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**E. L. Peay, *The Lands of Zarahemla***

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**Title**

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**Abstract** Review of *The Lands of Zarahemla* (1993), by E. L. Peay.

**E. L. Peay, *The Lands of Zarahemla*. Salt Lake City: Northwest Publishing, 1993. 314 pp. \$9.95.**

Reviewed by Les Campbell

The book *The Lands of Zarahemla* by E. L. Peay, one of the latest attempts to explain Book of Mormon geography, generally follows the geographical chronology outlined in the Book of Mormon. Peay's commentary begins with the departure of Lehi into the wilderness and ends with Alma 52. I assume the author plans a second volume.

Peay's interpretation of Lehi's travels is shown on the map on page 40. According to the author, the eight years of travel by the Lehi group took them 530 miles south of Jerusalem to the Red Sea. Somewhere close to the imaginary Tropic of Cancer lies Umla, where Peay has the travelers turn east and traverse the Arabian Peninsula just north of the Empty Quarter. They arrive at Al Kasab, just south of the Straits of Hormuz. A map of the possible oases used by Lehi along the route is included on page 36. Peay then has Lehi's party cross the Persian Gulf, presumably in a boat of some sort, and from there east across the plains of northern India. Barges are built at least twice for travel on the Yamuna and Ganges Rivers. This allows for 800 miles of travel on the water. On the next leg of the journey, Lehi follows the Brahmaputra River through Burma and eventually arrives at the East China Sea. In Peay's second option to this last leg, Lehi floats down the Honghui River, arriving at Macau near the South China Sea.

Peay suggests the present-day city of Hong Kong as a probable land of Bountiful, part of a route used in 1000 B.C. by the Chinese, Indians, Asians, and Europeans. As Lehi traveled through this area, Peay believes he was exposed to many cultural traits that later show up in the promised land. Peay believes that all the requirements of Bountiful met in this area. He also believes that the sea currents and prevailing winds to be right to help Lehi arrive at the promised land.

I was extremely disappointed in the lack of sources in a book 300 pages long which claims "amazing cross-referencing between

the Book of Mormon and the work of anthropologists and archeologists in Central America" (back cover; see also p. iii). This book does not deliver the goods. Peay used eighteen sources outside the scriptures and referred to them forty times. Half of these references are from Ferguson and Royce's book *Maya Ruins in Central America in Color*<sup>1</sup> and *The World Book Year Book of 1968*.<sup>2</sup> Another quarter come from a variety of atlases, issues of *National Geographic*, Time-Life books, and encyclopedias.

The author very nearly ignores *all* major research of the last twenty-five years. Names of anthropologists and archaeologists that could and should have appeared in his footnotes and bibliography might have included Carter, Coe, Freidel, Houston, Jett, Kelly, Scheale, Stephens, Stuart, and Thompson—all world-renowned scholars in the area of Peay's study.

With the exception of two quotes from Nibley's "Lachish Letters," Peay also seems to ignore entirely the research of respected LDS scholars who have made significant contributions to our understanding of the many cultural and geographical facets of potential relationship to the Book of Mormon. The only hint of Peay's awareness of LDS scholars is some similarity in his geography to Joe Allen's arrangement of Nephite cities along the east coast of the land of Zarahemla.<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, the book contains no bibliography, index, table of contents, or list of maps or illustrations. The book is also marred by a number of typographical errors and inconsistencies in references.

For the most part, Peay simply has not provided enough information to persuade readers that his interpretation merits consideration, or even to allow readers to test his interpretation. For example, are there ruins in each of the areas in which he has

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<sup>1</sup> William M. Ferguson, and John Q. Royce, *Maya Ruins in Central America in Color* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984). This book is a rather common tourist guide book, available in most bookstores. It is very simple and popularized in its approach to the anthropological and archaeological aspects of the Mayan ruins. No serious student of the scriptures or archaeology would make it the foundation of their research.

