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Abstract Review of *Mormon's Map* (2000), by John L. Sorenson.

INTERPRETING BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY

Randall P. Spackman

Mormon's Map is John L. Sorenson's most recent compilation and discussion of Book of Mormon passages relating to geography. The book is composed of 128 pages of understandable text (including seventeen maps illustrating geographical features mentioned in the text). Fifty-four endnotes (pp. 129–34), a scripture index (pp. 135–42), a subject index (pp. 143–54), and various other resources make this book a compact research tool. The inside front cover contains “Mormon's Map,” a blue-and-green graphic resembling the maps of biblical lands found at the end of the King James Version of the Holy Bible published by the church in 1979. A legend listing geographical details (that are indicated on the map only by numbers) accompanies this map. Another multicolored map entitled “Major Physical Features” is placed on the inside back cover, permitting the reader to refer quickly to general topographic features.

Mormon's Map revisits many of the verses in the Book of Mormon that were mined for geographical meaning in the author's earlier and larger volumes: *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (1985) and *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*

Review of John L. Sorenson. *Mormon's Map*. Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000. x + 154 pp., with notes, scripture and subject indexes. \$9.95.

(1992).¹ Indeed, the concluding paragraph in *Mormon's Map* asserts that “the features found on ‘Mormon’s Map’ as presented in this book are more carefully defined, more logically cross-checked, and more numerous than the criteria in the 1992 work” (p. 128). My first impression of *Mormon’s Map*—the sort of impression one would get in a bookstore after browsing through the book for a few minutes—was that it provided an attractively packaged, readable, and relatively thorough guide for anyone interested in a reasoned interpretation of Book of Mormon geography.

What Is Mormon’s Map?

Sorenson indicates that what he has called “Mormon’s Map” would, in its ideal form, be a “two-dimensional rendering of the body of information about geography that Mormon possessed in his mind” (p. 125). However, the version of Mormon’s map set forth in Sorenson’s book can only be “a reasonable approximation” (p. 126) of “the Nephites’ *conception* of their geography” based on “all the information [Sorenson has] been able to elicit from Mormon’s words and those of other Book of Mormon writers” (pp. 17, 126, emphasis in original).

Sorenson acknowledges that Mormon’s map is “simplified” and “partial” because “even Mormon could not have recalled at the time he was writing all the knowledge he had acquired about the lands he personally traversed” (p. 125). In addition, “Mormon drew on what he knew of geography and shed light on those matters only when it seemed required in order to formulate his account. . . . He wanted to teach moral lessons to future readers, not instruct them about sheer facts of history and geography. Geography was significant for his task at some points, but not central to it” (p. 125). Finally, the map is “incomplete” because it “can be improved, and will be if we discover new points in the text of the Book of Mormon that require change in the map” (p. 126).

1. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985); and John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, rev. ed. (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992).

Does Book of Mormon Geography Matter?

Mormon's Map begins with a crucial question: Does geography in the Book of Mormon matter? Sorenson supports his affirmative response by discussing five concepts: (1) Joseph Smith's characterization of the Book of Mormon as "the keystone of our religion"; (2) Brigham Young's questioning challenge to engage all our faculties as readers of scripture (p. 1); (3) Sorenson's belief that the promise of the Book of Mormon (interestingly, he cites 2 Nephi 11:8 rather than the more often utilized Moroni 10:3–5) can be more powerfully fulfilled if the reader's understanding and sense of realism are enhanced by a clearly delineated geographical setting (pp. 2–3); (4) the importance of geography ("precious lands") for the working out of the Lord's purposes (1 Nephi 17:23–26, 32–38) (pp. 3–4); and (5) the "limited and unsystematized" state of our knowledge concerning Book of Mormon geography. Sorenson notes that "a superb set of maps" is included in our edition of the Holy Bible and additional maps began to be included in the Doctrine and Covenants with the 1981 edition of those scriptures. "But our copies of the Book of Mormon still lack even the most basic map to clarify the complicated goings and comings reported in our keystone scripture" (p. 4).

I would add a proposition to the concepts discussed by Sorenson. Book of Mormon geography is vital because it helps to reveal accurate information and to establish rational inferences related to the meaning and truthfulness² of the Book of Mormon as an ancient text. As to geography, the Book of Mormon is Joseph Smith's translation of an ancient document that was originally written by record keepers who perceived events happening in real locations. Book of

2. "In the scriptures and in general usage of the Church, the term 'true' usually means that the events really, literally and actually happened. . . . For the record, the definitions listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the adjective 'true' used of things (such as books) or events in the time of Joseph Smith are 2. 'honest, honourable, upright, virtuous, trustworthy (*arch.*); free from deceit, sincere, truthful;' 3. 'consistent with fact; agreeing with the reality; representing the thing as it is.' 4f. 'conformable to reality.'" John Gee, "La Trahison des Clercs: On the Language and Translation of the Book of Mormon," *FARMS Review of Books* 6/1 (1994): 55 n. 12.

Mormon geography provides the internal clues from which theories can be constructed as to where such locations might be found. External sources (historical, archaeological, geological, geographical, ethnological, and so forth) may then be examined for corroboration or correction of the theories. For example, in the Near Eastern setting in which Lehi originated, we now have several proposed locations in the same general vicinity for the so-called “valley of Lemuel” (1 Nephi 2:10), and one of the locations appears to contain a river running “continually” (1 Nephi 2:9) from a spring.³ In another example, Nephi refers to the followers of Lehi passing through “the place which was called Nahom” (1 Nephi 16:34) and then turning “nearly eastward” and enduring “much affliction in the wilderness” before finally reaching “the land which [they] called Bountiful” on the seacoast (1 Nephi 17:1–6). Now it has been found that in a setting where Book of Mormon geography would place the location of Nahom, a place called “Nehhm” existed (according to an eighteenth-century map). References in related writings from several centuries earlier mention a pagan god (“Nuhum”), a tribal ancestor (“Nuham”), and a region and tribe (“Nihm”). Most recently, archaeological investigations in the area have unearthed an inscribed stone altar from the seventh or sixth century B.C. (about the time of Lehi) referring to the tribe of “Nihm.”⁴ Such tangible support indicates that the events described in the Book of Mormon were not the imagined novelties of Joseph Smith but reasonably could have happened just where and when the book says they occurred.

