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Andrew H. Hedges
andrew_hedges@byu.edu

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Teachers and students of the Book of Mormon may grapple with questions concerning the location of events in the New World.

Image from *Hammond Odyssey World Atlas* (Canada, rev. 2001 ed.), 49.

The Narrow Neck of Land

Andrew H. Hedges

Andrew H. Hedges (andrew_hedges@byu.edu) is an associate professor of ancient scripture at BYU.

At some point, most teachers and students of the Book of Mormon grapple with questions concerning the location of Book of Mormon events in the New World. Scholars and readers from Joseph Smith's day to the present have tried their hand at locating key features and sites mentioned in the text, and we can count several dozen scenarios proposed over the years.¹ Arguing that the text's "narrow neck of land" (Ether 10:20) lay somewhere between southern Mexico and Colombia, most proposed geographies locate the bulk of Book of Mormon events in Central or South America. Others have suggested limited sites centered in the eastern United States, specifically near the Susquehanna River and around the Great Lakes.²

Of the various models proposed over the years, John L. Sorenson's limited Mesoamerican geography is arguably the most widely accepted.³ A key feature of Sorenson's geography is his identification of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the "narrow neck of land." Sorenson arrives at this identification using several pieces of information, not the least of which is Mormon's description that it was "a day and a half's journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea," across this narrow neck of land (Alma 22:32)—somewhere potentially between 50 and 144 miles, Sorenson argues, with a "plausible compromise range" somewhere between 75 and 125 miles.⁴ Ruling out potential sites to the south of the Yucatan Peninsula, Sorenson concludes that "the only 'narrow neck' potentially

acceptable in terms of the Book of Mormon requirements is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico,” whose 120-mile breadth at its narrowest point “is just within the range of plausibility” he establishes.⁵

In this article, I argue three related points: first, if one accepts the range of distances Sorenson proposes for a “day and a half’s journey for a Nephite,” the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is actually too wide to meet the requirements of the text; second, there are good textual reasons for looking for a much narrower isthmus even if one increases the theoretical distance a Nephite could travel in a day and a half; and third, other “narrow necks of land” in Panama and perhaps Costa Rica are a better fit with the text of the Book of Mormon. While I am calling Sorenson’s theory into question, it must be emphasized that I am not arguing for the absolute impossibility of Tehuantepec’s candidacy for the “narrow neck of land.” My point is simply that there are good reasons for teachers, scholars, and students to be cautious in their acceptance of this popular theory and that other sites in Central America fit better with the textual evidence.⁶

Implications of Helaman 4:7

The most important textual challenge to the Tehuantepec thesis is in Helaman 4. In this chapter, Mormon recounts how Nephite dissenters and Lamanites “succeeded in obtaining possession of the land of Zarahemla; yea, and also all the lands, even unto the land which was near the land Bountiful” (Helaman 4:5). The routed Nephite armies retreated north “even into the land of Bountiful; and there they did fortify against the Lamanites, from the west sea, even unto the east; it being a day’s journey for a Nephite, on the line which they had fortified and stationed their armies to defend their north country” (Helaman 4:6–7).⁷

That a Nephite could make it across the narrow neck in a single day—that is, one-third less the time than the “day and a half’s journey” along the line Bountiful and Desolation—has significant implications for Sorenson’s thesis. Arguing that 125 miles was the most a Nephite could plausibly travel in a day and a half, and with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec being 120 miles at its narrowest, Sorenson is saying that it would take a Nephite a minimum of a day and a half to get across the isthmus. But the narrow neck to which Mormon refers could actually be crossed—apparently at some point other than along the “line Bountiful and the land Desolation”—in a single day. If Sorenson’s conclusions about how far a Nephite might plausibly travel in a day and a half are

correct, and if the amount of time required to cross the narrow neck is directly proportional to the distance across the narrow neck, then a distance of eighty-two miles or so—that is, one-third less the 125-mile distance a Nephite could travel in a day and a half—is the widest distance possible for Mormon’s narrow neck. Sorenson’s suggestion that a Nephite might potentially be able to travel 144 miles in a day and a half (a distance significantly beyond what he considers plausible) would allow our Nephite to travel ninety-six miles in a single day, but this is still more than twenty miles shorter than Tehuantepec’s width. At 120 miles across at its narrowest, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is simply too wide for the numbers Sorenson and Mormon present.

