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John Clark

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Author(s) John Clark

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Abstract Review of *Christ in North America* (1993), by Delbert W. Curtis.

Clark examines the scholarship and logic involved in assuming a one-Cumorah theory for Book of Mormon geography.

Delbert W. Curtis, *Christ in North America*. Tigare, OR: Resource Communications, Inc., 1993. 275 pp., with index. \$16.95.

The Final Battle for Cumorah

Reviewed by John Clark

In a period of less than 900 years the Hill Cumorah, or Ramah, twice witnessed the self-slaughter of once-righteous civilizations, and its slopes wept with the blood of hundreds of thousands of mutilated victims. This hallowed hill continues to receive victims today, but now the haughty combatants are those Delbert W. Curtis styles "Book of Mormon geography scholars." Curtis's *Christ in North America* is the most recent attempt to secure this eminence. Reacting to John L. Sorenson's view of two Cumorahs printed in the *Ensign* in 1984, Curtis addresses the questions of (1) whether there are two Cumorahs or just one, and (2) where the final Nephite and Jaredite battles really occurred. He argues for a limited geography in the area of Lake Ontario and Lake Erie and is convinced that there is only one Cumorah. "All the landmarks in the area prove the Hill Cumorah in New York is the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon" (Jacket Summary).

According to Curtis, the erroneous idea of two Cumorahs arose from the theoretical necessity of trying to place Book of Mormon lands in Mesoamerica. "For Book of Mormon geography scholars to admit that the hill in New York which we call Cumorah is the hill which the Book of Mormon named Ramah and Cumorah would leave them without foundation for their theories" (p. 6). Curtis's book attempts to leave all other proposed Book of Mormon geographies without foundation. His is a clear challenge. It is as if, as of old, epistles have been exchanged and champions enjoined to meet for a final struggle for Cumorah. Curtis's view allows no alternatives. In this review I consider Curtis's challenge to limited Mesoamerican geographies and his promotion of a limited Great Lakes geography.

Critical evaluation of *Christ in North America* presents several novel challenges that require explanation before I proceed. Parts of *Christ in North America* display pseudoscholarship at its worst, but these are covered in a self-protective cloak of personal testimony. These testimonies complicate review of this book, as any critique of the arguments proposed in *Christ in North America* can be viewed, however unfairly, as an assault upon Curtis's honesty, sincerity, or spirituality. Curtis bears frequent and fervent testimony concerning the divinity of the Book of Mormon throughout his book; I do not doubt his testimony nor question the sincerity of his witness. He also testifies that several landmarks in the Great Lakes region are those mentioned in the Book of Mormon and that these identifications were spiritually confirmed to him. These claims are a different matter. I do not doubt that Curtis sincerely believes his claims, but his beliefs are not binding on anyone else. It is poor practice to accept lay testimony as fact, and I will not do so here. The entire history of the Church, and my personal experience with numerous peoples' personal witnesses concerning the location of the Nephite repository of gold plates, suggests that we should treat such diverse and contradictory testimonies with extreme caution. Here, I do not consider the evidence of personal testimony as relevant to scholarly argument.

Curtis proposes four major and many ancillary arguments to make his case for a New York battleground. I consider each of his principal arguments in the following sections. Each of the following sections addresses fundamental claims of Curtis's thesis. I ignore minor claims and difficulties as they would merit consideration only if the major propositions are found to be logically consistent and convincing.

Unstringing the Bow

Joseph Smith once told a simple story of a hunter and his bow to some Church members who questioned Joseph's undignified roughhousing with the boys.¹ The gist of the story was that a hunter would not keep his bow strung at all times because it would

¹ See Hyrum L. Andrus, *Joseph Smith, the Man and the Seer* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1973), 16.

lose its spring; in like manner, a prophet did not always act as such because he would become ineffective if he did so. Not everything a prophet says is to be taken as scripture. The question of what early statements concerning the Book of Mormon are prophetic utterances lies at the heart of the question of Book of Mormon lands.

The first issue confronting anyone interested in constructing a geography of Book of Mormon lands is to decide the textual corpus that should be considered. Should one be limited to the Book of Mormon, or should one also consider the statements of General Authorities of the Church? As Curtis points out, this depends on whether the statements of modern apostles represent personal opinion or the word of the Lord.

This is another cause for confusion when Book of Mormon geography scholars locate a site where they would like the Nephites placed they then search the secular history of the church [*sic*] looking for a statement by a General Authority which places the Nephites where they would like them placed. Those scholars disregard what is written in the Standard Works that may present different facts. It must be remembered that everything a General Authority says is not inspired, if what is said or written is not in tune with the Standard Works. It is opinion and nothing more. (p. 7)

This is indeed sterling advice, but in this book it seems to be more a blueprint for selecting quotes than an effective caution. Curtis's advertisement for the book suggests that he discounts most General Authority statements: "For 150 years LDS Scholars, even General Authorities, have made the geography of the Book of Mormon a mystery."² Curtis dismisses statements by John Taylor, Frederick G. Williams, Orson Pratt, and Ezra Taft Benson that do not fit his theory. On the other hand, he accepts statements from Milton R. Hunter, Brigham Young, Joseph Fielding Smith, Ezra Taft Benson, and Mark E. Peterson that he thinks support the one-Cumorah-in-New York theory. The selection process for the evidence may leave many readers confused. I agree with Curtis in

² *Daily Universe*, 14 September 1993, Personals, 6.

principle but not in practice. I think he should have avoided all statements by General Authorities and spent more time analyzing statements from the Book of Mormon. As Sorenson demonstrates in his recent source book of Book of Mormon geographies, none of the statements of General Authorities should be considered as evidence, especially when they contradict the text of the Book of Mormon.³

In his selection of quotes from General Authorities, Curtis is in a very difficult position because all of the early statements dealt with a pan-American geography that included North, Central, and South America or could be read as evidence for a limited Mesoamerica/Central America geography.⁴ Curtis is advocating a limited Great Lakes geography and must thus discount the early all-of-America statements as well as any speculation that Book of Mormon lands were outside the modern boundaries of the United States of America. Therefore, he discounts all statements about Book of Mormon lands except those that bolster his theory of a New York Cumorah/Ramah; he should probably have disregarded these also. The only evidence that Curtis can accept is for the continental United States of America. Most of these statements deal with the location of the promised land mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

¿Es Ud. Norte Americano?

I first heard of Curtis's argument in 1989 when he came by my house and presented me with a copy of his pamphlet "The LAND of THE NEPHITES."⁵ I was surprised that anyone could seriously argue for a limited Great Lakes geography, but I was intrigued with his argument concerning the promised land. To my knowledge, no one had used this particular approach to Book of Mormon geography. I was eager to read *Christ in North America* so I could evaluate his argument in its most thorough and developed form.

³ John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, UT: F.A.R.M.S., 1990), Appendix A.

⁴ See Sorenson, *Source Book*.

⁵ Curtis, *The Land of the Nephites* (American Fork, UT: Delbert W. Curtis, 1988).

