

A SCIENTIFIC EVALUATION OF THE ZELPH REVELATION

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On June 3, 1834, Joseph Smith and others in the Zion's Camp expedition stopped at a large mound in Illinois one mile south of the current Valley City along the Illinois River. In inspecting and digging into the mound, human bones and an arrowhead were encountered at a shallow depth below the surface. These remains were the catalyst for an apparent revelation by Joseph Smith of the past relating to the person whose remains were found, with the vision identifying him as Zelph.

The Vision as Revelation

It has been long recognized that any utterance of Joseph Smith is not considered a revelation. For example, sections 121, 122, and 123 of the Doctrine and Covenants are extracts from a letter Joseph Smith wrote while imprisoned in Liberty Jail. This letter was addressed to the Saints in Illinois and elsewhere, as well as to Bishop Edward Partridge, and was dictated between March 20 and 25, 1839. These sections were not included in the Doctrine and Covenants until 1876 when they were added by Orson Pratt under the direction of President Brigham Young. The rest of Joseph Smith's letter from Liberty Jail contains further words of advice and inspiration, but only excerpts have been canonized and recognized as official revelation by the LDS Church in the Doctrine and Covenants. Of course, others outside of the LDS Church structure likely have different points of view with regards to Joseph Smith's

In the case of Zelph, unlike advice or even doctrinal commentary, the evidence of witnesses is that Joseph Smith had a vision, which by its nature, if accurate and factual, requires a revelatory experience. Of course, some visions may be instructive or representative as opposed to the observation of actual events, such as Lehi's vision of the Tree of Life found in the Book of Mormon. Given the specificity of individuals and locations and given the fact that there is essentially no doctrinal or allegorical information included, the Zelph vision is classified as a vision of actual historical persons, places and events, and is not in the nature of a commentary or opinion by Joseph Smith.

Record of the Vision

There are six individuals who made a recounting of a vision apparently received at that time by Joseph Smith regarding the individual found buried in the mound, which mound is now identified as Naples-Russell Mound Number 8, Pike County (Godfrey, 1989) (See figure 1). These are the only known primary sources, upon which other later recountings are based.

Godfrey (1989, 46) notes that the experience of historians and experiments of psychologists have established that precise recall of details about an event fades notoriously rapidly, so it is important to base a reconstruction of an event on primary sources.

