These letters were written by Zachary, a questioning Mormon who was hoping for some answers regarding the historicity of LDS scriptures. He emailed multiple letters to multiple scholars and received several responses. The following replies are shared with the respective scholar's permission.

Mesoamerica

Louise Burkhart- Professor in the Anthropology Department at the University at Albany, PhD in Anthropology from Yale University

Dear Zachary,

It is true that I am a busy woman, but I can answer your question. Since you have already reached your own conclusions and left the Church, I don't feel that I am belittling your religion if I say that all historical and archaeological evidence contradicts the Book of Mormon's stories of the peopling of the Americas and the early history of Native American societies. The Book of Mormon is a work of faith, and naturally has credibility to the faithful, but it has no historical basis, any more than the Book of Genesis is a historically or scientifically accurate version of the origin of the earth and human beings, however much it, or the Book of Mormon, may serve as a moral guide to believers. And I'm sure you can understand why people might be uncomfortable directly contradicting the teachings of what has become a very well-established religious movement.

The Americas were peopled by immigrants from Asia probably 15,000 years ago (give or take some thousands; archaeologists still haven't quite figured this out). This is born out by archaeology as well as genetic evidence (DNA, blood types, and other factors). Their descendants settled throughout the entire New World. Complex, urban civilizations developed in Mexico and Central America in isolation from the rest of the world, out of the accumulated knowledge of people who lived there for thousands of years, domesticated corn and other food crops, and learned very well how to live in those environments. Languages of the New World bear no relationship to Hebrew. Ever since Europeans became aware of Native Americans, there have been various attempts to identify them with the so-called "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" mentioned in the Old Testament. So we might say that Joseph Smith's version was in some degree a variation on this old theme.

Hang on to that inquisitive mind of yours. The archaeology and history of the Americas are fascinating. I hope you will have the opportunity to pursue further studies, in college or on your own.

Best regards,

Louise M. Burkhart
Professor of Anthropology
University at Albany, SUNY

David Carrasco- Professor of the Study of Latin America at Harvard Divinity School, PhD in the History of Religions from the University of Chicago

Dear Zachary

I see you are deeply interested in the history of Mexico as it relates to the Book of Mormon. I respect the Mormon religion and have been to Salt Lake City to see the Mormon monuments and displays.

The Book of Mormon is a book of faith and storytelling and not history. Historically it is inaccurate. If we go on archaeological evidence, there is no basis for what the Book of Mormon teaches, as you summarize it below. There is no record of the arrival of anyone from Jerusalem. Here's another point.

People of faith believe what they want to believe about the authenticity of their own religion. Some Catholics believed that St. Tomas, one of Jesus Christ's disciples migrated to Mexico after the crucifixion and preached in Mexico. This is because they found some parallels between Aztec and Maya religion and the Bible. But there is not one single fact, datum, object, word that supports either the Mormon view or the Catholic view.

My book Religions of Mesoamerica is coming out again in paperback in September and I address these claims in the first chapter.

Oswaldo Chinchilla- Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Yale University, PhD in Anthropology from Vanderbilt University

Dear Zachary,

I am not familiar with the Book of Mormon, except in a very superficial way. Therefore, I'm not able to evaluate its contents. However, I always tell my students that the past can be explained in multiple ways, and that there is no point in trying to make compatible diverse explanations that derive from radically different modes of inquiry.

Religious explanations (at least in major modern religions) generally rely on the criterion of authority, basing their interpretations on texts that are held as infallible. The acceptance of such explanations is based on faith and belief. By contrast, scientific explanations are based on logical reasoning and empirical evidence. Explanations are not meant to be accepted, but on the contrary, they are meant to be tested, and there is no established truth that is not amenable to be tested and falsified.

Having said that, I can tell you that I know the work of numerous archaeologists that are members of the Mormon Church, and they have produced important scientific work on ancient Mesoamerica. I cannot tell you whether they consider the results of their work as compatible with the Book of Mormon.