Sorenson bases his proposed distances on the “nearly 100 miles a day” some California Native Americans were reportedly capable of traveling under nineteenth-century conditions.⁸ As applicable as these numbers appear to be to the question of what an exceptional Nephite could have done in a real-world situation 2,100 years ago, the theoretical possibility of a Nephite traveling 120 miles in one day should be noted. According to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, a runner in New York City covered 153.76 miles in a twenty-four-hour period in April 2004—almost thirty-four miles more than the distance across Tehuantepec. Similarly, top runners generally complete the hundred-mile races that are becoming popular today in under fifteen hours, opening the door to the possibility of 120 miles being run in eighteen hours or so. How applicable these data are to estimating how far a Nephite might have been able to travel in a day, however, is another issue. The twenty-four-hour record, for example, was set on a treadmill, indoors, in a lighted room, by a runner well stocked with food and water and decked out in the most up-to-date running gear—a far cry from the conditions that would have faced a Nephite trying to make it across a narrow neck of land in Mesoamerica. The hundred-mile races, which are run outdoors, better approximate the conditions that would have faced a Nephite, but only roughly; again, the well-marked route, the running shoes, the water and juice stands, and the accompanying support crew give the clear advantage to the modern athlete. With people logging these distances and times today, however, the possibility that a Nephite, under ideal conditions, could have covered 120 miles in twenty-four hours or less is clearly a real one.

It is also possible that our Nephite was mounted on a horse rather than on foot when he crossed the narrow neck in a single day.⁹ How much this would have increased the distance he would have been capable of traveling is debatable. Most nineteenth-century Americans

considered fifty miles to be a long day's ride, although we do have reports of some Mexican riders, on Spanish horses, who were capable of traveling 100 or 120 miles in a single day in nineteenth-century California.¹⁰ This again brings us within reach, barely, of the distance across Tehuantepec. Differences between the equipment used by the Mexican riders (such as horseshoes), however, compared to the Nephite riders, and the fact that we have no clear evidence that the Nephites even rode horses,¹¹ call into serious question how reliably we might be able to apply this information to the Book of Mormon.

“A Day's Journey” in Context

While it appears, then, that we should accept the possibility of a Nephite making it over the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in twenty-four hours or less, it also seems clear that such a feat, either on foot or on horseback, would have been an extraordinary one for the time. Yet the words Mormon uses to describe this trip across the narrow neck of land—“a day's journey” or “a day and half's journey” for a Nephite—lack any hint that it was an exceptional performance, especially when compared with how Mormon and others use these same words elsewhere in the text. Rather than suggesting an almost superhuman effort, for example, all other occurrences of the word *journey* and its derivatives in the Book of Mormon are used in the context of average people—often with families, belongings, and animals—traveling under a variety of circumstances. Nephi and his brothers “took [their] journey . . . with [their] tents” from Lehi's camp to Jerusalem to obtain the brass plates (1 Nephi 3:9); Lehi's family “journey[ed] into the wilderness (1 Nephi 16:9, 33; see also 4:38; 5:6, 22; 7:5, 6; 17:1, 12; 18:25; 19:1; Mosiah 1:17; Alma 18:37; 37:41), as did the people of Mulek on their way to the promised land (see Omni 1:16). Nephi and his followers, similarly, loaded with “tents and whatsoever things were possible, . . . did journey” in the wilderness to escape Laman (2 Nephi 5:7; see also Mosiah 10:1); Zeniff's colonizers “took their journey” from Zarahemla to the land of Nephi (Omni 1:29; see also Mosiah 9:3); and Alma the Elder's “four hundred and fifty souls” (Mosiah 18:35), together with their flocks and grain, “fled eight days' journey into the wilderness” (Mosiah 23:3; see also 24:24). Limhi's people “journeyed” as well (see Mosiah 22:12), as did missionaries in the course of their labors (see Mosiah 28:9; Alma 17:1, 5, 6, 9, 18; 21:1; 28:8). This included Alma the Younger (Alma 8:3, 6, 13, 14), who met Amulek “journeying to see a very near kindred” (Alma 10:7) near Ammonihah. Other examples could be offered, but the point is clear: *journeying* was an activity

in which many people engaged under a variety of circumstances, rather than an exceptional feat of endurance.

