

Book of Mormon Anachronisms Part 1: Fauna, Animals

An “anachronism” is something that doesn’t fit the time or place for which it is claimed. For example, a tale of King Henry VIII watching television would be anachronistic (wrong time frame). The Book of Mormon has frequently been charged with containing numerous anachronisms. The six categories are: (1) fauna (animals); (2) flora (plants/vegetation) and textiles (silk and linen); (3) warfare; (4) metals; (5) pre-Christian Christianity; and (6) compass, coins, and other miscellaneous items. All five categories have some similarities. In all instances there is the possibility that (a) such things were once in the Americas but the evidence has either disappeared or has not yet been found, or (b) Book of Mormon labels are based on the re-labeling of New World items with familiar Old World labels. In this paper I deal with the first category (fauna, or animals) and a general overview of why supposedly anachronistic items may appear in the Book of Mormon.

The items were here, but have disappeared or have not yet been found.

A number of critics claim that since the remains of Book of Mormon items have not been found in pre-Columbia Mesoamerica sites that these things did not exist. This charge, however, commits the logical fallacy of *arguing from ignorance or silence*. Since not everything that ever existed in Mesoamerica has been found, we cannot positively say that something did not exist. It must be understood that the lack of evidence is not evidence. Until the middle of the twentieth century, for example, the best archaeologists were convinced that the camel was unknown in Egypt until Greek and Roman times, despite the mention of camels in the Biblical account of Abraham (Gen. 12:16). Today, however, scholars realize that the camel continued to be used in Egypt from prehistoric to present times.¹

Similarly, despite the many references of lions in Israel as noted in the Bible and in a number of ancient and relatively modern texts (up to the sixteenth century A.D.), the absence of lion’s bones perplexed Bible scholars. Such texts mention *lions* over a thousand years after the Book of Mormon mentions the “horse” yet until just a few years ago, there had never been a single discovery of lion bones in the land of Israel.²

The Huns of Central Asia and Eastern Europe present us with another case of disappearing remains. According to written records, the Huns must have had hundreds of thousands of horses – perhaps up to ten per warrior – yet there are virtually no horse remains in the entire empire of the Huns.³ Lastly we have the example of the elephant in western Asia. From written records we know that elephants roamed the temperate lands of Syria and the upper Euphrates well into the Middle Ages. The Pharaohs used to hunt them for sport. Yet now, they have disappeared with virtually no trace.⁴

Book of Mormon labels are the result of re-labeling according to familiar names

Through the years, in various cultures, people have renamed unfamiliar things with familiar labels. The Greeks, for example, when first encountering the hippopotamus in the Nile River, renamed it “river horse.” Likewise, when the conquistadors arrived in the New World both the natives and the Spaniards had problems classifying new animals. At first, the lowland Maya named the Spanish horse, “mule,” and ass with the name of the closest native equivalent—the “tapir.” To the Spaniards, however, the tapir resembled a 700-pound pig. The European goat was called “a short-horned deer.”⁶ When the Spanish introduced the European horse, some of the Amerindians simply called them “deer.”⁷

Book of Mormon animals that might have existed but whose remains disappeared

Elephant

The only place that elephants are mentioned in the Book of Mormon is in Ether 9:19 in approximately 2500 B.C. Thus any elephants existing upon the American continents need not have survived past about 2400 B.C. While the jury is still out, there are a number of North American Indian traditions which recount legends of giant stiff-legged beasts which would never lie down, had a big head and large leaf-like ears, round footprints, forward bending knees, and had a fifth appendage coming out of its head.⁸ In addition to the legends, five elephant effigies have been found in ancient Mexico and two in Arizona.⁹

Scientists agree that mammoths and mastodons once inhabited the Americas, and an article in *Scientific Monthly*, entitled “Men and Elephants in America,” suggests that these proboscidean animals (elephants, mammoths, mastodons) may have survived in the Americas until 1000 B.C.,¹⁰ well within the time frame demanded by the Book of Mormon.