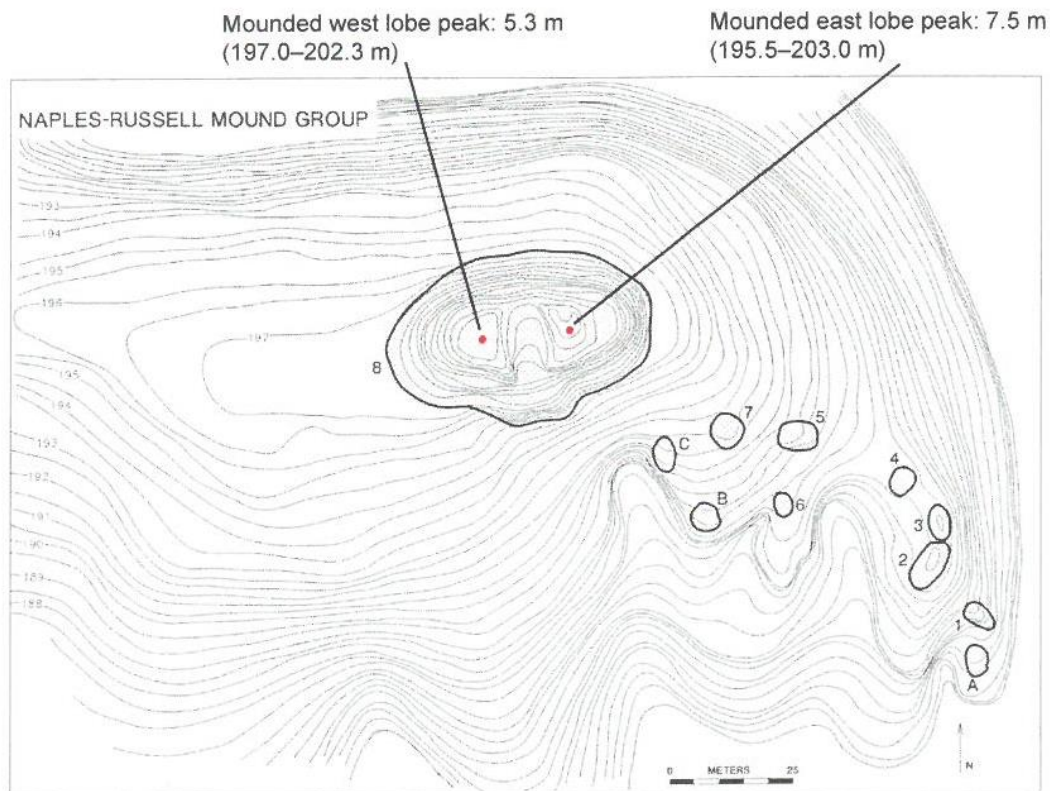


Figure 1 – The Naples-Russell Mound Number 8, Pike County (Farnsworth 2019, 114)

The purpose of this inquiry is not to recount all the historical particulars, but is to evaluate whether the vision that Joseph Smith was indicated to have had is consistent with the known archeological and scientific information that is currently available. As is typical with separate accounts of an historical event, no two accounts of what occurred and what Joseph Smith said are exactly the same and some have contradictory details. Kenneth Godfrey (1989) has provided an analysis of the different historical sources for the vision, and classified in a matrix each recounting and the differences in each account. As not all the information in the recounting is relevant to the scientific evaluation of the event, only the relevant portions of each of these recountings will be discussed here and each based on Godfrey's descriptions of each.

A summary of each account of the members of the Zion's Camp group is as follows in chronological order:

1. Reuben McBride. This report is considered a primary source as it is from his diary, and may have been the first one recorded, possibly being written on the day the find occurred.
2. Moses Martin. This report is considered a primary source as it is from his diary.
3. Wilford Woodruff. This report is considered a primary source as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry it does not appear that he was with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zelph. Wilford Woodruff made later reports, but none conflicted with his original diary entries.
4. Levi Hancock. This report is considered a primary source as it is from his diary. However, based on the entry he was not with the original party on the mound that discovered the remains of Zelph, but saw the bones and arrowpoint brought back to camp. Hancock indicates that "Onendagus (sp) was the king and in the mound did bury his dead and did not dig holes as the people do now but they brought there (sp) dirt and covered them."
5. Heber C. Kimball. An account of the discovery of Zelph was published in 1845 in the Times and Seasons under the title "Extracts from H.C. Kimball's Journal." An identical unedited account is found in the autobiography Kimball dictated to James Sloan after the Saints arrived in the Salt Lake Valley. Although not a "direct" journal entry, based on the corroboration of both accounts this would be considered equivalent to a primary source. Heber C. Kimball was also present on the mound.
6. George A. Smith. George A. Smith was present on the mound and in a history written 1857 included a very brief amount of information regarding the Zelph incident.

All essentially agree (or were silent) on the following points:

1. The individual was named Zelph
2. Zelph was a warrior
3. Zelph was a captain
4. Zelph was a man of God
5. Zelph was a prophet
6. Zelph was a white Lamanite
7. Zelph fought under Onandagus (some spelling differences)

8. There were great battles and Zelph was killed by an arrow in battle
9. Onandagus was a king, good man, leader, and prophet
10. Onandagus was known from the Rocky Mountains to the Atlantic Sea or Hill Cumorah
11. The mound was built by ancient inhabitants of this country, specifically Onandagus had the mound constructed