We can do the same with the word *day*. As we have seen, the only chance a Nephite had of making it across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in “a day” was if Mormon understood the word to refer to a twenty-four-hour period, or at least to a length of time several hours longer than daylight lasts in central American latitudes. Nowhere, however, does Mormon or any other writer in the Book of Mormon use the word *day* to denote such a length of time. To be sure, there are many instances where the precise length of time meant by *day* is ambiguous—precisely how long Alma’s people were on the move, for example, when they “traveled all day” in their flight from the Lamanites is unclear (Mosiah 24:20). On the other hand, there are numerous occasions where Mormon and other writers clearly meant something like “daytime” or “from dawn to dusk” when they used the word *day* to refer to a length of time. Enos, for example, cried “all the day long” for forgiveness and continued to pray “when the night came” (Enos 1:4); the Nephites “did pursue the Amlicites all that day,” after which they “did pitch their tents for the night” (Alma 2:19–20; compare 56:40); and the armies of Shiz and Coriantumr “fought all . . . day” several days in a row, retiring to their respective camps each night (Ether 15:20; see also vv. 15–26).

Day is also juxtaposed against *night* when a day of the calendar is meant—the best-known instance perhaps being the “day and a night and a day, as if it were one day and there were no night” that would signal the birth of the Savior (Helaman 14:4; see also 3 Nephi 1:19). Similarly, we read how the Jaredites praised the Lord “all the day long; and when the night came, they did not cease to praise the Lord” (Ether 6:9) and how Ether “hid himself in the cavity of a rock by day, and by night he went forth viewing the things which should come upon the people” (Ether 13:13). In Alma, we read of the Nephites who “fought valiantly by day and toiled by night,” and whose spies watched the Lamanites continually “that they might not pass [them] by night nor by day” and get in their rear (Alma 56:16, 22; compare 3 Nephi 3:14). Nephi reported how the Lord “heard [his] cry by day” and gave him “knowledge by visions in the nighttime” (2 Nephi 4:23; compare 9:52, 33:3). Even several doctrinal discourses preserve and utilize the idea that *day* meant “daytime.” Jacob, for example, urged his audience to “harden not [their] hearts” while the Lord’s “arm of mercy is extended . . . in the light of the day” (Jacob 6:5); Amulek reminded the Zoramites that “after this day of life . . . cometh the night of darkness

wherein there can be no labor performed” (Alma 34:33); and Alma taught Corianton that “he [who] has desired to do evil all the day long . . . shall . . . have his reward of evil when the night cometh” (Alma 41:5). Numerous other examples could be cited, but the point should be clear: each time the word *day* is qualified by the context, it means “daytime.” Never does it appear by the context to refer specifically to a twenty-four-hour period.

In the context of Book of Mormon usage, then, “a day’s journey for a Nephite” appears to be the distance someone could be expected to travel under common conditions during daylight hours. The only thing in this phrase that might suggest something out of the ordinary is its reference to “a” Nephite rather than to a group—a reference not unlike the generic “unburdened man” of Herodotus, perhaps, who could reportedly make it across the “narrowest neck” of Asia Minor in five days.¹² Otherwise, it appears to have been a distance with which many people could relate from their own travel experiences—indeed, one has a difficult time understanding how such a phrase could have been useful among the Nephites unless it had some sort of universal applicability.¹³ Without more data, any actual numbers we might propose can be considered only estimates, but if we assume that a “journeying” Nephite averaged between two and four miles per hour and that he could travel for some eight or twelve hours, Mormon’s “day’s journey for a Nephite” falls somewhere between sixteen and fifty miles.¹⁴

Central America and the Narrow Neck

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is the northernmost “narrow neck of land” in southern Mexico and Central America. The closest potential “narrow neck” to the south—a line running from northwest Honduras to southeast El Salvador—is even wider, at 150 miles. Moving farther south, the first place where less than one hundred air miles separates the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean is in northern Costa Rica, although it is with difficulty that one is able to find a constriction here representing a “neck” between larger land masses to the north and south. Such a neck is perhaps easier to see in southern Costa Rica, where a seventy-mile neck of sorts is found, and in western Panama, where only forty miles separate the Pacific from the Caribbean. “Narrow necks” of forty-five and fifty miles occur just west and east of the Azuero Peninsula, with others—like today’s Canal Zone—occurring farther east still. Just before Panama’s border with Colombia, the distance between the Pacific and Caribbean jumps again to eighty-five or ninety miles.

