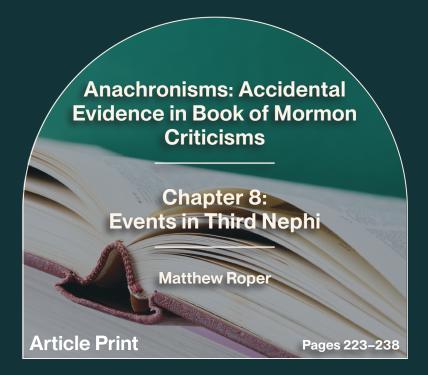


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A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship



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Anachronisms: Accidental Evidence in Book of Mormon Criticisms

Matthew Roper

[Editor's Note: We are pleased to present chapter 8 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.]

Chapter 8: Events in Third Nephi

Some readers have dismissed the description of destruction among the Nephites at the time of the death of Jesus as an account that could only be accepted by the credulous. Writing in 1838, Origen Bacheler claimed the account of the destruction in 3 Nephi was a prominent example of the many "improbabilities" in the Book of Mormon. "It has no appearance of truth. It seems just as a forgery would seem and has not one redeeming trait in this respect to counterbalance. If such a work is not a forgery, then the landmarks of evidence fail, and we have no means of this nature for detecting a forgery and discriminating between falsehood and truth."

M. T. Lamb claimed in 1887 that this account was "so improbable, and in some cases so absolutely impossible physically, as to furnish one of the completest proofs of the unreal and visionary character of the Book." He also mockingly characterized this event as the "climax of all miracles" which "gathers into it more that is strange and unaccountable and foolish and physically impossible, we may safely say, than any other miracle ever performed upon earth. The author,

evidently, mounts the fiery steed of his imagination and herds together every strange thing, every wonderful thing, every blood-curdling story, and every impossible thing he had ever heard of, or thought of, or dreamed of, and attempts, in this master effort, to combine them all in one *huge miracle!*"³

According to another writer in 1912, "Geology and the Book of Mormon are in irreconcilable conflict as to great seismic changes which the latter avers took place at the time of the crucifixion." Episcopal Bishop Franklin Spalding asserted that if true, "the account of the convulsions of nature, which occurred in America at the time of Christ's coming, would compel the geologist to re-examine his theories as to the formation of land and sea, and the astronomer to adjust his laws of the heavens to the wonderful three days of darkness." This section addresses these issues.

212. General Description of the Destruction in 3 Nephi

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the account of the destruction at the time of the death of Christ among the Nephites (3 Nephi 8:5–23; 9:3–12; 10:13–14) is implausible.⁶

Response: In 1913, Osborne J. P. Widtsoe noted significant correlations between the Book of Mormon account and the disastrous eruption of Krakatoa in 1883 (see figure 59). Subsequent Latter-day Saint researchers have cited additional correlations. Geologist Bart Kowallis showed that each of the phenomena described in Mormon's account are consistent with a significant volcanic event. These include a great and terrible storm or tempest, terrible thunder, earthquakes, sharp lightening, the burning of cities, the sinking of at least one city into the sea, earth being carried up upon and burying a city, the sinking and burial of settlements, changes upon the face of the land, whirlwinds, destruction of highways, the breaking up of cities during earthquakes, the breaking up and scattering of rocks, the three-hour duration of initial destruction, three days of darkness, the palpable nature of the darkness, inability to light fire in the darkness despite having very dry wood, vapors of smoke, and people crushed by falling objects.

In another important study, Jerry Grover shows that the account in the Book of Mormon would be consistent with one or perhaps two volcanic events in Mesoamerica associated with a major earthquake.¹⁰ Research, events, and discoveries since the publication of the Book of

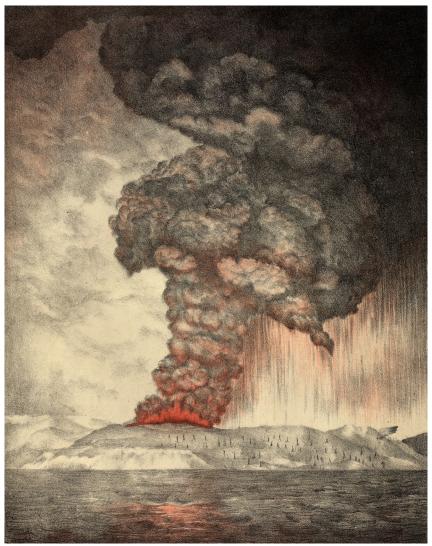


Figure 59. A lithograph of the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa. (*Wikipedia*, s.v. "An 1888 lithograph of the 1883 eruption of Krakatoa," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Krakatoa #/media/File:Krakatoa_eruption_lithograph.jpg.)