Unfortunately, the bulk of Curtis's argument appears to rest on a primal error that we would not expect from a seventh-grade student. He appears misinformed about the geographic extent of North America and confuses it with the continental United States. This reminds me of a frequent interchange I have with taxi drivers in Mexico City. I am invariably asked, "*¿Es ud. norte americano?*" I explain that I am indeed North American but so are they, as North America includes Mexico. Curtis does not think that Mexico (or Canada) is part of the "promised land" mentioned in the Book of Mormon. His claim on this matter deserves lengthy citation as it presents the pivotal evidence as well as his method of argument.

Book of Mormon geography scholars have stated, "Joseph Smith said that both North and South America are the land of Zion." Very few of them have read the statement which Joseph made, or they would know that is not what he said or what he meant:

"The whole of America is the land of Zion itself from the north to the south, and it is described by the prophets, who declare that it is the Zion where the mountain of the Lord should be, and that it should be in the center of the land."⁶

Notice that all references to America and Zion are singular; the whole of America, and Zion itself should be in the center of the land. How is it possible for anyone to read that statement and not understand that Joseph was saying that Zion is from Mexico on the south to Canada on the north? Most importantly, "the prophets described it."

"But in the last days it shall come to pass that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the tops of the mountains and it

⁶ *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1938), 362.

shall be exalted above the hills, and the people shall flow unto it. And many nations shall come, and say, come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his path; for the law shall go forth of Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem” (Micah 4:1–2; Isaiah 2:2–3; 2 Nephi 12:2–3).

“I established the Constitution of this land by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose.” (D&C 101:80)

How better can we describe the United States of America than the words of Micah? (p. 29)

The *modus operandi* of this book is clearly evident in this brief argument. Curtis (1) first attributes an unreferenced quote to a vague group of benighted Book of Mormon geography scholars, (2) chides them for ignorance or misunderstanding of basic scriptures and prophetic pronouncements, (3) asserts that the interpretation of the text in question supports his views, and (4) then cites text and scriptures that do not appear to support his argument. After the long citations, Curtis (5) repeats his assertion and considers the case closed. I find this style of exposition annoying and arrogant. Curtis claims to have an inside track on truth and presents all his arguments as counterarguments to supposed statements made by others. But these other scholars are never cited, nor is it clear that Curtis has read them with anything but disdain.

The central proposition of *Christ in North America* is that the United States of America is the promised land mentioned in the scriptures. Anyone with over a month's experience in the Church knows that interpretation of scriptures is tricky business and that differences of opinion are rarely resolved, especially when it concerns what someone “meant.” The existence of Curtis's book is clear evidence that the scriptures for Zion and the land of promise can be read in a narrow sense. The question, however, is whether they should be. The citation from Joseph Smith, as I understand it, appears to include “the whole of America.” That

this is “singular” only appears to weaken Curtis’s reading that “Zion is from Mexico on the south to Canada on the north.” Curtis appears to read the statement to mean that the land of Zion is in the center of the land; I think “center” refers to “the mountain of the Lord” as being in the center of the land. In any event, why would anyone want to read this statement so narrowly? The obvious suspicion is that it is the only reading that will support Curtis’s geography.

The same is true of the “Zion” scriptures. These appear to mention a Zion in “the tops of the mountains,” a reference that many have considered as an accurate description of the Salt Lake City intermountain region. It would be a poor description indeed for the Great Lakes area.

Given the importance of the prophecies of the promised land and Zion for his argument, it is surprising that Curtis does not attempt to abstract and list systematically all the characteristics of this land. The reader is presented with supposed quotations from the opposition, Curtis’s counterclaims, long citations of scripture, and a final “I-told-you-so” reassertion that the United States of America is the promised land, and Mexico, Canada, and Central and South America are excluded. This strains the interpretation at several points, but Curtis is up to the task.

The main text for Curtis’s argument, which he cites in full, is 1 Nephi 13. Given his narrow reading of the promised land, I was curious to see how he would treat the “Columbus” prophecy. If all these verses refer to the United States of America, how can Columbus be said to have discovered the promised land? Maybe the scripture referred to John Cabot or even John Smith. Curtis sticks to the Columbus interpretation of Nephi’s vision. A close look at some of these verses will allow a concrete evaluation of Curtis’s claims. To avoid the appearance of paraphrasing the text to suit my own argument, I present a portion of 1 Nephi 13 in full, starting with verse 12, and then consider Curtis’s claims concerning it.

And I looked and beheld a man among the Gentiles,
who was separated from the seed of my brethren by the
many waters; and I beheld the Spirit of God, that it came
down and wrought upon the man; and he went forth upon

the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land.

And it came to pass that I beheld the Spirit of God, that it wrought upon other Gentiles; and they went forth out of captivity, upon the many waters.

And it came to pass that I beheld many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise; and I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren; and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.

And I beheld the Spirit of the Lord, that it was upon the Gentiles; and they did prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance; and I beheld that they were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful, like unto my people before they were slain.

And it came to pass that I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles who had gone forth out of captivity did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them.

And I beheld that their mother Gentiles were gathered together upon the waters, and upon the land also, to battle against them.

And I beheld that the power of God was with them, and also that the wrath of God was upon all those that were gathered together against them to battle.

And I, Nephi, beheld that the Gentiles that had gone out of captivity were delivered by the power of God out of the hands of all other nations. (1 Nephi 13:12–19)

Curtis has as his working hypothesis that Nephi's vision "seems to be in order, time-wise" (p. 62). Preceding verses (1 Nephi 13:1–11) describe the Gentile nations and the Lamanites before the coming of Columbus. Curtis follows the popular interpretation that verse 12 refers to Christopher Columbus, but with a twist.

Columbus didn't actually come to North America, but he did start the flow of those seeking freedom from oppression, hunger, and bigotry, even though it was over 300 years before the next verse in the book of Nephi

began to be fulfilled. With the coming of Columbus, the Lord started to prepare the way. (p. 63)

Three hundred years? What is the justification for positing such a hiatus in Nephi's vision? I have always read verse 14 as an accurate portrayal of the Spanish Conquest of the New World. If verse 12 refers to Columbus, then perhaps verse 14 refers to Hernán Cortés. What arguments does Curtis offer to counter such a simple explanation of these verses? His arguments vary from very broad to very narrow interpretations of the text, presumably as it suits his purposes. As already noted, Curtis gives a general interpretation of the "Columbus" verse without having to admit that Columbus actually discovered the land of promise. On the other hand, Curtis appears to have a very narrow (and bordering on racist) interpretation of the Gentiles.

Verses 13 and 14 state that "many multitudes of Gentiles" "went forth out of captivity" to the land of promise and that the seed of Nephi's brethren "were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten." These Gentiles "were white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful" like unto the Nephites before they were slain. From these clues, Curtis infers that these verses cannot be talking about Mesoamerica or Central America but refer to the United States of America. The basic claims of his argument are as follows:

1. The Mayas of Mexico and Central America encountered by the Spanish were an educated people and do not fit Mormon's description of the Lamanites who survived the Nephite holocaust. Mormon prophesied:

"And that the seed of this people may more fully believe his gospel, which shall go forth unto them from the Gentiles; for this people shall be scattered, and shall become a dark, a filthy, and a loathsome people, beyond the description of that which ever hath been amongst us, yea, even that which hath been among the Lamanites, and this because of their unbelief and idolatry." (Mormon 5:15)

"The differences in the two people should be easy to see. In Central America was a united and educated people; in North

America was a people described in the Book of Mormon as a people full of all manner of wickedness” (p. 65).

