

The Story of Zelph

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When the twenty men who formed the vanguard of Zion's Camp left Kirtland, Ohio, on 1 May 1834, they could not know that one of their most lasting and intriguing contributions to Latter-day Saint history would take place, not on a Missouri battlefield but rather on top of a large mound in Illinois.¹ This elevation, located about one mile south of modern Valley City, has been called Naples-Russell Mound Number 8, Pike County. According to historian Stanley B. Kimball, this mound is a "typical prehistoric Middle Woodland mortuary complex of the Hopewell culture."² There, on 3 June 1834, members of Zion's Camp located a few bones, including a broken femur and an arrowhead, approximately a foot below the earth's surface, and these remains became the catalyst for revelation to Joseph Smith regarding the skeleton's identity. Subsequently, the information recorded by several of the camp's members would be used by historians, geographers, and other scholars as evidence that Book of Mormon events, especially those reported in its closing chapters, took place in the northeastern part of the United States.³ Because this account is cited so frequently, usually as it is given in the *History of the Church*, it seems useful to examine closely the primary sources reporting the details of this extraordinary event.

The day after the finding of Zelph, the Prophet Joseph Smith, "on the banks of the Mississippi River," wrote a letter to his wife, Emma. While he does not mention Zelph by name, Joseph describes the setting in general:

*The whole of our journey. in the midst of so large a company of social honest and sincere men, wandering over the mounds of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon. moving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones. as a proof of its divine authenticity, and gazing upon a country the fertility, the splendour and the goodness so indescribable, all serves to pass away time unnoticed.*⁴

Obviously, Joseph and his companions were inspired and elated as they moved closer to their land of promise in Missouri. The territory they were in was vast, rich, and unsettled. The ghostly mounds of former inhabitants, however, reminded Joseph and his camp that the land had once been occupied. As they went, they naturally talked about the Book of Mormon. Joseph called the land "the plains of the Nephites." They believed that the mounds had belonged to "that once beloved people," and they interpreted the mere fact that skulls and bones were readily found as evidence of the divine authenticity of the book. Evidently they were most impressed by the evidence that a prior civilization had been destroyed from off the face of this land, for the Book of Mormon similarly reports the destruction of a large group of people on this continent. Simple confirmation of the fact that destruction had taken place was evidence enough for these adventurers that the Book of Mormon was true.

Beyond enjoying this general confirmation of their faith, the members of Zion's Camp received more specific information about one skeleton in particular. Although Joseph did not mention this particular episode in his letter to Emma, seven others in the camp made records about the finding of Zelph's bones and what Joseph said about them. These records are generally consistent with one another, but they leave a number of details in doubt. Who was Zelph? Was he a Nephite or a Lamanite? When did he die? What army was he in? As will be seen, the answers to these questions cannot be given with certainty from the complex historical sources that resulted from this event. While this means that Book of Mormon scholars must remain tentative in drawing implications from this notable incident, it does not diminish the fact that Joseph was moved by the spirit of revelation to speak about Zelph and his noble past in connection with Book of Mormon peoples or their descendants.

FINDING ZELPH

There are seven accounts written or dictated by members of the expedition:

Reuben McBride's account is shorter and less detailed than the others, but it may have been the first one recorded.

McBride writes:

Tuesday 3 [June 1834] visited the mounds. A skeleton was dug up [by] Joseph, said his name was Zelph a great warrior under the Prophet Omandagus. An arrow was found in his Ribs His name was Zelph a warrior under the Prophet Omandagus. Zelph was a white Lamanite

[Joseph said] he Zelph was killed in battle. Said he was a man of God and the curse was taken off or in part he was a white Lamanite was known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains.

According to Reuben McBride, then, Zelph was a great warrior under Omandagus, a man of God, and a white Lamanite known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains, and the arrow that killed him was found with his remains. Joseph Smith is credited with uncovering the bones, but little more is said.

Another member of Zion's Camp, twenty-two-year-old Moses Martin, also kept a diary of his experiences while traveling through Pike County. He reported the incident in the following terms:

This being in the Co of Pike, here we discovered a large quantity of large mounds. Being filed with curiosity we excavated the top of one some 2 feet when we came to the bones of an extraordinary large person or human being, the thigh bones being 2 inches longer from one Socket to the other than of the Prophet who is upwards of 6 feet high which would have constuted some 8 or 9 feet high. In the trunk of this skeleton near the vitals we found a large stone arrow which I suppose brought him to his end. Soon after this Joseph had a vision and the Lord showed him that this man was once a mighty Prophet and many other things concerning his people. Thus we found those mounds to have be deposits for the dead which had fallen no doubt in some great Battles. In addition to this we found many large fortifications which also denotes civilization and an innumerable population which has fallen by wars and commotion and the Banks of this Beautiful River became the deposit of many hundred thousands whose graves and fortifications have are overgrown with the sturdy oak 4 feet in diameter.

It appears that Moses Martin was present when the digging occurred, since he reports vividly the party's curiosity that led them to excavate and find the bones. It seems likely that this diary entry was made while the party was still in Pike County, shortly after the event. It is interesting to note that while Martin is impressed with the size of the skeleton and with Joseph's vision of the unnamed prophet, he says nothing about his being killed in battle, about his ancestry, his name, his being a white Lamanite, or his having served under a prophet chief named Omandagus or Onandagus. Instead, in the Martin account, the deceased man was "a mighty prophet." No details are given about who did the excavating.

Wilford Woodruff, who five years later would be called to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, recorded in his journal the following account of what transpired:

While on our travels we visited many of the mounds which were flung up by the ancient inhabitants of this continent, probably by the Nephites & Lamanites. We visited one of those Mounds and several of the brethren dug into it and took from it the bones of a man. Brother Joseph had a vission respecting the person he said he was a white Lamanite, the curse was taken from him or at least in part, he was killed in battle with an arrow, the arrow was found among his ribs, one of his thigh bones was broken, this was done by a stone flung from a sling in battle years before his death, his name was Zelph. Some of his bones were brought into the camp and the thigh bone which was broken was put into my waggon and I carried it to Missouri. Zelph was a large thick set man and a man of God, he was a warrior under the great prophet that was known from the hill Cumorah to the Rocky mountains. The above knowledge Joseph received in a

vision.

Sometime later (date unknown), Woodruff added interlinearly in the same paragraph the following information:

considerd to be 300 feet above the level of the Illinois river, three persons dug into the mound & found a body, Elder Milton Holmes took the arrow out of the back bones that killed Zelfh & brought it with some of the bones into the camp, I visited the same mound with Jesse J. Smith. Who the other persons were that dug into the mound & found the body I am undecided.