Such evidence (whether geological, topographical, cultural, geographical, or environmental) is not a prerequisite for the development of a basic understanding and spiritual acceptance of and loyal commitment to the religious message of the Book of Mormon. The work-

3. George D. Potter, “A New Candidate in Arabia for the ‘Valley of Lemuel,’” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 54–63.

4. S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place That Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 66–68.

ings of the Holy Spirit are not dependent on educational attainments, scholarly acceptance, or scientific advances. Perhaps these facts are related to Sorenson's reasons for not expressly mentioning this line of argument. His book seems primarily addressed to Latter-day Saints who, in the overwhelming majority, are neither educationally ready nor sufficiently funded to develop carefully drawn theories, to pursue and examine potential data, to recognize physical substantiation, and, where necessary, to suggest modifications to prevailing interpretations of Book of Mormon geography. For such readers, *Mormon's Map* fills the purpose of providing a reasonably careful guide to current views about the geography of the Book of Mormon.

Nonetheless, Book of Mormon geography is vital to the establishment and management of an efficient and productive process for developing theories about, and seeking and finding material evidence related to, the Book of Mormon. The Lord has declared that the Book of Mormon "contains the truth and the word of God" (D&C 19:26), and he has commanded us to "grow . . . in the knowledge of the truth" (D&C 50:40). Surely that divinely intended growth may involve an organized process for extending our knowledge about the people and geography described in the Book of Mormon.

Sorenson does address the issue of Latter-day Saint church leaders having already settled questions about Nephite geography. He makes it clear that early suppositions of church members about a hemispheric geography ignored the evidence to be found in the text of the Book of Mormon. Sorenson also quotes church leaders and publications to show that no authoritative map or geography has ever been revealed or adopted, remarking that "what logically would seem to be one of the first steps in a systematic investigation—to construct a map of the American 'land of promise' based solely on statements in [the Book of Mormon] (at least 550 passages are relevant)—seems not to have occurred to anyone during the church's first century" (p. 4). The investigative efforts in the second century have resulted in "tremendous confusion and a plethora of notions that holds no promise of producing a consensus" (p. 5), primarily because most writers fail to take the first step of detailed textual examination.

Mormon's Map is Sorenson's most recent effort to provide such a first-step analysis for a general Latter-day Saint audience.⁵

A Comprehensive Process

In the book's second chapter, Sorenson describes the process for developing "Mormon's Map." The starting point, certainly, is the text itself. "Whatever the Book of Mormon says about its own geography . . . takes precedence over anything commentators have said of it" (p. 9). Sorenson advises that we must "intensively examine the text Mormon left us (of course, we have access to it only as it has been transmitted to us in English through Joseph Smith)" (p. 12). This is a premise he also sets forth in *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*:

If we are serious about answering the question [Where were the lands in which Book of Mormon events took place?] . . . what should we do . . . ? Well, the question itself has two sides to it. Our goal has to be to construct an equation involving the two sides:

Nephite locations A, B, C, etc. = New World locations X, Y, Z, etc.

We cannot work on the whole equation without first attaining thorough definition of the variables on either side of the equal sign. Equipping ourselves with that thorough knowledge demands different capabilities on the one side and on the other. For the external world, we cannot substitute knowledge of

5. Sorenson's *Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* interweaves a first-step analysis with his knowledge and beliefs derived from years of study and writing on the topic of Nephite geography. His *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* is another first step, and the map with which it concludes is virtually the same as "Mormon's Map." These are valuable research tools. However, the 1985 book moves rapidly from the text of the Book of Mormon to the geography and cultures of Mesoamerica and back again. The 1992 work does not connect the scriptural passages, Sorenson's inferences about Nephite geography from such passages, and the proposed map as seamlessly or as comprehensively as does *Mormon's Map*.

scripture for knowledge of climate, topography, hydrography, etc. Unavoidably, we must have a profound grasp of the elements of the physical and cultural scene in its own terms—without any reference to the scripture. Most people offering [geographic] models show that they have limited knowledge of that world. On the other side, we must know all there is to know about the statements in the Book of Mormon on the matters at hand—without any reference to external geography, archaeology, or history.

Everything done so far in studying the geography of Book of Mormon events [presumably including Sorenson's earlier writings] has been inadequate by reason of incompleteness, if not of real errors.⁶

John E. Clark addresses the same issue in his article “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” published in 1989.⁷ He examines the Book of Mormon passages he thought were important in developing an understanding of an “elemental” geography described in the book. Clark seems to be the first to attempt to treat the geography of the Book of Mormon solely from an internal standpoint and to base his thoughts on “all the geographical passages in the Book of Mormon.”⁸ Because of the importance of Clark's 1989 article and Sorenson's 1992 book with respect to the topic treated in *Mormon's Map*, this review will refer to these earlier studies. For example, Clark addresses the issue of textual examination as follows:

It has been my experience that most members of the Church, when confronted with a Book of Mormon geography, worry about the wrong things. Almost invariably the first question that arises is whether the geography fits the archaeology of the proposed area. This should be our second question,

6. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 209.