Moving south from the United States, then, and using the numbers Sorenson provides, the first place that presents itself as a possible candidate for the “narrow neck” is in northern Costa Rica, where the distance between the Pacific and either the Gulf of Mexico or the Caribbean first drops below one hundred miles. And not until we reach Panama, where the distance between the Pacific and Caribbean drops to between fifty and thirty miles at several points, do we find sites narrow enough to be “a day’s journey for a Nephite” as Mormon apparently understood the phrase. While not definitive, one could argue that these Panamanian “narrow necks” also fit other descriptions in text better than sites to the north. In a story we have already referenced, for example, the Nephites were able to prevent the Lamanites from advancing into the land northward by “fortify[ing] against the Lamanites, from the west sea, even unto the east” (Helaman 4:7; for a similar situation, see Alma 52:9). While the possibility that the Nephites could have fortified a line 120 miles long against a superior number of the enemy is not entirely out of the question, it requires far more explanation than the proposition that their line was only thirty or forty miles long. Similarly, Mormon’s statement that “the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were nearly surrounded by water, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward” (Alma 22:32), appears to give the seas in the vicinity of Zarahemla and Nephi a presence and influence in the local geography greater than appears likely near Tehuantepec, but in a way that accords well with Panamanian geography. Given Panama’s relative width, one also sees the Gulf of San Miguel, Chiriqui Lagoon, Lake Gutan, and Lake Bayano potentially answering to the enigmatic “place where the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20) better than any feature in the vicinity of Tehuantepec.¹⁵ The text is too vague in its descriptions for any of these observations to be conclusive, but it is clear that a “narrow neck” in or near Panama presents fewer difficulties than one at Tehuantepec in light of important textual descriptions about the area.¹⁶

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that if one accepts the data John Sorenson provides on how far a Nephite could have traveled in a day and a half, the 120-mile-wide Isthmus of Tehuantepec is too wide to be the Nephites’ “narrow neck of land.” While I cite evidence suggesting that we might legitimately increase the theoretical distance a Nephite could have traveled in a day, I argue from textual evidence that “a day’s journey” or “a day and a half’s journey” for a Nephite was substantially

less than the distance across Tehuantepec. In light of these and other considerations, I suggest that sites in or near modern Panama fit the textual evidence and descriptions we have for the “narrow neck” better than Tehuantepec. This last suggestion is made only on the basis of matching the available data on the distance across the narrow neck of land with a real-world location. Of course, many other issues, such as the archaeology and anthropology of the area, would need to be addressed before any firm conclusions could be drawn about the viability of this suggestion on a broader front.¹⁷ My intent is simply to point out where an existing theory runs afoul of the available data—including its own—on a fundamental feature of Book of Mormon geography and to suggest a possible point of departure for further research. **RE**

Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992), 38–206.

2. Most notably, see Delbert W. Curtis, *Christ in North America* (Tigard, OR: Resource Communications, 1993); Duane R. Aston, *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (Sacramento: American River Publications, 1998); Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, UT: Tepran, 1999); and Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2000). For a critique of these “Limited Great Lakes” models, see John E. Clark, “Evaluating the Case for a Limited Great Lakes Setting,” *FARMS Review of Books* 14, nos. 1–2 (2002), 9–77.

3. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, UT: FARMS, 1996).

4. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 17.

5. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 29, 36.

6. Other ideas about Book of Mormon geography currently popular with some scholars and students have been challenged recently as well. These include the thesis that the Nephites’ and Jaredites’ final battles must have taken place close to the “narrow neck of land” and the suggestion that most early Church members, including leaders, originally subscribed to a “hemispheric” model of Book of Mormon geography, which they later abandoned in favor of a more limited geography centered in Central America (see Andrew H. Hedges, “Text and Model: Cumorah and the Limited Mesoamerican Theory,” *Journal of Book of Mormon and Restoration Scripture*, forthcoming publication, Spring 2008; Andrew H. Hedges, “Book of Mormon Geography in the World of Joseph Smith,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 8, nos. 1–2 [Spring/Fall 2007], 77–89).