Apparently at the same time, he also added the word "Onandagus" after the words "great prophet," and inserted the words "on East sea" after "Cumorah."

Woodruff writes that the Prophet "Onandagus" was known "from the hill Cumorah on East sea to the Rocky mountains." This is the earliest source for this geographical data. (In Reuben McBride's account it is Zelfh who was widely known.) Woodruff also reports that the information about the skeleton came through a vision given to the Prophet Joseph. Two other accounts of this incident were later penned by Woodruff, but their wording is essentially identical

From the last few lines of the interlinear addition, it seems that Wilford Woodruff visited the mound only after the original group had made the find and that he remained "undecided" about who dug and found the body. While the point is not entirely clear, it appears that he was not with the original party. Thus his value as a witness to the events on the mound is somewhat diminished. He almost certainly was a party to discussions that took place away from the mound, however, since the thigh bone was carried in his own wagon.

The longest and most detailed near-contemporaneous account was written by Levi Hancock, later one of the Presidents of the Seventy. Like Wilford Woodruff, he was not with the group that discovered the remains of Zelfh, but he saw the bones and the arrowpoint they brought back to camp. Hancock wrote the following account in his journal:

On the way to Illinois River where we camped on the west side in the morning, many went to see the big mound about a mile below the crossing, I did not go on it but saw some bones that was brought with a broken arrow, they was layed down by our camp Joseph addressed himself to Sylvester Smith, "This is what I told you and now I want to tell you that you may know what I meant; this land was called the land of desolation and Onendagus was the king and a good man was he, there in that mound did he bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there dirt and covered them untill you see they have raised it to be about one hundred feet high, the last man buried was Zelf, he was a white Lamanite who fought with the people of Onendagus for freedom, when he was young he was a great warrior and had his th[igh] broken and never was set, it knited together as you see on the side, he fought after it got strength untill he lost every tooth in his head save one when the Lord said he had done enough and suffered him to be killed by that arrow you took from his brest." These words he said as the camp was moving off[f] the ground; as near as I could learn he had told them something about the mound and got them to go and see for themselves. I then remembered what he had said a few days before while passing many mounds on our way that was left of us; said he, "there are the bodies of wicked men who have died and are angry at us; if they can take the advantage of us they will, for if we live they will have no hope." I could not comprehend it but supposed it was all right.

Hancock reports different information than do the earlier accounts when he tells us the land was named Desolation and Onendagus was a king and a good man, but he says nothing about his being a prophet. However, he does inform us that Zelfh lost all his teeth but one, and he implies that Zelfh was relatively aged at death. His account makes no mention of the Hill Cumorah or of Onendagus's wide fame, but it agrees that Zelfh was a white Lamanite. Hancock's is the only source to report any specific circumstances surrounding Joseph Smith's statements about the skeleton, and this information may be significant.

An account by Heber C. Kimball of the discovery of Zelfh was published in the Times and Seasons in 1845 under the title, "Extracts from H. C. Kimball's Journal." An identical account, except for a lack of editing, is found in the autobiography Kimball dictated to James Sloan after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. The version in the autobiography goes as follows:

On Tuesday the 3rd, we went up, several of us, with Joseph Smith Jr. to the top of a mound on the bank of the Illinois river, which was several hundred feet above the river, and from the

summit of which we had a pleasant view of the surrounding country: We could overlook the tops of the trees on to the meadow or prairie on each side the river as far as our eyes could extend, which was one of the most pleasant scenes I ever beheld. On the top of this mound there was the appearance of three altars, which had been built of stone, one above another, according to the ancient order; and the ground was strewn over with human bones. This caused in us very peculiar feelings, to see the bones of our fellow creatures scattered in this manner, who had been slain in ages past. We felt prompted to dig down into the mound, and sending for a shovel and hoe, we proceeded to move away the earth. At about one foot deep we discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire; and between two of his ribs we found an Indian arrow, which had evidently been the cause of his death. We took the leg and thigh bones and carried them along with us to Clay county. All four appeared sound. Elder B. Young has yet the arrow in his possession. It is a common thing to find bones thus drenching upon the earth in this country.

The same day, we pursued our journey. While on our way we felt anxious to know who the person was who had been killed by that arrow. It was made known to Joseph that he had been an officer who fell in battle, in the last destruction among the Lamanites, and his name was Zelph. This caused us to rejoice much, to think that God was so mindful of us as to show these things to his servant. Brother Joseph had enquired of the Lord and it was made known in a vision.

Only Heber C. Kimball says that Zelph was killed in "*the last destruction among the Lamanites*," and the meaning of this phrase is unclear. "Last" may refer to the final destruction of the Nephites fifteen hundred years earlier, or it may have reference to the last battle of Zelph's people, whoever they were. The battle was "*among the Lamanites*," which may mean between the Nephites and the Lamanites but may also refer to a battle of Lamanites against other Lamanites, if we assume that the Lamanites may have had prophets among them. Kimball's account is also unique in that he says he went with Joseph Smith to the top of the mound and relates that they felt prompted to dig down into the mound, but first they had to send for a shovel and hoe. The discovery was made after digging about one foot. The other early accounts do not say that Joseph was present when the bones were dug up; rather they state or imply that he was not involved until some time later. According to Kimball, it was later in the day while continuing on the journey westward that the Prophet made the identification of the person whose bones they had found. This is consistent with Hancock's statement that Joseph spoke "*as the camp was moving off the ground*." Kimball states further that this was made known by means of a vision to Joseph after he had inquired of the Lord.

Kimball's account has a different tone from the earlier ones, especially those of Martin and Hancock. Instead of mentioning any concerns about death, destruction, evil influences, the angry dead, or thousands of graves, Kimball paints an idyllic scene, pleasantly overlooking meadow and tree tops, and he recalls their "*peculiar feelings*" as feelings of sympathy for these "*fellow creatures*" whose bones had been scattered in ages past. His depiction is in keeping with the joyous spirit reflected in Joseph's letter to Emma.

Kimball also speaks of locating certain remains that had "*the appearance*" of three altars, a detail mentioned in no other primary source. The passage of time may have dimmed Kimball's memory on this point. His account appears to be a later recollection, written possibly around 1843. Moreover, Kimball's account makes no explicit reference to the Nephites, and he sees the value of Joseph's vision primarily not in what it revealed about the ancient inhabitants of that region, but in how it showed that "God was so mindful of" the camp and especially of his "servant, Brother Joseph."

George A. Smith, another member of Zion's Camp who became an Apostle, included the following information in a history prepared in 1857: "*Monday, 2 June 1834: Some of us visited a mound on a bluff about 300 feet high and dug up some bones, which excited deep interest among the brethren. The President and many others visited the mound on the following morning.*" 14 According to this brief version, Joseph's visit to the mound came on the morning after the discovery of the skeleton.