7. John E. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” *FARMS Review of Books* 1 (1989): 20–70.

8. *Ibid.*, 23, 22.

the first being whether the geography fits the facts of the Book of Mormon—a question we all can answer without being versed in American archaeology. Only after a given geography reconciles all of the significant geographic details given in the Book of Mormon does the question of archaeological and historical detail merit attention. The Book of Mormon must be the final and most important arbiter in deciding the correctness of a given geography; otherwise we will be forever hostage to the shifting sands of expert opinion.⁹

With the fervent injunction (and leadership) of Clark and Sorenson requiring us to focus our attention on the text of the Book of Mormon as a first step in creating a realistic geography, the next crucial issue seems to be finding all the passages of text on which our focus is to rest. Both authors begin with Alma 22 and quickly build interpretative links to other passages of text. According to *Mormon's Map*,

the nearest thing to a systematic explanation of Mormon's geographical picture is given in Alma 22:27–34. In the course of relating an incident involving Nephite missionaries and the great king over the Lamanites, Mormon inserted a 570-word aside that summarized major features of the land southward. He must have considered that treatment full and clear enough for his purposes, because he never returned to the topic. Overall, over 550 verses in the Book of Mormon contain information of geographical significance: the account is steeped with information about the where of Nephite events. (p. 9)

Having read Sorenson's analysis, my assumption was that I could readily find the more than 550 verses mentioned by Sorenson if I looked in the scripture index to *Mormon's Map*. In fact, I found 637 verses.¹⁰ Clark used 318 verses to develop his "elemental" geography

9. Ibid., 21.

10. A few errors in the verses referenced in *Mormon's Map*, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, and Clark's "Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies" had to be corrected.

of the Book of Mormon. In light of this discrepancy in number of verses, I began to wonder how many verses in the Book of Mormon have been thought to hold meaning for someone intently seeking an understanding of the book's geography. More importantly, I wondered which verses they were.

Before reading *Mormon's Map*, I had been aware of the proposed internal or textual examination of Book of Mormon geography primarily through Sorenson's *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*; I therefore turned to part 4 of his 1992 study and counted the textual references: 725 verses. At this point, I questioned to what extent the verses identified by Sorenson matched those of Clark. I wondered whether Sorenson's 1992 study and *Mormon's Map* referred to essentially the same textual passages.

While Sorenson and Clark both started with Alma 22, they went on to examine quite different sets of verses. Of Clark's 318 verses, 85 did not show up in Sorenson's *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* and 140 verses were not cited in *Mormon's Map*. Of the 725 verses cited in *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 233 were listed in Clark's paper and 492 were "new" verses. Looking at *Mormon's Map*, I found that only 178 cited verses were listed in Clark's paper and only 201 verses came from the "new" verses listed in *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*. That is, of the 637 verses cited in *Mormon's Map*, neither Clark nor Sorenson had identified 258 verses earlier as being relevant to Book of Mormon geography. Furthermore, of the 492

In *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 249, Sorenson lists Alma 23:34, but this verse does not exist. In *Mormon's Map*, 96, 137, he refers to Alma 23:20 and 25, and these verses do not exist. These references probably should be to Mosiah 23:20, 25, and 34. Similarly, Clark refers to Alma 58:61 (p. 32) and Alma 62:8–9 (p. 41), but these probably should be Alma 51:26 and 62:18–19. In addition, both Clark and Sorenson occasionally refer to entire chapters in the Book of Mormon as being generally relevant. Often, specific verses in the chapter are also cited. Such general chapter references have value to a dedicated reader, but I did not add all such verses into the count. I thought that the occasional reference to an entire chapter materially skewed the count. Hence, only the verses cited by each author as having specific interpretative value are included. Finally, *Mormon's Map* might be interpreted as referring to specific verses when it cites 1 Nephi 18:23–Omni 1:13 (p. 108) and Mormon 2:16–6:6 (p. 50), but these citations are treated like chapter references and are not counted.

“new” verses listed in *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, fully 291 did not receive any mention in *Mormon’s Map*.

Table 1 below shows the distribution of verses with potential geographical significance cited in Clark’s article and in Sorenson’s *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* and *Mormon’s Map*. As the table depicts, Clark’s study of Book of Mormon passages relevant to geography relies almost entirely on verses in the books of Alma and Mosiah (86 percent of the cited verses). These books are also vital to Sorenson’s *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* (63 percent of the cited verses) and *Mormon’s Map* (53 percent of the cited verses). Nonetheless, Sorenson’s work indicates a capacity to expand the scope of inquiry outside the books of Alma and Mosiah and to find geographical inferences in a wide variety of scriptural contexts. This does not mean that Clark’s work is defective; he apparently did not intend to go beyond an “elemental” geography. Sorenson, on the other hand, has dedicated a tremendous amount of time to the study of an internal Nephite map of Book of Mormon events.

Table 1
Numbers of Specifically Cited Verses with
Potential Geographical Relevance

	<u>Clark 1989</u>	<u>Sorenson 1992</u>	<u>Sorenson 2000</u>
1 Nephi	0	3	24
2 Nephi	4	14	8
Jacob	0	10	0
Enos	0	2	2
Jarom	0	2	3
Omni	2	8	12
Words of Mormon	0	1	0
Mosiah	40	77	77
Alma	234	382	258
Helaman	14	39	63

3 Nephi	8	49	44
4 Nephi	0	13	9
Mormon	10	59	71
Ether	6	61	56
Moroni	0	5	10
<hr/>			
Totals	318	725	637

After I eliminated duplications and identified all geographically relevant verses used by Clark and Sorenson combined, I compiled a table of 1,068 verses that have been thought to carry potential meaning for constructing a Nephite conceptual geography.¹¹ It seems to me that if we are going to become conscious of and accept the idea that we are searching for as good an internal map as we can find, then we really need to be reading these 1,068 verses in the Book of Mormon. They would *now* seem to be the best place to *start*.