<sup>2</sup> *The World Book Year Book of 1968* (Chicago: Field Enterprises Educational Corporation, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> See Joseph Allen, *Exploring The Lands of The Book of Mormon* (Orem, Utah: S. A. Publishers, Inc., 1989), 195, 213, 304, 311.

placed cities on his model? Do his cities date archaeologically to the proper Book of Mormon time window? Do his sites really correlate in space and time with other related sites? Furthermore, nearly one-half of the book is taken up by quotations from the Book of Mormon and some of the remainder is nothing more than a restatement of Book of Mormon passages just quoted. For example, in Peay's commentary following 1 Nephi 3:28 we read, "Having fled beyond the city, they were told by an angel to return and the Lord would make it possible for them to get the brass plates." These comments follow 1 Nephi 4:5: "Not knowing beforehand what he would do, Nephi came to the drunken Laban. He fought the impression to kill him because it was unlawful." This commentary is offered after Peay quotes 1 Nephi 16:30: "Nephi subsequently brought food to the families. The families were grateful for this needed blessing."

### Maps

Peay is to be commended for giving us numerous maps on which he places his interpretation within a real-world framework. I know from my own experience the danger of maps that claim to show the internal geography of the Book of Mormon. There is a temptation to place sites to meet one's own interpretations (after all, isn't that what we expect in such a commentary?) while ignoring or compromising the real physical features present. After one has once "fudged" on a map, it is hard not to keep doing it. On the other hand, the use of actual maps forces one to conform his model to the geography as it is. This makes fudging most difficult, because we can't just create a river or mountain range to suit our model. Readers may disagree with Peay's interpretation, but his use of maps does help readers to visualize the author's views.

Nevertheless, the maps do have problems. Some maps were "painted with a broad brush," when in fact the reader is hoping for more detail. Maps on pages 40 and 85, for example, create far more questions than they answer.

Some map titles are incomplete and confusing. The map on page 34, for instance, has no title, though the intent is obvious. The title for the map on page 190 reads, "Ammonihah and Now Goes to Sidon." The title for the map on page 171 is "Alma and

His People Fought” but there is nothing to identify Alma’s army or where they fought or whom they fought.

A study of the maps on pages 82, 178, 206, 223, 266, 270, 285, reveals seven different configurations for mountain ranges in northern Yucatan. Furthermore, all the maps I am familiar with indicate there are no mountains in the northern Yucatan. All are hand-drawn maps and support the reviewer’s caution about such dangers.

In addition to these kinds of problems, I believe a fatal flaw in the book is reflected in this comment by the author: “The Mayan capital city in the Yucatan is now called Tikal and there are many other ancient cities with modern day names that just happen to be in the same location as the writers of the Book of Mormon place them. But it would be very confusing to attempt to use the modern day names. So we shall only refer to the capital city and its modern day name Tikal occasionally as we relate to and compare it to the city of Zarahemla” (p. 77). Failure to include modern-day sites actually creates more confusion than omitting them. The one thing that could have improved understanding of the model was omitted. Acceptable scholarship would demand that such a list be included so that archeological dating and geographical relationships can be compared with those in the Book of Mormon.

### Peay’s Geographical Parallels

Rather than critique each map, I thought it easier and shorter to list some of the parallels between the Book of Mormon text and the author’s model.

Bountiful (Old World) = Macau near Hong Kong (p. 41)

Bountiful, land of (New World) = central Yucatan (p. 78)

Cumorah, land of = land around Laguna de Terminos (p. 113)

Desolation, land of = northern Yucatan (p. 78)

Desolation, land north of = Ohio River valley, Indian mounds (p. 85)

East Sea = Gulf of Honduras (p. 265)

East wilderness = Maya Mountains of Belize (p. 266)

Gideon, valley of = Macal Valley in Belize (p. 173)

Hagoth’s ship launching area = Laguna de Terminos (p. 85)

Hermounts, wilderness of = Lacandone Mountains (p. 171)

Land of many waters = Laguna de Terminos (p. 113)

Lehi's landing site = Pacific coast of Guatemala (p. 52)

Mormon, waters of = Lago Amatitlan (p. 126)

narrow neck of land = sand bar separating the Gulf of Mexico from Laguna de Terminos (p. 275)

narrow pass = water gap connecting the Gulf of Mexico with Laguna de Terminos (p. 275)

