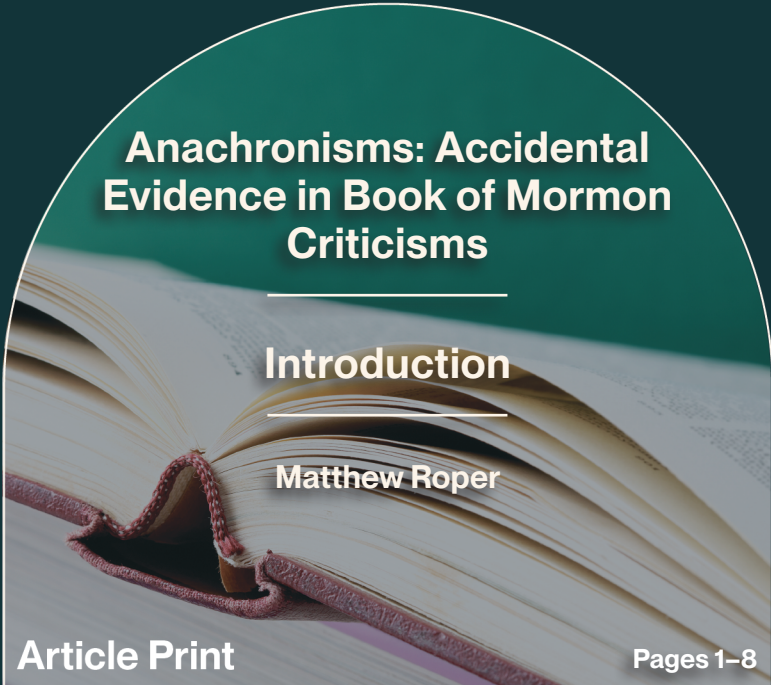


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Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms

Introduction

Matthew Roper

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Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms

Matthew Roper

[Editor's Note: *We are pleased to present the Introduction 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.*]

Introduction

All the scriptures, including the Book of Mormon, will remain in the realm of faith. Science will not be able to prove or disprove holy writ. However, enough plausible evidence will come forth to prevent scoffers from having a field day, but not enough to remove the requirement of faith. Believers must be patient during such unfolding.

—Neal A. Maxwell¹

When I was a boy, I went for a swim at the beach. Enjoying the water and the summer sun, I failed to notice the imperceptible draw of currents pulling me out to sea. When I realized what was happening, I began to panic. Although I was a good swimmer, the feeling of being alone and out of my depth left me confused and disoriented. Regaining my composure, I took my bearings from landmarks I had noticed earlier in the day (familiar rocks; a nearby pier) and recalled the advice somebody had once given me. To escape the treacherous current, I swam parallel to the shore for a few minutes until I was able to work my way back to safety.

It is no surprise that the Book of Mormon is controversial. Anachronisms, elements in the text that some readers conclude are out of their time in a translation of an ancient record, are among the most commonly stated reasons for rejecting the text as an authentically ancient record. When one finds oneself in the waters of controversy, good answers to difficult questions can be hard to come by. Perhaps hampered by our lack of knowledge, we may find ourselves far from shore and feeling out of our depth. We may become so focused on a particular question that evades immediate explanation that we fail to notice how many other issues that once seemed problematic have changed or been resolved through new research and discoveries. In such circumstances, knowing where we have been in terms of Book of Mormon questions can provide perspective on where we are and where in the future we may expect to be.

For years, I have been interested in tracking what people have said about the Book of Mormon since its first publication. During this time, I have been able to gather, review, and categorize examples of what others claimed were anachronisms in the text. That experience suggests to me that the Book of Mormon has fared rather well over time. This study provides a point-by-point report card to share where things stand at the moment.²

Anachronisms in the Book of Mormon

From its publication in 1830 until today, there have been readers who have proclaimed, sometimes with no little amusement, that some thing or another in the text is at odds with known facts or widely held assumptions about the ancient world.

As one former neighbor of Joseph Smith wrote, “No intelligent or well-educated man would have been guilty of so many anachronisms . . . as characterize every part of the Book of Mormon.”³ The book, stated an early European reader, is “so thoroughly absurd and puerile, that its gross anachronisms may be detected by a school-boy of the lowest form.”⁴ Gordon Fraser, writing in the mid-twentieth century, thought the presentation of the book as an authentic history was a fatal mistake of Joseph Smith.