Are the 637 verses cited in *Mormon's Map* (60 percent of the total) sufficient to develop an adequate internal map? Sorenson clearly believes that his book examines “mainly the most decisive and clearest statements” (p. 15). I do not know who could answer the question in any better manner today. A new level of Book of Mormon interpretative scholarship will have to be reached before our comprehension of the book's internal geography will be more accurate. Today, we can primarily refer just to the somewhat different views of Clark and Sorenson.

A Comprehending Process

In addition to including a *comprehensive* reading of textual passages, the process of reading the Book of Mormon for geographical meaning must provide us with *comprehension* of the meanings de-

11. This table, “Verses in the Book of Mormon with Potential Geographical Relevance,” is available on request from FARMS, P.O. Box 7113, University Station, Provo, UT 84602.

noted and connoted by the words in the text. Necessarily, this raises the issue of how to interpret the text. Sorenson identifies several important principles that guide his interpretation of the Book of Mormon text. Clark also sets forth his assumptions on how to interpret the text. At their most basic level, these principles or assumptions fall into four common categories.

The Assumption of Simplicity

Rational simplicity and economy are to be assumed. *Mormon's Map* states: "We should avoid needlessly complicated synthesis. If two explanations occur to us for solving a geographical problem, the simpler solution—the one with the fewest arbitrary assumptions—is probably better" (p. 14). Clark words the assumption of simplicity as follows: "The best internal reconstruction is one which reconciles all of the data in the Book of Mormon with a minimum number of additional assumptions."¹² These assumptions represent *Ockham's razor*, the "principle attributed to the fourteenth-century English philosopher William of Ockham . . . that one should choose the simplest explanation, the one requiring the fewest assumptions and principles."¹³ It is the rational principle of parsimony that ought to guide our interpretations of the Book of Mormon text *unless*, of course, the text itself unambiguously requires a more complex interpretation.

The Assumption of Consistency

In the *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, Sorenson presents the assumption of consistency this way: "Minor slips of the 'pen' aside, all the information on geography will prove to be consistent."¹⁴ In *Mormon's Map*, he sets forth his assumption in the form of a conclusion about consistency:

12. Clark, "Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 22.

13. *The New York Public Library Desk Reference*, 2nd ed. (New York: Prentice Hall General Reference, 1993), 277.

14. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 215.

My personal experience with the text of the Book of Mormon is that all the geographical information does prove to be consistent, so I conclude that Mormon possessed an orderly “mental map” of the scene on which his people’s history was played out.

... Mormon leaves no evidence of confusion about geography; he easily persuades me that he could have told us more had he chosen to do so. Even when particular lands or cities are mentioned at widely separated places in the text, the statements fit comfortably together into a plausible whole. He never hints that he did not understand the geography behind the records of his ancestors that he was abridging; rather, his writing exudes an air of confidence. (pp. 10–11)

Clark also expresses this assumption in his study of Book of Mormon geography: “Assume that all passages are internally consistent and can be reconciled.” Clark adds two closely related propositions: “Assume no scribal errors unless internal evidence indicates otherwise. . . . Assume no duplication of place names unless the text is unambiguous on the matter.”¹⁵ I would add the word *unmistakably* to Clark’s “scribal error” assumption. Internal evidence must *unmistakably* indicate an error. That which a reader might initially think is a “slip of the pen” (because of an insufficiently examined interpretation) usually turns out to be reconcilable when more evidence from the text of the Book of Mormon is carefully considered.

The Assumption of Uniformity

Both Clark and Sorenson rely on the assumption that at the time of the Book of Mormon, the natural world existed, operated, and was described in ways similar to the natural world we study and understand today. Clark makes this a general assumption and mentions, as examples, “that the locality where the Book of Mormon events took

15. Clark, “Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 22.

place was not unrecognizably altered at the time of the crucifixion, that geographic details in the small plates and in the book of Ether are therefore compatible with those in Mormon's and Moroni's abridgment, and that the principles of natural science that apply to today's environments are also pertinent to Nephite lands."¹⁶ In *Mormon's Map*, Sorenson expresses the sense of a general uniformitarian assumption with two rather simple propositions: "The expressions 'up,' 'down,' and 'over,' when used in a geographical context, refer to elevation. . . . Nature worked the same anciently as it does today." Sorenson elaborates with examples: "We can be sure that the headwaters of rivers were at a higher elevation than their mouths, and a river implies the presence of a corresponding drainage basin" (p. 13).

Sorenson also confronts the idea that "we cannot hope to attain clarity because of the great destruction that took place at the time of the Savior's crucifixion." Those who suggest such a notion may feel that the destruction "so changed everything that what could be seen of the landscape in former times would not be recognizable afterward. Mormon lets us know that this concern is unfounded" (p. 11). Sorenson then leads us through the textual evidence to conclude that "most of the basic land forms and ecological conditions had [not] been rendered unrecognizable" (p. 12). Hence, both textual evidence and logic require an assumption of uniformity in the way nature operates today and operated in Book of Mormon times.

If one were to assume otherwise, one's geographical theory would have to be categorized as being in the realm of science fiction. A fictional geography may be appropriate for a literary work about imaginary characters, but such a geography would not be appropriate for the Book of Mormon. The events set forth in the Book of Mormon were perceived to have happened by actual Nephite historians and their sources. Such events occurred in real geographical settings subject to the normal laws and processes of nature.

16. Ibid.

The Assumption of an Uncertain Cultural Comprehension

Clark suggests, without elaboration, that one should “assume a literal meaning” for Book of Mormon terminology.¹⁷ Sorenson seems to recommend otherwise. “Ideas in the record will not necessarily be familiar or clear to us. . . . Book of Mormon terminology will not necessarily be clear to us, even in translation, because language and cultural assumptions change. . . . We must seek to overcome any problems this causes us by striving to think, feel, and see as if we were Mormon, rather than supposing that we can read the text ‘literally’ (which actually turns out to mean ‘according to unspoken assumptions of our current culture’)” (pp. 13–14). Neither author is consistent in following his own advice, as will be discussed below.