Sincerely,
Oswaldo Chinchilla

Geoffrey Conrad- Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at Indiana University, PhD in Anthropology from Harvard University

Dear Mr. [REDACTED],
Thank you for your message. I should begin by saying that while I've written about Mesoamerican archaeology and taught about it for years, it isn't my primary area of specialization. I did most of my own fieldwork in South America and the Caribbean. When I wrote about Mesoamerica, I was collaborating with my colleague Prof. Arthur Demarest (now at Vanderbilt University), whose primary area of expertise is indeed Mesoamerica. When I taught about Mesoamerica, it was always in a course on comparative ancient civilizations. Also, I've never read anything more than snippets of the Book of Mormon and can only discuss the specific claims you've listed below.

After saying all of that, I think I do have enough knowledge to assess the claims you've listed. Insofar as I can tell, they are not supported by any archaeological, linguistic, or genetic evidence. Some specific points of disagreement are:

1) Complex societies ("civilizations," for short) began to emerge in Mesoamerica well before 600 B.C.--nearly 1,000 years earlier, in fact. All of the archeological evidence indicates that those complex societies were developed by the native peoples of Mesoamerica out of their own longstanding cultural traditions.

2) The native peoples of Mesoamerica are American Indians. All archaeological and genetic evidence indicates that their ancestors came from northeast Asia (Siberia) and entered what is today the Americas sometime before 13,000 years ago.

3) There were probably several thousand native languages spoken in the Americas when Columbus arrived. They belonged to a number of language families, but none of the ones we know anything about belonged to the Semitic language family, which includes Hebrew. None of the known native languages of the Americas show any evidence of being derived from Hebrew.

4) With the single exception of Norse settlement in what is today Newfoundland, there is no evidence of any people from Europe or Southwest Asia in the Americas before Columbus. A small number of Norse colonists from Greenland settled in Newfoundland around A.D. 1000. The colony was short-lived, however, and was abandoned within a century.

I hope this information is useful to you. I do have two colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University who are specialists in Mesoamerican archaeology. Both are out of the country this summer, but if they were here, I'm certain they wouldn't say anything different from what I've said.

All best wishes,
Geoff Conrad
Geoffrey W. Conrad
Professor Emeritus of Anthropology
Director Emeritus, Mathers Museum of World Cultures
Indiana University Bloomington

Virginia Garrard-Burnett- Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, PhD in History from Tulane University

From an academic perspective, the Book of Mormon is an interesting historical artifact that is probably the best example ever of the vivid religious imagination of the American people, and especially of Joseph Smith.
All the best,
VGB

John Henderson- Professor of Anthropology at Cornell University, PhD in Anthropology from Yale University

I haven't seen convincing evidence that a group of Hebrew speakers arrived in Mesoamerica. I see the Book of Mormon claim as one version of the general issue of transoceanic contact. It's really hard to find good evidence of that kind of contact. It's really unlikely that we would find an initial settlement, so the case usually comes down to looking at patterns of similarity between the origin and destination with evidence drawn from big chunks of time. Most archaeologists are hostile to the idea that people arrived from the Old World, so they don't think about the possibility. I'm not opposed to the idea myself, but I just haven't seen evidence that strikes me as tempting. Language is one area that seems to indicate a negative. Mesoamerican languages clump into a couple of large groupings, but those groupings are very different from one another, and none of them seems related to Hebrew; linguists are sure that there wouldn't be nearly enough time between 600 BC and the Spanish invasion to produce that much variation and obscure a Hebrew ancestry. Of course, I haven't seen a lot of the publications of the LDS church (claims of archaeological confirmation of the Book of Mormon don't show up in standard archaeological publications).
Hope this helps.
John Henderson

Arthur Joyce- Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, PhD in Anthropology from Rutgers University

Since I am not very knowledgeable on the claims of the Mormon faith regarding ancient Mesoamerica it is a little difficult to address your overall question. I can say that there is no evidence that I can see for the three assertions that you mention in your note. I don't see evidence of a major migration of outsiders into Mesoamerica around 600 B.C. Archaeologists are able to trace Native American populations back more than 10,000 years ago. There are no indications of Hebrew roots in Native American languages.

