Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography: A Review

John E. Clark
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Author(s)  John E. Clark


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Reviewed by John E. Clark

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If books came with warning labels, all treatises on Book of Mormon geography would carry the warning *caveat lector*: Reader Beware! Every such study that I have read presents an undifferentiated blend of scripture, testimony, zealous opinion, sound and naive arguments, flimsy evidence, and unfulfilled and unrealistic expectations. Even the best are deficient; even the worst contain slivers of silver among the dross. Paul Hedengren’s *The Land of Lehi* typifies the genre on all counts. Readers of this book need to be wary; they should sift through its contents with caution and with considerable attention to subtle details. Hedengren’s study is not the best I have seen, but neither is it the worst.

Although I disagree with the conclusions of *The Land of Lehi*, I strongly recommend it to all Book of Mormon geography enthusiasts. Hedengren does several things well and should receive due credit. In general, he argues clearly and explicitly for a limited Great Lakes geography centered in present-day Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York. Numerous maps aid Hedengren’s argument by making detailed descriptions explicit and memorable. One of the best features of the book is the patent distinction made among assumptions, various kinds of evidence, inferences, and conclusions. This expository courtesy allows the skeptical reader to follow the details of each argument—and to agree or disagree at any point. All Book of

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1 The same is true, of course, of all critiques and reviews of these same geographies, such as this one.
Mormon geographies could benefit by being reader-friendly in this manner.

A detailed and critical consideration of each claim in *The Land of Lehi* would entail a treatment at least twice as long as the original. Therefore, I will content myself here with two salient issues from Hedengren’s book: one substantive and one theoretical. I will consider Hedengren’s substantive argument for the location of Cumorah and his methodological argument for the construction and testing of Book of Mormon geography. My abbreviated treatment of just two issues from the many available should be sufficient to demonstrate both strong and weak aspects of Hedengren’s overall argument and to identify several significant but unresolved issues involved in writing Book of Mormon geographies. Before turning to these issues, however, I first present a brief synopsis of *The Land of Lehi* and its basic argument.

**Synopsis of the Book**

*The Land of Lehi* is a concise book composed of eight chapters, a postscript, a question-and-answer section, and a loose insert of additional questions and answers. Chapter 1 is only two pages long, but it establishes the importance of the questions asked in the volume and some of the rules for proceeding. Chapter 2 treats Lehi’s travels from Jerusalem to Bountiful. Hedengren rejects traditional wisdom concerning Lehi’s travel route from Jerusalem (pp. 3–11) and the location of the Old World Bountiful, the embarkation point for the New World. He marshals a variety of information concerning the distribution of mineral deposits, plant and animal life, and evidence of ancient trails (pp. 11–14). Hedengren argues that Lehi and his company sailed from the Arabian Sea around the tip of Africa, across the Atlantic Ocean, and probably into Chesapeake Bay. The reason for this rather unusual sailing route becomes apparent in chapter 3, which is a detailed argument for the location of Cumorah.

As with all such exercises, Cumorah is the linchpin for Hedengren’s Book of Mormon geography. He argues that the hill Cumorah of the final battles is the one near Palmyra, New York, from which Joseph Smith obtained the gold plates in 1827. I will examine this important claim in detail below. Suffice it to say that
all subsequent geographic claims in *The Land of Lehi* follow logically from this primary inference. In chapter 4, Hedengren presents a detailed map of Lehiite lands and identifies Book of Mormon cities and landmarks with points of geography in present-day Pennsylvania and New York. For example, the Sidon River is identified with the Susquehanna and Zarahemla with West Pittston, Pennsylvania. Hedengren also considers information on mineral deposits, climate, flora and fauna, agricultural potential, and hydrology. He argues that the distribution of these basic resources and natural conditions conforms to the requirements of Book of Mormon lands mentioned in the text. One could argue endlessly about these specific claims, but I will not do so here. They are only relevant if the primary claim of a New York Cumorah can be sustained, and I will examine this claim in detail in the following section.

In chapter 5, Hedengren discusses Nephite migrations. The distribution of Indian languages in his area of proposed Book of Mormon lands is said to support his hypothesis. At the time of European colonization, Iroquoian speakers occupied all the lands of Hedengren's proposed geography. Presumably, Iroquoian speakers are descendants of the Nephites and Lamanites who once inhabited the area. Hedengren also proposes cultural similarities between these groups and Book of Mormon peoples. Chapter 6 extends the analysis of the previous chapter and deals with adjacent Lamanite territories. Hedengren shows that archaeological evidence for the distribution of different house types conforms to the north/south division between Nephite and Lamanite lands that one would expect from the Book of Mormon.

The final two chapters, postscript, and question-and-answer sections treat a miscellany of issues. Chapter 7 presents the case for Nephite fortifications and their correspondence with ancient earthworks and fortifications known from the New York/Pennsylvania area. As all enthusiasts realize, the correspondences are remarkable. But Hedengren fails to mention two significant points that have always troubled this particular data set. First, this is precisely the body of evidence that Joseph Smith's detractors

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2 The logic follows from this initial inference as well as from a particular reading of each relevant verse of the Book of Mormon.
paraded to demonstrate that he had made it all up based upon local folklore. Second, and more important, none of these fortifications is known to date to the Book of Mormon time period.

