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**Abstract** Review of *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (1998), by Duane R. Aston; *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon* (1999), by Paul Hedengren; and *The Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon* (2000), by Phyllis Carol Olive.

## EVALUATING THE CASE FOR A LIMITED GREAT LAKES SETTING

John E. Clark

Before delving into details of particular geographies, I need to acknowledge my awareness of the enormous potential to give offense in an essay of this type; this is not my intention. I merely compare substantive claims in these books against the facts of the Book of Mormon, physical geography, archaeology, and anthropology—as far as I understand them. I avoid making judgments on testimony and rule all such statements in these books as out of bounds. I realize that working on the riddle of Book of Mormon geography can be an engaging pastime, and such activity is laudable. Once one publishes a proposed geography, however, he or she moves from the realm of recreation into scholarship and must be held responsible for this action. All such scholarship should be evaluated against a high standard—

Review of Duane R. Aston. *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived*. Sacramento, Calif.: American River Publications, 1998. ix + 197 pp., with 16 maps, 23 illustrations, bibliography, and subject index. \$19.95, hardback.

Review of Paul Hedengren. *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon*, 2nd ed., version 2.3. Provo, Utah: Tepran, 1999. 160 pp., with 33 maps, 25 illustrations, and subject index. \$14.95, spiral bound.

Review of Phyllis Carol Olive. *The Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon*. Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2000. xiii + 333 pp., with 40 maps, 9 illustrations, and bibliography. \$16.95, paperback.

preferably a higher standard than detractors of the Church of Jesus Christ would use in debunking such claims. I attempt to treat all such geographies with scholarly seriousness and hold their authors to appropriate standards. Have they set forth the facts? Have they cited all the relevant sources? Do their inferences flow logically from accepted facts? Is the argument convincing and interesting? Are the illustrations appropriate? Is the work a contribution? Is the book well written?

In this review, my fourth discussion of Book of Mormon geographies, I evaluate current theories proposing a Limited Great Lakes (LGL) setting.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I review the three featured books and revisit Delbert Curtis's *Christ in North America*, a book I have previously considered in detail.<sup>2</sup> I have also previously reviewed the first edition of Hedengren's *The Land of Lehi*,<sup>3</sup> but his second edition is significantly improved and deserves additional consideration here. I first consider briefly the general content of each book; in the second half of this essay, I consider remaining problems and challenges of LGL geographies as individual topics.

None of the geographical correlations is convincing, nor can a convincing geography be salvaged by amalgamating the separate strengths of each. Although each proposed geography advocates a limited territory that incorporates the Great Lakes region, they are mutually incompatible in basic assumptions and details. In my judgment, Aston's presentation is the most professional of the three and Olive's the least. I consider them in reverse order of their scholarly merit. Of the three, I focus principally on Aston's arguments in attempting to address his claims for a New York geography and his objections to a Middle American geography.

1. Earlier discussions include John E. Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," review of *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon*, by F. Richard Hauck, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20–70; John E. Clark, "The Final Battle for Cumorah," review of *Christ in North America*, by Delbert W. Curtis, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/2 (1994): 79–113; and John E. Clark, "Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography: A Review," review of *The Land of Lehi*, by Paul Hedengren, *EARMS Review of Books* 8/2 (1996): 1–24.

2. Clark, "The Final Battle for Cumorah," 79–113.

3. Clark, "Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography," 1–24.



## Limited Great Lakes Geographies

### *Olive's Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon*

The sixteen chapters of Olive's book cover four broad topics. In four introductory chapters, she dismisses the case for limited Meso-american geographies, establishes the prophetic identification of the United States of America as the land of promise mentioned in the Book of Mormon (Canada and Mexico are explicitly excluded), makes a case for a limited territory for Book of Mormon lands, and reconstructs the physical geography of the western New York region for Book of Mormon times. The next two chapters address issues of Jaredite occupation, with the next eight chapters covering issues of Nephite geography: specifically, the locations and features of the lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, Bountiful, the eastern borders, the narrow neck, the land northward, the region of many waters, and the hill Cumorah.<sup>4</sup> In the final two chapters, Olive considers the question of archaeological evidence and provides a final summary.

