

## Rational Interpretation of the Book of Mormon

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If the Book of Mormon's stories are fiction, then the chronology used by those stories is fiction. Even if the chronology can be linked logically with generally accepted historical events and dates, the chronology will remain fiction. However, if the stories are not fiction, but ancient history, then a rational chronology is a key component of that history and the study of Book of Mormon chronology may assist with linking to accepted historical events and dates, and with understanding other aspects of the book's content.

As a matter of rational principle, I must note that I was born to parents who were members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and I chose as an eight-year old boy to be baptized into that church. As a young man, I served a relatively typical two-year mission for the church. I perceive myself and my environment, including the Book of Mormon, through senses, emotions, thoughts, actions and memories educated and disciplined by my faith. In addition, for half a century, I have intentionally worked to improve my capacity to perceive, feel, think, act and remember through participation in higher education, marriage, parenthood, business and church leadership, travel and other recreational activities. Thus, in addition to my lengthy study of the topic of Book of Mormon chronology, I bring to this source book almost seven decades of experience that supports my faith in the Book of Mormon as an ancient, lineage history rather than fiction. I approach the production of this source book with that partiality and maturity.

I make this personal statement for a rational purpose. For me to engage in Book of Mormon interpretation without first identifying my faith would doom the trustworthiness of my interpretation. The simple fact is that the subjectivity of *every* investigator influences and at times may pre-determine the results of any ostensibly objective investigation. A mistake by an investigator is human and understandable. Rational principles and processes can be established to preclude or rectify mistakes. However, an investigator who does not or cannot identify and acknowledge, or who hides or mischaracterizes, his or her subjectivity creates a record that cannot be trusted. Hence, my faith or partiality and my intention to create an accurate chronology are precisely the reasons demanding my identification and application of a rational process for interpreting the Book of Mormon.

The interpretations of chronology in this source book are based on a rational interpretive process that was, for the most part, outlined and used by two scholars of Book of Mormon geography (John L. Sorenson and John E. Clark).<sup>1</sup> The process is designed to provide both comprehensive and comprehending interpretations of a Book of Mormon topic. The process relies on the application of six logical principles: rational reserve, thoroughness, simplicity, consistency, natural uniformity and uncertain cultural understanding.

*The Principle of Rational Reserve.* The first principle of the process is the attitudinal principle of rational reserve. I am naturally a subjective being with limited experience, imperfect memory and restricted perspectives; so, the application of rational reserve might be a goal more

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<sup>1</sup> See Randall P. Spackman, "Interpreting Book of Mormon Geography," in *The FARMS Review* 15/1 (2003):19-46; John E. Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," *FARMS Review of Books* 1/1 (1989):20-70; John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, 2nd ed. (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies ["FARMS"], 1992); idem, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000).

often than it is an achievement. The attitude of rational reserve could be confused with attitudes such as cynicism or idle doubt, but their negativity is not necessarily rational. The basic attitude is humility,<sup>2</sup> an active, ongoing and guiding recognition that—as well as I might understand an issue—there is probably more to learn. Even if I might obtain great knowledge, I remain inquiring and teachable. I recognize the limits of human capacity (my own included) and respect individual differences (just as I hope my own differences will be respected). I do well to appreciate the good-faith successes and failures of others in the search for knowledge, and I can be grateful for their attempts, even for their failures. I work to avoid the vanities of cynicism, indolence and strife.