2. Verse 13 states that the Gentiles came forth out of captivity. “The captivity mentioned is the hold that great and abominable church held over the people of the nations of the Gentiles. . . . The people of Central America were not freed from the great and abominable church.” (pp. 65–66).

3. Curtis also sees that the scourges that came upon the seed of the Nephites are additional evidence of a setting in the United States of America.

“And I beheld the wrath of God, that it was upon the seed of my brethren” (verse 14). The Gentiles brought with them diseases which destroyed many of the Lamanites. This was true all over the Americas. However, the next sentence narrows the location: “and they were scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten.” In all parts of the Americas the Lamanites were conquered and enslaved, but they were not scattered and smitten like they were on the land that became the United States of America. (p. 66)

As we look at the two Americas, even today a great difference is evident; The Lamanites are still looked on as lower-class people in the United States of America, and only now are beginning to break out and show their true potential. In Mesoamerica, the people are almost all Lamanites and look to the U.S.A. as the land of promise, and most are still under the influence of that great and abominable church. The Gentiles did not possess the lands of Central America, and while it is true that the Lamanites were treated badly over all of the Americas, it was only the United States which became a nation of Gentiles. (pp. 67–68)

4. “The ‘Gentiles’ which came to this land were ‘white’ races of Europe: the English, French, German, Dutch, Swedish, and later the Irish by the thousands” (p. 68). Curtis calculates that from 1819 to December 1855, 4,212,624 immigrants came to the United States. “Where else on the Americas can be found such an influx of white races from Europe, and where, on all of the

Americas other than North America, can be found such a flow of the 'fair and beautiful' people?" (p. 69).

5. The Gentiles that came to the land of promise "did humble themselves before the Lord; and the power of the Lord was with them" (1 Nephi 13:16). Following Mark E. Peterson's interpretation in *The Great Prologue*,⁷ Curtis interprets this verse as those who came to the Americas seeking religious freedom rather than gold. According to Curtis, this disqualifies Mexico and lands southward but fits our view of the United States of America.

6. Verse 20 mentions the coming forth of the Bible among the Gentile nations. This does not appear to have occurred in Latin America.

The padres carried the book into Central America. However, the book was not had among the people; only the men of the church had a Bible and could read the Bible. The situation was much the same in Canada. . . . On the land that became the United States of America. . . . All who wanted a Bible could have one, and all were encouraged to read it. (p. 72)

7. Many other passages also proclaim that the land which became the USA is that land choice above all other lands (2 Nephi 10:10–19).

The vision is seen by Jacob and reviewed once more; Jacob adds: ". . . there shall be no kings upon the land . . ." (verse 11). "For I, the Lord of Heaven shall be their king" (verse 14). No part of the Americas fill [*sic*] all the particulars of this great vision but the land which became the United States of America. (p. 75)

Many of Curtis's preceding claims sound quite reasonable, but others appear stretched and based upon inadequate information. The whole argument is presented as a choice between the USA and other parts of the Americas. Is this an appropriate dichotomy, and do the scriptures support such a view? In my mind, some of the verses dealing with the promised land appear to fit better in Latin America and others appear to fit better the

⁷ Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1974.

history of the USA. It is worth stressing that if one interprets the scriptures broadly to encompass all of the Americas (or even all of North America), the problem disappears and all of the verses are easily reconciled. The problems arising from forcing all of the verses into commentary on the USA suggest that such an interpretation may not be the best one. A closer look at each individual claim highlights several difficulties.

Claim 1. Curtis's claim that the Indians of Mexico and Central America were too educated or too civilized to qualify as Lamanite descendants is based upon gross ignorance of what the Spanish actually encountered in the New World. One cannot read accounts of Aztec human sacrifice and priestcraft and give any credence to the view Curtis advocates in his book.

Claim 2. Curtis's claim that the peoples of Mexico and Central America were not freed from the captivity of the great and abominable church appears exceptionally weak and requires a narrow interpretation of this church such as published in the first edition of *Mormon Doctrine*. If the great and abominable church represents all those that are not the true church of Christ rather than just the Catholic Church, then Curtis's claim on this score is unacceptable.

Claim 3. Curtis makes several related claims about the scattering of Nephi's "seed" and the promised land that do not hold up well. The bulk of his argument concerns the meaning of "scattered." Does this refer to all the people in the promised land, individual groups of people, or individuals? And is a minimal distance of displacement necessary before we can claim they were "scattered" rather than just conquered and enslaved? For me, this is one of the most outrageous claims that Curtis makes in his book. Although I do not have general estimates before me (precise estimates are not possible), it is quite probable that more Indians died in Latin America during the first 30 years of Spanish contact there than were living in what was the continental USA. Many millions died in Mexico and Central America, and many thousands were displaced.

Curtis concedes that the Indians of Mexico and Central America are Lamanites and that they look toward the USA as the promised land. This cute argument is merely a semantic illusion that confuses some modern peoples' views of the land of

economic opportunity, or the “promised land,” with the Book of Mormon “land of promise.” Part of this argument is that Latin America is still under the sway of the great and abominable church. This argument is hard to take under any interpretation of Satan’s church. It is quite probable, for example, that the relative percentage of Mormons in Mexico and most of the rest of Latin America is greater than the relative percentage in the USA. In neither case is the LDS Church dominant. I would contend that the good ole USA is under the sway of the great and abominable church even now, and to an equal or even greater degree than is Latin America. Curtis’s final claim is that the USA is a nation of Gentiles and the rest of the Americas are not. I consider this claim below.

Claim 4. Many of Curtis’s arguments appear to derive from a narrow interpretation of the term “gentile.” His claims on this score amount to blatant racism or gross ignorance, or both. True, the Book of Mormon describes the Gentiles as “white, and exceedingly fair and beautiful, like unto my people before they were slain” (1 Nephi 13:15). Use of this language is not offensive, but to attribute these attributes solely to the immigrants of England, France, Holland, Germany, Sweden, and Ireland is another matter. One gets the distinct impression that Curtis has never seen a Spaniard nor looked up any pictures. They are fairer than he or I. But surely the term “gentile” goes beyond relative evaluations of the whiteness of one’s skin or the beauty of one’s visage.

Moroni’s use of “gentile” in his preface to the Book of Mormon indicates that the term includes all who are not Jews (or the House of Israel); the Spanish, Portuguese, and Italians would seem to qualify under this broad interpretation. Curtis’s limited interpretation of “gentile” runs counter to some of his own arguments. He is willing to admit that 1 Nephi 13:12 refers to Columbus. It should be recalled that Columbus was “a man among the Gentiles.” This would seem to indicate that people in Spain (or Italy) could be considered gentiles. Following this narrow interpretation of “gentile” for the next several verses of Nephi’s vision, one could easily argue that Spain was included in the nations of the gentiles and that the multitudes of gentiles that came to the land of promise included Spaniards. I think such an

interpretation does less violence to the scripture than Curtis's interpretation.