Naturally, if one strives to think, feel, and see like Mormon, one might simply be thinking, feeling, and seeing in accordance with one’s own cultural preconceptions (including those one has about Mormon). To actually accomplish what Sorenson suggests, we must know something about how Mormon thought, felt, and viewed the world; to do that, we should know at least the basics about how others in his part of the world perceived themselves and their world. Thus, we must know *where* Mormon lived in order to discover from all this internal Book of Mormon research *where* Mormon lived!

The process is circular and moves forward only with the acceptance and incorporation of more completely developed and understood information. As a result of this circularity, Sorenson’s assumption of uncertainty in cultural terminology and ideas necessarily leads to a delicate exercise in determining when to rest (one cannot stop entirely) in this cyclical process of interpreting the text, associating the text with a theoretical world, examining the remains of the real world related to such a theoretical world, and then reinterpreting the text, modifying the theory, conducting further research, reinterpreting the text, etc. These are not tasks that most readers want to or can undertake. Hence, Sorenson’s assumption imposes a requirement

17. Ibid.

of special knowledge or expertise and turns the process of reading the Book of Mormon for geographical purposes into a process that must fundamentally be a scholarly pursuit.

While I think Sorenson's assumption is a correct one, as a general reader of Book of Mormon geography I also think the assumption is not without interpretative risk (Clark's "shifting sands of expert opinion" referred to above). We cannot continue to rely indefinitely on individual scholars working independently to bring about an improved understanding of Book of Mormon cultural ideas and terminology (whether having to do with geography or otherwise). The *need* for collaborative work continues to grow. The institutions necessary to produce such work ought to be identified, promoted, supported, and managed. But here I am really taking off on a tangent—an important tangent, nonetheless, that is directly related to Sorenson's work in *Mormon's Map*.

Sorenson is surely correct that we have to take Mormon's terminology and ideas into account. We must also bear in mind the transmission of the text from Mormon's language into the English of Joseph Smith and from there into the English of our contemporary culture. As *Mormon's Map* briefly observes, "English has changed between 1829 and 2000" (pp. 13–14). Does this mean we must strive to think, feel, and see like Joseph Smith, too? The answer is yes. Where did Joseph Smith live? How did people think, feel, and see in his culture? How did they express themselves? What did they know of Mormon's world? We must also question how people today think, feel, see, and communicate. Indeed, what do we know today about Mormon's world? Thus, we must be aware of three cultural screens—Mormon's (or the Nephites'), Joseph Smith's, and our own—standing between us and the world of the Book of Mormon. We must assume an uncertain comprehension at our own level, at Joseph Smith's level, and, perhaps to a much lesser extent, even at Mormon's level. All three cultural screens must be taken into account in any serious interpretative process.

My own research provides a clear example of the kinds of issues that need to be examined when attempting to interpret passages in

the Book of Mormon and place their meaning into current English language and concepts. *Mormon's Map* mentions the particular issue of the differences between contemporary and ancient notions about “many days” of travel. “Similarly, we might ask, would ‘year’ have meant the same to [Mormon] as it does to us? Lasting how long? Beginning and ending when? Composed of what seasonal variations in climate?” (p. 78).

When I began studying Book of Mormon chronology,¹⁸ I started with a naive awareness that part of Nephite record keeping included the measurement of *years*. That’s an English word familiar to me and the same word that Joseph Smith used to represent calendrical periods expressed by Nephi in the sixth century B.C. (e.g., 2 Nephi 5:28—“thirty years”), by Mormon in the fourth century A.D. (e.g., Mormon 6:5—“three hundred and eighty and four years”), and by Moroni in the fourth or fifth century A.D., when he abridged records based on historical reports from roughly one to two thousand years earlier (e.g., Ether 9:24—“an hundred and forty and two years”).

While Joseph Smith and the vast majority of his contemporaries surely understood the common notion of a solar or seasonal year as the repeating period indicated by the term *year*, they were not acquainted to any significant degree with ancient timekeeping systems. The idea that ancient cultures may have used a variety of different calendars or *years* (at separate times or at the same time) probably did not cross the minds of more than a few of Joseph Smith’s contemporaries in North

18. See, for example, Randall P. Spackman, “Introduction to Book of Mormon Chronology: The Principal Prophecies, Calendars, and Dates” (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1993); and Randall P. Spackman, “The Jewish/Nephite Lunar Calendar,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 7/1 (1998): 48–59. These studies primarily introduce the twelve-moon calendar that was used for official and religious Nephite record keeping before the birth of Christ and secondarily indicate the use of a 365-day calendar for Nephite record keeping after the birth of Christ. My more recent research indicates the use of both 365-day and 260-day calendars by Jaredites, Lamanites, and Nephites (in addition to the Jewish/Nephite lunar calendar). Before examining the use of 365-day and 260-day calendars, one must first adjust the recorded history for the Nephites’ use of the twelve-moon calendar in their records during the era before the birth of Christ; that is, twelve-moon years must be turned into days, and days must then be recombined to measure 365-day years or 260-day years.

America. And if such an idea did cross their minds, what word other than *years* would they have chosen to describe simply and accurately the meaning of recurring calendrical periods that were significantly longer than a few months?

Hence, an important question for interpreting Book of Mormon chronology is whether one can reasonably conclude that Joseph Smith's use of the word he knew and understood (*years*) necessarily requires the conclusion that we must understand that word in the Book of Mormon in exactly the same way that Joseph Smith and his contemporaries did or the conclusion that the exact same calendar was used by Nephi, Mormon, and the Jaredites described by Moroni in the book of Ether. My research, which has undergone several interpretative cycles, indicates that in each of the three citations above, the word *years* describes a period of time measured with a distinctly different calendar and that for most of Nephite history all three calendars were in use by the timekeepers.