Neither Clark nor Sorenson expressly mentions this principle. However, they exhibit the principle in their best work. Clark's article begins with the following expression based on rational reserve:

My purpose here is to suggest a simple key for evaluating any Book of Mormon geography that may be proposed. Given the sensitivity of this field, it is worth noting that I do not espouse a particular geography and have no vested interests in which geography may or may not prove the most satisfactory.<sup>3</sup>

The attitude comes through clearly: the intent to suggest, an acknowledgement of sensitivity and a disclosure of preconceptions, if any. Similarly, Sorenson's final chapter of *Mormon's Map* notes that his proposed map is both "simplified" and "incomplete." He states that the proposed map "utilizes all the information [he has] been able to elicit from Mormon's words and those of other Book of Mormon writers." And he also notes that his "assumptions are subject to correction, but they are the best [he can] do at present."<sup>4</sup>

I have placed the principle of rational reserve first in my list because it establishes an attitudinal tone and directly modifies each of the other principles. For example, the principle of rational reserve modifies the principle of thoroughness by requiring me to recognize that as I study a topic I may think I have gathered all the relevant text and external sources. However, the process of thoroughly examining and integrating information from such sources may lead me to redefine what texts, in fact, are relevant and may send me on a more thorough search. Rational reserve informs me that sound changes in understanding are to be welcomed.

*The Principle of Thoroughness.* The principle of thoroughness has one directive: seek diligently for all of the relevant information. If my examination is not comprehensive, whether through lack of resources, knowledge or industry, then my understanding may be incomplete and subject to revision when more of the relevant information is later examined. Once I have gathered what appears at the time to be the relevant text of the Book of Mormon (and my list may not be complete), the process of studying for a more complete comprehension can begin. As I study a text, I may find it is not relevant to my topic. When I understand the relevant text as well as I am able, my search can expand to include outside sources of relevant information. The scope of the

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<sup>2</sup> This attitude is an integral part of scriptural discussions about learning. For example, Moroni cautions the seeker to "remember how merciful the Lord hath been unto the children of men, from the creation of Adam even down until the time" that the seeker occupies, and then to "ponder it" — "it" referring at least to the Lord's mercies — "in your hearts" (Moroni 10:3). Alma's process by which we gain a "perfect knowledge" is conditioned on humility (Alma 32:4-16, 24-25). D&C 88:118 requires us to "teach one another words of wisdom," which implies that we keep ourselves teachable or humble.

<sup>3</sup> Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 20.

<sup>4</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 125-26.

search develops as needed for comprehension. The search process required by the principle of thoroughness is not artificial and limited, but natural, flexible and expanding.

Clark stated that a sound interpretation of the Book of Mormon first must fit “the facts of the Book of Mormon” itself, without any reference to “archaeological and historical detail.” And “[t]he Book of Mormon must be the final and most important arbiter in deciding the correctness” of any proposed interpretation.<sup>5</sup> Sorenson presented the principle as follows, “Whatever the Book of Mormon says about its own geography ... takes precedence over anything commentators have said of it.”<sup>6</sup> And “we must know all there is to know about the statements in the Book of Mormon on the matters at hand—without any reference to external [sources]. Everything done so far in studying the geography of the Book of Mormon events has been inadequate by reason of incompleteness, if not of real errors.”<sup>7</sup>

Gathering all of the verses in the text of the Book of Mormon that may bear on a particular topic is not a simple task because as I learn more about the topic, other passages in the text may be seen in that new light. With respect to Clark’s and Sorenson’s work on Book of Mormon geography, the number of verses used in their three related writings can be seen to have changed significantly: Clark (1989): 318 verses; Sorenson (1992): 725 verses; and Sorenson (2000): 637 verses. After eliminating duplications, I compiled a list of 1,068 verses that these two scholars have identified as bearing, to some extent, on the topic of Book of Mormon geography.<sup>8</sup>

*The Principle of Simplicity.* This principle has been called *Ockham’s razor*, the “principle attributed to the fourteenth-century English philosopher William of Ockham ... that one should choose the simplest explanation, the one requiring the fewest assumptions and principles.”<sup>9</sup> Sorenson worded the principle this way: “We should avoid needlessly complicated synthesis. If two explanations occur to us for solving a geographical problem, the simpler solution—the one with the fewest arbitrary assumptions—is probably better.”<sup>10</sup> According to Clark, “The best internal reconstruction is one which reconciles all of the data in the Book of Mormon with a minimum number of additional assumptions.”<sup>11</sup> This third principle helps me choose an interpretation which takes the facts into account with the fewest or least of assumptions. Rational interpretation may rely on facts and assumptions based on facts, but it cannot rely on speculation. When application of the principle of thoroughness brings a new fact to my attention, then my assumptions and interpretation may need to change to account for that information. The principle of rational reserve informs me that changes in assumptions based on facts are a normal part of the work of seeking to interpret and comprehend. Rational change is to be expected.