Chapter 8 is a miscellaneous catalogue of what Hedengren labels “additional harmonies.” He provides a logical explanation for the awkward phrase going into the mountain (Alma 47:10, 12), based upon local, Pennsylvania geography; discusses the prevalence of pearls in his proposed area; notes that grapes were prevalent in this same area but would have been absent from Central America; discusses tree cultivation, corn, and barley; emphasizes land-use patterns among the earliest farmers in the eastern United States (Adena-Hopewell); and demonstrates that all minerals mentioned in the Book of Mormon are found in this area of North America. Further supposed harmonies concern flimsy evidence for elephants, land-use and population increases, reasons for the lack of archaeological evidence for extensive populations (wooden buildings would not have left many traces), and a detailed discussion of “a small neck of land” (Alma 22:32).

The postscript is a mere half page in length and summarily cautions the reader not to take the book’s proposals for facts. Hedengren wisely advises that

The history of Book of Mormon geographies is clouded by enthusiasm and hasty generalizations. Nothing that is proposed here should be taken too seriously, but should instead be viewed more as guides to further research. (p. 83)

This sage advice could and should also be extended to cover Hedengren’s techniques of discovery and evaluation of generalizations.

In the question-and-answer section, Hedengren addresses seventeen questions that the inquisitive reader might be likely to raise after reading this book. Among the more interesting are the following: “3. If the Nephites lived in the area proposed, why is snow not mentioned in the Book of Mormon?” “4. Are your sources credible?” “5. Why have you not compared your theories with alternatives?” “12. Why have you not considered southern Mexico or Central America to be the site of the events in the
Book of Mormon?” and “17. Where might Moroni have wandered after hiding the plates for the last time?”

**Cumorah as a Geographic Key**

All recent geographies of the Book of Mormon can be divided into variants according to their initial assumptions concerning (1) the scale of Book of Mormon lands and (2) the location of Cumorah. The first division is between those advocating “limited” or small-scale geographies versus Pan-American geographies. The second division cleaves on the controversy between one Cumorah or two. The first division has, for all intents and purposes, been resolved. Only a few die-hards still advocate the folklore version of Book of Mormon geography that imagines a Pan-American geography with the location of Cumorah in New York, the narrow neck of land in Panama, and the land southward as South America. This traditional view simply cannot be supported with the internal evidence from the Book of Mormon, which clearly indicates that the lands of the Nephites and Lamanites had to be much more limited in extent, perhaps similar in size to the Holy Land of the New Testament.

The second rift of opinion continues unresolved and is evident in each year’s crop of limited Book of Mormon geographies. One brand argues for Mexico and Central America as the probable location of Book of Mormon lands. To make this argument, each author claims that the hill Cumorah of upstate New York is not the ancient Cumorah/Ramah mentioned in the Book of Mormon as the site of the final battles. In other words, two hills are known to Mormons as “Cumorah”; hence the “two Cumorahs” label. On the other hand, a series of recent geographies advocates variants of a limited New York or Great Lakes thesis and takes as its point of departure the known location of the singular hill Cumorah.3

To overpolemicize a nest of complex issues, the Central American thesis has the bulk of textual and scientific evidence on

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its side, but the New York thesis has the sanction of Church tradition on its side. (What a terrible choice for a gospel hobbyist to have to make!) Those arguing for a Central American Cumorah emphasize statements from the Book of Mormon and tend to disregard statements attributed to General Authorities on geography matters. In contrast, those arguing the New York thesis tend to do the opposite; they stress modern statements, however ambiguous, and pay lip service to the internal evidence from the Book of Mormon. Common ground eludes both camps, and the two groups disagree about what should count as primary evidence, how various classes of evidence should be weighed and evaluated, and what the logical bases for deriving sound inferences from evidence ought to be.

Hedengren’s argument for Cumorah is extraordinary and refreshing precisely because it claims to establish the New York Cumorah as the Cumorah/Ramah of the Book of Mormon on the basis of primary textual evidence from the Book of Mormon itself rather than from nebulous traditions ascribing such a belief to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and their associates. In short, Hedengren relies on the technique of textual exegesis, employed by advocates of the Central American thesis, to establish the primary claim central to the New York thesis. Given the importance of this argument to Hedengren’s proposed geographic correlation, and its potential importance to continuing intelligent debate about Cumorah, I will examine it in detail here.

As noted, Hedengren grapples with the Cumorah question in his third chapter. He puts the problem and central issues succinctly.

We know where the Lehites began their journey: Jerusalem. We also know precisely where Joseph Smith received the gold plates: on a hill near his home near Palmyra, New York. Is this hill the hill referred to in the Book of Mormon as Cumorah? If it is, this fact is critical to determining where the events described in the Book of Mormon occurred. (p. 19)

Hedengren then proceeds to establish the following three critical claims: (1) “Joseph Smith obtained the gold plates written by Mormon and Moroni from a hill not far from Palmyra, New
York” (p. 19). (2) “The place where Moroni buried the plates is the very place where Joseph Smith received them” (p. 19). (3) “The place in which Moroni buried the plates is the hill Cumorah referred to in the Book of Mormon” (p. 20).