Sometime after arriving in the Salt Lake Valley, probably during the 1850s, Wilford Woodruff began writing his autobiography. An examination of the manuscript in his own hand, now in the Church Archives, reveals that when he came to that part of his life when the bones of Zelph were found he added information not found in his journal account. Woodruff's

autobiographical account is as follows:

During our travels we visited many mounds thrown up by the Ancient inhabitants of Nephites and Lamanites, this morning we went unto a high mound near the river Joseph & many of the Brethren went up this mound was very high from the top of it--we could overlook the tops of the trees as far as our vision could extend and the scenery was truly delightful. On the top of the mound were stones which presented the Appearance of three Alters having been erected one above the other according to the Ancient order of things & human bones were strun upon the ground. We had taken a shovel along with us Brother Joseph wished us to dig into the mound we dug into it about one foot & came upon the skeleton of a man almost entire and an Arrow was found sticking in his back bone Elder Milton Holmes picked it out & brought it into camp with one of his leg bones which had been brocken He put the leg bones in my waggon & I carried it to Clay County Missouri. Brother Joseph feeling anxious to learn something Governing the man, prayed to the Lord & the Lord gave him a vision in open day while lying in his waggon, this mound & his history was placed before him. His name was Zelf, He was a white Lamanite the curse had been taken off from him because of his faith and righteousness He had embraced the gospel, he was a short stout thick set man, He had been a great warrior, Had joined the Nephites & fought for them under the direction of the great Onandagus who held sway & command over the Armies of the Nephites from the Hill Cumorah & Eastern sea to the rocky mountains though the Book of Mormon does not speak of him, He was a great warrior leader & great prophet Zelf had his thigh bone brocken from the sling of a stone while in battle in their of his youth He was killed with the Arrow sticking in his back bone the vision of the great prophet at the time that Zelf was killed was opened to the prophet Joseph & there [word unclear] were heaped upon the earth & that great Mound of near 300 Feet High placed over them. I felt impressed to bury Zelf's thigh bone in Temple Block at Jackson County Missouri but I did not have an opportunity and I brought it to Clay County near the house owned by Colonel Arthur & occupied by Lyman Wight.

At the end of the account, written in a different hand and probably at a later date, are the words, "*The arrow head is now in possession of his wife Emma Woodruff.*"

In this account, written upwards of twenty years after the event, Joseph Smith is described as lying on his back in his wagon when he received the vision in "*open day*" regarding not only Zelf but the mound and its history. Zelf is here described as a "*short, stout, thick set*" man, in contrast to the extremely tall man in the Moses Martin account. According to Woodruff, Zelf had joined the Nephites and fought for them under the direction of the Prophet Onandagus, who "*held sway*" from the Hill Cumorah and eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains. Zelf's thigh bone was broken by a stone while in a battle in his youth, and he was killed by the arrow found in his back. We are led to believe that the thigh bone was buried near the Clay County house owned by a Colonel Arthur and that Emma Woodruff had possession of the arrow, not Brigham Young or Burr Riggs, as in other accounts. This might indicate that President Young did not attach any particular significance to either the arrow or the remains in which it was found. Finally, in this account, Zelf was clearly associated with the Nephites, as was Onandagus.

On 22 February 1893, James E. Talmage reported a visit with Wilford Woodruff during which President Woodruff showed him "a sacred relic then in his possession in the shape of an Indian arrow head." This arrow was said to have been the cause of the death of the white Lamanite, Zelf. According to Talmage's account the arrow point had come into Wilford Woodruff's possession through Zina Young Card, a daughter of Brigham Young, who had formerly had possession of it. At the suggestion of George F. Gibbs, his secretary, President Woodruff then dictated the following account of the finding of Zelf:

While traveling with Zion's camp, through the State of Ohio, we came to a very high mound, to the top of which we climbed by means of steps over which grass had grown. The steps were very wide, probably about twelve feet. We found the top of the mound to be quite level and to cover a great deal of ground. After overlooking the surrounding country, and descending half way down we were halted by command of the Prophet Joseph. We had taken a shovel with us to the top of the mound, thinking we might have some use for it, and after halting, the Prophet, speaking to the man who had the shovel, told him to throw up the dirt at a certain place to which he pointed, After removing a little more than six inches of soil the skeleton of a man was

discovered, from a joint in whose backbone the Prophet drew a flint arrow head which had been the means of taking his life.

The Lord showed the Prophet Joseph that this was the skeleton of a white Lamanite named Zelph, and that he fought under a great chieftain named Onandagus, whose dominion covered an immense body of country. The book of Mormon does not mention the name of this Indian Chief, Onandagus.

In this account, dictated fifty-nine years after the event, Woodruff says that he accompanied the Prophet onto the hill, which was not the case according to his earlier accounts; he also adds details that are absent from his journal and from the other primary sources. He tells us they took the hoe and the shovel with them, while others said they had to send for them after they arrived on top of the hill. He also states that they were halfway down the hill before they began digging and that they commenced at the request of the Prophet himself. President Woodruff also tells us that they found ancient steps which they used to make their way up the hill. According to James L. Bradley, who has visited the mound many times, there are no steps leading to the top, or altars. However, the writer recently climbed the eastern side of the mound and found in certain places indentations that might be described as steps. Understandably, some details had faded in the memory of President Woodruff and other points had been logically added over the space of many intervening years. Still several basic parts of the story are recognizable in this late recollection.

In 1842, Willard Richards, as Church Historian, was assigned the task of compiling a large number of documents and producing a history of the Church from them. He worked on this material between 21 December 1842 and 27 March 1843. He himself had not joined the Church until 1836, but he would easily have learned from associates that Joseph Smith had kept no record of the march of Zion's Camp. Therefore, Richards presumably had to rely on the writings or recollections of Heber C. Kimball, Wilford Woodruff, and perhaps others for his information. The McBride and Martin accounts in particular, and perhaps also the Hancock record, may have been unknown to him, as the writers were not prominent Church figures. It is possible that Richards consulted with Joseph Smith, for the Prophet was overseeing the preparation of the history.

Blending the sources available to him, and perhaps using oral accounts from some of the members of Zion's Camp, but writing as if he were Joseph Smith, historian Richards drafted the story of Zelph as it appears in the "Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-1" (words in italic are in the handwriting of Wilmer Benson):

Tuesday the 3rd During our travels we visited several of the mounds which had been thrown up by the ancient inhabitants of this country, Nephites, Lamanites &c. and this morning I went up on a high mound near the river, accompanied by several the brethren. From this mound we could overlook the tops of the trees and view the prairie on each side of the river as far as our vision could extend and the scenery was truly delightful.

