evidence of the Nehor Religion in Mesoamerica, Sumerian Roots of Jaredite-Derived Names and Terminology in the Book of Mormon, Geology of the Book of Mormon, and Ziff, Magic Goggles, and Golden Plates.*

Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship is a peer-reviewed academic journal published by The Interpreter Foundation. Our mission is simple: Supporting The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints through scholarship.