I would also direct your attention to the New World Archaeological Foundation at Brigham Young University. My understanding is that the NWAF has as one of its goals to find evidence of the Book of Mormon in the archaeological record of Mesoamerica. The professional archaeologists employed by the NWAF, however, are fine scholars and well respected in the field of archaeology. I know that some of them are also devout Mormons. Their professional publications in the field of archaeology do not address questions related to the Mormon religion, although my understanding is that some of them have addressed these issues in other venues and that other Mormon writers (non-archaeologists) have used their research to view the Mesoamerican past from the perspective of the Mormon faith.
Best,
Art Joyce

William Saturno- Assistant Professor of Archaeology at Boston University's College of Arts and Sciences, PhD in Anthropology from Harvard University

Dear Zach,

First let me say that I am neither an expert in modern religion nor a religious person. Nonetheless, all modern religions, Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc. present either scientifically inaccurate or historically unverifiable accounts of the past. Practitioners of these religions are asked to accept these discrepancies as a matter of faith, overlooking errors in fact in order to accept the larger messages of the religious narratives as lessons to guide a moral life.

Any attempt to scientifically verify the events of largely religious documents, whether that be Noah's flood or the travels of Lamanites and Nephites is unlikely to produce a result that will appeal to anyone beyond the faithful. That is to say that people will believe what they are most comfortable believing regardless of what scientists illustrate to be the most likely scenario, take global warming as an example.

In direct reference to the existence of evidence of Hebrew speaking/descendant populations in the Mesoamerica prior to the arrival of Columbus, there is none. That is to say that following more than a century of dedicated research, not a single shred of evidence (potsherd, seed, or residue) of old world origin has ever been found. This is the case even though some Mormon scholars themselves have been searching for that evidence.

If you have any further questions, drop me a line,

Michael Smith- Professor of Anthropology at Arizona State University, PhD in Anthropology from the University of Illinois

You are asking about religious interpretations, not scientific interpretations. From a scientific viewpoint, the Book of Mormon has no standing as an accurate or even a relevant source about ancient Mesoamerican history or archaeology. There is no reason to believe that Joseph Smith knew anything

about the Mesoamerican past, or to believe that he heard historical truth from God. So I have no opinion about this.

It is often impossible to “test” historical religious accounts against archaeological evidence. The reason is that many people bring strong pre-dispositions to believe the accounts (or to Not belive them), and this colors their interpretations. Consider the archaeology of the Old Testament. Did David exist? Did he rule an empire, or build a big palace and temple? Have we found evidence for these things? There is endless argument about this, and the situation will probably never be settled.

I assume that you know about the New World Archaeological Foundation. It is funded by the LDS church for carrying out archaeology in Mesoamerica. The archaeology they do is rigorous and very good. Their technical reports say nothing about the Book of Mormon. But at some level in the church, people are probably interpreting the archaeological results with reference to the Book of Mormon.

Dr. Michael E. Smith
Professor of Anthropology, School of Human Evolution & Social Change
Affiliated Faculty, School of Geographical Sciences and Urban Planning
Arizona State University

Brian Stross- Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Texas at Austin, PhD in Anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley

To reply directly to your question that I paraphrase as, "apart from Mormon investigators funded by the church, is there much support to the claim that the Book of Mormon is historically accurate, and if not, then why doesn't it carry credible historical weight."

Correct that there is little if any support to the historicity claim for the Book of Mormon, even including scholarly Mormon investigators, who, like Thomas Lee and John Clark have advanced Mesoamerican archaeology (without, however, advancing support of historical propositions in the Book of Mormon. The Book of Mormon therefore doesn't carry credible historical weight except to persons who take it on faith that it is a sacred book with historical import.