Claim 5. Curtis's claim about humble gentiles is difficult to evaluate. What does it mean that the "gentiles did humble themselves before the Lord" (1 Nephi 13:19)? Does it refer to the initial, purported motives for colonization, as claimed by Curtis? Or does it refer to basic life-style, religiosity, and humility of a people? I would welcome the evidence that the early inhabitants of the USA were more humble, religious, etc. than their contemporaneous neighbors in Canada or Mexico. I think we need to be extremely careful in accepting ethnocentric histories of our country versus those of others. I think the counterclaim that the USA is the most arrogant nation in the hemisphere could be more easily demonstrated with historic documentation. In the final analysis, however, it is foolish to put so much analytical weight on a vague scriptural pronouncement of relative humility. The inherent comparison in this scripture, I think, refers to the "mother nations" of the gentile nations of the promised land rather than to Canada, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America.

Claim 6. Curtis's argument about the Bible appears to be his most concrete case, but is it? The Spanish in Mexico, Central America, and South America, for example, had been preaching from the Bible to the natives for about a century before the English first settled in the New World. Could this be a fulfillment of Nephi's vision that a book "was carried forth among them" (1 Nephi 13:20)? I think it can. If one is not worried about pedagogical methods for "spreading" the Bible, it could easily be said that the Spanish brought "Christianity" to more natives than did any other Gentile nation. Indeed, the people of the USA appear to have done almost nothing to take the Bible to the Indians.

Claim 7. The claim concerning kings appears to be heavy on rhetoric and thin on substance. We are told that there were to be no kings in the land of promise. Does this somehow signal the USA over Mexico, Canada, and the rest of the Americas? I think not. If the original USA colonies were under the hegemony of a king, then one must allow the same condition to the rest of the Americas. If the meaning of the verse concerns breaking the yoke of distant kings, then the question becomes one of relative timing.

I do not think we can put too much weight on Curtis's interpretation of this verse.

The preceding consideration of Curtis's claims has perhaps given them more credence than they deserve. I find no convincing evidence for believing his claim that the land of promise is the USA and that Canada and Mexico are excluded. One fundamental problem with the argument for a land of promise as the USA is that it confounds a "land" with a "political entity." I can easily conceive of "land" meaning a piece of real estate of unknown size, but I have difficulty in assuming *a priori* that it refers to a political territory. I do not consider the argument worth making in detail, but I think the most parsimonious view of the land of promise is that it included "the whole of America . . . from the north to the south"⁸ and not just the United States of America. There is no evidence in *Christ in North America* that Curtis has researched recent statements by General Authorities about Latin America. I think it would be instructive to see what the brethren have told the Saints in Latin America about the location and extent of the land of Zion.

Ramah by Any Other Name

Commenting on the final battle of the Jaredites, Moroni informs us that the hill Ramah is the same hill where his father "Mormon did hide up the records unto the Lord" (Ether 15:11), or the hill Cumorah (see Mormon 6:6). For the first 22 years of my life I thought the location of Cumorah was well-known, as Joseph Smith received the plates from Moroni at that spot. My father occasionally told us stories about the New York Cumorah that he had heard while serving a mission there during World War II. I was told of tremendous earthworks and defensive trenches encountered by the earliest settlers in Palmyra, and of large deposits of metal weapons. I also heard of a vision wherein his mission president saw a red-headed Moroni lamenting over the destruction of his people. These were moving images in my youth. As with Curtis, I was extremely offended when I first heard the two-Cumorah theory, and I reacted strongly against it.

⁸ Smith, *Teachings*, 362.

Until I heard the two-Cumorah theory after returning from my mission, I had no idea that the location of Cumorah was even a question or that the location of Book of Mormon lands was a topic of research. My initial reaction was to take offense and to argue the point with my roommate who was taking a class in Book of Mormon archaeology from M. Wells Jakeman. In the course of our arguments, it soon dawned on me that I had unthinkingly accepted a traditional view of the matter and had never seriously looked at the statements from the Book of Mormon. The internal evidence from the Book of Mormon eventually convinced me that I had been naive in accepting the traditional view and that there must be two hills called Cumorah: that of the Book of Mormon and one in New York.

The internal evidence from the Book of Mormon for Cumorah is most clearly presented by David Palmer in his excellent book, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico*.⁹ It is noteworthy that this book is not cited by Curtis, nor are its arguments for the internal evidence for the hill Cumorah considered. This is not polite or serious scholarship. The location of the hill Cumorah is the primary strut in Curtis's argument for Book of Mormon lands, yet he presents no analysis of the statements from the Book of Mormon which reveal features of this hill. He *assumes* that the New York Cumorah and that mentioned in the Book of Mormon are one and the same. All his arguments for the configuration of Book of Mormon lands (see next section) follow from the assumption that the hill Cumorah is the one known Book of Mormon location in the New World.

Setting aside all of the claims of the proponents of the Mesoamerica theories, let us examine the one spot in all the Book of Mormon which is identified without question, or should be without question, as the Hill Cumorah. It is named specifically in the Book of Mormon as the burial spot of the plates, as well as being the place where Joseph Smith received them. It was also near the city of Zarahemla. (p. 87)

⁹ Bountiful, UT: Horizon Publishers, 1981.

The meager evidence adduced to support this claim come from the “traditional” view and a few early statements of dubious origin. Curtis’s primary text is the Oliver Cowdery story of the Nephite records repository, as related by Brigham Young many years later. Until now, it has been quite easy to ignore this story as being devoid of specific content. But in light of its place in Curtis’s argument I cite it here and consider it briefly.

On June 17, 1877, Brigham Young addressed the Saints in Farmington, Utah, on the occasion of organizing a stake there. The primary focus of the first part of his discourse was to warn the Saints against seeking after money and precious metals. As part of this message he conveyed the following story:

Oliver Cowdery went with the Prophet Joseph when he deposited these plates. Joseph did not translate all of the plates; there was a portion of them sealed, which you can learn from the Book of Doctrine and Covenants. 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.¹⁰

If we accept this story at face value, it would seem to indicate that the hill Cumorah in New York is indeed the one in which Mormon deposited all of the plates. There is no indication in this story that Joseph and Oliver were carried away in vision, rather, the circumstances appear quite pedestrian—a walk to the hill with the plates to return them to the angel. This story also indicates that at least two visits were involved and that other people were familiar with this story.

Heber C. Kimball alluded to a slightly different version of the story with the significant difference that a vision experience is mentioned.

Brother Mills mentioned in his song, that crossing the Plains with hand-carts was one of the greatest events that ever transpired in this Church. I will admit that it is an important event, successfully testing another method for gathering Israel, but its importance is small in comparison with the visitation of the angel of God to the Prophet Joseph, and with the reception of the sacred records from the hand of Moroni at the hill Cumorah.

How does it compare with the vision that Joseph and others had, when they went into a cave in the hill Cumorah, and saw more records than ten men could carry? There were books piled up on tables, book upon book. Those records this people will yet have, if they accept of the Book of Mormon and observe its precepts, and keep the commandments.¹¹

Now, it makes a great deal of difference whether we are dealing with a vision of a record repository or with a less miraculous event. The two statements cited above suggest that the matter will remain ambiguous until we receive further revelation on the matter. Given this uncertainty, it seems unfortunate to place so much emphasis on these cave stories one way or the other.