The first two claims are clearly supportable, but the third is not, and it is the crux of the whole issue. Hedengren’s evidence for its truth comes from a methodical analysis of Moroni’s story as the lone survivor of the Nephite race. His analysis demonstrates that Moroni must have resided for most of his postwar years in the vicinity of the hill Cumorah/Ramah until he completed his record. Hedengren’s analysis is inherently interesting and important and merits detailed recitation here. Most Central American theories, for example, postulate that Moroni began his wanderings soon after the Nephite apocalypse and that he had several decades to wander into upstate New York and hide the plates there. Hedengren’s analysis effectively removes this facile explanation by tethering Moroni to the Nephite records repository. Unfortunately, however, in the final analysis Hedengren’s demonstration fails to establish convincingly his third claim that the New York hill is Cumorah/Ramah.

Hedengren notes that Moroni felt on three different occasions that he had completed his record: “first in AD 401 when he finishes the book begun by his father (Mormon 8:1–6); second when he finishes the book of Ether (Ether 12:38); third in AD 423 when he finishes the book of Moroni (Moroni 10:1)” (p. 20). Hedengren’s analysis, although plausible, is overly compromised by unjustified and liberal conjecture. Lengthy citation of his argument will demonstrate this tendency as well as establish its major claims.

When he is finishing his father’s account, Moroni says,

I have but a few things to write, which things I have been commanded by my father. Therefore I will write and hide up the records and whither I go it mattereth not. How long the Lord will suffer that I may live I know not. (Mormon 8:1, 4)[emphasis in original]
Moroni then records the final few events following the complete destruction of the Nephite armies, writes a farewell and the book ends. *It seems that at this point Moroni would have quickly hidden the record and wandered off.* If he kept the gold plates with him and he were discovered and killed by Lamanites, they would have destroyed the record.

Furthermore, at this point, Moroni clearly does not expect to add to the record. . . .

After finishing the record of his father, apparently in obedience to his command, *it is reasonable to expect* Moroni to end the Book of Mormon. And *it is also reasonable to think* that Moroni would have hidden the plates as quickly as possible to keep them from being found by Lamanites. However, the Book of Mormon does not end with Moroni’s farewell in chapter 9. Two more books are included in the Book of Mormon, the book of Ether and the book of Moroni. When were they added, and what does their addition tell us about where the plates were hidden?

The book of Ether is an abridgment of the history of the Jaredites. It appears that the Lord commanded Moroni to add this history to the Book of Mormon. When Moroni is writing Mormon chapters 8 and 9, his father Mormon is already dead and the text indicates that Moroni is not expecting to write further, for he refers to going wandering and he finishes writing, as he says, “this sad tale of destruction of my people.” (Mormon 8:3,4) (pp. 20–21)\(^4\)

Hedengren proceeds to demonstrate from internal evidence in the book of Ether that Moroni was probably commanded by the Lord to abridge the Jaredite record. When did this abridgment take place? Hedengren argues that it must have been after Moroni finished his father’s record in A.D. 401 and before he completed his own book in A.D. 421.

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\(^4\) In this and all subsequent citations, the emphasis is mine unless otherwise indicated. Also, I have retained the original punctuation in all citations.
This range can be somewhat narrowed if we assume on one end that it took Moroni some time to get ore and plates and on the other end that Moroni had finished the book of Ether and had been hiding for some time before he felt to add again to the gold plates.

During the time that Moroni obtains ore and makes plates would he have carried the gold plates with him? Considering how Moroni reports even many years after the great battle at Cumorah that he remains alive only by hiding from the Lamanites, it seems that going out to acquire ore would have been a high risk activity, not one to be undertaken with the valuable gold plates in his possession. The risk would be too great that they would fall into the hands of the Lamanites. Thus it seems more reasonable to think that Moroni hid up the gold plates before he went out to obtain the ore from which he made the plates used in writing the book of Ether. After completing these plates, it seems reasonable that he would then go to where the plates were hidden and add these new plates to those already made by Mormon.

Near the end of the book of Ether, Moroni again bids farewell to the Gentiles, indicating that he once again believes he has completed the Book of Mormon. (Ether 12:38)

After adding the book of Ether to the gold plates, Moroni writes a preface to the Book of Mormon. . . . The preface also refers to the record being sealed and “hid up unto the Lord to come forth in due time.” This strongly suggests that after completion of the preface, the gold plates with the interpreters are secured in their final place of hiding.

It is important to remember that in abridging the history of the Jaredites, Moroni has the original twenty four plate history in his possession. . . .

