

Kathryn Jenkins Gordon recently read through the Book of Mormon with a distinct purpose:

I wanted to determine how many evidences were found in the Book of Mormon itself supporting the fact that it was translated from an ancient document and not written by Joseph Smith in the early 19th century.

She documented her findings in [3 Examples of Evidence That Support the Book of Mormon](#), an article posted recently in LDSLiving.

Generally, I think she did a great job of summarizing interesting evidence that is consistent with the idea that the Book of Mormon is an ancient record (Although I think she misunderstood or significantly overstated the evidence for horses in Book of Mormon times—but I'll address that in turn.)

About a year and a half ago I read through [Mormon's Codex](#), John Sorenson's magnum opus, which meticulously details all the correspondences between mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon. And, like Gordon, I was impressed by the number of correspondences that existed between the Book of Mormon and the ancient world.

However, in the interest of fairness, I also decided to examine all the data which might support a modern origin for the Book of Mormon. In doing so, I was stunned by the number of correspondences between the Book of Mormon and ideas floating around Joseph Smith's milieu.

I am not the first to notice these correspondences with Joseph's environment. For instance, Richard Bushman—a devout member and emeritus Professor of History at Columbia University—[recently observed](#):

... there is phrasing everywhere—long phrases that if you google them you will find them in 19th century writings. The theology of the Book of Mormon is very much 19th century theology, and it reads like a 19th century understanding of the Hebrew Bible as an Old Testament ...

I will address each of the evidences that Gordon presented and show how Joseph Smith may have been able to glean such ideas from his environment (most often the Bible, with which [Joseph was arguably very familiar](#)). Finally, I'll wrap up by pointing to some of the parallels between the Book of Mormon and other ideas common to the early 1800s.

Olives, Steel, and Horses

Olives

Gordon writes:

Honestly, think about it. Could Joseph Smith, who had only three years of formal schooling, have been acquainted enough with ancient horticultural practices to write the allegory of the olive tree, with all its detailed description? Not likely.

The parable of the Olive Tree may be viewed as an amalgamation and embellishment of Romans 11 and Isaiah 5. Paul, in Romans 11, uses an olive tree as a metaphor and Isaiah uses a vineyard. They are similar, but also somewhat distinct, and the slight difference is apparent in Jacob 5—in fact [the patchwork is still evident](#).

Halfway through the parable, the Jacob 5 author shifts from a focus on *the olive tree* to a focus on *the whole vineyard* (in Jacob 5:41). As Curt van den Heuvel has pointed out “the break appears at the same point that the Book of Mormon quotes a passage from Isaiah.” From then on, the the au-

thor of Jacob 5 “refers exclusively to the ‘fruit of the vineyard’, apparently forgetting that vineyards yield grapes, not olives.” (source: Curt van den Heuvel, [here](#), and [here](#)).

In addition, Joseph grew up in a farming community and was undoubtedly familiar with apple cultivation and grafting, which is similar to that described for olive trees.

Steel

Gordon writes that early critics scoffed at the idea that steel would have existed when Nephi mentions breaking his bow of “fine steel”. Later, Gordon reports, archaeologists found “that various combinations of iron and steel existed near Jerusalem as early as 600 B.C.” This is clearly a win for viewing the Book of Mormon as an ancient record. [edit: It’s possible that these were not actually steel swords, as originally presumed by some apologists. See [this analysis](#) which suggests that the original claim may have been baseless]. However, other mentions of steel in the Book of Mormon run counter to available archaeological evidence.

Steel is mentioned five times in the Book of Mormon (Ether 7:9, 1 Nephi 4:9, 1 Nephi 16:18, 2 Nephi 5:15 and Jar 1:8). The discovery of steel being used in the ancient Middle East makes 1 Nephi 4:9 and 1 Nephi 16:18 historically plausible in that regard. However, we have two references to the Nephites in the new world working in steel—and they exist 180 years apart:

2 Nephi 5:15 — “work in all manner of wood, and of iron, and of copper, and of brass, and of steel, and of gold, and of silver, and of precious ores” (~580 BC)

And again:

Jarom 1:8 — “workmanship of wood, in buildings, and in machinery, and also in iron and copper, and brass and steel, making all manner of tools of every kind to till the ground, and weapons of war—yea, the sharp pointed arrow, and the quiver, and the dart, and the javelin, and all preparations for war” (~400 BC)

Finally, we have reference to the Jaredites making many “swords out of steel” on the ancient American continent well before 600 BC:

Ether 7:9 — “Wherefore, he came to the hill Ephraim, and he did molten out of the hill, and made swords out of steel for those whom he had drawn away with him”

The big problem is that there is no record of steel being made in pre-columbian America ([source](#)).