Horse

There have been a number of horse bones discovered in America that might date to Book of Mormon times. The surviving remains from such finds are currently undergoing testing to determine their antiquity.¹¹

New World animals that might have been re-labeled by the Nephites

Cattle and Cows

The term “cattle” is used three times in the Book of Mormon (Ether 9:17-19; Enos 1:21; 3 Nephi 3:22), while the term “cow” is used twice (Ether 9:18; 1 Nephi 18:25). The Jaredite record is unclear as to whether “cattle” and “cows” are the same animals, or if “cows” are a subcategory of “cattle.” When the Miami Indians, who were familiar with cows, first encountered the unfamiliar buffalo they simply called them

“wild cows.” Likewise the explorer DeSoto called the buffalo “*vaca*” which is Spanish for “cow.” The Delaware Indians named the cow, “deer,” and a group of Miami Indians labeled sheep, which they were unfamiliar with, “looks-like-a-cow.”¹²

Horse

Could the Nephites have used the term “horse” for deer or some other animal? It is not impossible considering the above examples. Figurines, for example, of the pack bearing South American alpacas – which is related to the camel – have been unearthed as far north as Costa Rica.¹³ An early pre-Spanish incense burner discovered in Guatemala shows a man riding on the back of a deer. A stone monument dating to 700 A.D. shows a woman riding a deer. Another similar figurine was found in central Mexico, and until recently, many people in Siberia rode on the backs of deer. In such cases the deer served as “horses.”¹⁴

Ox (Oxen)

“Ox” or “oxen” is mentioned six times in the Book of Mormon (Ether 9:18; 1 Nephi 18:25; 2 Nephi 17:25; 2 Nephi 21:7; 2 Nephi 30:13; Mosiah 13:24). Some critics charge that this is an anachronism because, they claim, an “ox” is a castrated bull – something that would be impossible to find in the wild (see 1 Nephi 18:25). Ox, however, also refers to members of the subfamily Bovinae, in the Bovidae family, which includes Asiatic buffaloes, African buffaloes, cattle, and bison. A glance at a good encyclopedia will reveal the listing of other “wild ox” such as the yak, banteng, and the wild North African ox.¹⁵ Some LDS scholars have suggested that the Book of Mormon “ox” may refer to the tapir, camelidae, or perhaps bison.¹⁶

Swine

Despite the charges of some critics, the early Americans did have native pigs. The Aztecs called them *pisote*, which basically means “glutton” and was often applied to the peccary or wild pig.¹⁷ It should also be noted that some critics have ridiculed the Book of Mormon for its mention of swine as “useful food” (see Ether 9:18). While the critics claim that this would have violated Mosaic Law, they fail to recognize that statement in Ether would have been made *prior* to the Law of Moses.

Some critics have claimed that *dogs* and *bees* were also unknown in the ancient New World. Current research, however, suggests that both were present¹⁸ (and the *bee* is never mentioned in a New World setting in the Book of Mormon).

There is enough evidence for the existence of real Book of Mormon animals, or re-labeled Book of Mormon animals that suited similar purposes, that it just cannot be claimed that the Nephite scripture is fraudulent for the inclusion of animal names.



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¹ Hugh Nibley (1980), *Lehi in the Desert & The World of the Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft), 216-217.

² John A. Tvedtnes (1994), *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* v6:1 (Provo: FARMS), 29-30; Benjamin Urrutia, “Lack of Animal Remains at Bible and Book-of-Mormon Sites,” *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology*, No. 150, Aug. 1982, 3-4.

³ William J. Hamblin (1993), “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* v2:1 (Provo: FARMS), 194.

⁴ Nibley, 217.

⁵ Tvedtnes, 10.

⁶ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS), 293-294.

⁷ Tvedtnes, 10.

⁸ Sorenson, 298; Ludwell H. Johnson, III, “Men and Elephants in America” (*Scientific Monthly*, Oct., 1952), reprinted in FARMS, JOH-52, 4.

⁹ Diane E. Wirth, *A Challenge to the Critics* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon Publishing, 1986), 51.

¹⁰ Johnson.

¹¹ John L. Sorenson, “Once More: The Horse,” *Reexploring the Book of Mormon*, ed., John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Company and FARMS, 1992), 99.

¹² Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 294-5.

¹³ John L. Sorenson, “Digging into the Book of Mormon: Changing Understanding of Ancient America and Its Scripture,” *Ensign* (September 1984), 15.

¹⁴ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 295-296.

¹⁵ *The Software Toolworks: Multimedia Encyclopedia Version 1* PB (Grolier Inc. and Online Computer Systems, Inc., 1991, 1992).

¹⁶ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 299.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 290.

¹⁸ See Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 293 and Bruce W. Warren, “Further on the Claims of the Book of Mormon as to the Origin and Characteristics of its First Civilization,” *Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, 1963), 94.