Mormon have shown that the description of the events in Third Nephi are not only plausible, but in several cases strikingly realistic.¹¹

213. Sunken Cities

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: The account in Third Nephi states that many cities were sunk into water (3 Nephi 9:7) or into the earth (3 Nephi 9:8) at the time of the death of Christ. Some have claimed that this is not realistic.¹²

Response: Similar phenomena are now known to have occurred. One way that this occurs is due to liquefaction. For example, during an earthquake in 1692, a significant portion of the town of Port Royale in Jamaica sunk into the sand.¹³

214. Great Tempest

Status: Confirmed (1966-2024)

Critic's Claim: The account of destruction at the death of Christ among the Nephites describes a great and terrible tempest (3 Nephi 8:6). Some have claimed that the description of this kind of event is implausible.¹⁴

Response: Similarly destructive events are now attested. Dramatic tempests frequently accompany volcanic events.¹⁵

215. Destruction by Fire

Status: Confirmed (1966-2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the destruction of cities by fire among the Nephites at the time of the death of Christ (3 Nephi 8:8; 9:3, 9–10) is not realistic.¹⁶

Response: The account of destruction by fire is consistent with similar events associated with volcanism.¹⁷ For instance, the 1982 eruption of El Chichon in Chiapas Mexico reportedly caused destruction by fire. One witness stated, "The fire started coming out of the sky... and we didn't know whether to leave or stay. Ash and sand were falling, and rocks came through the roof like bullets." Another stated, "I had 20 cattle and a few horses. The fire that came burned everything. I had corn, beans, coffee, and everything now is flat ground." During fire accompanying the eruption of the Mexican Volcano Popocateptl in the first century AD, it is estimated that around 20,000 people may have been killed.

216. Whirlwinds

Status: Confirmed (1966-2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the report of whirlwinds

(3 Nephi 8:12, 16) during the destruction reported in Third Nephi is implausible.²⁰

Response: Based on the text, it is impossible to know whether the whirlwinds were directly associated with volcanic activity or just a contemporaneous disaster. In any case, whirlwinds and tornadoes are phenomena known to sometimes accompany volcanic events.²¹ It was reported that during the 1815 eruption of Tambora, "violent whirlwinds carried up men, horses, cattle, and whatever else came within their influence, into the air; tore up the largest trees by the roots, and covered the whole sea with floating timber."²²

217. Earthquake

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the description of earthquakes in the account of the destruction among the Nephites at the death of Christ (3 Nephi 8:12, 17) is absurd.²³

Response: The description of earthquakes and destruction associated with them among the Nephites at the time of Christ's death is consistent with many other events associated with earthquakes.²⁴

218. Earthquakes in Mesoamerica

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the description of earth-quakes in Third Nephi (3 Nephi 8:12, 17) is implausible because earth-quakes are uncommon in Mesoamerica. According to Gordon Fraser, the Yucatan peninsula, a region which some Latter-day Saints think may have been associated with the Book of Mormon, is "an area of flat jungle growing on a bench of limestone and has been singularly free from earthquakes, if, indeed, such were physically possible." ²⁵

Response: Earthquakes are well attested in many parts of Mesoamerica.²⁶

219. Buildings Fall

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the account of people dying through the destruction of fallen buildings at the time of the death of Christ (3 Nephi 8:14) is implausible.²⁷

Response: Serious destruction and deaths from the collapse of buildings is an attested phenomenon during serious earthquakes.²⁸

220. Thick Darkness

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the description of thick darkness (3 Nephi 8:8–23) during the destruction at the time of the death of Christ is implausible.²⁹