On the top of the mound were stones which presented the appearance of three altars having been erected one above the other, according to ancient order and the remains of human bones were strewn over the surface of the ground. The brethren procured a shovel and hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs the stone point of was a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death. Elder Burr Riggs Brigham Young retained the Arrow, and the bretheren carried some pieces of the skeleton to Clay County The contemplation of the scenery around before us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms and subsequently the vision of the past being opend to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose Skeleton we had seen was before us was a white Lamanite, a large thick set man and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus who was known from the hill Cumorah or eastern Sea, to the Rocky Mountains, His name was Zelph. The curse was taken from Zelph him, or at least, in part. One of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle, by the arrow found among his ribs, during a last great struggle with the Lamanites and Nephites: Elder Woodruff carried the thigh bone to Clay county.

A second copy of the same material exists, known as "Manuscript History of the Church, Book A-2," apparently written entirely in the hand of Wilmer Benson. It differs from the Richards version in a dozen details of spelling, punctuation, and phrasing, but only two differences are substantive. Where Richards describes Zelph as "a man of God," Benson puts "a son of God," and Richards's "*a great struggle with the Lamanites*" reads in Benson, "*the last great struggle with the Lamanites.*" The second manuscript was written as a back-up in case the first was lost or destroyed.

Following the martyrdom of the Prophet, the Times and Seasons published serially the "History of Joseph Smith." When the story of the finding of Zelph appeared in the 1 January 1846 issue, it read as follows:

We encamped on the bank of the river until Tuesday the 3rd during our travels we visited several of the mounds which had been thrown up by the ancient inhabitants of this county, Nephites, Lamanites, &c., and this morning I went up on a high mound, near the river, accompanied by the brethren. From this mound we could overlook the tops of the trees and view the prairie on each side of the river as far as our vision could extend, and the scenery was truly delightful.

On the top of the mound were stones which presented the appearance of three alters having been erected one above the other, according to ancient order; and human bones were strewn over the surface of the ground. The brethren procured a shovel and hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot discovered [the] skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs was a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death, Elder Brigham Young retained the arrow and the brethren carried some pieces of the skeleton to Clay county. The contemplation of the scenery before us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms; and the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the spent of the Almighty I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us, was a white Lamanite, a large thick set man, and a man of God. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Omandagus, who was known from the hill Cumorah, or Eastern sea, to the Rocky Mountains. His name was Zelph. The curse was taken from him, or at least, in part; one of his thigh bones was broken, by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle years before his death. He was killed in battle, by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.

Most of the words crossed out in the Richards manuscript are, for some unknown reason, included in this publication, along with the point that the prophet's name was Omandagus. Brigham Young, not Burr Riggs, is still said to have retained the arrow, and the reference to the Hill Cumorah, from the unemended Wilford Woodruff journal, is still included in the narrative. Further, the concluding sentence in the Times and Seasons account reads, "*during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites,*" whereas both the Richards and Benson manuscripts had crossed off "*and Nephites.*"

The story of Zelph appeared again in June 1888 in the Historical Record, a periodical edited and published by Andrew Jenson, the Church's primary historical writer at that time. In this account, Burr Riggs is said to have retained the arrow, and the Hill Cumorah is still mentioned, as are the Nephites. The 1904 first edition of the B. H. Roberts edited, seven-volume History of the Church repeats the account as Richards had left it. In 1948, after Joseph Fielding Smith had become Church Historian, explicit references to the Hill Cumorah and the Nephites were reintroduced. That phrasing has continued to the present in all reprintings.

It seems obvious that discussion and argumentation about historical and geographical questions in LDS circles has put more weight than is justified on the detailed phrasing of the account of Zelph as it is published in the History of the Church. Joseph Smith himself did not write much about the incident. He alluded to it only once, in his letter to Emma of 4 June 1834, when he identified the terrain over which the camp had marched as the "plains of the Nephites." Evidently these plains were in some respect associated with, or comparable to, the battlefields of the Nephites, but beyond that it is unclear what Joseph meant by this expression.

While it is impossible with the available evidence to reconstruct the exact process by which the narrative as it appears in the History of the Church was constructed by historical writers, some points are apparent. Practically all elements of the story incorporated into the account by Willard Richards are found in just two sources, Woodruff and Kimball. Kimball's diaries begin with his British mission in 1837, and the journal from which the account of the finding of Zelph is taken was dictated from memory to Robert B. Thompson in 1840. It is probable that Joseph Smith read

what his clerks, Willard Richards and Wilmer Benson, wrote about this event for the History of the Church. Their manuscript accounts cross out all reference to "the Nephites" and to the "hill Cumorah." We cannot know on present evidence, however, whether the crossing out was at Joseph's instance or with his approval.

That members of Zion's Camp dug up a skeleton near the Illinois River in early June 1834 is certain. Equally sure is that Joseph Smith made statements about the deceased person and his historical setting. It is unclear which statements attributed to him derived from his vision, as opposed to being implied or surmised either by him or by others. Nothing in the diaries suggests that the mound itself was discovered by revelation. Moses Martin indicates that the men dug because they were "filled with curiosity." Levi Hancock simply reports that "many went to see the big mound about a mile below the crossing." Heber C. Kimball seems to say they went to the mound to get "a pleasant view of the surrounding country."

Most sources agree that Zelph was a white Lamanite who fought under a leader named Onandagus (variously spelled). Beyond that, what Joseph said to his men is not entirely clear, judging by the variations in the available sources. Therefore, those who try to support a particular historical or geographical point of view about the Book of Mormon by citing the Zelph story are on inconclusive grounds.

The date of the man Zelph remains unclear. Expressions such as "great struggles among the Lamanites," if accurately reported, could refer to a period long after the close of the Book of Mormon narrative as well as to the fourth century A.D. None of the sources before the Willard Richards composition, however, actually say that Zelph died in battle with the Nephites, only that he died "in battle" when the otherwise unidentified people of Onandagus were engaged in great wars "among the Lamanites." Archaeological research in mounds near the one where the bones of Zelph were discovered indicates that the mounds and the artifacts found within them belong to the Middle Woodland Period, dated somewhere between perhaps 100 B.C. and A.D. 500. However, the Zelph skeleton came from a shallow burial near the top of the mound. Who knows whether it was intrusive, buried there more recently than the period of the main mound construction? Apostle John A. Widtsoe once wrote, "Zelph probably dated from a later time when the Nephites and Lamanites had been somewhat dispersed and had wandered over the country." 24 Thus, it is unclear when Zelph himself lived.