Nephi, city of = Guatemala City (p. 107)

Ripliancum, waters of = Laguna de Terminos (p. 113)

Sidom = at the mouth of the Belize River (p. 79)

Sidon river = Belize river (p. 77)

Zarahemla = Tikal (p. 77)

West Sea = Gulf of Mexico (p. 84)

West Sea north = Gulf of Mexico (p. 206)

West Sea south = Pacific Ocean (p. 206)

In addition, Peay locates the following Book of Mormon sites in a south to north line between the Maya Mountains and the east coast of the Yucatan Peninsula, beginning with Moroni near the eastern end of Lake Isabela and extending north to the Bay of Chetumal: Moroni's camp, Lehi, Morianton, Hill Onidah, Aaron, Omner, land of Jerushon, Gid, Melek, Ammonihah, Mulek, and Bountiful.

### Things to Consider

In spite of all my criticisms of *The Lands of Zarahemla*, I did find many new thoughts to consider. Some are direct challenges to what I have read by other scholars on the subject of Book of Mormon geography and culture; others were entirely new and stimulating. Scholars may wish to pick up Peay's challenges and do further research on his ideas, like the following (a few examples will suffice to show the kind of ideas that may merit further study):

1. Peay believes that burnt offerings were made only at the first camp, using the animals the Lehites brought from Jerusalem. Because "wild game would not be an acceptable offering," he concludes there were no sacrifices during the twelve-year journey to the promised land (p. 7). Though nothing specific is mentioned in the Book of Mormon about this, I doubt that a prophet as

righteous and obedient as Lehi would ignore the requirements of the Laws of Moses for twelve years.

2. Peay believes that Lehi's youngest sons, Jacob and Joseph, were given names that Lehi learned from the plates of Laban, and that they were probably twins (p. 18).

3. "The terrible storm [that drove them back for three days] was part of the Lord's plan to place Lehi and his family in the proper path to be carried and blown to Central America by the prevailing sea currents and winds" (p. 50).

4. "Mormon was taken to Zarahemla at the age of 11 and apparently left there, probably at a school. It appears to me that he was going through a spiritual training, starting with his baptism, wherein he learned the scriptures. . . . Then at age 16 he was given the command of the Nephite army, indicating that he had had extensive training in the field of combat" (p. 94).

5. "When it says that the Lamanites 'carried them back' are we to take that literally, such as, did the Lamanites transport them back on animals or on wheeled vehicles? This is especially likely considering horses are mentioned twelve times in the Book of Mormon" (p. 133). This is a new argument for the use of the wheel, as far as I know.

6. Peay has this to say concerning the name *Sidon*: "Today, the name *Sibun* appears frequently on maps of that area: the *Sibun Rive [sic]* (a small, short river), *Sibun Gorge* (a steep-banked gorge), and the *Sibun Forest*. They are all in the same general area by the north end of the Maya Mountains. I think, considering it has been over two thousand years since Book of Mormon times, these names have not been altered very much because the name of the major river in the Book of Mormon is *Sidon*" (pp. 188-89).

## Conclusion

One of my friends once said to me, "I never review a book which I cannot recommend to others." I now know what he meant. I could not recommend this book to serious students except as a curiosity. I would not recommend the book to novice Book of Mormon students for fear that it would mislead them into mistaking *The Lands of Zarahemla* for good scholarship, which it is not. In sum, the author has spent much time in developing and



preparing his ideas. He is obviously serious about his research, but I question how seriously his work will be taken when it appears he has ignored relevant and readily available research that could have enhanced his own efforts. A few minutes in the library or conversations on the phone with local Book of Mormon scholars would give the author enough sources to research for another four years. There needs to be a table of contents, a list of illustrations, an index, and a bibliography to really make it a serious work. The author needs to limit his commentary to the subject of the book and not pass ideas about irrelevant items. A pervasive naiveté throughout the whole book alerts the reader to be careful. However, I also found the book intriguing and challenging in regard to the new views proposed by Peay, a few of which have been mentioned above.