¹⁰ *Journal of Discourses* 19:38.

¹¹ *Journal of Discourses* 4:105.

Contrary to some claims I have heard, the remainder of Brigham Young's discourse in Farmington that day gives no indication that this was one tall tale among many that he fabricated for the occasion. The direct historical background to this story, and the accuracy of the version recorded in the *Journal of Discourses* (or Brigham's memory of Oliver's account), are both important questions but are beyond my abilities to address. The story should raise a few questions for most Mormons, however, because it does not appear to conform to other information we have about the plates. Joseph Smith's official history indicates that the plates were returned to Moroni in a different manner than indicated in "Oliver's story."

I soon found out the reason why I had received such strict charges to keep them safe, and why it was that the messenger had said that when I had done what was required at my hand, *he would call for them*. For no sooner was it known that I had them, than the most strenuous exertions were used to get them from me. Every stratagem that could be invented was resorted to for that purpose. The persecution became more bitter and severe than before, and multitudes were on the alert continually to get them from me if possible. But by the wisdom of God, they remained safe in my hands until I had accomplished by them what was required at my hand. When, according to arrangements, *the messenger called for them, I delivered them up to him*; and he has them in his charge until this day, being the second day of May, one thousand eight hundred and thirty-eight.¹²

Of course, this account can be taken as an allusion to a return trip to Cumorah to deliver the plates as Brigham Young and Heber C. Kimball mentioned, but it can also be read that Moroni visited Joseph and took the plates back.

I would further suggest that the circumstances surrounding the vision given to the Three Witnesses, their stories of the experience, and Joseph's relief that others had seen these things, do not fit Brigham's version of Oliver Cowdery's story about returning the

¹² Joseph Smith—History 1:60

plates to an angel at the hill Cumorah, or of paying a return visit. Moreover, Oliver's and Joseph's awkward silence about this event certainly cannot be attributed to hesitancy about testifying of angels, gold plates, and the like. There are issues of the timing of events and the reasons for silence here that I am not competent to address. Certainly this story deserves more analysis in its historic context and more comparison to other claims we have for events surrounding the plates. Parts of the story do not square with other, more reliable information. Therefore, it would seem poor procedure to take the story "at face value" as certain evidence that Mormon's Cumorah was in New York.

Curtis has proposed a procedure for dealing with conflicting claims from the early brethren. He argues that one give precedence to the standard works. What does the Book of Mormon tell us about the location of Cumorah? Palmer reviews the detailed evidence for the hill that indicates that the small hill in New York is an unlikely candidate. More convincing evidence for the location of Mormon's Cumorah/Ramah comes from a relative geography of natural features. The Book of Mormon clearly indicates that the hill Cumorah was (1) near a narrow neck of land in a land northward and (2) close to the borders of an East sea. These minimal and incontrovertible geographic relationships are not met by the hill near Palmyra, despite Curtis's claims to the contrary.

One if by Land, Two if by Sea

The major clue to the location and extent of Book of Mormon lands is the identification of the "seas" mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Curtis argues that some of the Great Lakes were the seas referred to rather than the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, as presumed by most scholars. This is certainly a plausible hypothesis, but does it hold water?

The Book of Mormon is full of geographic details, but the most significant are those that describe relationships among various features, and from different points of reference. The most important of these concern the lands northward and southward, a narrow neck of land between them, the River Sidon, the location of wildernesses, and the locations of uplands and lowlands. In a previous evaluation of a Book of Mormon geography, I proposed

a simple list of ten significant geographic relationships that are clearly described in the Book of Mormon and which can be used to evaluate any proposed geography.¹³ I draw on information summarized there for the following discussion.

The major criterion for evaluating a geography is how well it can account for the complexity of detail in the Book of Mormon without recourse to special assumptions. The geography described by Sorenson, for example, that Curtis reacts against, can account for all of the unambiguous details of the Book of Mormon by making only one special assumption; the assumption is that the hill Cumorah in New York is *not* the one mentioned in the Book of Mormon.¹⁴ Curtis's geography makes the opposite assumption: that the hill Cumorah in New York *is* the Cumorah/Ramah mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Does this assumption allow Curtis to make sense of the geographic detail in the Book of Mormon in a parsimonious manner?

If the principal test of a Book of Mormon geography is its explanatory power without recourse to special assumptions, we must conclude that Curtis's geography is an unmitigated disaster. In giving up the possibility of two Cumorahs he is forced to argue for (1) two lands of Nephi (p. 111), (2) two lands northward (various maps), (3) two lands southward (ibid.), (4) many lands of desolation (p. 117), (5) a hill Cumorah that is south of the East Sea and east of the narrow neck of land (various maps), (6) a River Sidon that is only 40 miles long (p. 127), and (7) an East Sea that is north of a West Sea and both to the east of a North Sea and a South Sea (p. 108). This is a surprising amount of special assumptions given the limited geographical features that Curtis considers in his study. A detailed evaluation of these geographic details is beyond my purpose here. I will consider only a few claims and point to some of the principal difficulties with the geography.

It is appropriate that we begin at Cumorah as does Curtis. Secure knowledge that the hill in New York is indeed the one mentioned in the Book of Mormon allows Curtis to read the text

¹³ Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20-70.

¹⁴ Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S.), 1985.

in a creative manner. Any ambiguities in the text are hammered into conformity to fit this fact. I think the Book of Mormon clearly describes a small land that has an East sea and a West sea, a land northward connected by a narrow neck to a land southward, and a major river in the land southward that runs northward. The hill Cumorah is described as in the land northward, north of the narrow neck, and near the East sea. Curtis's hill Cumorah, in contrast, is located to the east of his narrow neck of land, and to the east of the River Sidon and Zarahemla, and south of the East Sea. To make these descriptions work, Curtis has had to fabricate a dual geography that has at least two of everything. This is too much special pleading.

For most proponents of Book of Mormon geographies, the major clues in the text concern the narrow neck of land, the East and West seas, and the River Sidon. The narrow neck of land is the pivotal geographic feature in the geography described by Mormon, as this is the point where the East and West seas come closest together and is the land that connects the land northward with the land southward. In Curtis's geography, the narrow neck of land is located between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. It connects "Alma's Land Northward" east of the narrow neck to the "Land Southward" and the "Land of Nephi," located directly to the west. Clearly, directional labels lose all significance in this geography. I do not consider Curtis's creative semantics a plausible clarification of the text.

A final example should suffice as an indicator of the plausibility of Curtis's limited Great Lakes Book of Mormon geography. He identifies the River Sidon as the Niagara River. This 40-mile-long river connects Lake Ontario with Lake Erie. There is no reasonable way in which the Book of Mormon references to the River Sidon can be crammed into a 40-mile stretch of river between two seas.¹⁵ At a very minimum, the Book of Mormon describes the city of Manti near the headwaters of the Sidon, the city of Zarahemla at least three or four days or more downstream, and the city of Sidom about the same distance downstream from Zarahemla. We are not told which sea the river

¹⁵ See John L. and Janet F. Hilton's "A Correlation of the Sidon River and the Lands of Manti and Zarahemla with the Southern End of the Rio Grijalva (San Miguel)," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1 (Fall 1992): 142-62.

runs into, but it is quite clear that the mouth is a considerable distance from Sidom. It is simply absurd to think that a 40-mile river can be the River Sidom.