Differences related to a potential Book of Mormon setting in the various accounts are as follows:

1. Four primary witnesses to the event do not indicate the nature of the death other than by an arrow. Reuben McBride wrote in his journal contemporaneous to the event that Zelph “was killed in battle.” Heber C. Kimball records 9 years after the event that Zelph was killed “in the last destruction among the Lamanites.” George A. Smith 23 years after the event indicates it was “a last struggle with the Nephites and Lamanites.”
2. Reuben Hancock near contemporaneous accounting of the event indicated that Joseph Smith, after returning to camp, later recounted to Sylvester Smith, a troublemaker in the camp, that “this land was called the land of desolation.” No other witness recounts this.
3. Reuben McBride indicated that it was Zelph (as opposed to Onandagus) that was known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains.

Consistency of the Vision with Known Archeology

The vision appears to be consistent with what is known of the Hopewell culture which is known to have existed in that area anciently from approximately 100 BC to 400 AD. The Hopewell Interaction Sphere consisted of the long-distance sharing of certain artifact styles and raw materials. The center of the Hopewell tradition is found in Ohio and items found there are fossilized shark’s teeth from the Gulf Coast (east sea), copper and silver from the Great Lakes region, mica from the Appalachian Mountains, and spear points made of obsidian from the Montana portion of Yellowstone National Park (See figure 2).



Figure 2 – The Hopewell Culture Interactive Sphere (Thornton, 2023)

Hopewell archeologists indicate that these big earthwork centers in Ohio were probably widely known. They were built over a period of hundreds of years. They are significant structures to see, so people knew about them. Bret Ruby, an archaeologist at Hopewell Culture National Historic Park in Chillicothe, Ohio, indicates that the trade going on consisted of direct trade (meaning the traders traveled all the way to Ohio from the Atlantic, Gulf of Mexico, and the Rocky Mountains), or also likely is people went as pilgrims from distant places to Ohio to visit these great religious centers, bringing objects with them (Thornton, 2023). Brad Lepper, curator of archaeology at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus (Thornton, 2023), stated:

“I think that during the Hopewell era in the Middle Woodland period (100 BC to 400 AD), Ohio was this nexus, this cultural center for much of eastern North America”

This does support the possibility that Onandagus, if considered a significant leader among one of the Hopewell groups, especially if from Ohio, could have been known from the Atlantic to the Rocky Mountains as indicated in the vision by virtue of a centralized pilgrimage of people from various locations.

Under current understandings of the broad use of the term Lamanite, although generally so, the term “Lamanite” is not always definitive as to an unbeliever and does not require a genetic link, thus there is no issue with Zelph or Onandagus (if he was one) being Lamanites as specified in the vision. Native Americans of the Hopewell culture can thus qualify as Lamanites under Book of Mormon terminology. The Book of Mormon indicates migrations have occurred to the north from the core area of the Book of Mormon (some never being heard from again), so the Hopewell civilization, although not known to have been derived from cultures to the south in Mesoamerica, may have incorporated some of these migratory persons, so it is possible that there may have been integration of some Lamanite persons who originated from Mesoamerica.

The vision also indicated that king Onandagus built the burial mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound) for the burial of “his dead” which could either mean his family or more broadly for at least some of his subjects. The archeological investigation of the Napoleon Hollow sites determined that the mortuary facilities likely served the occupants of numerous Middle Woodland hamlets located away from the mortuary precinct from a large area along twelve miles of the river and up into tributary valleys (Farnsworth et al, 2019, 185) so is consistent with this portion of the vision.