Zelph was identified as a "Lamanite," a label agreed on by all the accounts. This term might refer to the ethnic and cultural category spoken of in the Book of Mormon as actors in the destruction of the Nephites, or it might refer more generally to a descendant of the earlier Lamanites and could have been considered in 1834 as the equivalent of "Indian" (see, for example, D&C 3:18, 20; 10:48; 28:8; 32:2). Nothing in this study can settle the question of Zelph's specific ethnic identity.

Exactly what Joseph Smith believed at different times in his life concerning Book of Mormon geography in general is also indeterminable. Only a few clues remain. For example, while the Church was headquartered in Nauvoo, Joseph read a best-selling book of his day by John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, which John Bernhisel had sent to him from the East. In a letter dated 16 November 1841, the Prophet thanked Bernhisel and wrote of the book that "of all histories that had been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct" and that it "supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon." Ten months later, the *Times and Seasons* printed an enthusiastic review of the Stephens volume. John Taylor was the editor, although Joseph Smith had shortly before announced his own editorial responsibility for the newspaper. The unnamed writer of the review (probably Wilford Woodruff) stated that "we have just learned . . . the city of Zarahemla . . . stood upon this land" (Guatemala, whose ruins Stephens was reporting). Still, other data seem to reflect a different view and make it uncertain just what geographical conception, if any single one, prevailed among the early Church leaders. Evidently Joseph Smith's views on this matter were open to further knowledge. Thus in 1834, when Zelph was found, Joseph believed that the portion of America over which they had just traveled was "the plains of the Nephites" and that their bones were "proof" of the Book of Mormon's authenticity. By 1842 he evidently believed that the events in most of Nephite history took place in Central America. While it is possible to reconcile these two views--for example by believing that the bulk of Nephite history occurred in Central America while only certain battles or excursions took place in Illinois--it is likely that the thinking of the early Church leaders regarding Book of Mormon geography was subject to modification, indicating that they themselves did not see the issue as settled. When the committee preparing the 1921 edition of the Book of Mormon (composed of George F. Richards, Orson F. Whitney, James E. Talmage, Anthony W. Ivins, Joseph Fielding Smith, and Melvin J. Ballard) met "to give certain brethren an opportunity to state their views regarding the geography of the Book of Mormon," none of the scholars who spoke to the group used the Zelph story as evidence for their position. That was probably because the quartet who made presentations--Joel Ricks, Willard Young, B. H. Roberts, and President Ivins--generally argued that the Nephite-Lamanite civilization spoken of in the scripture was centered in South or Central America. A

quarter of a century later, however, Joseph Fielding Smith used the Zelph story to support his view that the Hill Cumorah in the state of New York "is the exact hill spoken of in the Book of Mormon." The debate about Zelph's relation to Book of Mormon geography will likely continue since the facts in hand do not allow for a decisive settlement of the matter.

Zelph Revisited

Donald Q. Cannon Regional Studies, Illinois

Probably most Latter-day Saints would not recognize the name Zelph. However, serious students of LDS Church history and Book of Mormon geography would likely know Zelph as the white Lamanite whose remains were found by Zion's Camp as they traveled through central Illinois. The name Zelph first appears in LDS history in connection with Zion's Camp. The most familiar version of the story is in the History of the Church. The story of Zelph from that source follows: Our enemies had threatened that we should not cross the Illinois river, but on Monday the 2nd we were ferried over without any difficulty. The ferryman counted, and declared there were five hundred of us, yet our true number was only about one hundred and fifty. Our company had been increased since our departure from Kirtland by volunteers from different branches of the Church through which we had passed. We encamped on the bank of the river until Tuesday the 3rd. During our travels we visited several of the mounds which had been thrown up by the ancient inhabitants of this country-Nephites, Lamanites, etc., and this morning I went up on a high mound, near the river, accompanied by the brethren. From this mound we could overlook the tops of the trees and view the prairie on each side of the river as far as our vision could extend, and the scenery was truly delightful.

On the top of the mound were stones which presented the appearance of three altars having been erected one above the other, according to the ancient order; and the remains of bones were strewn over the surface of the ground. The brethren procured a shovel and a hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot, discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs the stone point of a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death. Elder Burr Riggs retained the arrow. The contemplation of the scenery around us produced peculiar sensations in our bosoms; and subsequently the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea to the Rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part-one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the [p.98] arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites.¹

The primary source material for the Zelph story comes from diaries kept by some members of Zion's Camp.² Six men wrote diary accounts concerning Zelph: Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, George A. Smith, Levi Hancock, Moses Martin, and Reuben McBride.

What do these six contemporary accounts tell us about Zelph? The answer to that question is based upon a careful analysis of the primary sources. Each diary account is reproduced herein as it appeared in the original, without changes in spelling or grammar. Following the printed text of each diary account is a paragraph summarizing the account and including my own interpretations. Wilford Woodruff, who was the preeminent LDS journal-keeper of the entire nineteenth century, prepared a characteristically detailed record of the events surrounding the discovery of Zelph. Woodruff's reputation and stature is further attested to by his decade of church service as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and as president of the Church during a crucial period in its history. His journal entry about his experience in Zion's Camp under the date May-June 1834 follows:

While on our travels we visited many of the mounds which were flung up by the ancient inhabitants of this continent probably by the Nephites & Lamanites. We visited one of those Mounds and several of the brethren dug into it and took from it the bones of a man.

We visited one of those Mounds: considered to be 300 feet above the level of the Illinois river. Three persons dug into the mound & found a body. Elder Milton Holmes took the arrow out of the back bones that killed Zelph & brought it with some of the bones in to the camp. I visited the same mound with Jesse J. Smith. Who the other persons were that dug in to the mound & found the body I am undecided.

Brother Joseph had a vision respecting the person. He said he was a white Lamanite. The curs was taken from him or at least in part. He was killed in battle with an arrow. The arrow was found among his ribs. One of his thigh bones was broken. This was done by a stone flung from a sling in battle years before his death. His name was Zelph. Some of his bones were brought into the Camp and the thigh bone which was broken was put into my waggon and I carried it to Missouri. Zelph was a large thick set man and a man of God. He was a warrior under the great prophet /Onandagus/ that was known from the hill Camorah /or east sea/ to the Rocky mountains. The above knowledge Joseph received in a vision.³

Wilford Woodruff tells us that these mounds were probably built by the Nephites and Lamanites. He also records that Joseph had a vision concerning the skeleton, learning that he was a white Lamanite, who had been killed in battle. His name was Zelph, "a large thick-set man and a man of God, he was a warrior under the great prophet that was known from the Hill Cumorah to the Rocky Mountains."

