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Abstract Review of *The Land of the Nephites* (1988), by Delbert W. Curtis.

Delbert W. Curtis, *The Land of the Nephites*. Orem: Delbert W. Curtis, 1988. v + 50 pp. \$3.00.

Reviewed by David A. Palmer

A booklet entitled "The Land of the Nephites" has been prepared by Delbert W. Curtis. It goes a step beyond the traditional idea of Jaredite and Nephite last battles being in New York. It places the entire cultural histories of these people in the small area of southern Ontario and western New York. The various "seas" are considered to be Lakes Huron, Ontario, and Erie. This is certainly a unique approach, and Curtis expended considerable effort in figuring out a geography to go with his hypothesis.

Preliminary Comments

Curtis states that "Sorenson, Warren and Hauck all base much of their findings of [*sic*] the possibility that Zarahemla was on the Yucatan Peninsula, and at the same time discount the possibility of Lehi landing south of Darin [*sic*]" (p. iv).¹ Actually none of those books suggests that Zarahemla was in the Yucatan Peninsula. This suggests that he may have read those books with insufficient care.

Curtis further indicates that all three authors used the same premise and came to vastly different conclusions. Actually, Warren and Sorenson are in complete agreement. The work by Hauck was questioned in several previous reviews by this journal. Mr. Curtis is also evidently unaware of my book *In Search of Cumorah, New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico*, published in 1981.² It also agrees with the Sorenson theory on the location of Jaredite and Nephite ruins in Mesoamerica.

Many comments could be made about problems with the Curtis geography. For example, there is no consideration

¹ Cf. John A. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985); Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987); and F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

² David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful: Horizon, 1981).

whatsoever for the highlands and lowlands, coastal plains, mountains, and so forth. However, that is not the primary issue. The key question is whether or not the overall geography and especially the cultural elements described in the Book of Mormon can be justified in the setting proposed.

Where Were the Jaredite and Nephite Cultures?

Curtis says that "The sacred writings of Mesoamerica suggest that it was cold enough for some to have frozen to death, the hail and storms put out their fire. Hail is mentioned in the Book of Mormon" (p. 22). Actually *snow and cold are never once mentioned in the text* of the Book of Mormon. More typical were *fevers* (Alma 46:40). This makes it highly unlikely that any of the text is describing the land of western New York. It is also rather unlikely that a text describing the area of the Book of Mormon would not have described Niagara Falls, a wonder of the world, had the history been taking place there.

The booklet also discusses the great destructions at the time of the crucifixion of the Lord. However, it is clear that there were not only great earthquakes but large volcanic eruptions.³ Those would be found in a land close to tectonic plate boundaries. Such a land is Mesoamerica, which is dotted with volcanoes. Eruptions of two or three of them can now be dated to the time of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The land spoken of in western New York is not a place where earthquake insurance is needed.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has never taken an official position on issues of Book of Mormon geography. Some unofficial books, written before modern archaeological methods were applied, assumed that Mormon's Cumorah and the New York hill were the same. This tradition, begun by Oliver Cowdery, has continued to the present. The New York hill came to be known as the one Book of Mormon location known with certainty. However, it was generally believed that Mesoamerica was the cradle of those cultures. Curtis tries to refute the latter idea. He believes that everything took place in upstate New York.

However, the exact statement made by Mormon must be taken into account. He was custodian of a large number of

³ See Hugh Nibley, *Since Cumorah*, vol. 7 in *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley*, 2d ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1988), 235-36.

engraved plates, some over a thousand years old! He abridged them to produce what is now known as the Book of Mormon. Mormon said, "Therefore I made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the *hill Cumorah* all the records that had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, *save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni*" (Mormon 6:6). Thus, the original Cumorah is the repository for a great wealth of undiscovered documentary material. However, it was *not* necessarily the location where Moroni buried the plates in his care.

Curtis also cites one circumstance where Joseph Smith appears to have referred to Cumorah as being in New York. It had to do with the discovery of a skeleton near the top of a Hopewellian culture mound (PK5) along the Illinois River.⁴ The mound is near the top of a high ridge overlooking the river. The mound is now difficult to find, but is in fact located as originally described. There are numerous conflicting accounts of what Joseph Smith said after leaving the mound. The original account by Willard Richards is cited in the second edition of the *History of the Church*, edited by Joseph Fielding Smith.

The first edition, edited by B. H. Roberts, eliminates any reference to last battles, Nephites, or Cumorah. The prophet Joseph Smith had not reviewed that part of his history prior to his death. Therefore, subsequent to the martyrdom, the Quorum of the Twelve directed its continued review. Thomas Bullock made the corrections, directed by Brigham Young, Heber C. Kimball, and Willard Richards. At that time the corrections were made and can be seen in the handwritten version preserved in the Church archives. The first edition more correctly reproduced the official handwritten version. Thus, the Zelp incident sheds no light on the location of the last battleground.