Response: Similar accounts of thick darkness during volcanic events are commonly attested.³⁰ Survivors of the Krakatau eruption in Indonesia reported "thick darkness, so black and intense that I could not see my hand before my eyes," and passengers on an American boat that was eighty-three kilometers from Krakatau said that at 9:30 in the morning it was "darker than the darkest night."³¹

221. Darkness that Can Be Felt

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the description of a darkness so thick that it can be felt (3 Nephi 8:20) is unrealistic.³²

Response: Accounts of volcanic events often describe a thick darkness in similar terms. During the Krakatoa eruption in 1883 one witness described "a darkness that might almost be felt." 33

222. Three Days of Darkness

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the description of three days of darkness (3 Nephi 8: 23; 10:9) at the time of destruction at Christ's death is implausible.³⁴

Response: Historical accounts of significant volcanic events sometimes report multiple days of thick darkness. The eruption of the volcano Coseguina in Nicaragua, for example, caused a period of thick darkness of forty-four hours (figure 60). Other accounts mention three days of darkness.³⁵

223. Inability to Light Fire

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

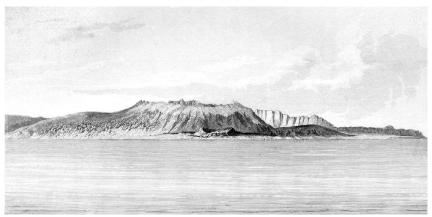


Figure 60. Volcano of Conseguina, Gulf of Fonseca. (Captain Sir Edward Belcher, RN, Wikimedia Commons, s.v. "Narrative of a Voyage around the World — Volcano of Conseguina — Gulf of Fonseca," commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narrative _of_a_Voyage_around_the_World_-_Volcano_of_Conseguina_%E2%80%94 _Gulf_of_Fonseca.png.)

Critic's Claim: Some readers of the Book of Mormon have claimed that the idea of darkness that was so thick that fire could not be lit (3 Nephi 8:20–21) is unrealistic.³⁶

Response: Reports of the difficulty or inability to light fire following a significant volcanic event are attested.³⁷ A witness to the Krakatau eruption stated, "We couldn't light a fire, as matches went out immediately," although eventually after much effort they were able to do so.³⁸

224. Earth Carried Up

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the idea of the earth being carried up over a city and causing its destruction (3 Nephi 8:10) is unrealistic.³⁹

Response: Similar geological events, sometimes accompanying significant volcanic phenomena, are attested.⁴⁰

225. Earth Closing Up

Status: Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that the idea of the earth cleaving together again after having opened up (3 Nephi 10:10) is unrealistic.⁴¹

Response: The event described in 3 Nephi could plausibly be an example of liquefaction during an earthquake. Examples of such a phenomenon include the destruction of much of the city of Port Royal in 1692.⁴²

226. Destruction at the Time of Christ

Status: Partially Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: Some have claimed that there is no evidence to support the idea that a significant geological event, such as that described among the people of Nephi, occurred specifically at the time of the death of Jesus.⁴³

Response: Although it is impossible to date most volcanic eruptions with exact precision, there is limited geological evidence that several volcanic events may have occurred in Mesoamerica and possibly parts of Central America during the first century AD. An eruption of the San Martin volcano in Veracruz Mexico may have occurred around this time, although precise dating is uncertain. The Tacana volcano near the site of Izapa near the Pacific coast of Chiapas, which seemingly halted development there for a time, has been dated to 25–72 AD.⁴⁴ Further south, archaeologist Payson Sheets found evidence that the Arenal volcano in Costa Rica may have erupted about this time, although the dating was not very precise.⁴⁵

An excellent set of carbon dates have been obtained for the Popocatepetl volcano in central Mexico, which erupted during the early to mid-first century AD, likely resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands in the region and the forced relocation of more than 100,000 in parts of Puebla and the Valley of Mexico. The archaeologists found evidence suggesting that the event occurred during the early spring of the year between the end of March and early April. ⁴⁶ Such evidence suggests that possibly several significant volcanic events may have occurred around the time of Christ, although not yet enough to consider the events described in Third Nephi as completely confirmed.