The key is that, as with most religions, faith rather than scientific evidence, is what props up beliefs and information given to and propagated by the faithful.

Egyptology

Peter Brand- Professor of Ancient History and Egyptology, PhD in Ancient Egyptian Language and Literature from the University of Toronto

Hi Zachary,

Its good to hear from you and I'm happy to help you out. Just as background I am an Egyptologist and I am also someone who has a close friend and colleague (a historian) who is Mormon but who does not necessarily believe everything the elders tell him. As it happens I suspect that I know, too, who the "notable PhD's" the members of your church are referring to. I am not an expert on LDS but I do understand that there is a long standing connection with Egyptology based on a papyrus the Church holds. There are two Egyptololologists from Brigham Young University who are also members of the church and who often act to promote and defend the Church's teachings in the academic realm, but with

little success in changing minds I suspect.

I am not myself a believer and I am highly skeptical of the Book of Mormon and the Book of Abraham. I would also agree with the mainstream Egyptological view that the Joseph Smith Papyrus is simply a Roman era set of Egyptian papyri with various Ancient Egyptian magical texts including sections of a "Book of the Dead" and another known as the "book of breathing". There is no connection between these texts and any aspect of Christianity or Judaism. Outside of Mormon scholars, there is not any recognition of or belief in a "reformed egyptian" script or language. The photos of so called "reformed Egyptian documents that I have seen do not resemble genuine Egyptian scripts of any kind from any period of Egypt's long pharaonic history including both hieroglyphic forms or the more cursive forms known as hieratic and demotic. They look like a modern person's attempt at making cryptogramatic symbols of a modernly invented secret code in that they resemble nonsense "letters" of an alphabet rather than pictorial symbols like hieroglyphs or even the much more varied and differently shaped ligatures of hieratic or demotic Egyptian cursive writing.

There is simply no evidence that the Smith Papyri are anything more than mainstream Egyptologists have identified them as being-- namely typical pharaonic funerary papyri from the last centuries of pagan civilization in Egypt. Despite years of study at BYU, no one has duplicated Smith's "readings" of the papyri as the so-called "book of Abraham" which strongly suggests it is a fictional invention of his imagination. This is not necessarily to say that he didn't believe himself what he told to others. Who knows? People are as capable of deceiving themselves as they are of others.

To my knowledge, there is no archaeological evidence of Nephites or Lamanites, or indeed any other immigrants or settlers in the Americas between the arrival of Asian populations in the prehistoric era until the arrival of European travelers beginning with Columbus. Certainly the Nephites and Lamanites are a figment of Joseph Smith's imagination. There have been other non-religious (specifically non-Mormon) claims of pre-Columbian visitors from the Old World (Europe, the Middle East, Africa) to the Americas via the Atlantic Ocean (As opposed to visits by Asians- specifically Chinese-- to the Americas via the Pacific Ocean). Aside from the original human migrants to the New World 10s of 1000s of years ago probably via a land bridge during the last Ice Age and long before any civilziations arose on earth, it is highly unlikely that there were any early visitations to the Americas. Yet pseudo-scientific claims have been made of Egyptians and other visitors. There is even a popular magazine about it called "Ancient American Magazine" which proposes that there is "archaeological" evidence for Egyptians among others visiting or colonizing North America. I have seen supposed "Egyptian" hieroglyphic inscriptions they claim were found in the US supposedly left by Ancient Egyptians. The ones I have seen resemble modern forgeries of sometimes well-known Egyptian artifacts including ones stored in the British Museum. I bring this up as an independent parallel for the kind of pseudo-scientific belief in a pre-columbian contact between Old World civilizations like Egypt or the Israelites and the Americas. Joseph Smith was not the only one to believe such things although there is no relationship between Mormonism and the beliefs of the editors of "Ancient Americas" magazine. In fact I'm sure they would agree about absolutely nothing.