Is a "literal" interpretation of the word *years*, such as Clark proposes, even possible? I would say yes—in a sense it is. Whatever period of time is indicated, it must literally be some form of a *year*. But several dissimilar types of *years* eventually must be understood. A "literal" use of Joseph Smith's calendar, which is our calendar (the Dionysian/Gregorian calendar introduced by Pope Gregory XIII in A.D. 1582), must necessarily lead to a distorted Book of Mormon chronology because it was not the calendar used by the ancient record keepers. Nephi, Mormon, and the Jaredites used distinctive calendars for separate purposes. Our interpretative experience can add rich levels of meaning to our literal reading of the word *years*.

Can I also, as Sorenson proposes, think, feel, and see as Mormon did? Again, I would say yes—in a way I can. But sitting in my easy chair and urging myself into some sort of imaginary late-Nephite reverie is certainly not the way. Once the terminology and ideas expressed in the Book of Mormon with respect to a specific topic have been fully examined from a textual standpoint, then careful study of external sources (including other scriptures) and thoughtful synthesis must be undertaken. That is one of the reasons why *Mormon's Map* is

such a valuable book—a scholar of Sorenson's stature has taken the time and effort to clarify his thinking regarding the textual evidence he has examined and interpreted concerning the Book of Mormon land of promise.

Interpreting Book of Mormon Directions

The assumptions of Clark and Sorenson appear to differ most in their interpretative effect in relation to issues about directions in the Book of Mormon. These issues require the adoption of interpretations that are more complex and uncertain because the Book of Mormon seems, at least on the level of construal undertaken so far, to provide relatively little information about the Nephite directional system. As a result, Clark and Sorenson bring significant external assumptions to their interpretative tasks. These assumptions are valuable for the light they shine on the interpretation process.

Sorenson's treatment of the Nephite directional system in *Mormon's Map* is for me the least satisfying discussion in the entire book. It is not a step forward.¹⁹ To explain my disappointment and to help elucidate the interpretative process yet to be commenced with respect to directions in the Book of Mormon, I will contrast Sorenson's treatment of Nephite directions with the very limited interpretation undertaken by Clark.

In *Mormon's Map*, Sorenson devotes a short section to Nephite directions. He begins, not with an examination of the text relating to directions, but with textual passages that indicate how limited our understanding of Nephite ideas and terminology might be. "When we examine the text of the Book of Mormon carefully, we can detect numerous places where cultural assumptions that were second nature to the Nephites are quite different than those we hold. We Latter-day Saints may have become so used to 'liken[ing] all scriptures unto us' (1 Nephi 19:23) that we assume we understand ideas in them that actually are foreign to our experience" (p. 78). Then, instead of dealing

19. Compare Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 399–415.

with such foreign textual matters associated with directions, Sorenson talks about a Book of Mormon execution ceremony, the king's priests versus the church's priests, a royal pleading process, dragons, heaven and hell, and the space above the earth.

None of these topics has anything to do directly with the geography of the Book of Mormon world; so, one might logically ask how they are related to the Nephite directional system. Sorenson continues, "There are many points of similarity, of course, between [the Nephites'] concepts and ours. Much of the thought and experience conveyed in the ancient records relates sufficiently to the symbols and meanings familiar in our culture that we can learn much from studying them. But differences need to be recognized, not ignored. Direction is one such concept" (p. 79).

After such a lengthy introduction, I was ready for the evidence. But instead of focusing on the text of the Book of Mormon related to directions, Sorenson cites external sources to show that directional systems have varied from culture to culture. The Inuit of the north, the Sumerians and Babylonians of Mesopotamia, and the Maya of Mesoamerica are mentioned as having directional systems different from our own. "To those who share a particular culture, their way of labeling [directions] invariably seems 'obvious' and does not require explanation, while all other schemes seem to them strange. One thing we learn from studying this material is that the cardinal directions—east, west, south, north—have not been basic to the directional schemes of most of the world's cultures. What our culture has taught us, that the cardinal directions are obvious, is not true historically" (p. 80).

Finally, Sorenson turns to passages in the Book of Mormon having something to do with directions. He begins by mentioning the obvious difference between terms such as *north* and *northward*, *south* and *southward*. He then jumps to what I consider an unsupportable conclusion. "By their frequency of using the '-ward' suffix, we can infer that Mormon and his ancestors used a somewhat different cultural scheme for directions than we do" (p. 80). Why is this a reasonable inference? Did Mormon use the suffix or did Joseph Smith, in his attempt to express a Nephite concept? How does frequency of use

necessarily require a different directional system? What if the Nephite directional scheme were exactly the same as ours, but the more important geographic areas were not directly *north* or *south* of the Nephites? Wouldn't Joseph Smith then refer to *northward* and *southward* as a matter of accuracy and fact, rather than to indicate a different directional scheme? Indeed, in an earlier chapter of *Mormon's Map*, Sorenson uses the term *northward* to help explain his reason for tilting the hourglass-shaped Nephite lands away from a strict north-south axis (pp. 18–20). That is, his argument about the need for a tilt in the axis of the Nephite land of promise is founded on an interpretation of the Nephite directional system so that it included cardinal directions. Clearly, this matter has not been thoroughly examined, and we have no reason at this point to disregard a directional system based on cardinal directions.

Sorenson then provides a second example that he thinks should lead us to be cautious when interpreting the Nephite directional system. He contrasts the use of the terms *came* and *went* in the Book of Mormon. He speculates that the distinction may have something to do with the place where the historian was recording the events, but then he notes that this contrast has not yet been analyzed systematically.