Issues Related to Book of Mormon Geography

It is initially notable, just considering the Book of Mormon text, that if there was a prophet Onandagus (and Zelph) that was so widely known, the fact that there is no mention of him in the text by Mormon or Moroni is indicative that he was not living in the area of the Book of Mormon. Also, if one is to think that Zelph and Onandagus existed at the time of the final battles between the Lamanites and Nephites as some persons have opined, then how could they be considered as righteous persons, since Mormon indicated that at that time there were no righteous Nephites existent except for him and Moroni (Mormon 1:17, 3:3, 4:10-12, 5:2)? While Zelph is described as a Lamanite under the command structure of the Nephites, as part of the command structure elucidated in the vision, Onandagus is required to be a Nephite.

The LDS Church on its official website has recognized the Zelph vision as a revelatory “open vision” (Church Educational System, 2025, 145). With regards to the position of the LDS on the location for Book of Mormon geography being revealed, it has formally stated that “the Church’s only position is that the events the Book of Mormon describes took place in the ancient Americas” and “(T)he Church does not take a position on the specific geographic locations of Book of Mormon events in the ancient Americas” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, 2025).

Since the LDS Church has recognized the Zelph revelation as “open vision,” and considering that there is no recognized revelation involving the specific location of the Book of Mormon, it is clear that the Zelph mound and revelation is not related to Book of Mormon lands. Of course there are other churches, organizations and individuals that retain a belief in the Book of Mormon that are not part of the LDS Church so may see things differently.

The Naples-Russell Mound 8 and is part of the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District, which consists of twenty-six burial mounds and two possible burial knolls known collectively as the Russell Mound Group (See figure 3).

In 2001 the Naples-Russell Mound Number 8 underwent an archeological investigation. It was determined that Mound 8 was constructed atop an earthen platform supporting two ramped log tombs – presumably for processing the dead – that had been capped by an “earthen saddle.” Burial 1 Skeleton 1 (QL-4904) was interred on the upper west side of the tumulus and was one of the last burials in the mound. QL-4904 was thus determined to be the end use of the structure. By radiometric dating it was determined that QL-4904 was interred in 91 AD (Calibrated Range (2 σ) AD 58-127). (King et al, 2011). No intrusive burials (burials after completion of the mound) were observed by archeologists investigating the mound (Farnsworth, 2010).

Heber C. Kimball, in a later recollection written in 1843 and published in 1845, indicated that several of the group, along with Joseph Smith, walked first to the top of the mound. Kimball states:

"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."

Wilford Woodruff indicated that they had gone to the top of the mound and then, while descending, halfway down the mound, Joseph Smith pointed to a location that was then excavated where the Zelph skeleton was then found. (Godfrey 1989).

During the 2001 archeological excavation of the mound, two areas about halfway down the hill were noted as having looter disturbance, with either location consistent with the 1834 description of the digging (Farnsworth, 2019, 125-125) (See figure 4).