Where did Moroni obtain the original records? It seems most reasonable to believe that he obtained them from the Nephite record depository made by Mormon in the hill Cumorah. This is the very same place from
which the Urim and Thummim might be obtained that Moroni is commanded to place with the record. When he completes the abridgment, Moroni is commanded to hide these original records up again. (Ether 4:1,3) That Moroni is told to hide them up again suggests they were already hidden. All of this implies that Moroni remains in the vicinity of the Nephite record depository in the hill Cumorah at least sixteen years after the great battle at Cumorah and possibly as long as thirty six years. (pp. 21–22, emphasis added with the exception of the last italicized word)

The third stage of this saga involves the actual writing of the Book of Moroni that was completed in A.D. 421. Moroni completes the record at least 36 years after the final battle.

Since he did not expect to write this record and since the preface to the Book of Mormon suggests that the record was given a final hiding after the completion of the book of Ether, it is quite likely that the gold plates had been in their place of final hiding for some time. Yet when Moroni finishes his record, he is close enough to the final hiding place to add his record to the plates already hidden. (p. 22)

All of this suggests, according to Hedengren, that Moroni lingered at the hill Cumorah at least 36 years after the final destruction of the Nephites. The content of the Book of Moroni is further evidence of this since it includes materials likely taken from the storehouse of records.

Apparently at the time Moroni begins writing the book of Moroni, he has ample plates for nothing that he includes is essential to the completion of the work and he only has the hope that “perhaps they [the things he writes] may be of worth unto my brethren, the Lamanites.” (Moroni 1:4)

So what does he include? He includes the wording used in some priesthood ordinances, a sermon his father gave at the dedication of a new synagogue, and two epistles written to Moroni by his father. Then he
writes as the last chapter what is now truly his final farewell and the book ends.

The only historical facts included in the book of Moroni are the existence of fierce wars among the Lamanites and the killing of any Nephite that will not deny the Christ. (Moroni 1:4) Had any other events of historical significance occurred, Moroni would have had ample opportunity to record them.

In light of this, it appears highly improbable that Moroni undertook any purposeful extended travel at the command and direction of the Lord. Had he done so, he would have most certainly had opportunity and desire to write about this travel. Yet no travel is ever indicated in the text. Instead we read that about thirty-six years after the great battle at Cumorah, Moroni is simply hiding seeking to avoid death at the hands of the Lamanites. (Moroni 1:1) (p. 22)

I have presented the details of Hedengren’s argument as fully and as accurately as possible because these fine points lead him to significant conclusions that the reader would otherwise not be able to evaluate independently of my expressed opinions of them. From the foregoing analysis and interlaced speculations about what is “reasonable to believe,” Hedengren derives the following five “established facts”:

1. Moroni remains at least until the writing of the book of Moroni in the presence of the Lamanites.
2. Moroni remains close enough to the hidden gold plates that he is able to add the plates of Moroni.
3. Moroni likely put the gold plates in their final hiding place after writing the book of Ether.
4. To write the book of Ether, Moroni must have been near the Nephite record vault in the hill Cumorah.
5. Had Moroni undertaken extended purposeful travel, he would have mentioned it. There is no mention of such travel.

These facts indicate that at least until the completion of the book of Moroni in AD 421, Moroni remains
in the vicinity of the hill Cumorah and the vicinity of 
the buried gold plates.

Thus the hill Cumorah is at least in the vicinity of 
the place where the gold plates are buried. (pp. 22–23)

The foregoing argument, or sophistry, takes the reader by the 
nose and carefully leads him or her down to an invalid conclu-
sion. I will address some of the specifics of this beguiling tech-
nique below, but only after asking an irreverent question: So 
what? Even if, for sake of argument, one concedes each supposed 
“established fact” on Hedengren’s list, does this necessarily lead 
him or her to Hedengren’s conclusion about the location of 
Cumorah/Ramah? No. If not, where is the flaw in the chain of rea-
soning?

Before addressing this question, it is of interest to note the fi-
nal question that Hedengren addresses in his question-and-answer 
section at the end of his book.

17. Where might Moroni have wandered after hiding 
the plates for the last time?

He could have gone any place. If he averaged only 
eight miles per day, in a year he would travel 2920 
miles.5

This is, of course, a self-serving, debate-ending question that could 
be better phrased to indicate the huge dilemma it raises for 
Hedengren’s preceding analysis: Where might Moroni have wan-
dered after he finished the plates for the last time? This phrasing 
leaves open the legitimate question hidden by the original ques-
tion: Did Moroni take the finished, abridged record with him in 
his final wanderings? I think the answer is clearly yes. Could he 
have reached New York from Central America had he only lived a 
year or so after completing his record? Hedengren’s analysis sug-
gests that Moroni could have done so quite easily. In short, 
Hedengren’s detailed analysis of Moroni’s journeyings, in reality, 
brings one no closer to resolving the Cumorah controversy than 
before. For me, one of the more interesting questions is why 
Hedengren thinks that it does.

5 Ibid., unbound insert, 18 December 1995.
Leaving aside hypothetical debates and being more practical, I cannot concede each of the five points of Hedengren’s argument. His third and fifth points are not supported by the evidence or his logic. In short, I consider Hedengren’s argument to be fallacious. At least four logical problems, and one substantive one, undermine his desired conclusions. I will briefly consider each one in turn.