The best that Sorenson seems to be able to muster in this section is an expression of caution. “Beware of making assumptions about meanings that may prove to be misleading because they spring from modern-day assumptions rather than from ancient ways” (p. 81). However, Sorenson has not guided us through an examination of passages leading to the conclusion that a literal reading is not appropriate when it comes to the Nephite directional system. In fact, he acknowledges that not enough work has been done on this topic. While commenting that “directional matters” are often “subtle,” he expressly notes that there is much yet to be considered “before we even know all the right questions about Nephite direction systems” (p. 81).

In contrast, Clark's interpretation of the directions used by Nephite authors is, at least initially, “literal” and thus builds on the foundation of textual analysis. Clark specifies his directional assumptions as follows:

I assume that the Nephite directional system was internally consistent and that this consistency persisted throughout the period of their history. I do not pretend to know how Nephite “north” relates to the north of today’s compass, and such information is irrelevant for my present purpose of reconstructing an internal geography. I do assume, however, that regardless of what any “real” orientation may have been, Nephite north was 180 degrees from Nephite south, and both were 90 degrees off of east and west. The directional suffix “-ward” is here loosely interpreted to mean “in the general direction of.” Thus, I read “northward” as “in a general northerly direction.” Finally, all directions are directions from “somewhere.” I assume the central reference point was the city of Zarahemla, located in the “center” of the land of Zarahemla (Helaman 1:24–27).²⁰

Clark’s initial view of Nephite directions relies precisely on our own culture’s cardinal directions. Our “literal” understanding is, and to my mind must be, our first and most unsophisticated interpretation of the meanings associated with words used in the Book of Mormon. This “literal” approach to Book of Mormon directions also happens to be consistent with concepts of direction and geographical organization that were familiar to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries.²¹ As Joseph translated the Book of Mormon, he seems to have used the directional and geographical concepts familiar to him. This is, and must be, our second level of interpretation of a word or phrase

20. Clark, “Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 25.

21. In 1837, Wilford Woodruff recorded in his diary that “Joseph presented us in some degree the plot of the city of Kirtland. . . . The city extended to the east, west, north, and south.” Dean C. Jessee, ed., *The Papers of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 1:113 n. 3. The plot plan of the city of Nauvoo, Illinois, the headquarters of the church from 1839 to 1846, was laid out with square city blocks and streets oriented east-west and north-south. See Richard N. Holzapfel and T. Jeffery Cottle, *Old Mormon Nauvoo 1839–1846: Historical Photographs and Guide* (Provo, Utah: Grandin Book, 1990), 2, 25, 30.

mentioned in the Book of Mormon. In most cases, the first and second levels of interpretation probably will be identical, but this need not always be the case. The English language has changed in some respects since the time of Joseph Smith.

Near the end of his article, Clark describes in much greater detail another related directional pattern when he seeks to interpret Helaman 3:8. In that verse, the Nephites are said to have expanded “from the land southward to the land northward, and . . . spread inso-much that they began to cover the face of the whole earth, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east.” Clark acknowledges that his reading of the Book of Mormon directional system can be literal only to a point. Then another level of interpretation is called for and additional assumptions must be made. Clark refers to this change in interpretative process as requiring an explanation that is metaphorical:

The passage in Helaman may have been meant in a metaphorical rather than a literal way. Explaining away difficult passages as metaphors goes against one of my guiding assumptions for dealing with the text, but in this case I think it is well justified. North and south sea probably have no more concrete meaning than the phrases “filling the whole earth” and “as numerous as the sands of the sea.” Mormon waxes poetic whenever describing the Nephites’ peaceful golden age of uninterrupted population growth and expansion. This is understandable given the circumstances under which he wrote, and his knowledge of the certain doom of his people. It is interesting that in a parallel passage describing the same sort of population expansion [Helaman 11:20] no north or south sea is mentioned. . . .

I am convinced that the reference to a north sea and a south sea is devoid of any concrete geographical content. All specific references or allusions to Book of Mormon seas are only to the east and west seas. Any geography that tries to

accommodate a north and south sea, I think, is doomed to fail. But we cannot dismiss the reference to these seas out of hand. If they are metaphorical, what was the metaphor?²²

With this piling up of inferences, Clark theorizes that the north and south seas mentioned in the text are not physical bodies of water. He bases this theory on the slim fact that these seas are not mentioned in one similar passage in the Book of Mormon. Hence, he moves his interpretation of Book of Mormon directions from a literal one consistent with our culture (and Joseph Smith's culture 175 years ago), where cardinal points are the principal directions, to a third level of cultural understanding (a Nephite metaphorical level) that still may have been somewhat accurately depicted by English words describing a cardinal direction system. Clark also notes that this metaphorical interpretation "would not be out of place in the Middle East at the time of Lehi; and it is remarkably close to the Mesoamerican view of their world."²³ That is, at this third level of interpretation, a nonliteral theory has been created and compared favorably with what Clark would consider appropriate external cultures to lend credence to his further sense of the meanings that might be associated with our (and Joseph Smith's) cardinal directions. Clark's conceptualized Nephite world, "as part of a metaphor for the whole earth," places Zarahemla at the center and expands outward (in the four cardinal directions) through lands and wildernesses to the four seas mentioned in Helaman 3:8.²⁴

Clark's literal interpretation of a couple of verses that mention (and don't mention) north and south seas, his identification of an interpretative problem, and then his creation of a metaphorical solution

22. Clark, "Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 65. Clark does not refer to Mosiah 27:6, a related example, where peaceful conditions and another societal expansion occurred into what seem to have been cardinal quarters: "And there began to be much peace again in the land; and the people began to be very numerous, and began to scatter abroad upon the face of the earth, yea, on the north and on the south, on the east and on the west, building large cities and villages in all quarters of the land."