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<sup>5</sup> Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 21.

<sup>6</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 209.

<sup>8</sup> “This table, ‘Verses in the Book of Mormon with Potential Geographical Relevance,’ is available on request from FARMS, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, UT 84602.” Spackman, “Interpreting Book of Mormon Geography,” 29 n11.

<sup>9</sup> *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall General Reference, 1993), 277.

<sup>10</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 22.

For example,<sup>12</sup> in 1976, Lynn M. and Hope Hilton proposed (based on their travels) that a site mentioned in the Book of Mormon and called *Nahom* (1 Nephi 16:34) was located “around Al Kunfidah near the Red Sea coast of Saudi Arabia.” Within a couple of years, Ross T. Christensen “suggested an alternative location for Nahom, based upon a map of Yemen prepared as a result of a 1762-64 exploration by Carsten Niebuhr for Danish King Frederick V.” In 1984, “Warren P. and Michaela J. Aston of Australia visited Yemen ... searching for additional evidence concerning Nahom.... The Astons located a 1976 map at the University of Sana’a ... that showed ‘Nehem’ located ... further south than the site proposed by the Hiltons ... [but in] the same region Niebuhr listed as ‘Nehm.’” Additional facts were discovered and related to the maps: the name of a local tribe, local pronunciations of the area’s name, Semitic language roots related to the word *Nahom*, local archaeological inscriptions of the name “NHM” from the time of the Book of Mormon prophet Lehi and relationships of the area with ancient incense trails. Thus, the earlier geographic interpretation was altered because new facts came to light and others were re-evaluated, and all of this information was integrated with the text of the Book of Mormon.

*The Principle of Consistency.* The principle of consistency holds that the text of the Book of Mormon, as composed and engraved by its original authors, interpreted and dictated by Joseph Smith, and recorded by his scribes, accurately records the consistent meanings they intended to create. To use Clark’s phrasing, this principle assumes that verses of text in the Book of Mormon are “internally consistent and can be reconciled” and, consequently, that there are “no scribal errors unless internal evidence indicates otherwise.”<sup>13</sup> Sorenson stated the assumption this way: “Minor slips of the ‘pen’ aside, all the information on [a Book of Mormon topic] will prove to be consistent.”<sup>14</sup>

This principle provides a logical basis for linking one sentence, phrase, word or other source of information to another within the text. To assume inconsistency is to remove the foundation for logical connection. Nonetheless, the principle of rational reserve requires me to respect the possibilities that mistakes can be made and “identical” words can have different meanings in dissimilar contexts. Thus, if the context of a word leads me to consider a different meaning, I will seek the meaning that may be most suitable. If the context of a passage unmistakably indicates an error, I will seek to understand how the error might have occurred.

For example, the word *days* occurs three times in the first numbered verse of the Book of Mormon (1 Nephi 1:1), which is part of a colophon that, among other things, promotes the book’s reliability.<sup>15</sup> This verse is quoted below in what I identify as a repetitive form:<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> The quotations in this paragraph are taken from “Lehi’s Trail and Nahom Revisited,” in John W. Welch, ed., *Reexploring the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 47-51. See also S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place Which Was Called Nahom:’ New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999):66-68; and Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars from Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10/2 (2001): 56-61.

<sup>13</sup> Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 22.

<sup>14</sup> Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 215.