7. Sorenson fails to consider this verse in his reconstruction of Book of Mormon geography, as a review of his “Scripture References” shows (see Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 407).

8. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 9, 17.

9. Sorenson entertains the possibility of the narrow neck being traversed by “some mode of travel other than on foot” but ultimately bases his calculations on

“foot travel—probably the normal mode” (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 17).

10. Andrew H. Hedges, “First Impressions: California Through the Eyes of Its Early Saints, 1846–1857,” in *Regional Studies in Latter-day Saint Church History: California*, ed. David F. Boone, Robert C. Freeman, Andrew H. Hedges, and Richard Neitzel Holzapfel (Provo, UT: Department of Church History and Doctrine, Brigham Young University, 1998), 13.

11. The only references we have to any Book of Mormon peoples using horses for travel has Lamanites using them to pull chariots (see Alma 18:9–12; 20:6).

12. Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. A. D. Godley, 1.72 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 89. In a comment relevant to the current discussion, Godley believes it to be “much more than a five days’ march” across the 280-mile “narrow neck” of Asia Minor.

13. This is how we often use such phrases today. When someone from Ogden, Utah, asks me how far it is to Yellowstone, for example, and I tell him “four or five hours,” I am assuming he will be traveling under the conditions one from Ogden usually travels to Yellowstone. Unless I have good reason to do so, I do not base my answer on the assumption that he will be flying in a plane, even though such a travel option is not out of the question. Nor do I base my answer on the assumption that he will be driving a high-performance race car with the freeways and highways devoid of traffic and a well-trained pit crew stationed every twenty miles along the route. An answer based on these assumptions might indicate how quickly one could get to Yellowstone under exceptional conditions but would have little meaning and utility for the average person. By the same token, the phrases Mormon uses would have been far more useful among the Nephites if they conveyed the idea of how far an average person could expect to travel over the course of any given day or day and a half than if they represented exceptional people and conditions.

14. Archaeologists generally calculate “a day’s walk” or “a day of travel” in ancient Mesoamerica to have been about twenty to thirty kilometers, or twelve to nineteen miles (see Arthur Demarest, *Ancient Maya: The Rise and Fall of a Rain-forest Civilization* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004], 152; Richard E. Blanton and others, *Ancient Oaxaca* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 89).

15. Like Helaman 4:7 (see note 7 above), Ether 10:20 does not appear in Sorenson’s reconstruction (see Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 408).

16. It should be noted here that Sorenson rejects Panama as a candidate for the “narrow neck” on the grounds that “Limhi’s exploring party [see Mosiah 8:7–8; 21:25–26] could hardly have passed through it and returned without realizing that they had left the land of Zarahemla” (Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 29; see also 14, 16–17). There are at least two problems with this line of reasoning, however. First, the text provides no evidence that Limhi’s men knew that Zarahemla lay south of the “narrow neck”; and second, it is quite conceivable that forty-three men could have traveled through one of the heavily forested “narrow necks” of Panama without realizing the distance to the sea on either side of them was shorter than it had been. Had they known as much about the general location of Zarahemla, as Sorenson suggests, it is doubtful they would have been as “lost” as they were (see Mosiah 8:8; 21:25). In short, Sorenson’s rejection of

Panama as a possible “narrow neck” rests more on his assumptions about the text than on the text itself.

17. This may be easier said than done at this point. Situated between the high cultural centers to the north and south, Panama has received relatively little attention from archaeologists over the years. Some might view this as evidence in and of itself that the area was not home to a people with as complex a civilization as the Nephites, but such a conclusion would be unwarranted. To date, none of the sites excavated in southern Mexico and Central America have been clearly identified with any of the events or places of the Book of Mormon, and the question of what Nephite or Jaredite remains should look like is very much an open one. Until a positive identification is made, scholars should be open to a variety of possibilities regarding the form Nephite and Jaredite remains might take and where they might be found.