But if we look to Joseph Smith’s milieu, we find the idea that the ancient Americans were skilled in metal work commonplace in the early 1800s. For instance, [The View of the Hebrews](#) talks about the ancient inhabitants working metals in several places (here are two examples):

The Taultees introduced the cultivation of maize and cotton; they built cities, made roads, and constructed those great pyramids, which are yet admired, and of which the faces are very accurately laid out. They knew the use of hieroglyphical paintings; they could found metals, and cut the hardest stones.

we now see that they possessed the art of working metals

And “The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee,” published in Tennessee in 1823, describes

the native Americans working in steel:

They had swords of iron and **steel**, and **steel bows**, and mirrors with iron backs, knives of iron, with ferules of silver: tools also of iron and **steel**... (emphasis added; [source](#))

Hence the presence of steel (and a steel bow in particular) in the Book of Mormon may merely reflect the thinking of Joseph Smith's time (there was steel in pre-Columbian America), rather than what is understood today (there was no steel in pre-Columbian America).

Horses

Gordon says:

But once more, archaeological evidence discovered in the past few decades proves that horses existed on the American continent as early as 2600 B.C. There is no way Joseph Smith could have known such evidence existed as he was translating the ancient records.

The problem is that there is no indisputable evidence that horses existed by the time that Nephi arrived (~600 BC) as described in 1 Nephi:

1 Nephi 18:25 — “And it came to pass that we did find upon the land of promise, as we journeyed in the wilderness, that there were beasts in the forests of every kind, both the cow and the ox, and the ass and the horse...”

Nor do we find any evidence for horses being used in the manner described in the Book of Mormon (i.e., to escort people and chariots around):

Alma 20:6 — Now when Lamoni had heard this he caused that his servants should make ready his horses and his chariots.

For a “best case” comprehensive treatment of the topic, see Daniel Johnson's BYU Studies article [“Hard' Evidence of Ancient American Horses”](#). Johnson admits:

so far no incontrovertible proof of Book of Mormon horses exists—that is to say, physical remains conclusively dated to around 500 BC (and earlier) from supposed Book of Mormon lands in Mesoamerica are yet to be found.

So, even though LDS apologists have some evidence that they think is worth considering, to date there is not enough evidence to convince a single non-LDS scholar of its legitimacy.

Finally, the animals associated with ancient mesoamerican sites have now been catalogued fairly extensively. Archaeologists have found [the bones of all kinds of others animals integrated into meso-american civilization](#)—but they have not found evidence of horses. This lack of evidence for horses in the face of much evidence for many other kinds of animals in mesoamerica have forced apologists to consider the alternative idea that Book of Mormon references to “horses” were in fact references to “tapirs”.

What about Joseph Smith's milieu in the early 1800s? A frontiersman in the early 1830's would have no reason to suspect that horses were not present in the ancient Americas. For instance, ancient horse artifacts are mentioned in “The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee”, published in Tennessee in 1823. But dating techniques such as carbon-14 dating were still more than 100 years from

being invented, so Joseph Smith would not have known that horses were not present in the Americas during Book of Mormon times.

Fortifications and the Land of Bountiful

Fortifications

Gordon quotes Sorenson to describe the discovery of fortifications similar to those described in the Book of Mormon:

No doubt, this is a great correspondence between meso-American fortifications and the fortifications described in the Book of Mormon.

However, did descriptions of these kinds of fortifications exist in Joseph Smith's time?

James Adair's "A History of the American Indians" contains this account:

Through the whole continent, and in the remotest woods, are traces of their ancient warlike disposition. We frequently met with great mounds of earth, either of a circular, or oblong form, having a strong breast-work at a distance around them, made of the clay which had been dug up in forming the ditch on the inner side of the inclosed ground, and these were their forts of security against an enemy... About 12 miles from the upper northern parts of the Choktah country, there stand...two oblong mounds of earth...in an equal direction with each other... A broad deep ditch inclosed those two fortress, and there they raised an high breast-work, to secure their houses from the invading enemy. (pgs 377-378)

And this account was published in 1826:

In the most pleasing positions of these prairies we have our Indian mounds, which proudly rise above the plain. At first the eye mistakes them for hills; but when it catches the regularity of their breastworks and ditches, it discovers at once that they are the labours of art and of men. ([source](#))

And many other books of the time describe the impressive fortifications built in North America and Mexico (see [compilation by Sandra Tanner](#)).

Bountiful

I agree with Gordon that it is a great find for Book of Mormon apologists that such a place as Bountiful, in the approximate location it needed to be, was discovered. However, the idea of an oasis in the desert may also be derived from a prominent description in the Bible (Exodus 15):

22 So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.
23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah.
24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink?
25 And he cried unto the Lord; and the Lord shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them,
26 And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I

have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the Lord that healeth thee.
27 And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters.