Olive places Book of Mormon lands in western New York. She assumes that the modern-day Hill Cumorah outside of Palmyra is the hill mentioned in the text. None of the numerous maps in her text carries a scale; she makes no attempt to correlate postulated Book of Mormon features to modern state boundaries or towns, so the precise locations of minor features are hard to determine. Moreover, the numerous maps are light, fuzzy, cramped, and difficult to read. The bulk of Olive's proposed geography occupies western New York between Lake Erie and the Genesee River, an area about 90 by 110 miles. This limited geography applies only to the narrative center of Book of Mormon lands, but even so, it appears much too small and off scale by a whole order of magnitude. There is hardly any room in a territory this size for groups to have become lost for many days when traveling, for example, from Zarahemla to Nephi.

4. I distinguish the ancient hill Cumorah from the modern-day Hill Cumorah by capitalization, except when citing the various authors—I have followed their capitalization in quotations.

The hill Cumorah is located in the northeast corner of Olive's land southward, with the Finger Lakes region being the "land of many waters." Lake Erie is the west sea, and its southwestern extremity (Ohio shore near Kirtland) is the land of "first inheritance." Lake Ontario is the Ripliancum of the Jaredite report and the North Sea of the Nephite report. These identifications take care of the obvious bodies of water that any reviewer can see on modern maps. From here, Olive gets creative and interesting. To her credit, she has studied topographic maps of the region and has worked through basic geologic reports.

The Book of Mormon narrative obviously requires more than just northern and western seas. Olive finds these other seas for the southern and eastern margins, as well as the Jaredite mention of a "sea that divides the land," in the former presence of Pleistocene (postglacial period) lakes, now only evident in geologic reports and marked by the presence of lowland marshes on the current landscape. Early Lake Tonawanda was a narrow, east-west-tending lake that extended from modern-day Niagara Falls to about Rochester. This lake paralleled the southern shore of Lake Ontario. The narrow strip of higher ground trapped between these two lakes was about twenty to twenty-five miles wide and about seventy miles long. This isolated strip is her candidate for the land northward and the probable location of most Jaredite settlements. By recourse to reconstructions of ancient lakes that no longer exist, Olive is able to nearly surround Book of Mormon lands by water, create a narrow neck of land within this currently landlocked region, and to make sense of all the water passages in the text.

Unlike any previous geography I have encountered, Olive implicates a universal flood at the time of Noah to make her point. In doing so she makes untenable assumptions about water depths and drying rates. She opines that the Jaredites fled the Old World soon after the flood, meaning that much of the water would still have been ponded on the land surface in places such as upstate New York. But she continues to identify these bodies of water until the end of the

Nephtite era, even after crucifixion cataclysms altered the land surface. No one seriously doubts the evidence of ancient lakeshores and lake sediments in New York any more than they question the former presence of Lake Bonneville in the Salt Lake Valley. The ancient lake benches are obvious. But Olive cannot have it both ways. These same reports must give sufficient indication that the lakes in question were ancient and disappeared over ten thousand years ago. If one wants to accept the word of geologists, it has to be a full commitment that includes their dating of the phenomena in question. One is not free to extract only the scientific statements favorable to one's view unless one has the training to raise valid scientific objections to contradictory material. Melting continental ice sheets and Noah's flood are mutually incompatible.

The question at stake here is the appropriateness of uniformitarian principles: how much can we rely on modern knowledge of geologic processes to interpret those of the past? In terms of dating ancient lake beds, it would be a rather simple matter to find the date of the oldest archaeological sites in these regions and to have them provide terminus dates for the disappearance of the various lakes. This has not been done. In her zeal to reconstitute a plausible hydrology for Book of Mormon lands, Olive simply ignores all evidence for temporal placement that does not suit her purpose. The other books listed above make the same mistake, but in archaeological rather than geological time.

The city of Zarahemla in Olive's microgeography would have been in the area around present-day East Aurora, New York; this is less than twenty miles east of the shore of Lake Erie to the west and from Buffalo to the northwest. This location does not leave sufficient room for settlements and wilderness west of Zarahemla. Buffalo Creek–Buffalo River is the mighty Sidon. The precise location of the ancient city of Nephi is not given, but based on extrapolation from her maps to a modern atlas, it appears to have been in the region of West Clarksville or Cuba, New York, located approximately fifty miles to the

southeast of East Aurora. This placement is too close to accommodate the Book of Mormon narrative for travels between Zarahemla and Nephi and for many significant cities located between them.

