The subject of “Book of Mormon geography” has stimulated three different responses among Latter-day Saints over the years. On the part of Church authorities caution, if not anxiety, has prevailed. For a minority of members the reaction has been persistent curiosity. Meanwhile a large majority have been satisfied to ignore the matter.

The leaders’ position probably stems from mixed concerns all classed under the heading of the threat of change: (1) fear of embarrassment to the Church from premature, non-revelatory settling of popular opinion on one solution to the question that might later have to be changed; (2) fear of divisiveness among members over competing correlations; (3) the challenge to traditional views about geography that is posed by scholarly study which might shake the faith of lay members who have not distinguished mere tradition from revelation; and, (4) generalized mistrust of intellectuals and hobbyists in religious matters. But whatever the concerns of the leaders, a portion of the membership of the Church goes right on thinking their own thoughts about the geography of Book of Mormon events just as on many other subjects. Between these two unfocused interests or concerns, Mormon students of the scripture have produced a remarkably large body of writings that displays in its variety, if not its quality, the vigor of LDS thought.

The expressed motivation for much of this literature seems to have been little more than intellectual gymnastics—working on the equivalent of a complex crossword puzzle where all the Ammonihahs and Mantis must interrelate. Another motive for writing has been apologetic, for some have assumed that an accurate geography could lead to a correlation with archaeological remains or traditions that would support “the authenticity of the Book of Mormon” against scoffers. Serious discussion of benefits for the individual reader of the scripture that could come from a solution to the geography conundrum has been surprisingly rare. Among obvious points that could be made are: (1) a heightened sense of concreteness or believability conferred on readers by their having specific, detailed knowledge of the setting of reported events; and (2) likelihood that giving the scriptural account definite spatial, historical and cultural dimensions will make its lessons-for-living clearer. Third, the matter of geography may also be seen as a challenge: if Latter-day Saints have so far failed to examine “the keystone of our [LDS] religion” with sufficient care to set it into a definite place and concrete scene, does that not mean that we are treating a sacred matter superficially? That there are many hundreds of geographical statements and facts included in the record can be taken to indicate that we ought to pay attention to them. So while I do not consider the topic crucial, I believe it is significant. And for me personally it is interesting.
This volume aims to review the entire subject. The first thing to do is to examine what has been done previously with what has been called “Book of Mormon geography.”

The literature reveals confusion. A great amount of effort has gone into the work. Most of it, probably, has been wasted. One reason is that devotees of the topic have been loners, mainly, hence they have not had the benefit of criticism. In this volume, at least, the means will be laid out to allow future workers to see what others have done and to set out on a more productive course. I would like to see this volume lead toward a meeting of minds rather than more of the arm-waving so common in the past. By a willingness to correct past errors, we may move toward helpful sharing of knowledge and even a text-based consensus.

Because of a negative attitude of some Church leaders, the expression “Book of Mormon geography” has taken on a bad connotation. Another problem with the expression is its ambiguity. The label could cover topics as diverse as where copies of the Nephite scripture are being printed and distributed or which Church members in which areas own and use copies. In addition, there are students of the scriptural text who deal only with events and their locations in the Old World—where the events took place that were reported by Nephi in the first eighteen chapters of his record. But here I am concerned with only one aspect. I have chosen an unambiguous name for the topic to distinguish it: “the geography of (American) Book of Mormon events.” Since 99% of the text’s reflections of geography concern the American promised land scene, I shall drop the parenthetical label and simply suppose that hereafter “the geography of Book of Mormon events” will be taken as referring to the question of what locations in the New World constituted the scene of the events reported in the Book of Mormon after Lehi’s arrival in the American promised land? (The Jaredite record is impossible to deal with except where it connects with the Nephite account; thus I ignore those geographical statements and hints in the book of Ether which I cannot connect to Mormon’s account.)

The first task I have set is to examine everything substantive that has been written by Latter-day Saints on the subject. There is no use “re-inventing the wheel.” If answers to questions of the geography of Book of Mormon events already have been found, we might as well acknowledge and take advantage of them. If reliable answers have not come forth, we at least need to know what ground has been plowed. Of course some of the work done has been inconsequential, and certain writings are inaccessible to me, yet I have learned so much more than anyone hitherto about who did and said what that my findings to this point may be useful to others.

To avoid others having to look up the sources, which are often obscure, I give summaries of them below. Part 2 includes sketches of all the schemes encountered (some unpublished) according to a paradigmatic format that will simplify comparisons. Copies of available maps are included. I consider this
a working edition, so no doubt I will have missed some sources and possibly misread others. Corrections and additions will be appreciated.

Each distinctive body of geographic interpretation—each scheme which identifies particular Book of Mormon lands and features with a particular set of places on the western hemisphere map—I term a model. Closer examination probably will no doubt allow identifying certain of those models as sufficiently close to others that the total number (70, so far) ought to be reduced by lumping very similar, derivative schemes together in families—variants. Initially, here, I have chosen not to suppose that models which look a good deal alike are necessarily related to each other historically; the similarities may be coincidences following separate discoveries or invention of ideas.

Part 1 consists of a historical interpretation of the course of LDS (and RLDS) thought on the topic from the appearance of the Book of Mormon in 1830 to the present. My interpretation is based on the summaries in Part 2 plus some other minor literature. I am attempting in this treatment to place the sequence of discoveries and statements about the geography of Book of Mormon events in context. It becomes apparent that certain notions continued from writer to writer (often without acknowledgment and perhaps even unrealized). Yet overall there has been a historical cumulation of data and interpretations that can be appreciated best in the format of the "history of ideas."

To anticipate my conclusion, the upshot is that the existing literature goes in so many directions that no solution stands out as sufficiently persuasive to rally consensus behind it. As a consequence I conclude (in Part 3) that the task must start over with the basics. The following parts then present a set of tools to move students toward a consensus. The logic for them will be explained in Part 3.