Joseph Smith made an unfortunate choice of a literary vehicle when he presented the Book of Mormon as sober history. Joseph’s upbringing, in areas quite remote from adequate opportunities for formal study or research, can account for his ignorance of the necessity of choosing an

appropriate vehicle for a work on philosophy or religion. . . . With the choice of either allegory or fiction, Smith legitimately could have conveyed his religious message without inviting the inevitable peril of having his doctrine judged by the standard of accuracy of historical statement.⁵

Fraser claimed that the modern origins of the book (which he considered to be fiction) would become apparent to any who would simply compare it with what was known about the culture and geography of the ancient Near East or pre-Columbian America on such matters as economy, agriculture, crafts, warfare, politics, and religion.⁶ “One could proceed through the entire Book of Mormon and find some gross blunder in discernment or fact on almost every page of the book, all of which betrays the fact that the writer was totally uninformed.”⁷

Over the years, believing Latter-day Saints have pushed back against such claims. Hugh Nibley, whose pioneering work on the Book of Mormon was the impetus for many subsequent scholarly studies, showed how the Book of Mormon accurately reflects many facets of the ancient Near Eastern culture from which Lehi and his family came, much of which would likely have been unfamiliar or completely unknown to Joseph Smith.⁸ In his classic work, *Lehi in the Desert*, Nibley compared the account of Lehi’s wilderness journey to other accounts of Bedouin culture. He revealed that some elements which were once the object of derision can be shown, upon closer examination, to accurately reflect the ancient world.

Writing in 1952, Nibley stated,

Such changing points of view, largely the results of the new discoveries, are very significant for Book of Mormon study. Their immediate result is to show for the first time on what extremely flimsy groundwork criticism of the Book of Mormon has rested in the past.⁹

Nibley further argued that confirmation of features that were once widely thought to be in error provides a useful measure of its ancient heritage.

It is the “howlers” with which the Book of Mormon abounds that furnish the best index to its authenticity. They show, first of all, that the book was definitely not a typical product of its time, and secondly, when they are examined more closely in light of present-day evidence, they appear very different indeed than they did a hundred years ago.¹⁰

In an address given at the commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the birth of Joseph Smith, John Clark, a Mesoamerican archaeologist, showed how over time, items that were once considered problematic in the Book of Mormon have trended toward confirmation, particularly when examined in a Mesoamerican setting.¹¹ In one study he reviewed sixty of these items as mentioned in three nineteenth-century publications. He found that over sixty percent of them had been resolved in favor of the Nephite record.¹²

Conceptually, methodologically, and informationally, this study builds and expands upon such previous efforts. I like to call this “accidental evidence” because it comes about as the unintended byproduct of our critics’ efforts to discredit the Book of Mormon. They point us to look more closely at certain subjects and lead us inadvertently to new discoveries that can support the book.

Purpose

There are many ways to approach the Book of Mormon, and not all of them are or need be concerned with issues of evidence and antiquity. The suitability of one’s approach depends on the kinds of questions one would like to answer. This study focuses on a subcategory of evidence known as *anachronisms*. Its purpose is to evaluate the status of items in the text which many writers have considered as out of place if it is, indeed, a product of the ancient world. How, in other words, has the Book of Mormon fared over time in relation to these claims?

To answer this question, it is necessary to review what has been said in the past as well as what commentators have more recently claimed in regard to these issues. It should be understood that the state of collective knowledge and scholarly opinion often changes over time due to new research and discoveries. Thus, something in the text that was thought to be problematic in 1834 or 1857 may very well not be considered anachronistic today. While they do not encompass all that can be said for or against the Book of Mormon, anachronisms can be a useful measure of changing perspectives and the status of particular items over time. This information may also help inform future expectations.

This study is not intended to address all evidence which may be marshaled for or against the Book of Mormon. Nor does it discuss every item of culture, language, or environment that could relate to the book’s claimed ancient origins. Moreover, just because some items remain anachronistic does not mean that there are no valid reasons

for the current lack of evidence. At the same time, it also shouldn't be assumed that items no longer considered anachronistic require no further research, study, or scrutiny. In some cases, an issue may even be more a matter of textual interpretation than archaeological verification. Rather than providing the final word, this study offers a general picture of the state of alleged anachronisms during the nearly two centuries since the Book of Mormon first came off the press.

At the time of its publication and throughout much of the intervening history, many of its readers — including both believers and non-believers in its divine origins — have assumed that the Book of Mormon represents an account set within all of North and South America. Furthermore, many have supposed that it purports to explain the origin of all or most of the native inhabitants of the Americas (a claim that the text itself does not actually make). These types of assumptions are often reflected in the charges of anachronism that have been made. Only more recently has a limited view of the Book of Mormon's geography and of its social history become more common, especially among scholarly readers.¹³ Importantly, this study does not attempt to correct or contend with the geographic or demographic assumptions held by those who have proposed anachronisms. Rather, it aims to simply identify, categorize, and assess allegations on their own terms, based on whatever stated or implicit assumptions the authors bring to the table. Given the imprecision and variability of the claims involved, this requires the investigation of a broad swath of literature and scientific data. That is, when an alleged anachronism assumes a hemispheric model for the Book of Mormon's geography, evidence from the *entire* Western hemisphere is considered as relevant and valid for assessing the claim.

This study should therefore not be seen as expressing any type of favor for or against any specific geographic model or setting for the Book of Mormon. Nor is it primarily concerned with establishing whether all of the cultural, linguistic, or environmental features mentioned in the text are believable or historically accurate (although that is clearly a related issue). Instead, the key purpose of this study is to see how well alleged anachronisms themselves have held up over time. In the future, it may be useful to add approaches that compare and contrast evidence relevant to specific geographic models.