Archaeology plays a minor part in Olive's proposal. Both the area of Cumorah and Zarahemla are said to be archaeological hotspots. Referring to the region of Zarahemla she claims the following:

Modern day East Aurora sits in this central location today. . . . More relics have been found in this region than almost any other in western New York which is strong evidence that the capital city of Zarahemla was indeed located in this very spot.

Archaeological evidence indicates the ancient city took in an area of about 3 to 4 [square] miles and was heavily populated. Interestingly, large skeletons have been unearthed in this area as well as numerous artifacts of husbandry and war. (Olive, p. 144)

Similar claims are made for the Cumorah region:

The bones and artifacts found in western New York are consistent with those described in the text of the Book of Mormon.

The historian, O. Turner, describes a fortified hill within three miles of the Hill Cumorah which was barricaded on an eminence made for a large and powerful enemy. The entrenchments were ten feet deep and twelve feet wide. Skeletons found within the enclosure indicate a race of men one third larger than the present race. (Olive, p. 236)

These statements are typical of the significant claims made for an archaeological confirmation of Olive's Book of Mormon lands. Specific claims, and references supporting them, are avoided, and everything is generic but said to be obvious. What are the weapons of war, for example, and where can one read about them? The few references



to archaeological findings that one can actually trace through her footnotes are to dated claims made in the nineteenth century, most of which she has taken from previous Latter-day Saint correlations, namely E. Cecil McGavin and Willard Bean's *The Geography of the Book of Mormon*<sup>5</sup> and B. H. Roberts's *New Witness for God*.<sup>6</sup> Both books are rich resources for early settlers' accounts of archaeological evidences destroyed during colonization of upstate New York. But in the final analysis, these reports are merely very old gossip and folklore that require confirmation. What is the best current archaeological evidence, and where can one access it? I have yet to see a study that has seriously evaluated these early documents. Reports of bones of extra-large humans are the sort of exaggeration we expect from early amateur accounts.

What is distressing in such treatments of archaeological evidence is that none of the good artifacts reported to have been commonly found during the early days of colonization has since come to light. If iron, brass, and copper artifacts were found by the basketloads in early times, some should have survived to modern times, either in the ground or in private collections of artifacts. The lack of such evidence puts these accounts of archaeological finds in doubt. I will return to this archaeological problem after summarizing the other books because it is a problem they all share. In passing, it is interesting that no one has ever claimed to have found fortifications on the Hill Cumorah itself. The fact is that fortifications have been reported all around the area. This shows that such evidence was not destroyed in the colonial era. If evidence of ancient warfare and fortifications could be expected anywhere, Cumorah is the place—but it is archaeologically clean.

The conclusion I reach after reading Olive's text is that Book of Mormon lands remain lost, despite her valiant effort.

5. E. Cecil McGavin and Willard Bean, *The Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1948).

6. B. H. Roberts, *A New Witness for God* (Salt Lake City: Cannon and Sons, 1895).

### Hedengren's *The Land of Lehi*

Hedengren's second edition of *The Land of Lehi* differs substantially in tone, substance, and scale from Olive's book. Where Olive's book is florid in rhetorical excesses and logical lapses, Hedengren's is a no-nonsense and nothing-but-the-facts account. Hedengren avoids commingling testimony with facts and confusing sentiments for evidence. He states his proposals as models capable of scientific testing. Unfortunately, he provides minimal references to outside sources and fails to provide a master bibliography, so he does not promote research in the normal scholarly way. As indicated by the format of his work, Hedengren's proposals are designed to be works in progress that can be updated in his computer version. His second edition is version 2.3. It is twice the length of the first edition, and it shows substantial improvement in the quality and clarity of accompanying computer maps and illustrations. Unfortunately, he has removed the short chapter setting out his theoretical orientation that was found in the first edition, and he has removed the color photographs of probable locations of Nephite places that once graced his cover. He has, however, added at least five new chapters and greatly expanded others.

The fourteen chapters of this book are usefully divided into four sections. The first five chapters deal with Book of Mormon geography in the Old World—the trek from Jerusalem to Bountiful and the eventual departure to the promised land. This is a topic rarely dealt with in proposed Book of Mormon geographies. Chapters 6–11 address Lehiite (Nephite and Lamanite) regions in the New World. The next two chapters briefly cover issues of Mulekite and Jaredite geographies. The final chapter, "Additional Harmonies," is composed of forty-four sections dealing with everything from minerals and their placement to panpipes. For many of these sections, Hedengren provides no explicit link to Book of Mormon issues. For example, he never clarifies what panpipes have to do with the Book of Mormon. The reader is supposed to know why such things as pearls, body armor, fortifications, grapes, grains, minerals, and so forth are impor-

tant for determining the probable location of Lehite lands. It almost appears that in his quest for fostering an air of objectivity in presenting evidence, Hedengren has neglected to mention why some things are correspondences and why they might be of interest.