Book of Mormon Criteria

The Book of Mormon itself must stand as the best witness of the criteria necessary to locate the Jaredite, Nephite, Lamanite, and Mulekite cultures. Therefore, thirteen geographic/topographic criteria were determined from the text and fifteen cultural criteria. A discussion of the specific references

⁴ John H. Wittorf, "Joseph Smith and the Prehistoric Mound-builders of Eastern North America," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the Society for Early Historical Archaeology* 123 (October 1970): 1-9.

from the Book of Mormon is given in Palmer.⁵ The geographic criteria are as follows:

1. near eastern seacoast
2. near narrow neck of land
3. on a coastal plain and near other mountains and valleys
4. one day's journey south of a large body of water
5. an area of many rivers and waters
6. presence of fountains
7. water gives military advantage
8. an escape route southward
9. hill large enough to view hundreds of thousands of bodies
10. hill must be a significant landmark
11. hill must be free standing so people can camp around it
12. in temperate climate with no cold or snow
13. in a volcanic zone susceptible to earthquakes

The hill in New York meets criteria 2 (minimally), 4, 5, and 11. It does not meet the others. The hill Vigía in Mexico, proposed by Palmer⁶ and Sorenson⁷ meets all of them. The cultural criteria are listed below:

1. cities
2. towers
3. agriculture
4. metallurgy
5. formal political states
6. organized religion
7. idolatry
8. crafts
9. trade
10. writing
11. weaponry
12. astronomy
13. calendar systems
14. cement
15. wheels

⁵ Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 28-72.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 89-123.

⁷ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting*, 350.

The Cerro Vigía in Mexico meets all of these cultural criteria. The hill in New York meets none of them. Modern archaeological research shows that there was little culture there until A.D. 1100.

An Archaeological Test for Western New York and the Land of the Nephites

Only archaeological studies can serve to evaluate whether western New York State was the land of the Jaredites and Nephites. Certainly, the cultural requirements must be met if it were. A definitive study of the archaeology of New York State was published in 1965 by William Ritchie.⁸ He defines a number of archaeological stages which are summarized here:

Archaic Culture (3000 B.C. to approximately 1300 B.C.). The archaic cultures were mobile and without much, if any, social structure. Their sites were small and their dwellings were insubstantial. The largest village had about 100 people. They left no traces of agriculture or pottery. Though they obtained some copper tools, they had no ornaments. They selected their sites according to fishing potential, but they also hunted deer, turkeys, and pigeons. There was some gathering of vegetable foods. The males are described as being about five feet five inches tall, of slender build, and having long, narrow, and oval-shaped faces with narrow noses. During the latter half of this phase, the "Laurentian tradition," the people were heavy boned and were about the same height. They had broad, round heads, with short and broad noses.

Transitional Phase (1300 B.C. to 1000 B.C.). The transitional phase saw the introduction of pots made of soapstone, plus some early ceramics. Little of this cultural tradition is found in western New York.

Early and Middle Woodland Stage (1000 B.C. to about A.D. 900). During this stage there was a gradually increasing emphasis on agriculture. Burials were mostly cremations. A pottery tradition began and small copper ornaments were developed. There was trade with the Upper Great Lakes area, Quebec, and Pennsylvania. There were also some contacts with the Adena culture from the Mississippi valley.

Ritchie has developed a picture of the life of these people based on archaeological data. In the winter they probably

⁸ William Ritchie, *The Archaeology of New York State* (Garden City, NY: Natural History, 1965).

ranged the forests in small groups. No campsites have yielded post molds, so the shelters must have been quite temporary. In the summer they used "a flimsy wigwam affair of poles with bark or mat covers, which rested almost upon the surface of the ground."⁹ Overall, the picture we gain of these people, who overlapped Jaredite and Nephite time periods, is one of small bands of semicivilized people with little social organization. It would have presented someone from Mesoamerica, such as Moroni, with an ideal opportunity. He could have come in unnoticed and sealed up his record until the time that he would deliver it as a resurrected personage to Joseph Smith.

The simple fact is, they still did not have agriculture, but subsisted by hunting and gathering. "Projectile points, chiefly of large size, probably for arming javelins and hand-held spears, and bone fish hooks, proclaim the already ages-old basic hunting-fishing economy in our area [upstate New York]. That area has as yet supplied no trace of cultigens, although maize horticulture is now definitely established for the Hopewell culture of Illinois and Ohio."¹⁰

Late Woodland Stage (A.D. 900 to A.D. 1600). Finally, in this late phase, especially after A.D. 1100, the Owasco people in New York began to show signs of moving out of the cultural backwater in which their ancestors had been mired. The bow and arrow finally came into use—arrowheads from the Palmyra area are probably no older than A.D. 1100. The villages developed in size up to 300 people. Pottery was still crude; the vessels did not even have supports. The Owasco culture is the earliest culture in New York State for which the cultivation of corn and beans can be substantiated.

Conclusions

This summary of the archaeology of western New York, developed by a prominent archaeologist, shows that the region of western New York could not have been the scene of the culture described in considerable detail by Mormon. Where are the ruins? Where are all the other cultural facets demanded by his text? They simply are not there. This author fails to show that the Nephites ever lived in that area. By contrast, there is substantial evidence for a Mesoamerican location for those

⁹ Ritchie, *Archaeology of New York State*, cited in Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 85.

¹⁰ Ritchie, *Archaeology of New York State*, 214.

cultures. In fact, there is agreement on a number of site locations being specific Book of Mormon cities. There is also general agreement that the probable site of the Hill Ramah/Cumorah was at the hill called Vigía, in Veracruz, Mexico.

The author of this pamphlet has worked diligently. However, its formal publication as a book does not seem to enhance continuing scholarly research on Book of Mormon geography.