**Problem 1**

The first difficulty is that Hedengren confuses stated intentions for deeds. To present the problem at its most obvious, suppose that Moroni had written plainly in his last book that he intended to hide his record with all of the other records in Cumorah/Ramah (he did not actually say this). Would such a statement help us? What assurance could we have, once the line was inscribed and the record sealed, that Moroni’s intention was actually realized? Hedengren’s own useful analysis of Moroni’s saga suggests that Moroni did not know what was to become of him or his record. Why should a final entry alluding to his intentions be any different from the previous ones?

**Problem 2**

Another prevalent difficulty is the confusion between what the Book of Mormon records and what Hedengren thinks is *reasonable to believe* about individual statements. Statements and conjectures appear to be given equal weight in the final analysis. Information introduced as an “if” clause [“reasonable to believe”] transmutes to a “then” clause halfway through the argument without any recourse to additional data. Consequently, his conclusions are merely restated initial conjectures. Evaluative tools of “reasonableness” are particularly suspect. What makes any particular reading and interpretation “reasonable” and others not? From what perspective, or from whose perspective, is something reasonable? One does not have to be a social science wizard to realize that people’s opinions of plausibility vary widely according to circumstances, even within individual nuclear families.

The most egregious example of the logical lapses attributed to “reasonableness” criteria is also the most critical for Hedengren’s
argument. He suggests that “it appears highly improbable that Moroni undertook any purposeful extended travel at the command and direction of the Lord. Had he done so, he would have most certainly had opportunity and desire to write about this travel” (p. 22). This is a variant of Problem 1 just noted above concerning intention and behavior. Here, however, lack of information (i.e., failure to make a diary entry) is taken as a positive indication of lack of noteworthy behavior. This is mere wishful thinking. Of course, Hedengren may be guessing correctly on this matter, but no compelling logical reason to believe so exists.6

It is of interest to note that Hedengren also shifts the burden of proof in this last argument concerning Moroni’s travels, or lack thereof. In preceding arguments, Hedengren concerns himself with what is “reasonable to believe.” The rhetorical shift to the claim that something is “improbable” conveys an air of greater probability to the implied “probable” behavior alluded to by implicating its inverse. But this is merely the same old conjecture viewed from the other side of the fence, and it is no more probable than the other conjectures.

**Problem 3**

The third problem concerns semantic sloppiness and ambiguous, conflated, or sliding referents—the use of the same term to refer to two different things, with a concomitant failure to distinguish clearly between them. In Hedengren’s argument for Cumorah, this is apparent in his obsessive concern with the hiding place of the plates. This focus makes little sense until it is realized that the hiding place is the key to establishing the identity of the hill Cumorah. Hedengren’s review of the evidence and the structure of his argument follow:

1. First, a conjecture: “After finishing the record of his father . . . it is reasonable to expect Moroni to end the Book of Mormon. And it is also reasonable to think that Moroni would

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6 In several places in the Book of Mormon, the prophet-scribes mention that they were forbidden to write what they had seen. Therefore, the presumption that Moroni could automatically write down everything important is a curious one and seems to presume a certain knowledge of what would be reasonable for the Lord to require.
have hidden the plates as quickly as possible” (p. 20, emphasis added).

2. Follow this with three more conjectures: “it seems more reasonable to think that Moroni hid up the gold plates before he went out to obtain the ore from which he made the plates used in writing the book of Ether. After completing these plates, it seems reasonable that he would then go to where the plates were hidden and add these new plates to those already made by Mormon” (p. 21, emphasis added). Note that the reasonable expectation of a hiding place (statement 1) has already become a fact at this point in the argument.

3. Next, a wild inference: “The preface also refers to the record being sealed and ‘hid up unto the Lord to come forth in due time.’ This strongly suggests that after completion of the preface, the gold plates with the interpreters are secured in their final place of hiding” (p. 21). This reading clearly goes beyond the mark. A future anticipated event is being taken (1) as an historic fact and (2) as the final fact of the hiding place of the record. Moroni’s statement reveals no clear indication as to when or where the record will be hidden. Clearly, it could not have been at the very instant that the verse was written.

4. Finally, some evidence: “When he completes the abridgment, Moroni is commanded to hide these original records up again. (Ether 4:1, 3) That Moroni is told to hide them up again suggests they were already hidden” (pp. 21–22).

5. Now for reification through repetition and a sliding referent: “Since he did not expect to write this record and since the preface to the Book of Mormon suggests that the record was given a final hiding after the completion of the book of Ether, it is quite likely that the gold plates had been in their place of final hiding for some time. Yet when Moroni finishes his record, he is close enough to the final hiding place to add his record to the plates already hidden” (p. 22, emphasis added). This argument is mere assertion and confuses a hiding place with the final hiding place.