Curtis's reconstruction of Book of Mormon lands defies the laws of logic and distorts the text, as I understand it, beyond recognition. It is an interesting document to puzzle over for those who enjoy issues in the philosophy of science and textual criticism but is best avoided by those seeking a clear description of Book of Mormon lands. It is full of inconsistencies and contradictions. The principal contradiction is that it violates Curtis's discussion of the land of promise as the United States of America. More than half of his proposed geography is in present day Canada. It is hard to imagine how such an oversight could have occurred.

It Never Rains in Southern California

As Curtis notes, one of the issues raised by those advocating Mesoamerica geographies concerns the description of weather. If the hill in New York is Cumorah/Ramah, why is there no mention of snow, ice, or the bitter cold? Curtis addresses this issue nearly head-on.

I was told, "If the Nephites lived near the Hill Cumorah, they would have said something about the weather." Picking up a Book of Mormon, it fell open to Helaman 5. Reading along, the word "hail" in verse 12 caught my eye. Helaman was teaching his sons a lesson. Hail must have been common or the lesson would have had no meaning.

I went to the phone and called the U.S. Weather Information and asked, "Where does it hail?"

"What are you talking about?" he asked.

"This is the U.S. Weather Information office?"

"Yes," he replied.

"Can you tell me where it normally hails at sea level?"

"I will need to call you back," he remarked.

A few minutes later the phone rang. "It can hail almost anywhere," he spoke.

"I understand, but normally at sea level?" I asked.

“Between the 30th and the 60th degrees of latitude. Below the 30th it melts before it hits the ground; above the 60th it is too cold to form,” he said.

This put Helaman a long way from Mesoamerica, yet the Hill Cumorah is right in the middle of the hail belt, and not far above sea level. That area can also be reached from the Atlantic Ocean in a sailboat. (p. 10)

It is comforting to know that the U.S. Weather Information service supports Curtis’s designation of the hill Cumorah! That this dialogue is presented as serious evidence for the location of Book of Mormon lands speaks volumes for *Christ in North America*. Nonetheless, given the denunciation of a limited Mesoamerica geography based upon this weather information, we should accord it some attention.

Curtis slips two important assumptions almost unnoticed into this argument, at the same time avoiding the real “weather” issue. First, he claims that Helaman was teaching a lesson; therefore, “Hail must have been common or the lesson would have had no meaning.” This is clearly too strong a claim. But if it were true, would it not make more sense to describe weather that was even more common than hail in this area, such as snow? The second assumption comes out in his conversation with the weatherman. Why are we only interested in hail at sea level? What is the basis of this qualification?

I think it would be more accurate to claim that for Helaman’s lesson to have impact, it was only necessary that his children know of hail storms and their effects, not that they be common. And we certainly have no basis for only considering hail at sea level. Helaman refers to a mighty storm and says that we must build our foundation on the rock of our redeemer lest we be blown away when the devil “shall send forth his mighty winds, yea, his shafts in the whirlwind, yea, when all his hail and his mighty storm shall beat upon you.” (Helaman 5:12; cf. Alma 26:6). The Book of Mormon refers to mighty winds, some hail and rain, but no snow. I have experienced all of this weather on numerous occasions while living in southern Mexico. Therefore, I consider Curtis’s argument for excluding this area from consideration on the basis of the sea-level “hail belt” to be unacceptable. Weather patterns and related aspects of geography certainly should be considered

in delimiting Book of Mormon lands. Sorenson's *Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* is still the best word on the subject. All of the details of physical geography mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and those that can be inferred, fit more comfortably into a Mesoamerican setting than a New York setting. In this regard, what is not mentioned or alluded to requires explanation if the Book of Mormon writers lived in New York. I cannot imagine Moroni in a cave in New York Cumorah working through the winter scratching out the history of the Jaredites on gold plates. Rather than lamenting his weakness in expression (Ether 12:25), Moroni should have complained of numb fingers, freezing cold plates, and inability to hold his stylus.

No Evidence Is the Best Evidence

Curtis devotes 101 pages to a discussion of "artifacts," meaning archaeological evidences for the ancient inhabitants of New York. His initial arguments merit citation here.

While seeking knowledge from Book of Mormon geography scholars, the comment was often heard, "But there are no artifacts up there."

The lack of impressive monuments, temples and other artifacts in North America actually gives us more evidence that the ones who kept the records from which the Book of Mormon was translated must have lived in North America [*sic*] rather than in Mesoamerica. The Lamanites destroyed all who wouldn't deny the Christ (Moroni 1:1-2). This would have left no one around in A.D. 400 to build those great mounds and temples like the ones found in Mesoamerica. Even if a powerful leader had managed to bring all of the people under his rule, and had brought peace to the people, it would have been four or five generations before there would have been enough people to even start one of those great pyramids.

At the time Moroni finished his father's record, he was surrounded by a people who had degenerated into blood-thirsty and probably, illiterate savages (Mormon 6:6, 8:8). (p. 150)

When it comes to questions of "Just what type of artifacts should we be looking for in the area covered by the Book of Mormon?" (*ibid.*), scholars have been treated to some of the most artful dodges on record. Curtis is asking profound questions here and has several solid ideas worth considering, as well as his own artful dodges. It is a particularly useful ploy to suggest that no evidence is the best evidence. Curtis may be correct about the conditions at A.D. 400, but what of the preceding 2000–3000 years? What of the Jaredites, the people of King Benjamin, and so on? Should we not expect some evidence of their existence?

Curtis proposes the following artifactual expectations for the Book of Mormon:

1. From the time of Christ to A.D. 200 the people lived the United Order and had all things in common. "Having all things in common, there were no rich, no poor, and no elite or ruling class for whom to build huge monuments. Their temples would have been plain working temples, not large ornate temples to pagan gods" (p. 151).

2. After A.D. 200, the people divided into small groups and thus lacked the manpower to erect impressive monuments.

Just as today many small religious groups cannot build great buildings, so would the people near the narrow neck of land be unable to build those huge and ornate temples found in Meso- and South America.

Kings and absolute rulers cannot abide contention, and would have put an end to what is described in 4 Nephi. There must have been very little contention in Mesoamerica. (*ibid.*)

3. Near the end of Nephite history, the people were so preoccupied with war that they had little time to put up impressive buildings. "It is impossible to maintain a war of extermination and at the same time build great monuments to their elite and to their pagan gods" (p. 152).

4. The remnant of the Book of Mormon peoples were not industrious enough to build great buildings.

When the Gentiles came to the promised land, they found a people just like the people that Nephi, Mormon,

and Moroni described: dark, filthy, and loathsome, whom the Gentiles did their utmost to exterminate, just as the Book of Mormon stated. The people of Mesoamerica were nothing like those in the Book of Mormon. They were a well-educated and industrious people under powerful leaders. They would need to be, to build the great temples and other buildings which they left.

The great ruins of Mesoamerica prove two things: the Book of Mormon is true, and the people of Nephi did not live there. (pp. 153–54)

5. We are told that the Nephites built fortifications and fortified cities. Many of these have been found in the area Curtis considers Book of Mormon lands.