The Language

River of water

Gordon suggests that a reference to a “river of water” is evidence of ancient origin since only a desert dweller would know to distinguish between dry rivers and year-round “rivers of water”.

But the phrase “river of water” is found in Revelation 22:1:

And he shewed me a pure **river of water** of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. (emphasis added)

Also, because it was found in the Bible, the phrase also turns up in [much of the devotional literature of Joseph Smith's day](#).

In addition, [the Late War](#), which was likely available to Joseph Smith and is very similar to the Book of Mormon stylistically, frequently uses [the “construct state”](#) (e.g., “balls of lead”).

Given the influence of the Bible and the potential influence of The Late War on Joseph, use of the phrase “river of water” seems less remarkable.

Altar of stones

Gordon suggests that the author of the Book of Mormon understood the difference between an “altar of stones” and a “stone altar” and chose the appropriate description. However, “altar of stone” is used twice in the KJV Bible while “stone altar” is never used:

Deuteronomy 27:5 — And there shalt thou build an altar unto the LORD thy God, an altar of stones: thou shalt not lift up any iron tool upon them.

Exodus 20:25 — And if thou wilt make me an altar of stone, thou shalt not build it of hewn stone: for if thou lift up thy tool upon it, thou hast polluted it.

And, as mentioned above, The Late War frequently uses [the “construct state”](#) (e.g., “balls of lead”).

Here again, use of the construct “altar of stones” is rather unremarkable if the book is of modern origin.

Only women allowed to officially mourn

Gordon writes:

Another tidbit Joseph Smith almost certainly wouldn't have known: in the desert Arab culture, only the women were allowed to officially mourn.

The idea of women being the primary mourners in that culture seems derivable from the Bible (Jeremiah 9):

17 Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Consider ye, and call for the mourning women,

that they may come; and send for cunning women, that they may come:
18 And let them make haste, and take up a wailing for us, that our eyes may run down with tears, and our eyelids gush out with waters.
20 Yet hear the word of the LORD, O ye women, and let your ear receive the word of his mouth, and teach your daughters wailing, and every one her neighbour lamentation.

So, once again, we do not necessarily need to look any further than the Bible as an influence for the idea of women as the primary mourners.

The Ultimate Test

Gordon concludes by suggesting that all the evidences will not create a testimony. She says:

Testimony comes only from reading with real intent, pondering, and praying. If you haven't yet done so, apply the formula found in Moroni 10:3-5. Rely on the Holy Ghost to teach and testify to you. It works every time.

Even though Moroni's promise is viewed by members as a silver bullet, there are legitimate problems with this approach, as detailed in [Testimony, Spiritual Experiences, and Truth: A Careful Examination](#). The primary issues with using Moroni's promise to determine the Book of Mormon's truthfulness are:

1. There are many other religious and quasi-religious groups—each with many mutually exclusive truth claims—who rely on this method for convincing others of their truth-claims.
2. This method is typically applied in a highly biased manner. For instance, investigators or youth are told to keep trying this method *ad infinitum* until they get the “right” answer (see [diagram](#)). Such a process seems likely to result in a “confirmation” of any sufficiently inspiring book.
3. Using an unsubstantiated promise derived from the Book of Mormon (i.e., Moroni 10:3-5) to determine if the Book of Mormon itself is true is circular reasoning: “A is true because B is true; B is true because A is true.”

Correspondences with early 1800s Protestant America

The Book of Mormon contains an immense number of ideas and phrases common to the early nineteenth century (see [Book of Mormon parallels to 1800s thought](#) for a comprehensive list). For instance there are *many* similarities with [the sermons of Jonathon Edwards Jr. and Sr.](#) (the father/son duo were well-known preachers during and directly preceding Joseph Smith's day). Also, “[The Late War](#)”, by Gilbert Hunt, contains many similar ideas (and phraseology). Like the Book of Mormon, it also contains [extensive chiasmic structures](#), and many [similar “Hebraisms”](#).

[The Mormon Challenge](#) presents many additional religious influences, and Thomas Donofrio has written extensively on modern [historical](#) and [religious influences](#) on the Book of Mormon.

Conclusion

The Book of Mormon is generally viewed as a historical record of ancient peoples by believing members of the Church. While there are certainly some correspondences between the book and recent discoveries from the ancient world, much of what we know about the ancient world does *not* match up well with the Book of Mormon text. However, if a reader is willing to look to the early 1800s as a source or influence on the text, then an answer to these discrepancies appears—the content of the Book of Mormon fits comfortably within the mix of ideas present in Protestant America in the early

1800s.