Problem 4

The final logical lapse is the most severe. The preceding argument just outlined for Hedengren’s transmutation of a
conjecture (a needed hiding place) into a fact (the final hiding place) reveals that the overall argument for a New York Cumorah/Ramah is founded on a deft sleight-of-hand—I suspect even an accidental and unrecognized one. The whole purpose of Hedengren’s detailed analysis of Moroni’s final years is to demonstrate that Moroni stayed in the vicinity of the hill Cumorah/Ramah until the very last recorded moment. But as the argument for Moroni’s sedentism progresses, Hedengren works a conjurer’s trick and transforms the conjecture of Moroni’s (1) need to hide the plates into (2) the fact of hidden plates and eventually into (3) the conclusion that Moroni’s temporary hiding place was actually the final hiding place from which Joseph Smith obtained the plates. So by the time the reader is willing to concede the trivial point that Moroni stayed put, he or she has swallowed the more controversial claim that Moroni built his stone box in the same hill in which his father Mormon had stored all of the rest of the plates.7 No textual evidence or “reasonable” logic supports this claim. When the facts are put on the table, the claim appears absurd. This supposed fact is mere conjecture parading as legitimate inference.

**Problem 5**

The final issue concerns a matter of evidence. To this point I have given Hedengren’s data claims and primary inferences the benefit of the doubt. As is clear in the preceding argument, he makes much of the preface to the Book of Mormon and uses it to argue for an episode in which Moroni retrieved the plates, lamented his sorry state, and then hid the record, again, in its final hiding place. The legitimate questions that Hedengren raises are: when was the preface written, where was it written, and by whom was it written? Given the importance of this supposed intermediary

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7 This scenario raises what I consider to be an interesting question: Why would Moroni bury the abridged plates in the same hill that housed the total record repository? Why hide them on the surface when they could be better hidden within the hill with all the other records? The obvious answer that occurs to me on this is ultimately unsatisfying as it meddles with divine intervention (i.e., separating the plates of Moroni from the rest of the plates for Joseph Smith’s benefit—perhaps to remove temptation).
episode in Moroni’s career, I am disappointed that Hedengren bypassed his opportunity to provide the reader with some legitimate scholarship here, touching on the questions he raises.

Joseph Smith informs us that the preface was “from the very last leaf” of the plates.8 This final placement brings immediately to mind the possibility that the title page was inscribed after the Book of Moroni and that the order of the leaves in the plates could relate to their writing sequence. I see no reason why this could not have been the case. But such a chronology would undermine Hedengren’s argument as presently constituted. As David Honey notes in his recent article on the title page of the Book of Mormon, opinions vary widely on when it was written and by whom.9 Some suggest that Mormon wrote the first part and that Moroni added to it later. In this scenario, it would have been Mormon who wrote “Written and sealed up, and hid up unto the Lord, that they might not be destroyed.” Moroni repeated much of the same message: “Sealed by the hand of Moroni, and hid up unto the Lord, to come forth in due time by way of the Gentile.”10

Hedengren is right that a lot of sealing and hiding appears to have taken place. But acknowledging the complexity of the composition of the preface and its physical placement in the bound plates, it is difficult to accept Hedengren’s uninformed claims concerning the completion date of the preface and then from this unsubstantiated postulate derive any useful information relevant to the final disposition of the records. It further stretches the point to make this the key evidence for the location of Cumorah/Ramah.

In conclusion, I find Hedengren’s logic for a New York Cumorah/Ramah unconvincing and unfortunate. I think any claim to establish the hill’s location from details of the text must consider all the clues available. Hedengren does not do this. He does not locate the probable place of Cumorah by carefully construct-

10 I am not sufficiently familiar with the details of this debate to comment further. I merely raise the point to call attention to the issue as the various interpretations have significant implications for Hedengren’s argument.
ing a whole geography; rather, he constructs the geography from presuming the location of the hill. And he has been a bit precipitous in making this identification. As noted, his attempt is ingenious, but it ultimately collapses because of logical flaws.

**Geography and Understanding**

A question that ought to be asked of every Book of Mormon geography is why it was written. Hedengren's stated purpose is to promote increased understanding of the lands and peoples mentioned in the book. The general metaphor alluded to is that of a picture puzzle. Attempts to locate Book of Mormon lands in the real world allow one to supply the missing pieces and fill in the picture. Consider, for example, Hedengren's key for evaluating geographies:

In evaluating theories about the geography of the Book of Mormon, three questions need to be carefully considered.

First, is there any characteristic of the proposed area that is clearly inconsistent with the text? . . .

Once an area is found to satisfy the textual requirements of the Book of Mormon, the second question is: How well does an understanding of the area further our understanding of events described in the text? . . .

. . . If a site is proposed as a battlefield and it turns out that the site has an impassable canyon to the south, our knowledge of the existence of that canyon helps us understand why none fled south. In this case knowing the actual site of the battle helps us fill in the picture given in the text and helps us understand why what is described occurred.

The final question to consider is: What cultural similarities exist between the people described in the text and the inhabitants of the proposed area, both ancient and at the time of initial European contact? (p. 2)

Greater understanding appears to be the laudable goal of all Book of Mormon geographies, but what kind of understanding is
involved? What do we mean? Following the picture metaphor, “understanding” would appear to be a more complete and coherent picture of what may have occurred.