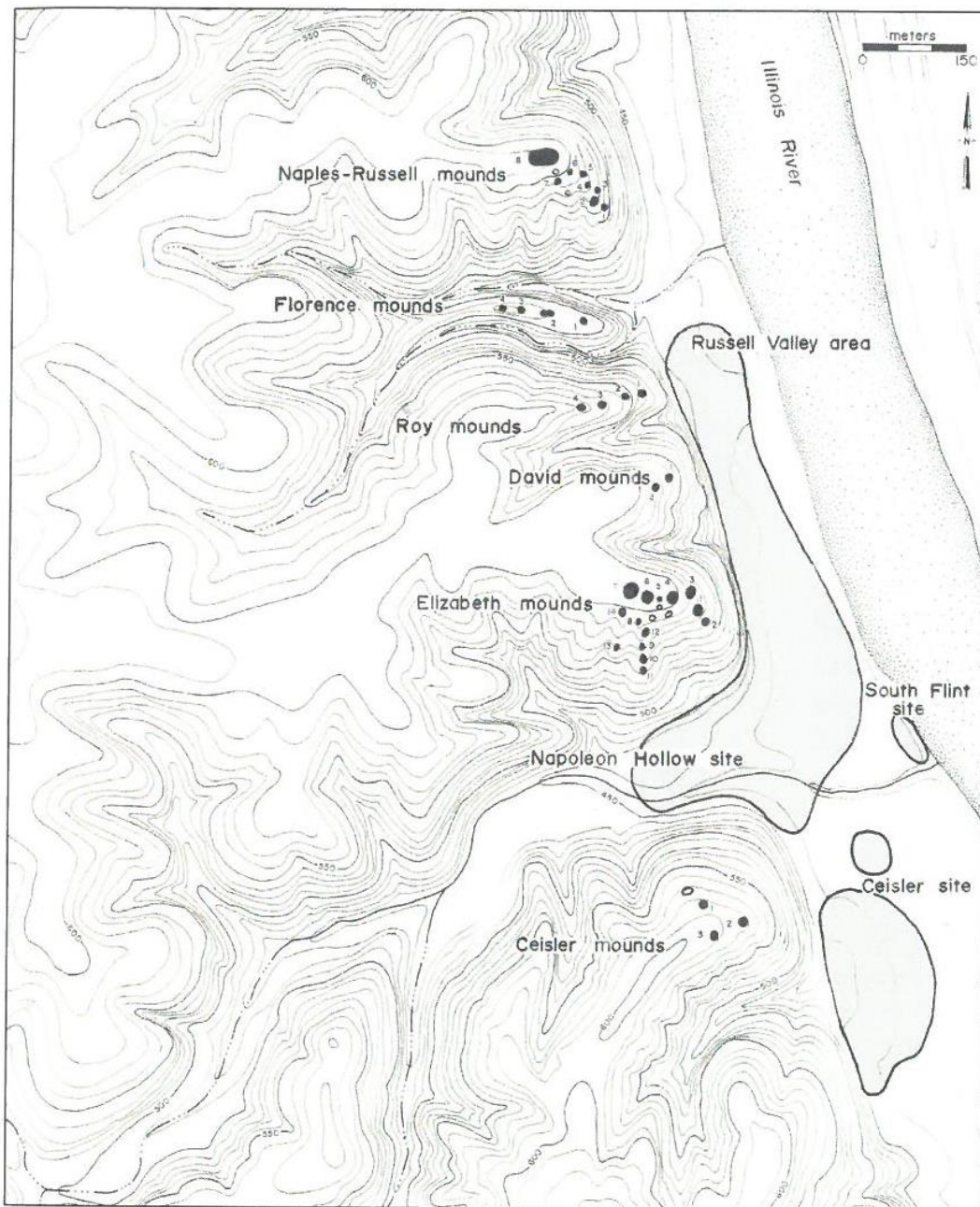


Figure 3 – The Napoleon Hollow Archeological District (Farnsworth 2019, 114)