Heber C. Kimball's journal has a good reputation, a fact supported by the numerous times it has been published, both in extracts and in book form. The Zelph episode is found in one of these published versions in the Times and Seasons under the title "Extracts from H. C. Kimball's Journal." His comments on Zelph include the following:

On Tuesday the 3rd, we went up, several of us, with Joseph Smith jr. to the top of a mound on the bank of the Illinois river, which was several hundred feet above the river, and from the summit of which we had a pleasant view of the surrounding country: we could overlook the tops of the trees, on to the meadow or prairie on each side the river as far as our eyes could extend, which was one of the most pleasant scenes I ever beheld. On the top of this mound there was the appearance of three altars, which had been built of stone, one above another, according to the ancient order; and the ground was strewn over with human bones. This caused in us very peculiar feelings, to see the bones of our fellow creatures scattered in this manner, who had been slain in ages past. We felt prompted to dig down into the mound, and sending for a shovel and hoe, we proceeded to move away the earth. At about one foot deep we discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire; and between two of his ribs we found an Indian arrow, which had evidently been the cause of his death. We took the leg and thigh bones and carried them along with us to Clay county. All four appeared sound. Elder B. Young has yet the arrow in his possession. It is a common thing to find bones thus drenching upon the earth in this country.

The same day, we pursued our journey.-While on our way we felt anxious to know who the person was who had been killed by that arrow. It was made known to Joseph that he had been an officer who fell in battle, in the last destruction among the Lamanites, and his name was Zelph. This caused us to rejoice much, to think that God was so mindful of us as to show these things to his servant. Brother Joseph had enquired of the Lord and it was made known in a vision.⁴

From Heber C. Kimball's account we learn that several men went with Joseph Smith to visit the mound, which was several hundred feet above the Illinois River. He tells of altars being located on top of the mound. They discovered a human skeleton about one foot below the surface. There was an Indian arrow between his ribs. He said that Brigham Young had the arrow in his possession.

George A. Smith's church experience was similar to that of Woodruff and Kimball. He served as a member of the Quorum of the Twelve and as a counselor in the First Presidency. He is known as a reliable witness. He recorded the event in his journal; however, the text which follows was prepared later in connection with the History of the Church: "Monday, 2 June 1834: Some of us visited a mound on a bluff about 300 feet high and dug up some bones, which excited deep

interest among the brethren. The President and many others visited the mound on the following morning."5

The record from George A. Smith is much shorter than the other accounts. He gives the full date (Monday, June 2, 1834), tells of the height of the mound, and indicates Joseph Smith visited the mound the following morning.

Another Church leader, Levi Hancock, served as one of the presidents of the Seventy. His account is the most detailed and complete of any of the six accounts. His diary is regarded as a reliable and accurate source for events he experienced.

On the way to Illinois River where we camped on the west side in the morning, many went to see the big mound about a mile below the crossing, I did not go on it but saw some bones that was brought with a broken arrow, they was layed down by our camp Joseph addressed himself to Sylvester Smith, "This is what I told you and now I want to tell you that you may know what I meant; this land was called the land of desolation and Onendagus was the king and a good man was he, there in that mound did he bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there dirt and covered them untill you see they have raised it to be about one hundred feet high, the last man buried was Zelf, he was a white Lamanite who fought with the people of Onendagus for freedom, when he was young he was a great warrior and had his th[igh] broken and never was set, it knited together as you see on the side, he fought after it got strength untill he lost every tooth in his head save one when the Lord said he had done enough and suffered him to be killed by that arrow you took from his brest." These words he said as the camp was moving of[f] the ground; as near as I could learn he had told them something about the mound and got them to go and see for themselves. I then remembered what he had said a few days before while passing many mounds on our way that was left of us; said he, "there are the bodies of wicked men who have died and are angry at us; if they can take the advantage of us they will, for if we live they will have no hope." I could not comprehend it but supposed it was all right.6

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From Levi Hancock we learn some things previously known as well as some new information.

Hancock identifies the Illinois River and says they were camped on the west side of the river.

Further, he says the mound was a mile below the crossing, i.e., south [p.101] of the ferry.

Following a vision, Joseph told the members of the camp, especially Sylvester Smith, about the bones. He told them this was the Land of Desolation and that Onandagus was their king. Zelph was a white Lamanite who fought for freedom. This mighty warrior was killed by an arrow.

Moses Martin, who was on site when the skeleton was excavated, wrote the following:

This being in the Co of Pike, here we discovered a large quantity of large mounds. Being filed with curiosity we excavated the top of one so[m]e 2 feete when we came to the bones of an extraordinary large person or human being, the thigh bones being 2 inches longer from one Socket to the other than of the Prophet \whi\ who is upwards of 6 feete high which would have constuted some 8 or 9 feete high. In the trunk of this skeleton near the vitals we found a large stone arrow which I suppose brought him to his end. Soon after this Joseph had a vision and the Lord shewed him that this man was once a mighty Prophet and many other things concerning his people. Thus we found those mounds to have be[en] deposits for the dead which had falen no doubt in some great Batles. In addition to this we found many large fortifications which als[o] denotes sivilisation and an innumerable population which has falen by wars and comotion and the Banks of this Beautiful River became the deposit of many hundred thousands whose graves and fortifications \have\ are overgrown with the sturdy oak 4 feete in diameter.7

From Moses Martin the following is reported. They were in Pike County, and there were several large mounds. He furnishes details such as the excavation being two feet deep, the skeleton being extra large. He estimated the skeleton to be eight or nine feet tall because of the size of the thigh bone. There was a stone arrow in his rib cage. Joseph had a vision concerning the event and

learned that this was a mighty prophet. These mounds were graves for the dead who had fallen in great battles.

Reuben McBride's account is important because it was written close to the time of the event. It is, however, somewhat confusing because the information on Zelph is written in two different parts of his journal. In order to clarify the meaning, the entries relating to Zelph have been compressed together and the intervening, extraneous information has been deleted.

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Tuesday 3 visited the mounds. A skeleton was dug up. Joseph, said his name was Zelph a great warrior under the Prophet Omandagus. An arrow was found in his Ribs which he said he supposed occasioned his death \Said\ he was killed in battle. Said he was a man of God and the curse was taken off or in [p.102] part he was a white Lamanite was known from the atlantic to the Rocky Mountains.⁸

From Reuben McBride we learn that the date was Tuesday, the third, when they visited the mounds. They dug up a skeleton and Joseph identified the remains as Zelph, a warrior under the prophet Onandagus.

What do these six contemporary accounts tell us about Zelph and Book of Mormon geography? In order to answer this question, I will present the following summary containing the basic facts followed by the sources of information in parentheses. A key to abbreviations is also included.