Ancient Studies often involve a lot of pseudo-scientific, New Age or similar beliefs and claims about the Ancient World which archaeologists and ancient historians reject as modern inventions or misinterpretations. examples would include "pyramid power" some Afrocentric (and New Age) claims about the Egyptians having aircraft, the "Baghdad battery.” But. even if the Babylonians some how "invented" a "battery", they didn't have flashlights or ipods to plug it into!

A good rule of thumb in judging such matters is that "Extraordinary claims should have extraordinary evidence" so, when they haul up the actual body or capture a live plesiosaurus in Loch Ness in Scotland then I will believe in the Lock Ness Monster. I desperately wanted to believe in it when I was 12 but after reading a 300 page book on it from the library with some fuzzy pictures and invented drawings i came to realize that there was no evidence for such a creature.

To non-Mormon's, the story of the gold tablets and the Book of Mormon is often viewed as absurd. Golden tablets and "seeing stones" in a hat sounds like a bad magic trick to be honest and was ruthlessly parodied in an episode of South Park a few years ago.

Sale of antiquities was very common in the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. Given that-- unless you believe it to be a "miracle"-- how likely is it that someone like Smith who knew nothing about Egyptology per se, would just happen to buy the "right" papyri that happened to have this "lost book" of scripture? It strikes anyone who does not already believe the truth of it, or who wants to believe the truth of it, as being highly unlikely. Of course, people often want to believe the highly improbable and can be easily swayed to believe in fantastic or miraculous claims. This is often how new religions spread. Simply by being old, religions can often become accepted as being "fact" or "true" in part because so many people have believed them for so long. Other Christians who are highly dubious of newer, less traditional sects like LDS, Jehovah's witnesses or Seventh Day Adventists accept tenents of belief that have been around for 2000 years of Christian history that non-Christians are highly dubious, including Muslims and Jews who do not accept the divinity of Christ, the virgin birth or the concept of the Trinity. But after 2000 years, nearly every denomination of Christianity accept these things as dogma just as many Christians and Jews also accept the literal interpretations of fantastic and miraculous events from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). One wonders, however, why there are no Old Testament style miracles and plagues today? Who knows, in 700 years from now, LDS beliefs may be as "Mainstream" or "traditional" as older Christian beliefs although there is obviously universal skepticism about them among all non-Mormon persons, both Christian and non-Christian.

I hope this helps. let me know if you have any further questions.

best wishes

Peter Brand

Salima Ikram- Professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo, PhD in Egyptology and Museum Studies from the University of Cambridge

See below.
Salima Ikram
Professor of Egyptology
Egyptology Unit Head
American University in Cairo

Here is the most basic summarization of the Book of Mormon:
-In 600 B.C a family from Jerusalem sailed to what is now Central America and began a civilization there. This civilization split up into “Nephites” and “Lamanites” and after centuries of war the Lamanites were the last alive.

-Lamanites are the primary and principle ancestors of Native Americans
No evidence.

-Nephites and Lamanites initially spoke Hebrew when they arrived in Mesoamerica. Over centuries, the linguistics evolved to what some Native Americans speak today.
No evidence.

The Book of Abraham and "Reformed Egyptian": (This is the area I was hoping you could provide the bulk of information.)
-In 1835 Joseph Smith purchased Egyptian papyri from a traveling mummy exhibit and revealed that they were the writings of the prophet of Abraham. Today, these facsimiles have caused considerable controversy. Many Egyptologists have noted that the facsimiles have no bearing on Joseph Smith's translations and are instead common Egyptian funerary texts from the first century B.C.
I echo the sentiments Of the Egyptologists.

Peter Der Manuelian, Professor of Egyptology and Director, Harvard Semitic Museum, Harvard University. PhD in Egyptology from the University of Chicago
Dear Zachary,

Thank you for this email. I am one of those who believe, as you wrote, that the "facsimiles have no bearing on Joseph Smith's translations and are instead common Egyptian funerary texts." I am not personally aware of any professional Egyptologists who feel differently.

With best wishes,

Peter Manuelian"

END