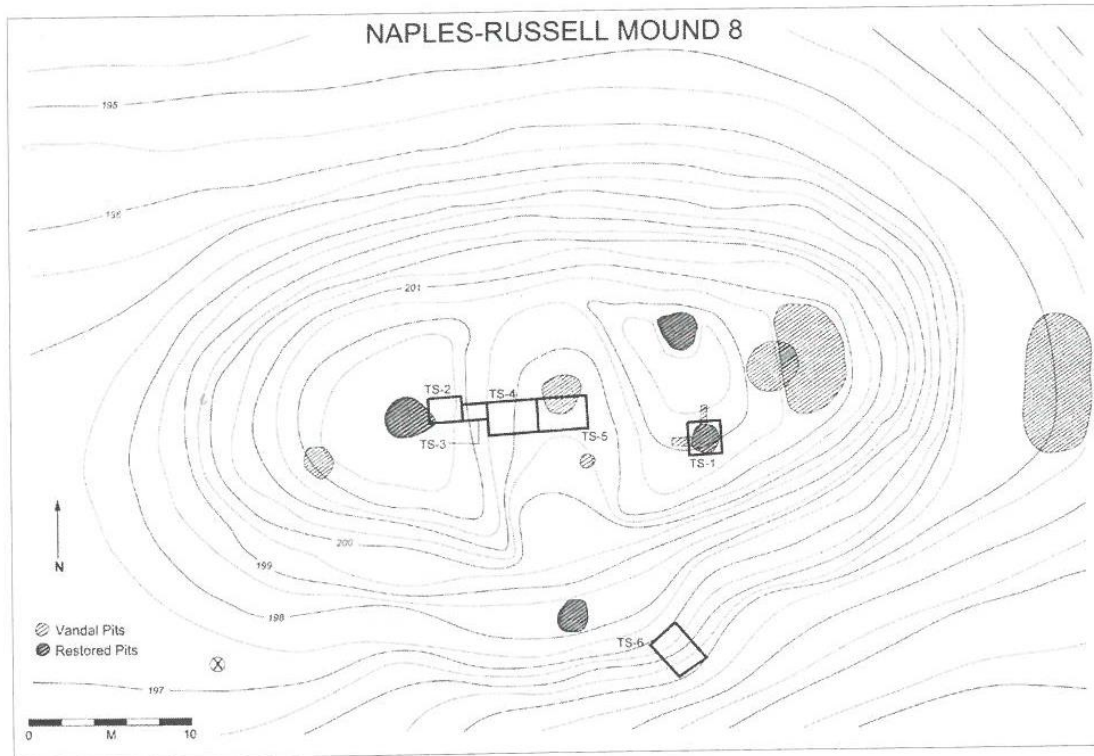


Figure 4 – Areas of Historic Looter Disturbance on Naples-Russel Mound 8 (Farnsworth 2019, 126)

After Joseph Smith had identified the location where digging was to take place, Kimball and the others then dug into the side of the mound, having previously sent for a shovel and a hoe. Kimball describes what was discovered:

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.

(Godfrey 1989)

Occupation and burials in the Napoleon Hollow Archeological District existed from 50 BC to 100 AD as determined by extensive radiometric dating (Farnsworth, 2019). Thus, the Zelph skeleton, which was located further down the hill indicative of an earlier or middle time frame (circa 25 AD), could not be a candidate to be involved in any final battle of the Nephites and Lamanites, which according to the Book of Mormon occurred much later (late 4th century AD) than 100 AD.

In addition, during the period in the Book of Mormon encompassed by 91 AD, the Book of Mormon indicates that there were no Nephites or Lamanites and it was also a period of peace, (approximately year 85 in the Book of Mormon calendar) as it is very clear that from 29 AD on there was “no contention among all the people, in all the land” (4 Nephi 1:13). No battles started until year 321 (approximately 315 AD) (Mormon 1:6). Thus, Zelph and the mound cannot be a part of Book of Mormon lands. As the archeologists determined there were no later burials in the mound (or any other mounds in the district) after its completion, there is no scientific support for a later Zelph burial.

Further, part of the vision indicates that Onandagus (under whom Zelph served) was the one who directed the construction of the mound (or at least a significant portion of the mound) which does not allow for Zelph to be buried long after the mound was completed. Even if Zelph died later than Onandagus, if one is to consider a later burial, it could not be later than say 50 years after completion of the mound. Even if one uses the latest radiometric date within the date range of 127 AD, the latest date for Zelph would be 177 AD, centuries short of the final Nephite/Lamanite battles.

In addition, according to the Book of Mormon there were no Lamanites or “-ites” of any kind from 29 AD to 104 AD (110th year) (4 Nephi 1:). Sometime apparently towards the end of the period between 104 AD and 188 AD a small part of the people left the church and took upon themselves the name Lamanite (4 Nephi 1:20).

Thus, based on all of the various avenues of independent evidence, it is improbable that any Lamanite, let alone a warrior captain/prophet named Zelph, serving a larger leader named Onandagus, could have existed in Book of Mormon lands in the archeological time frame specified.

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