Hedengren’s approach to picture-building and “understanding” results in several serious difficulties that I would like to put on record. If one were able to determine the actual location of Book of Mormon lands, Hedengren’s method of filling-in-the-picture with details supplied by local geography and ethnography would be perfectly acceptable. But the whole point is that the location of Book of Mormon lands is unknown and that individual geographies are attempts to identify them. Therefore, we need methods (1) of identifying probable locations and (2) of evaluating the relative merits of each proposed geographic correlation. Hedengren’s method of working dialectically between the text and a specific, real-world geography does not allow either, because both the text and the real-world geographic details become promiscuously compromised in the process. It is worth noting here that what I call the “dialectical method” is the most common approach used by geography hobbyists, and it has an abysmal record of failure because it promotes fallacious reasoning and compromise of textual and historical details.

However delicately one phrases it, the bottom line is that the dialectical method is an excuse for promoting one’s conjectures as facts. It is a method for “making all the pieces fit.” Mutual accommodation between text and physical feature is sought. For example, Hedengren argues that

In evaluating any region as a proposed site of Lehiite habitation, we should consider not only the consistency of the region to the text, but how well what is known about the region helps us understand the text. (p. 59)

This sounds noble and scientific but is really a recipe for disaster. What would happen, for instance, if one evaluated the text against the wrong backdrop (something that surely must happen more often than not)? Naive science would suppose that the evidence would not “fit” and thus prod us to move on to better prospects. This rarely occurs, however, in the real world of investigators enthused with their own novel ideas. The reality blatantly evident in
scores of Book of Mormon geographies is that intractable facts are either made to “fit” or are summarily ignored. With this tendency in mind, it is highly significant, I think, that most limited Great Lakes geographies use less than half of the geographic details in the Book of Mormon whereas Central American geographies employ many more. Hedengren’s own analysis only attempts to identify about thirty cities and natural features. Why so few?

Returning to the quest for understanding, what is really being sought? Are we interested in a clear, coherent picture or are we interested in the correct picture? How can we know when we have it right? In short, how can we distinguish between truth and entertainment? If by “understanding” we signal our commitment to the “truth” of a particular geography, then we claim more than is our right. If, however, by “understanding” we mean that we see things in a particular light—the truth or falsity of which remains in doubt—then our claim is legitimate but trivial.

To consider a specific example, the notion of “wilderness” has been interpreted in sundry ways. Nibley’s early work treated “wilderness” as some extension of Old World notions of desert wastes.11 On the other hand, limited Central American geographies interpret “wilderness” as thickly wooded mountains or even jungle. Limited Great Lakes geographies, in turn, presumably would treat “wilderness” as tracts of hardwood forest (I have yet to see a limited Great Lakes geography that even addresses the question of wilderness).12 Each of the “wildernesses” of these different geographies differs radically from the others, and reading the Book of Mormon in light of any one of them would lead to correspondingly different insights and understanding—at

12 The references in the Book of Mormon to various wildernesses in the New World have commonly been interpreted by those constructing geographies as a physiographic distinction between land forms or vegetation communities: wilderness and non-wilderness [habitable] lands. This distinction does not easily fit into the environmental situation of upper New York and its seemingly homogeneous, broad expanses of hardwood forests. It could be argued that “wilderness” is a perceived difference between cultivated and occupied lands (i.e., those that have been cleared) and native stands of vegetation rather than one signaling a marked physiographic feature of zone.
least two (and maybe all) of which would be erroneous, but perhaps intellectually stimulating. Should one imagine desiccated travelers with parched lips dragging themselves across some baked wasteland? Or should one envision men, women, children, and flocks pushing a path through the unyielding vegetation of some torrid jungle? Should these differences in interpretation make a difference? These are rather simple questions derived from a simple example, but they make an obvious point: "understanding" comes from prior commitment to a particular geographic scheme. It is preprogrammed in our initial biases.

All models will yield "insights," but only the correct model can yield true understanding. Unfortunately, no rational way exists to distinguish between pseudoinsight and the real thing short of knowing with certainty that one has correctly identified the location of Book of Mormon lands. Consequently, short of receiving pure revelation on the matter, one cannot choose among the geographies based upon what one feels are the relative insights of each, or on the relative completeness of each picture, because each will yield the same number of insights and be approximately of the same caliber.

To return to the metaphor, the different frames in which one attempts to assemble the geography puzzle pieces change the possible ways in which the pieces fit together and the theme of the image assembled. One geography may reveal the metaphorical equivalent of a mountain scene, another that of a river, another that of a garden, and so on. How should one choose from among these equally lovely and complete scenes? Surely, assessments of relative loveliness cannot help. Grounding the metaphor in real behavior, I am arguing that autoevaluations of relative inspiration, vis-à-vis a particular geographic model, are a poor measure by which to judge relative truth value.