6. The Lamanites would not have left artifacts to be found.

There is no mention of the Lamanites burying the dead. In fact, at the rate they were covering the area, murdering, looting, ravishing, and laying waste to the land, the Lamanites could not have taken the time to bury even their own dead. Thus, the bodies of several million people lay scattered and heaped on the land to molder and decay, leaving only spear points, axes, arrow heads, and stone clubs that felled soldiers, wives, and children to mark their passing. As the years passed, the survivors' children would find the area a good spot to look for gold, silver, and copper trinkets. The implements of war would also be in great abundance, needing only to be fitted with new handles and shafts. Then came the Gentiles with their spades and plows, turning up some and completely destroying other artifacts. However, John L. Sorenson said, "You cannot prove anything with artifacts." Today little is left except the words of a few early men who recorded what they saw on the land as they traveled the woods and hills before modern man. (pp. 156, 163)

7. The archaeology of Mesoamerica does not conform to Curtis's expectations for Book of Mormon lands because it is too complex. "With conditions like those described in the Book of

Mormon, it would be impossible to build anything like the ruins of Mesoamerica" (p. 167).

8. Curtis claims that at A.D. 400 there were two very different peoples in the Americas: the Lamanites and the peoples of Mesoamerica. "Those around the narrow neck of land and on the land of promise would leave only burned cities and the bones of the dead" (p. 171).

9. Any buildings or artifacts would have been destroyed by the Gentiles.

For almost 300 years the "Gentiles" have systematically pillaged, leveled, plowed, and cultivated the land of northeastern United States of America. Almost all of the mounds, the wasted cities, and the trenches filled with bones, and the mounds of bones with a very thin cover of earth have been obliterated. Yet there is still enough evidence to show that a people with a high degree of civilization lived and died there. (pp. 171-72)

10. "What we should be looking for are the remains of fortified cities and of a people at war, not great pagan temples and burial mounds built by a people united and at peace" (p. 174). The bulk of Curtis's chapter is devoted to listing this evidence. He does this by reprinting most of McGavin and Bean's *Book of Mormon Geography*,¹⁶ now long out of print. This book focuses on the early accounts of upstate New York that describe fortified sites and remains of weapons. The only parts of this book not reprinted are those sections where McGavin and Bean discuss Mesoamerica as part of Book of Mormon lands, which, in Curtis's view, is an unfortunate oversight on their part (pp. 196-202).

Some of Curtis's suggestions are right on the mark and others are just plain silly or misinformed. His sweeping generalizations for Mesoamerica come from one recent *National Geographic* article about the lowland Maya. Curtis's portrayal of Mesoamerica is wide of the mark. His treatment of the archaeology of New York is even less appropriate. His lengthy citation of McGavin and Bean is a repetition of information that was out-of-date even in 1948. Has nothing new been learned about the archaeology of

¹⁶ Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1948.

New York since then? Should it not be incumbent upon Curtis to read at least one of these recent books or articles?

The overall impression of Curtis's discussion of artifacts might appear impressive, but such an impression would be misleading. *Christ in North America* exhibits the common failing of amateur excursions into archaeology. Curtis lacks any appreciation of *time*, either in his construction of archaeological expectations or in his handling of the archaeological information. Curtis is interested only in showing that forts, weapons, and bones have been recovered in the narrow neck region in abundance. This is a good start. The critical question is: What do they date to? We are not told; Curtis does not cite any study that would contain this information. Archaeological dating techniques have come a long way since 1948.

The general cultural-historical picture for upstate New York, as I understand it, does not support Curtis's scheme. Our minimal expectations for the Book of Mormon are at least two traditions of civilization: Jaredite and Nephite/Lamanite. Curtis devotes all of his energies to discussing the period from the time of Christ to A.D. 400. What of the earlier periods? Is there any impressive archaeological evidence in New York for an early tradition? No. Most of the sites and weapons Curtis recapitulates from McGavin and Bean probably postdate A.D. 400. Undoubtedly much information has been destroyed, modified, and even misunderstood, but we would expect some information to survive.

One of Curtis's main claims for archaeological expectations is that we are looking for things that we ought not. I think he is absolutely correct on this score. It does not follow, however, that his anemic list of archaeological expectations resolves the problem, especially when he ignores the bulk of the text. True, the Nephites did not move to the land northward until quite late in their history, but the Jaredites had lived there for over a thousand years previous to Nephite occupation. This is not a trivial point. Curtis's silence on the Jaredites is inexplicable.

Detailed discussion of the archaeological expectations of the Book of Mormon is better left to a more appropriate forum. I need only note here that attempts at minimizing them are not helpful. The Book of Mormon clearly indicates a network of large cities and complex culture and not merely fortifications. A few

specific remarks to Curtis's claims will suffice in closing this discussion.

1. Curtis's conjectures concerning the absence of ornate buildings in Nephite lands during the first two centuries after Christ's visit are sound. We should probably not expect many impressive buildings for the time period of A.D. 30–200. But what about all of the rest of the time?

2. Curtis's related claim that small groups could not erect impressive monuments is worthy of comment. We do not expect small groups to make themselves noticed in the archaeological record. But we lack indications of the "smallness" of the groups involved in this instance. Curtis asserts that kings cannot abide contention. He takes evidence of large building projects as evidence for the absence of contention. This is patently absurd as stated. Recent understandings of Mesoamerica, for example, show it was rife with contention.

3. Curtis mentions that the Nephites were so preoccupied with war that they could not put up impressive buildings. This is a good point and possibly true. However, many large buildings do get constructed during wartime. Curtis's view here is overly narrow as it really only considers the Nephite view. What of the Lamanites? What percentage of the Lamanites were involved in war? There are too many unknowns to be confident of Curtis's projections of building activity during wartime. What was done between wars? In our own culture, the brief period between World War I and World War II witnessed tremendous building activity. Who suspected that another world war would occur so soon?

4. Curtis's claim that the ruins of Mesoamerica both prove the Book of Mormon to be true and that the Nephites did not live there is a classic case of having your cake and eating it, too. Curtis thinks the Mesoamericans were too civilized to have been part of the Book of Mormon story and that the evidence of all of the impressive building activity there demonstrates that the Nephites did not live there. Even if we stretch the bounds of scholarly charity to their breaking point and concede Curtis's assertion on these matters, how would their presence prove the Book of Mormon true? In fact, we cannot concede either of Curtis's assertions nor accept his conclusions. Mesoamerica was not as he

pictures it, and Nephite and Lamanite culture and history were also more complex than he describes them.

5. Fortified sites are one of the clear archaeological expectations from the Book of Mormon, but finding one does nothing *per se* to prove the case. These fortifications must be in the areas described and date to the proper time periods. Much is being made of fortifications these days, with little attention to details. The irony of Curtis's claims is nearly overwhelming. He is using the same arguments and data that anti-Mormons use to prove that Joseph Smith made up the Book of Mormon and incorporated local lore in doing so.

6. Curtis does a good job in his considerations of the possible archaeological evidence that one would expect to find at Cumorah. We need to worry a great deal about the archaeological evidence as it was laid down—and picked up again or plowed under. We should consider various classes of evidence and how they would be affected differently. We would not expect to lose all information on a city in the same manner we could lose sight of a great battle. Picking up axes is one thing: plowing under a city wall is quite another.