<sup>15</sup> “The major writings of the Book of Mormon are introduced and concluded by ‘colophons,’ which have the purpose of acquainting the reader with the source of the material given and informing him of the authorship of the particular manuscript.... This complacent advertising of one’s own virtues, in particular one’s reliability, is a correct and indeed required fixture of any properly composed Egyptian autobiography of Nephi’s time—a time at which the writing of autobiographies was very fashionable.” Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah: The Book of Mormon in the Modern World* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company, 1970), 170. See also John A. Tvedtnes, “Colophons in the Book of Mormon,” in John L. Sorenson and Melvin J.

A<sub>1</sub> I, NEPHI,  
 B<sub>1</sub>       having been born of *goodly parents*, therefore  
 C<sub>1</sub>           I was taught somewhat in all the *learning* of my father; and  
 D<sub>1</sub>           having seen many afflictions *in the course of my days*, nevertheless,  
 D<sub>2</sub>           having been highly favored of the Lord *in all my days*;  
 C<sub>2</sub>           yea, having had a *great knowledge*  
 B<sub>2</sub>       of the *goodness of God*, therefore  
 A<sub>2</sub> I make a record of my *proceedings in my days*.

A consistently defined word *days*, in this context, probably would mean the “time during which anything exists or takes place” and, with the pronoun *my*, would mean the period of Nephi’s activity or lifetime.<sup>17</sup> However, if I do not assume consistency in the use of the word *days*, I run the risk of missing the message of reliability, one of the primary points of the colophon. If the word *days*, in one or the other of its appearances, could mean only periods of sunlight, or several of the “perpendicular divisions or ‘lights’ of a mullioned window,” or several areas of “ground over a mine”—each of which (in other contexts) would be a perfectly acceptable definition of the word *days*<sup>18</sup>—then my interpretation of 1 Nephi 1:1 surely would be confused or wrong.

Some of the things that Nephi reports happened at night (1 Nephi 4:5; 16:9); so, his record cannot be merely about things that happened during periods of sunlight. While Nephi seems to have understood the skills required to mine ore and refine it (1 Nephi 9; 17:9-11, 16; 18:25; 19:1), how would I then interpret this passage if one or the other of the *days* is thought to mean the areas of ground over several different mines? Is this a book about the blessings and afflictions of being in the mining business? How would mullioned windows fit in? Were they always breaking from the ground shaking when the Nephite miners were at work down in the mines near Nephi’s house?

What if I also feel free to violate the principle of simplicity? In translating the Book of Mormon, Joseph Smith is described as dictating the text to a scribe.<sup>19</sup> What if I speculate that the scribe for 1 Nephi 1:1<sup>20</sup> should have written *daze*, rather than *days* in one of the phrases? Could I then describe 1 Nephi 1:1 as referring to Nephi’s explanation that his writings would record his

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Thorne, eds., *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book Company and Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1991), 32-37.

<sup>16</sup> The logic of this verse seems to be chiasmic, as shown by my indenting and italicized words. Whether or not this verse would be considered a “literary” chiasm or poetry, I leave to others to consider. See, e.g., John W. Welch, “Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 10/1 (1969):69-84; Richard Dilworth Rust, “Poetry in the Book of Mormon,” in Sorenson and Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 100-113; John W. Welch, “A Masterpiece: Alma 36,” in Sorenson and Thorne, *Rediscovering the Book of Mormon*, 114-131.

<sup>17</sup> *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), I:650 (“Day”).

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> John W. Welch, “The Miraculous Translation of the Book of Mormon,” in John W. Welch with Erick B. Carlson, eds., *Opening the Heavens: Accounts of Divine Manifestations, 1820-1844* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press and Salt Lake City, Utah: Deseret Book, 2005), 77-213. This article compiles and republishes 202 documents containing the comments and recollections of nearly 90 individuals (some published in newspapers) who tell a remarkably consistent story about the origin of the Book of Mormon.

<sup>20</sup> The surviving fragments of the original manuscript do not include 1 Nephi 1:1-2:1; so, we do not know who might have been acting as scribe. Even where we have the original manuscript, some of the handwriting cannot be identified. Royal Skousen, ed., *The Original Manuscript of the Book of Mormon: Typographical Facsimile of the Extant Text* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2001), 13-14, 37.

recovery from a serious state of bewilderment, incurred when Nephite miners shook the ground and Nephi's mullioned windows broke and fell on him (an obvious affliction)? This is quite a different interpretation from the one in which Nephi promotes the reliability of his record.