Method

After reviewing over 1,000 publications critical of the Book of Mormon

and printed between 1830 and 2024, this study has identified a total of 226 features of the Book of Mormon that have, in those publications, been claimed as anachronisms. These have been divided into eight subcategories:

- Book of Mormon animals
- Warfare in the Book of Mormon
- Metals and metallurgy
- Ancient culture
- Book of Mormon names
- Old World journeys by land and sea
- Records, writing, and language
- Events in Third Nephi

Each subcategory constitutes a chapter in this work. At the end of each of these there are charts that illustrate the state or status of anachronisms included in that chapter. These charts further divide the individual anachronisms into three main eras (1830–1844, 1845–1965, and 1966–2024), which can help track their status over time.¹⁴

In the chapters that make up this work, each alleged anachronism and its corresponding Book of Mormon data is briefly assessed. They are presented, in no particular order, in the eight subcategories just mentioned.

In contrast to John Clark’s earlier research — which focused exclusively on items related to archaeology, culture, and history — this study adds items relating to languages and names. When an item from the Book of Mormon that was once thought to be out of place turns up in the historical, archaeological, or linguistic record, it is labeled as “confirmed.” When the available data isn’t conclusive but is trending towards confirmation, the item is labeled as “partially confirmed.” And when no known data directly supports an identified feature of the text, it is labeled as “unconfirmed.” The results for each subcategory are summarized at the end of each chapter.

It should be clarified that these labels (“confirmed,” “partially confirmed,” and “unconfirmed”) do *not* refer to the claims or allegations of the anachronisms themselves. Rather, the labels describe the status of the *textual features* of the Book of Mormon (or, in a few cases, *assumed* textual features or related data¹⁵) which some have viewed to be anachronistic or lacking in evidence. The distinction is crucial

because a misunderstanding on this point could drastically skew one's entire understanding of the findings of this study.



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Notes

1. Neal A. Maxwell, *Plain and Precious Things* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1983), 4.
2. I would like to express heartfelt appreciation to those who offered support and encouragement and without whose help this research never would have seen fruition. This includes John Clark, Wade Ardern, Jack Welch, Lynne Wilson, Kirk Magelby, and Dave Jenkins. I am especially thankful for the remarkable research staff at Scripture Central, particularly Neal Rappleye, John Thompson, Ryan Dahle who provided constructive comments and suggestions, and Paul Bryner for help with source checking. Allen Wyatt, Jacie Mustard, and Raquel Angulo also deserve special thanks for their assistance with the charts that accompany this work.
3. John A. Clark, "Gleanings by the Way. No. VII," *Episcopal Recorder* (Philadelphia), 12 September 1840.
4. "Mormonism, or, New Mohammedanism in England and America," *Dublin University Magazine*, March 1843, 283.
5. Gordon H. Fraser, *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1964), 11.
6. See Fraser, *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach?*, 11–13.
7. Fraser, *What Does the Book of Mormon Teach?*, 32.
8. See Hugh Nibley, *Lehi in the Desert / The World of the Jaredites / There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies [FARMS], 1988). Nibley's book was first published in 1952. See also Hugh Nibley, *An Approach to the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988); Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1988); Hugh

- Nibley, *The Prophetic Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1989).
9. Nibley, *Prophetic Book of Mormon*, 80.
10. Hugh Nibley, "'Howlers' in the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Star*, February 1963, 29.
11. See John E. Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," *BYU Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2005): 83–104, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3732&context=byusq.
12. See Clark, "Archaeological Trends and Book of Mormon Origins," 93. See also John E. Clark, "Archaeology, Relics, and Book of Mormon Belief," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 14, no. 2 (2005): 38–49, 71–74, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1380&context=jbms; John E. Clark, Wade Arden, 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. For a sample of similar studies considering ancient Mesoamerican contexts, see John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985); John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: Research Press, 1998); John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2013); Brant A. Gardner, *Traditions of the Fathers: The Book of Mormon as History* (Draper, UT: Greg Kofford Books, 2015).
13. For an example of this approach see Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*.
14. Many relevant publications from 1830–1844 have been digitized and are available in the Harold B. Lee Library's *19th-Century Publications about the Book of Mormon (1829–1844)* digital collection at lib.byu.edu/collections/19th-century-publications-about-the-book-of-mormon/. On this collection, see Matthew Roper, "Early Publications on the Book of Mormon," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 18, no. 2 (2009): 38–51, scholarsarchive.byu.edu/jbms/vol18/iss2/5/. For publications from 1845–1965 and 1966–2024, sources were drawn from Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library in Provo, UT, and the Church History Library in Salt Lake City.
15. For example, critics assumed that if the Book of Mormon's claims about horses were valid, then the reader should expect to find oral or textual *traditions* about horse culture that could be traced back to pre-Columbian times. Thus, while the item is based on a feature of the text (horses), it specifically involves the critics' own assumptions about what type of evidence should be available if that feature of the text were historically authentic.

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