Hedengren makes a very useful distinction between Book of Mormon lands and the “narrative center” of those lands. The lands and features described by writers of the Book of Mormon were a small subset of the total territories occupied by Book of Mormon peoples. Hedengren proposes that the Lehiters crossed the Arabian peninsula and embarked from the coast of Oman, circled Africa, crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and landed somewhere in the Chesapeake Bay area of the Atlantic seaboard. From there they migrated inland and northward to the Great Lakes region. The lands described in the text include present-day Delaware, Maryland, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and New York. This scale may be a bit big, but it is certainly in the range of travel distances required by the Book of Mormon.

The critical postulate for inferring Lehite lands is that the Hill Cumorah near Palmyra is the hill mentioned in the text as the site of the final Jaredite and Nephite battles. The New York Hill Cumorah is on the northern edge of Hedengren’s proposed Lehite lands. The land of Nephi is located in southeastern Pennsylvania, with the city of Zarahemla located near present-day West Pittston, in central Pennsylvania. He proposes the Susquehanna River as the ancient river Sidon, and he locates Bountiful upriver (northward) from Zarahemla near the town of Sayre, Pennsylvania. In this proposed geography, the Atlantic Ocean is available to serve as the East Sea, Lake Erie becomes one west sea, and Lake Ontario becomes the North Sea. The Delaware peninsula is flanked by bays. Delaware Bay is also an east sea, and Chesapeake Bay is a west sea, thus creating a portion of Lehite lands nearly surrounded by seas. Delaware Bay is also the place where the “sea divides the land.” These designations are not quite as creative as Olive’s identifications, but they do require duplicate features that share ambiguous titles in the Book of Mormon. It is an extremely



messy correlation and requires special assumptions of duplicated names for geographic features, a requirement that should be viewed with suspicion.

Hedengren's proposed location for Book of Mormon lands presents the problem of coming up with a narrow neck of land somewhere between Zarahemla and Cumorah in this landlocked territory of upstate New York. He interprets the land between two of the Finger Lakes (Lakes Seneca and Cayuga) as this narrow neck. If he is right, this feature would lose all the strategic importance it appears to have held for the Nephites. In its favor, his geography appears to be of a credible scale; he preserves the relative directions mentioned in the Book of Mormon between features, he has managed to find large bodies of water in enough places to pass the "seas" test of the text, and the relative terrain is higher in the south than in the north, as required by descriptions in the Book of Mormon. He has also picked a significant river for the Sidon.

In my review of Hedengren's first edition, I considered only two points of logic and did not delve into the geographical, archaeological, or anthropological details of his proposal. I attempted to show that Hedengren's argument that the New York Hill Cumorah was the hill mentioned in the Book of Mormon failed to make the case. His argument for Cumorah remains essentially unchanged in this second edition, and my assessment remains the same: it does not work. There is no compelling logical case to be made for identifying the hill in Palmyra as the hill Ramah in the Book of Mormon, so the best that LGL advocates can do is rely on traditional Mormon views on this matter. Such an assumption provides sufficient grounds for building a geography without pretending to establish it on a more rigorous logical basis.

The other issue I addressed was the notion of puzzling together the picture of the Book of Mormon lands in such a way that textual understanding could be aided by knowledge of a real-world setting. Hedengren has since removed much of this argument from his second edition, but it remains the key metaphor and objective of Aston's