227. Light for a Day, Night, and Day

Status: Partially Confirmed (1966–2024)

Critic's Claim: The signs given at the time of Christ's birth have been questioned. Some have claimed that the account of an extended

period of light extending for a day and a night and a day (3 Nephi 1:15, 19) is impossible.⁴⁷

Response: The Book of Mormon never clarifies whether this sign was caused via supernatural means or through a natural phenomenon. If the former is true, then it would likely be futile to expect to find naturalistic evidence for this occurrence. On the other hand, the latter scenario is possible, as the Lord apparently used other seemingly natural events (earthquakes, whirlwinds, volcanic eruptions) to carry out his will. In that case, several examples of comparable phenomena have been reported, lending plausibility to the extended duration of light reported in Third Nephi.⁴⁸

Summary of Results

During the first period (1830–1844), writers had noted fourteen items relating to miraculous events surrounding the birth and death of Jesus mentioned in the Book of Mormon that they considered unlikely or implausible, none of which could be confirmed (figure 61). By the end of the second period (1845–1965), that number had risen to fifteen (figure 62). By 2024, however, while the total number of items rose to sixteen, fourteen of these could be confirmed and two partially confirmed (figure 63).



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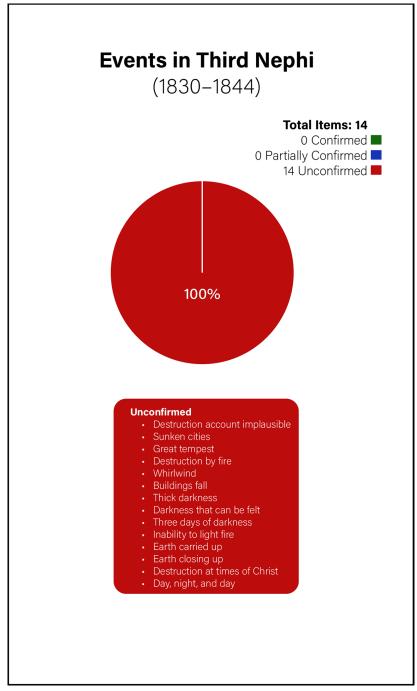


Figure 61. Anachronisms for Third Nephi events in the Book of Mormon (1830–1844).

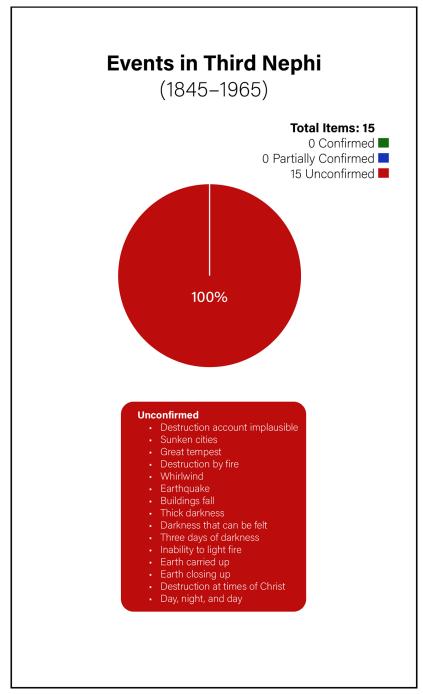


Figure 62. Anachronisms for Third Nephi events in the Book of Mormon (1845–1965).

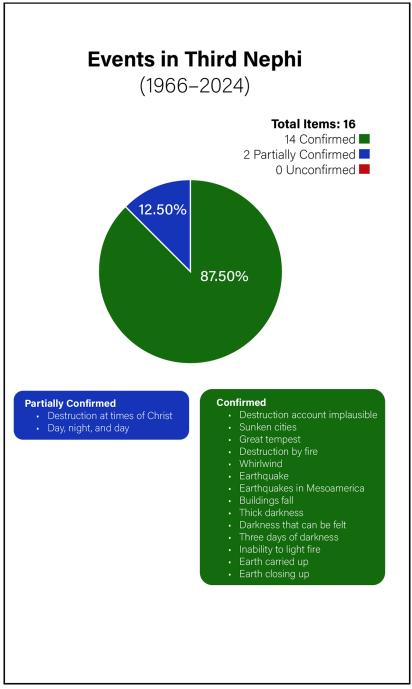


Figure 63. Anachronisms for Third Nephi events in the Book of Mormon (1966–2024).

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