The foregoing example of unprincipled interpretation is not entirely silly. Rational reserve informs us that occasions may arise when "identical" words require different meanings. For example, part of Nephite record-keeping included the measurement of *years*. This is a common English word. Joseph Smith used it to translate periods of time expressed by Nephi in the sixth century B.C. (e.g., 2 Nephi 5:28—"thirty years"), by Mormon in the fourth century A.D. (e.g., Mormon 6:5—"three hundred and eighty and four years"), and by Moroni in the fourth or fifth century A.D., when he abridged a record based on historical reports from roughly one to two thousand years earlier (e.g., Ether 9:24—"an hundred and forty and two years"). Since huge spans of time separate these historical reports, a question must be asked: Did the original record-keepers each use a *year* that was identical in length of time? This is a question worth studying because how people define a *year* may vary from culture to culture and, even within a single culture, may have changed over time.

In addition, any human endeavor may include one or more errors. There might be "scribal error" in the Book of Mormon.<sup>21</sup> However, I must not abandon rational reserve, thoroughness, simplicity or consistency at the first hint of such error. Internal evidence must clearly indicate scribal error. A passage that I may at first consider to be a "slip of the pen" (because of my own inadequately considered interpretation) may turn out to be consistent when I find and more fully understand additional data in the Book of Mormon.

*The Principle of Natural Uniformity.* According to this principle, throughout the time described in the Book of Mormon, the natural world existed and operated in ways similar to the natural world that can be studied today. In Clark's article on Book of Mormon geography, he made this a general assumption and mentioned, as examples:

that the locality where the Book of Mormon events took place was not unrecognizably altered at the time of the crucifixion, that geographic details in the Small Plates and in the Book of Ether are therefore compatible with those in Mormon's and Moroni's abridgment, and that the principles of natural science that apply to today's environments are also pertinent to Nephite lands.<sup>22</sup>

Sorenson also expressed the general idea of a natural uniformitarian principle with two simple ideas: "The expressions 'up,' 'down,' and 'over,' when used in a geographical context, refer to elevation.... Nature worked the same anciently as it does today." In addition, he gave a couple of examples: "We can be sure that the headwaters of rivers were at a higher elevation than their mouths, and a river implies the presence of a corresponding drainage basin."<sup>23</sup>

When I examine chronological issues in the Book of Mormon, I must take into account the capacity to calculate current astronomical cycles and rates of change in such cycles. For decades, scientists and engineers have been able to calculate forward in time and accurately place

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<sup>21</sup> See Moroni's postscript to the Book of Mormon, now contained in the title page: "And now, if there are faults they are the mistakes of men; wherefore, condemn not the things of God, that ye may be found spotless at the judgment-seat of Christ." Moroni also wrote: "And if there be faults [in the Book of Mormon] they be the faults of a man. But behold, we know no fault" (Mormon 8:17). See also 3 Nephi 8:2.

<sup>22</sup> Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 22.

<sup>23</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 13.

equipment near, in orbit around and even on the surface of the moon and planets in our solar system.<sup>24</sup> Current mathematical skills also permit astronomical calculations backward in time and ancient documents confirm the results of such calculations. For example, Claudius Ptolemaeus, who lived in the Egyptian city of Alexandria in the second century A.D., compiled hundreds of details and notes about ancient astronomy. His *Almagest* includes a note in which he stated that “In the fifth year of Nabopolassar, which is the 127th year from Nabonassar, 27/28 Athyr in the Egyptian calendar, at the end of the eleventh hour in Babylon, the moon began to be eclipsed.”<sup>25</sup> This eclipse has been calculated (using modern astronomical data and formulae)<sup>26</sup> to have occurred on the evening of 21/22 April, 621 B.C. in the Julian proleptic calendar,<sup>27</sup> a date which correlates with Hathyr 27/28 in the Egyptian calendar.<sup>28</sup> The Babylonian chronicles and biblical history (e.g. 2 Kings 24:10-18; 2 Chronicles 36:5-11), taken together with Nabopolassar’s eclipse, permit the conclusion that the reign of Judah’s king Zedekiah began in 597 B.C. (about 24 years after the eclipse).<sup>29</sup> Since the family of Lehi left Jerusalem after the commencement of the first year of Zedekiah (1 Nephi 1:4-2:4), I can conclude that our solar system and, thus, astronomical measures of time operated throughout Book of Mormon times, just as they do today.