SUMMARY

Key to Abbreviations:

GAS = George A. Smith HCK = Heber C. Kimball
LH = Levi Hancock MM = Moses Martin
RM = Reuben McBride WW = Wilford Woodruff

Dates of Visits to Mounds

Group: Monday, June 2, 1834 (GAS)

J. Smith: Tuesday, June 3, 1834 (HCK, RM) May-June 1834 (WW)

Place Where Mounds are Located

Illinois River (WW, HCK, LH)

Pike County (MM)

Description of Mounds

300 feet above River (WW, GAS)

Flung up by ancient inhabitants (WW)

Several 100 feet above River (HCK)

Three alters on top of Mound (HCK)

Big Mound (LH)

Large Quantity of Mounds (MM)

Fortifications (MM)

Artifacts Found

Body (WW)

Arrow (WW, HCK, LH, MM, RM)

Human Bones (HCK, GAS, LH, MM)

Skeleton of a man (HCK, RM)

Zelph Identified

Name Zalph (WW, HCK, LH, RM)

Large, thick-set man (WW)

Warrior (WW, HCK, LH, RM)

White Lamanite (LH, RM)

Mighty Prophet (MM)

Man of God (RM)

Killed in Battle (WW, HCK, MM, RM)

Nephite-Lamanite References

Nephite (WW)
Lamanite (WW, HCK, LH, RM)
Joseph Smith's Vision of Zelph
Vision received (WW, HCK, MM)
Onandagus Identified
Name (various spellings) (WW, LH, RM)
Great Prophet (WW, RM)
Know from Atlantic to Rocky Mountains (WW, RM)
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From the foregoing summary it seems evident that these accounts indicate the possibility of some Book of Mormon events being located in North America.

The evidence in these journal accounts should be taken seriously for two reasons. First, there is a remarkable harmony and good agreement between the accounts. They are certainly not contradictory. Second, these are credible, competent witnesses. When one refers to the journal of Wilford Woodruff, for example, one is working with material which has been described by the experts as among the best nineteenth century journals. Indeed, [p.104] Woodruff's journals constitute basic source material for the published history of the Church. Heber C. Kimball and George A. Smith are also well-known for the accuracy and integrity of their journals. These records have also been included in the History of the Church. While not as well known as the three mentioned above, the other three writers are also reliable witnesses of historical events. Additional information is available to us beyond these diary accounts. Just two days later Joseph Smith wrote to his wife, Emma Smith, telling her about his experiences, and recounting, specifically, the experience at "Zelph Mound." In the letter he writes that they were "wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity."⁹

This letter to his beloved Emma not only tells about the general news of the progress of Zion's Camp, it specifically deals with Book of Mormon matters. Joseph Smith was obviously very excited about the findings. He refers to the geographic area in Illinois as "the plains of the Nephites." He reports that the mounds belonged to the people of the Book of Mormon, and, further, that these discoveries were proof of the authenticity of the Book of Mormon. This letter shows that Joseph Smith firmly believed that some Nephites had inhabited North America before their final destruction at the hands of the Lamanites.

Neither Joseph Smith nor the six journal writers associated with the Zelph incident were alone in writing and speaking about Book of Mormon geography. Nineteenth century Church members commonly referred to Book of Mormon locations in North America. Many of these people sincerely believed that at least some of the events described in the Book of Mormon took place in North America. The Times and Seasons, published by the Church in Nauvoo, often carried stories and statements about Book of Mormon geography. An example is this statement from Oliver Cowdery (original spelling has been preserved).

You are acquainted with the mail road from Palmyra, Wayne Co. to Canandaigue, Ontario Co., NY...you pass a large hill on the east side of the road...[a discription of the hill follows]. At about one mile west rises another ridge of less height, running parallel with the former leaving a beautiful vale between. The soil is of the first quality for the country and under a state of [p.105] cultivation which gives a prospect at once imposing, when one reflects on the fact, that here, between these hills, the entire power and national strength of both the Jaradites and the Nephites were destroyed. By turning to the 529th and 530th pages of the Book of Mormon you will read Mormon's account of the last great struggle of his people, as they were encamped round this hill Cumorah.... This hill by the Jaredites was called Ramah: by it or around it, pitched the famous army of Coriantumr their tents.¹⁰

Concerning Adam-ondi-Ahman, Zerah Pulsipher, a member of the First Council of Seventy, wrote:

Daviess County was a beautiful place situated on Grand River. First rate land and plenty of good timber where we supposed there had been an ancient city of the Nephites, as the hewn stone were already there in piles also the mound or alter built by Father Adam, where he went to offer sacrifices when he was old. Leaning upon his staff, prophesying the most noted thing that should take place down to the latest generation therefore it was called Adam-ondi-Ahman.¹¹

Orson Pratt, a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles and a leading intellectual figure in nineteenth century Mormonism, said the following about Book of Mormon geography:

They landed to the south of this, just below the Gulf of California, on our western coast. They inhabited North America, and spread forth on this Continent, and in the course of some sixteen hundred years' residence here, they became a mighty and powerful nation. Although they became a great and mighty people, they were oftentimes very much chastened because of their sins. Here let me observe that before they arrived on this land the Lord said to them, "I design to lead you forth to a land that is choice above all other lands on the face of the whole earth; and this is my decree concerning the land which you are to occupy, that whatever nation shall possess the land from this time henceforth and forever shall serve me, the only true and living God, or they shall be swept off from the face thereof, when they are fully ripened in their iniquity." The Jaredites had this decree before them, before they set foot on this Continent. It was before them during the whole term of their existence here, that inasmuch as they would serve God they would be prospered, and inasmuch as they would not serve Him great judgments were upon them. Hence they were afflicted oftentimes because of their wickedness. On a certain occasion there were a very few individuals, Omer and his family and some few of his friends, that were righteous enough to be spared out of a whole nation. The Lord warned them by a dream to depart from the land of Moran, and led them forth in an easterly direction beyond the hill Cumorah, down into the eastern countries upon the sea shore. By this means a few families were saved, while all the balance, consisting of millions of people, were overthrown because of their wickedness. But after they were destroyed the Omerites, who dwelt in the New England States, returned again and dwelt in the land of their fathers on the western coast.¹²

Brigham Young said much about Book of Mormon geography and especially the Hill Cumorah. The following comment concerns the records stored in the Hill Cumorah:

When Joseph got the plates, the angel instructed him to carry them back to the hill Cumorah, which he did. Oliver says that when Joseph and Oliver went there, the hill opened, and they walked into a cave, in which there was a large and spacious room. He says he did not think, at the time, whether they had the light of the sun or artificial light; but that it was just as light as day. They laid the plates on a table; it was a large table that stood in the room. Under this table there was a pile of plates as much as two feet high, and there were altogether in this room more plates than probably many wagon loads; they were piled up in the corners and along the walls. The first time they went there the sword of Laban hung upon the wall; but when they went again it had been taken down and laid upon the table across the gold plates; it was unsheathed, and on it was written these words: "This sword will never be sheathed again until the kingdoms of this world become the kingdom of our God and his Christ." I tell you this as coming not only from Oliver Cowdery, but others who were familiar with it, and who understood it just as well as we understand coming to this meeting, enjoying the day, and by and by we separate and go away, forgetting most of what is said, but remembering some things. So is it with other circumstances in life. I relate this to you, and I want you to understand it. I take this liberty of referring to those things so that they will not be forgotten and lost.¹³

These four quotations are a powerful statement concerning a North American location for events in Book of Mormon history. This belief of a North American location for certain Book of Mormon events was a certainty for these people.