7. As mentioned previously, Curtis's views on Mesoamerica are not credible. His claims that the conditions described in the Book of Mormon precluded the erection of large buildings are outrageous.

8. Much of the archaeological record of the area considered by Curtis has been damaged severely over the years, as he mentions. We have two options in reacting to this tragedy of frontier expansion: (1) claim that the data are too badly damaged to deal with—and maybe with a great deal of relief as none of our claims for how it might have been can now be checked, or (2) study the record very carefully and try to compensate for known biases for certain parts of the record. Surely anyone interested in a Great Lakes geography ought to pursue the second option.

9. The early evidence for the archaeology of New York compiled by McGavin and Bean is a good start for a consideration of the culture-history of this area, but no more than that. It is difficult to believe that Curtis has chosen to ignore the recent information. The tragedy of *Christ in North America* is that the thesis is so inexpertly argued, and it is argued on the basis of

assertion rather than evidence. A much better case could be constructed using the evidence in “creative” ways, something that Curtis demonstrates some flair for.

To summarize, the archaeological case that Curtis attempts to provide for his one-Cumorah thesis is unconvincing. His research displays a lack of seriousness and/or ability. He consistently ignores recent scholarly work in the two areas that he pretends to be comparing. As a reader, I was not able to take his claims seriously because he does not appear to have done the basic homework required by his thesis nor even appear to know what that research should entail. It is clear that he has “talked” with many “Book of Mormon geography scholars” in his search for truth. There is no indication in *Christ in North America* that he ever took the time to listen to anything they had to say. His book is the worse for it.

Towards a Book of Mormon Geography

In this final section, I want to view *Christ in North America* in a broader context. It is my impression that no other topic in Book of Mormon studies lends itself so readily to poor scholarship as the subject of geography. *Christ in North America* is merely the latest, but not the last, in a long series of highly improbable geographies based upon dubious assumptions, minimal research, fallacious logic, and wishful thinking. I find little of redeeming value in the substance of Curtis’s book. But can anything of lasting value be salvaged from it? Yes. *Christ in North America* will stand for the next few years as an example of *what not to do* in writing a Book of Mormon geography. I do not mean to be cruel or flippant in this claim; often a poor example of “scholarship” is more useful to the cause of science than a good one. Scholars wishing to write Book of Mormon geographies should heed the tragic lessons of *Christ in North America* and profit thereby.

What are some of the scholarly traps that one should avoid in writing a Book of Mormon geography? What can we learn from *Christ in North America*? First, one should avoid the trap of obvious facts. Curtis begins his study where it ought to end—with a known geographical Book of Mormon location in the New World. Most of the distortions of the Book of Mormon text in *Christ in North America* are a logical consequence of assuming a

priori that the Cumorah in New York is the one mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Curtis's unconvincing attempt to make this point serves as a useful caution for anyone seduced by this easy "fact."

The second caution is related to the first. Curtis's assumption of one known geographic point compromised the rest of his geography. One should work out a consistent geography based upon the information provided within the Book of Mormon itself, independently of any locations in real space that one thinks might be Book of Mormon spots. Very few Book of Mormon geography scholars have followed this procedure, but it is absolutely fundamental. It is hard to be convinced of a Book of Mormon geography when it is clear the author has not studied the book in enough detail to get the basic facts clear. In Curtis's book, his discussion of the River Sidon, the narrow neck of land, and the location of Cumorah in relation to Zarahemla all signal a basic misunderstanding or misreading of the text.

One useful resource that Curtis ignored, to the detriment of his geography, was the work published by other scholars. It is one thing to have honest disagreements over the meaning of the text and the relationships implied in it and quite another to ignore others' arguments altogether. The combination of disdain and arrogance in *Christ in North America* is lethal. Curtis bases his whole argument on the location of Cumorah but does not see the need to review even one of the books detailing the arguments for two Cumorahs. Nor does he review the basic facts of the hill given in the Book of Mormon. When one considers that the Book of Mormon text comes out on the short end of the stick, it is not too surprising that scholarly studies are also ignored.

A series of interpretive difficulties are also apparent in *Christ in North America*. Curtis reads prophecy as history, and along lines that are very self-serving for his argument. He considers statements of General Authorities concerning these same prophecies, and speculations about geography, as evidence when it suits his purposes. In neither case is the reader presented with a comprehensive view of what these statements might mean. The same naive method of interpretation is apparent in Curtis's treatment of geographical details in the Book of Mormon. His treatment of Zion and the land of promise is a classic case of his

reading of the text. One is surprised to learn that only the USA is the land of Zion and that Canada, Mexico, and the rest of Latin America do not qualify.

Apparent in many of Curtis's interpretations is the ethnocentric trap of allowing cultural biases to serve as data. This is most evident in Curtis's treatment of the Gentile and Lamanite questions. Curtis claims that the natives of Mesoamerica were too civilized to have been the peoples described in prophecy by Moroni. Only USA Indians are seen as sufficiently savage to qualify. On the other hand, the fair races that populated the USA are seen as "the gentiles," and the rest of the continent is left out. I suggest that Curtis's interpretation of the "great and abominable church" should also be considered as culturally biased.

Finally, most studies try to locate Book of Mormon lands in terms of modern geography; this brings up the question of archaeology. This is the death trap for most proposed geographies, including Curtis's. Use of archaeological information requires some basic knowledge of how such information is obtained and what parts of it are most susceptible to error. This is not to say that only archaeologists can deal with this information, only that one is on very swampy ground here and should proceed with caution. It helps if one reads at least one archaeology book on the area he or she is proposing as Book of Mormon lands. There is no evidence that Curtis did this, either for New York or Mesoamerica. How can one take *Christ in North America* seriously when the extent of Curtis's archaeological research is one dubious article in *National Geographic* and an LDS book printed in 1948?

Finally, the major weakness in *Christ in North America* is that nothing is analyzed or argued thoroughly. Impressions replace logic, and assertions stand in for data. This may be adequate for one's personal witness, but this is not the way to persuade others. Curtis misses every opportunity to make his case through careful analysis of the Book of Mormon text (e.g., Zion, land of promise, Cumorah, Gentiles, etc.), analysis of General Authority statements (e.g., what has been said of Latin America), or analysis of the archaeological evidence (e.g., fortifications, cities, weapons).

In summary, although I think *Christ in North America* fails to reach minimal standards of scholarship, prose, and publishing

excellence, I think that some good may eventually come from the book if it is viewed as the road most frequently traveled by Book of Mormon enthusiasts. I have tried to point out here some of the most obvious pitfalls to be avoided along the way by those who wish to pursue similar research. The real tragedy of the book is that the argumentation is so poor that dismissal of the book does not allow dismissal of the hypothesis argued in it. It is highly likely, therefore, that the New York theory will surface from time to time. I only hope that future scholars do a better job of it and that we can eventually verify or falsify the one-Cumorah hypothesis on logical grounds. Curtis's principal intention with *Christ in North America* was to counter the Mesoamerica theories. His poor showing for New York only strengthens the case that Book of Mormon lands lie elsewhere, perhaps in Mesoamerica.