23. Clark, "Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 67.

24. *Ibid.*, 66 (fig. 8), 67.

or theory are procedurally sound (but not necessarily substantively correct). He then compares the metaphorical theory with ideas from external sources he assumes were related to the Book of Mormon. This is a valid interpretative process, but not necessarily one that leads to an accurate interpretation. From a substantive point of view, one must also note that Clark's problem with the text of Helaman 3:8 is based on his inference from Helaman 11:20 that the north and south seas "probably" had no real existence. Why is that inference "probably" accurate? Are there no other passages in the Book of Mormon that might bear on this question? In how many other ways is the term *north* used in the Book of Mormon? What about uses of the term *south*? Is it impossible or just unlikely that there were north and south seas? The interpretative process dealing with north and south seas has actually just begun.

In *Mormon's Map*, Sorenson seems to throw his required caution to the wind when he interprets north and south seas literally. These seas seem to serve his purpose of tilting the axis of the Nephite promised land to an orientation similar to that of Mesoamerica. He first identifies a difference between the *land north* (five references) and the *land northward* (thirty-one references).

There is, of course, a distinction; "land northward" implies a direction somewhat off from literal north. This implication that the lands are not simply oriented to the cardinal directions is confirmed by reference to the "sea north" and the "sea south" (Helaman 3:8). These terms are used only once, in reference to the colonizing of the land northward by the Nephites, but not in connection with the land southward. The only way to have seas north and south on a literal or descriptive basis would be for the two major bodies of land to be oriented at an angle somewhat off true north-south. That would allow part of the ocean to lie toward the south of one and another part of the ocean to lie toward north of the other. (pp. 19–20)

Sorenson makes this argument from a literal point of view because he seems to be seeking to confirm the tilt he wants to give to his hourglass-shaped lands. (Note that in map 1 and all subsequent maps in the text, he does not tilt the lands the opposite way from Mesoamerica, which would seem to be an equally likely possibility under his interpretation of north and south seas.) I could not find any of the maps in *Mormon's Map* that actually show where the north and south seas were supposed to be. How were they related to the east and west seas? Why would the Nephites have referred to a land northward or southward if they didn't want to distinguish them from other lands that were literally north or south? In other words, isn't the whole concept of Nephite directions founded on a basic four-part directional system that Joseph Smith was content describing as north, south, east, and west? Frankly, my conclusion from this very brief review of Book of Mormon directions is identical to Sorenson's in one regard: so little work has apparently been done on the topic that we do not yet know all the right questions to ask.

Where Does Sorenson Think We Are Today?

I have not attempted to provide a substantive evaluation of the chapters of *Mormon's Map* that deal with Sorenson's detailed views of Book of Mormon land forms, topography, environment, distances, and civilization. I have no training or expertise in those subjects. Frankly, the task would have to begin with comparisons of Sorenson's inferences and the 1,068 verses identified as having potential geographical relevance. That will take a great deal of impartial (hopefully collaborative) work. Thus, I find myself in the position of virtually every other reader of *Mormon's Map* (Sorenson excepted). I must rely on my own rational responses to Sorenson's detailed interpretations and those responses include "interesting," "challenging," and "what if . . ." but hardly anything substantive.

To his credit, Sorenson also helps us in this area by concluding *Mormon's Map* with a chapter entitled "So How Much Do We Know?" In essence, he reviews his own work. He compares the version of

“Mormon’s Map” he has been able to construct with the widely duplicated maps that early European cartographers produced: “They drew in coastlines on the basis of reports that were not very clear or full from voyagers who had traversed portions of the coast. Where they did not possess direct information, those mapmakers made inferences—guesses may be more accurate. As for the interior spaces beyond the coasts, their information was even sketchier. Still, the maps they drafted were avidly sought by later voyagers and served them well enough. The comprehensive ‘Mormon’s Map’ on the inside front cover of this book can prove useful too” (p. 126).

Sorenson then lists the three uses to which he thinks “a map in this tentative condition” (p. 127) can be put. First, it provides “a model that we can apply to stories from the record to check their consistency and perhaps shed new light on factors [the stories] involved that had not occurred to us before.” Second, “we may discern new questions about geography . . . gaps in our knowledge for which we might seek answers by consulting Mormon’s text anew.” Third, “the map summarizes a set of criteria . . . against which to evaluate proposals for where in the external world Nephite lands were located” (p. 127).

This is a succinct summary of where we are today. “Mormon’s Map” is surely “tentative,” but we may finally be in a position to begin filling in the blank spots in our understanding through a reasoned process. By combining Clark’s “elemental” geography and interpretative process with Sorenson’s more comprehensive *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* and *Mormon’s Map*, we have a solid foundation for a collaborative project to consciously produce a generally acceptable interpretation of the Nephite map described in the text of the Book of Mormon. We have a method for identifying interpretative issues, pulling together the textual passages that have been identified on each issue as controlling, determining various interpretative theories about those passages, and then comparing the theories for simplicity, consistency, uniformity, and uncertainty in our interpretation of ideas and terminology. Will such a collaborative project necessarily produce a duplicate of Clark’s “elemental” geography or Sorenson’s *Mormon’s Map*? I have met John Clark and John Sorenson and admire

them both, but I don't think I know anyone who could answer that question today. Why don't we find the answer?

When one approaches a landfall from the sea, the barest edge of land first appears as a dark contour rising up on the horizon. *Mormon's Map* leaves me with a clear sense that it represents just the first contour of a wonderful, exciting, and "promised" land filled with information and levels of meaning that are yet to be discovered, understood, and communicated. Thank you, Professor Clark, for your attention to the interpretative process. Thank you, Professor Sorenson, for extending that process into *Mormon's Map*. "Land ho!"