There is still another body of evidence that is entirely independent of the Church. I refer to the evidence from archaeological and anthropological studies of the area near Zelph Mound. Several studies have been undertaken, beginning in the nineteenth century. One of the earliest studies of this area took place in the 1870s and 1880s. The Smithsonian Institution published the results of these investigations in 1884 in its Annual Report. This report provides useful information on excavation undertaken directly on the site now identified as Zelph Mound. It describes the work of the mound builders who occupied the Illinois River Valley. Among the relics unearthed were clay pipes, copper axes, and arrow heads. No attempt was made to establish a precise date for the mound builders of the area. They did find some connection with other geographic areas such as Michigan and Mexico.¹⁴

Many studies of the area have been conducted during the twentieth century. Zelph Mound is referred to in scientific terms in most of these reports as Naples-Russell Mound Number 8. Highway construction has prompted several recent archaeological investigations of the area. In order for the new state highway, Route 36, to span the Illinois River Valley, large cement and steel supports had to be constructed. The base of these supports on the west side of the river are located on the bluffs near Naples-Russell Mound Number 8. Before any major excavation began, teams of archaeologists came on site to conduct exploratory excavation and identify any artifacts recovered from the mounds. The results of these studies conducted by the state of Illinois, the University of Chicago, and other organizations are very revealing and interesting for Latter-day Saints. Although they use terminology such as Woodland and Hopewell Culture, which is not derived from Book of Mormon terms, the dates are clearly within the scope of Book of Mormon history. Some of the fabric recovered from the archaeological digs conducted on the bluffs dates between 100 BC and AD 400.¹⁵ I find this data to be absolutely astonishing. The various cultures and peoples which occupied the lower Illinois River Valley span several hundred years. Remarkably, items discovered in the Zelph Mound area fit precisely within the parameters of the Book of Mormon historical chronology. It seems to me that this general collection of evidence points to a possible North American Book of Mormon geographic location. At least it should be seriously considered and not ignored.

Stating that there is a North American location for some Book of Mormon events does not exclude the possibility of other Book of Mormon events having occurred elsewhere. It seems possible to have Book of Mormon history occurring in both Central America and North America. This raises the feasibility of a connection between Central America and North America.

Some studies link the people and culture of Central America with those in North America.¹⁶ These studies have been conducted by people who are not LDS and, consequently, do not share the same beliefs about the Book of Mormon and its origins. Nevertheless, they have made a connection between Meso-America and the Mississippi Valley, a connection which is potentially useful for Latter-day Saints.

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One of the most convincing of these studies which link Central America to North America is the one conducted by Robert Silverberg, a scholar who has published over 130 books and articles. His [p.108] investigation shows a direct link between the mound builders of the Midwest and the cultures found in pre-classic Mexico. The presence of corn in both areas is one of several connections which exist between these two areas. As Silverberg explains: "The corn that is being found increasingly more often at Hopewell village sites seems to argue in favor of direct or indirect contact between Hopewell and Mexico."¹⁷

A recent book on the archaeology of North America adds corroborating evidence on the cultural connections between Mexico and North America. Specifically, temple mounds in Mississippian villages show evidence of Mexican influence.¹⁸

Conclusion

Where does all this lead us? What can we conclude about Zelph? What does the Zelph incident tell us about LDS Church history, Book of Mormon geography, and Joseph Smith?

We know for certain that some members of Zion's Camp were on the west bank of the Illinois River in Pike County on 2 and 3 of June 1834. While in the area these men climbed up on a 300-foot earthen burial mound, overlooking the Illinois River. While on the mound on 2 June they uncovered a large skeleton. On 3 June Joseph Smith accompanied some of the men to the same burial mound. Later in the day he received a vision in which he learned that these skeletal remains belonged to Zelph, a white Lamanite, who had been a warrior under a leader named Onandagus. On 4 June on the banks of the Mississippi River, Joseph Smith wrote a letter to his wife Emma. In that letter he told her they had been wandering among the land of the Nephites. According to Joseph Smith this experience attested to the authenticity of the Book of Mormon.

The journal accounts of Joseph Smith's activities and his letter indicate that he believed that Book of Mormon history, or at least a part of it, transpired in North America. What does one do with such a prophetic statement? Some have dismissed it as a joke or playful exercise of Joseph's imagination.¹⁹ Others have chosen to emphasize discrepancies and possible contradictions in the source accounts, thereby discrediting what Joseph Smith said.²⁰

It seems to me that either approach carries heavy risks. When one chooses to state that Joseph Smith can't be taken seriously on [p.109] this issue, the door is opened to question his statements on other issues. Where does it stop? Does the First Vision, with the discrepancies in the primary source accounts, also come under the doubt and skepticism applied here to Zelph? Why can't we simply take Joseph Smith at his word?

As I have shown, there is additional evidence which can be employed to support these claims. Statements made by nineteenth century Mormons about a North American location for the Book of Mormon can be used to support this position. Also, there is a considerable body of archaeological evidence concerning the people who lived in the Illinois Valley in ancient times. A North American location for some Book of Mormon events does not rule out a Central American location for others. The two are not mutually exclusive. The Book of Mormon is a book of scriptures, a religious record-not a geography book. Why not link Meso-America and North America? There are, after all, studies which already connect these two areas of the world. It seems to me that the foregoing conclusions dictate several challenges and tasks. It is important for Latter-day Saint scholars to further investigate the connections between Central America and North America. More work also needs to be done on nineteenth century LDS statements concerning Book of Mormon geography. There are interesting possibilities and much yet to be learned. I suggest we not reject the story of Zelph and its relationship to Book of Mormon geography until all these areas have been fully investigated. As things stand now we are still uncertain about any of the theories concerning Book of Mormon geography.