In accordance with my partiality described above, I do not view events described in the Book of Mormon as fiction. I think they were perceived anciently by living writers and their sources. Such events would have occurred in real geographical settings and at specific times, in accordance with the normal processes of nature. However, consistent with rational reserve, I also recognize that humans do not always perceive, understand or describe natural events the same way. A natural event perceived and described anciently might not be depicted as it would be today. In addition, with faith in Deity who is concerned about the course of humanity, I accept the possibility of miracles. Hence, I seek an interpretation of an ancient text that is consistent with natural uniformity or with other ancient descriptions of natural events, unless the text unmistakably requires a miracle.

*The Principle of Uncertain Cultural Comprehension.* The sixth principle, respect for an uncertain cultural understanding, teaches me to recognize that between my world and that of the world described in the Book of Mormon, there are cultural screens. With rational reserve, I can acknowledge an uncertain comprehension for myself. I can also understand that cultural screens were experienced by Joseph Smith and the original writers of the Book of Mormon. Human perception and knowledge, and the capacity to record them, all are limited. The less I know about the ancient world and Joseph Smith’s world, the less I understand the historical and natural texts of the Book of Mormon. The less I am aware of my own world, the less I may be able to understand earlier times. The work of seeing through these cultural screens (and the uncertainty associated with partial sight, perhaps even blindness at times) must be respected in any rational interpretive procedure.

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<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Donald H. Mensel and Jay M. Pasachoff, *Peterson Field Guides: Stars and Planets*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1983), 324-326, 348, 368, 371-372, 374-375, 378-379.

<sup>25</sup> *Ptolemy’s Almagest*, trans. and annotated by Gerald J. Toomer (London: Duckworth, 1984), 253.

<sup>26</sup> See, e.g., the eclipse table for Baghdad, Iraq, in the “Javascript Lunar Eclipse Explorer” for the seventh century B.C. at <http://eclipse.gsfc.nasa.gov/JLEX/JLEX-AS.html>.

<sup>27</sup> See the chapter on “Calendars” in this source book for relevant information about the Egyptian, Julian and Julian proleptic calendars.

<sup>28</sup> See Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 23-29, for the Egyptian calendar system and correlation dates with the Roman calendar system.

<sup>29</sup> See Donald J. Wiseman, *Chronicles of Chaldean Kings (625-556 B.C.) in the British Museum* (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1956), 1-33, for the dating of Zedekiah’s enthronement.

As with the other principles, the principle of an uncertain cultural comprehension is straightforward, but its application may take twists and turns. For example, Sorenson states, “We Latter-day Saints may have become so used to ‘liken[ing] all scriptures unto us’ (1 Nephi 19:23) that we assume we understand ideas in them that actually are foreign to our experience.”<sup>30</sup> So, how do I determine when my interpretation of a passage in the Book of Mormon text is culturally correct? Clark seems to advise, without explanation, that I should assume a “literal meaning” for Book of Mormon expressions.<sup>31</sup> Sorenson, on the other hand, advises that:

Ideas in the record will not necessarily be familiar or clear to us.... Book of Mormon terminology will not necessarily be clear to us, even in translation, because language and cultural assumptions change.... We must seek to overcome any problems this causes us by striving to think, feel, and see as if we were Mormon, rather than supposing that we can read the text ‘literally’ (which actually turns out to mean ‘according to unspoken assumptions of our current culture’).<sup>32</sup>

In seeking cultural understanding, one must also consider the communication of the text from an ancient language into that of Joseph Smith, and from his language into contemporary English. As Sorenson briefly noted, “English has changed between 1829 and 2000.”<sup>33</sup> Is it possible to think, feel and see like Joseph Smith? Where did he live? How did his contemporaries think, feel and see? How did they communicate? What did they understand about the ancient world?