The obvious answer for how to choose the best geography from the rest is that we need to know beforehand what scene we should be seeking. If we know it should be a mountain scene, for example, the choice would be simplified. Put in this manner, my claim may appear to be the height of philosophical naiveté. But investigators can approach this situation by constructing complete Book of Mormon geographies, however fuzzy the image, based solely on the text and avoiding prior commitments to a particular
piece of real estate where they hope the lands may have been. Geography hobbyists must do their homework within the Book of Mormon before venturing forth to “prove” that Lehite lands were located in a particular place in the real world, such as the country of one’s missionary experiences, place of birth, and so on. Every effort should be taken to avoid the temptation of playing the text off against a real-world setting in order to fill in the missing pieces. Surrendering to such a temptation robs one of the only viable tool for evaluating proposed geographies and choosing from among them.

Of course, the Book of Mormon also contains a wealth of detail concerning climate, flora and fauna, food crops, minerals, cultural beliefs and practices, architecture, tools, demographic trends, population movements, war, trade, and so forth. These details can be used for additional tests of any proposed geography. But as with details of the physical landscape, any proposed “tests” must be reconstructed independently of any real-world target. For example, I am personally convinced that the catastrophic events narrated in 3 Nephi conform to a clinical description of a volcanic eruption. Therefore, were I to take up the geography hobby, I would consider regions with evidence for recent volcanism and look, specifically, for a volcano that occurred in the first century A.D. The list of independent checks could be

13 I first heard this idea in a class from Dr. M. Wells Jakeman in 1974, and it was clear that he had plenty of historical examples to back up his claim. Perhaps this is absolutely the simplest test of a proposed Book of Mormon geography that one could devise: find a place in this hemisphere, near an ocean, with volcanoes that were active in the first century after Christ. It is significant that no limited New York geography will ever pass such a test. Of course, before the volcano criterion could constitute a valid test, a convincing case would have to be made for their presence based solely on the textual information in the Book of Mormon. John A. Tvedtines has recently made this case in “Historical Parallels to the Destruction at the Time of the Crucifixion,” Journal of Book of Mormon Studies 3/1 (1994): 170–86. I anticipate a number of responses to the above claim, all of which would raise a profound dilemma. In order to rescue any limited Great Lakes geography, advocates would have to find ways of arguing their way around the evidence for volcanoes. Undoubtedly this will be done. By so doing, these advocates will preserve the slim hopes for a limited geography centered around upstate New York. But what will they lose? For starters, to argue away the evidence for volcanoes would be to make a mockery of the descriptions in 3 Nephi. Of course, the Lord could make all these things happen anywhere and at
extended to several hundred. I would think that with all of these requirements, it would be a relatively simple matter to sort through the geography morass and identify the best one. For my money, Sorenson’s *Ancient American Setting* is still the best available on all counts (theoretical, methodological, inferential, and substantive).

**Concluding Remarks**

Evaluation of Book of Mormon geographies quickly becomes an onerous and tedious task, so why do it? As readers of this journal know, I engage in this diversionary activity from time to time whenever I encounter a novel argument that merits detailed treatment and one that I think should be of general interest. Contrary to the opinions of some, I do not evaluate geographies out of meanness, envy, or spite, but from a personal interest in the topic. Any book that claims to proclaim the truth about a topic as important as Book of Mormon lands ought to be subjected to the best criticism available. Unfortunately, those minds are generally otherwise occupied, and so I fill in when the opportunity presents itself.

The preceding criticisms and evaluation of Hedengren’s *The Land of Lehi* avoided the bulk of the text, so I do not pretend to have accorded it exhaustive treatment. The principal reason for this is that I do not think it deserves detailed consideration. I argued above that the primary claims of the book could not be logically sustained and that the whole method for proceeding was ill-advised. Hedengren skips the first and most critical step in constructing a geography, namely, the construction of an internal map that can be used to evaluate proposed correlations to the real world. Moreover, he advocates a promiscuous dialectic that has no anytime, but why discard the simple explanation that has recourse to natural phenomena when it is readily available? Such complex issues here deserve separate discussion. My point is that whenever the text of the Book of Mormon is forced into a particular scheme, the resulting distortions make the lands, peoples, customs, technology, and so forth less credible. Bad geography and simplistic anthropology always exact a terrible toll.

chance of helping him sort through the complex philosophical issues he raises.

In reading *The Land of Lehi*, one gets the sense that it was written in an intellectual vacuum. All other geographies are ignored, and this investigative ruse is justified by claiming that it is still too early to engage in comparative analysis. The failure to acknowledge previous studies is the primary weakness of most Book of Mormon geographies (perhaps forced ignorance is a necessary condition for writing something truly original). Until the various practitioners can overcome the colossal conceit implied in their self-imposed ignorance, all their attempts are doomed to fail.

As an interested reader of books on Book of Mormon geography, my primary question has to be: How does a particular geography stack up against the others? Hedengren does not say, nor does he provide any clues whereby a novice reader can formulate a legitimate opinion. My evaluation is that *The Land of Lehi* does not fare well. The book does have several redeeming qualities, as noted, but the tragedy of the book is that it could have been so much better had Hedengren attempted to incorporate the best of what others had done. To conclude: *caveat lector!*