As Clark and Sorenson interpreted the text for geographical meanings, they departed from their seemingly different statements about this principle. Clark approached the principle from the standpoint of a “literal meaning,” but he sought for a metaphorical meaning to satisfy his examination of Helaman 3:8, when his literal interpretation became unwieldy.<sup>34</sup> Sorenson emphasized the need to “overcome” problems of cultural comprehension by striving to think, feel and see like ancient Nephites. Nonetheless, he departed from this approach when he attempted to explain the tilt in Book of Mormon lands from a “literal” view of the cardinal directions.<sup>35</sup>

Is a “literal” interpretation of the Book of Mormon, such as Clark initially proposed, even possible? As a starting point, it is. Whatever the text actually says to us now is the place where the interpretation begins. Clark was correct in starting with the “literal meaning” of the text—but that is only the place to start. From there, we consider the uncertainties created by the three cultural screens. Can we, as Sorenson proposed, in fact think, feel and see as Joseph Smith and the original authors did? To some extent, the answer is yes. However, we must also recognize that once the expressions and ideas set forth in the Book of Mormon with respect to a specific topic have been fully examined from a textual standpoint, then careful study of relevant external sources (including other scriptures) and thoughtful synthesis may need to be undertaken.

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<sup>30</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 78.

<sup>31</sup> Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 22.

<sup>32</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 13-14.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 65-67.

<sup>35</sup> Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map*, 19-20.



*Outside Sources.* That recognition brings me to issues about the use of, and reliance on, outside sources, information external to the Book of Mormon (or perhaps external to a particular author's writings in the Book of Mormon) that might help me understand a text more completely and accurately. Human tendencies to accept shortcuts and carelessness, and to seek social acceptance and power, may lead me to assume the relevance or value of a traditional or authoritative outside source. But if I do not first seek to gather the relevant text and study what the Book of Mormon seems to be telling me (in accordance with rational principles), I may not even be able to identify which external sources are relevant, I may mistakenly rely on irrelevant sources and I may misinterpret relevant external sources. My earliest and most important work must be to study the text of the Book of Mormon itself using a rational and explainable process.

*Procedural Assumptions.* Finally, I must note that every method of interpretation relies on procedural assumptions, whether they are explicitly stated or not. Against the principle of rational reserve is an entire train of attitudes pulled by the locomotive of personal vanity (cynicism, prejudice, arrogance, greed, strife, rebellion, indolence, etc.). Against the principle of thoroughness is the assumption that it is adequate to rely on the least proof possible, which for some might be no proof at all (speculation and falsehood). The principle of simplicity is opposed by any number or mass of assumptive burdens. The principle of consistency establishes meaning, while the assumption of inconsistency promotes confusion, disinterest and deception. The principle of natural uniformity conflicts with reliance on an unlimited host of fictional assumptions and embroidered stories. The principle of uncertain cultural understanding must contest against all forms of ignorance and the isolating fear that can be engendered in human social groups.

Thus, to alleviate and, hopefully, avoid the partial or outright blindness that more often than not accompanies interpretations founded on procedural assumptions such as personal vanity, neglect or unawareness, superfluous assumptions, inconsistency, fiction and cultural arrogance, I am committed to interpret the Book of Mormon texts analyzed in this source book to the best of my ability through the application of rational principles. To this point, I have identified six overriding principles: rational reserve, thoroughness, simplicity, consistency, natural uniformity and uncertain cultural understanding. I will refer to these principles throughout this source book.