book. I agree with the sentiment of reconstructing a clear picture, but true understanding depends on getting the real-world correlation exactly right, something that no geography has managed to do. None of the proposed LGL geographies successfully passes the tests of physical geography or archaeology. In a footnote to my review of Hedengren's first edition I proposed that the simplest physical test for locating Book of Mormon lands would be to locate a volcano near a seashore.<sup>7</sup> Hedengren addresses this issue in his section 5, "The Geology of the Destruction Recorded in 3 Nephi," of chapter 14. This is his longest treatment of any topic, but it has almost no geology in it. Without specifying the source of counterarguments that he is addressing, thus maintaining his practice of not citing any previous assessments of Book of Mormon geographical matters, he spins hypothetical reasons why the descriptions in 3 Nephi could not depict a volcanic eruption. There is no indication that he has consulted professional geologists on these topics, read about vulcanology, or read travelers' descriptions of volcanic eruptions in Central America. In short, his appreciation of physical expectations of such eruptions appears deficient, a circumstance that would render his opinion on these issues problematic. His argument is unconvincing. Aston makes a similar exculpatory argument in his book. He claims that volcanoes are not required to explain the conditions in the accounts, but he demonstrates little knowledge of their effects.

As before, a major deficiency with Hedengren's second edition (and also with Olive's book) is the failure to build on the extensive literature on Book of Mormon geography. Hedengren reveals no sign of having read the work of others on Book of Mormon geography, and he has consulted only a few outside sources on geography and archaeology. His treatment of subjects is selective, with avoidance of difficult issues the norm, coupled with the promotion of a few minor matters that seem to favor his particular correlation. Hedengren appears more concerned with minor issues than the main message. Issues of method and inference are not addressed.

7. Clark, "Two Points of Book of Mormon Geography," 22–23.

When I first addressed Book of Mormon geography in a review,<sup>8</sup> I made the point that the first step in fashioning a geography is a thorough analysis and understanding of the Book of Mormon text on its own merits, unencumbered by any real-world correlations. All geographies claim to receive validation of proposed lands by showing how closely Book of Mormon features correspond to the real world. In short, they require some sort of goodness-of-fit analysis based on comparisons between a map of Book of Mormon lands drawn from references in the text (what I call an internal map) and a map of the real world. None of the books considered here begins by creating an internal map to compare to the real world. Olive and Aston mention such maps created by others in their appended materials, but Heden-gren does not even do this. Rather, he has worked interactively, or dialectically, between the text and the region proposed for Book of Mormon lands, thereby creating only one map. This is a recipe for disaster because it lures the model builder into distorting the meaning of the text to fit the proposed real-world setting. Thus the narrow neck ends up being something as strange as a narrow strip of land between two finger lakes; others have to resurrect ancient lakes to bound the desired territory of Nephite lands.

### *Aston's Return to Cumorah*

Of all LGL proposals I have seen, Aston's *Return to Cumorah* makes the strongest case for a credible geography. For those seriously interested in an LGL geography, this is the book I recommend. It is succinct and deals with a variety of evidence. His analysis is interesting because he once held the view that Book of Mormon lands were located in Mexico and Central America but has since become persuaded that a much stronger case can be made for western New York and Pennsylvania and Ontario, Canada. In particular, he rejects the so-called "two-Cumorah theory." I do not accept Aston's arguments, but I consider them the best of the current proposals that are trying to reclaim New York as ancient Nephite and Lamanite territory.

8. Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," 20–70.

The force of Aston's argument is to change the default assumptions of current theorizing about Book of Mormon lands. As do other authors, he presumes that the current interest in Central American cultures is an unjustified distraction that goes back to the 1840s, when the spectacular ruins of stone cities there were first brought to the attention of the English-speaking world. Back when members of the Church of Jesus Christ naively thought Book of Mormon lands encompassed all the Americas, speculation about Mesoamerican cultures as being Nephite or Lamanite made sense. Now, with the consensual realization that the lands of the Book of Mormon were quite small, fitting a Middle American picture together with a New York hill becomes untenable. Within the past fifty years there has been a major shift of opinion among the church membership about the probable location of Book of Mormon lands, to such an extent that those advocating Great Lakes geographies find themselves arguing the minority position. Therefore, those so engaged need to provide especially strong arguments to overcome current default assumptions that favor competing models for a Mesoamerican setting. Aston sets up his argument to address the major traditional objections to a New York geography. He presumes that if he can remove these objections, we should favor an upstate New York correlation because it would conform to long-standing church traditions and the stunning symbolism of having the gospel restored in this same place where it was lost. I consider his specific arguments below.

In fourteen succinct chapters, Aston considers and amply illustrates major features of Nephite geography as described in the Book of Mormon and identifies them with places in upstate New York, Pennsylvania, and Ontario. He also considers the archaeological remains and customs of native peoples of this area and the concordances of these data with the sacred account. The region that Aston identifies as Book of Mormon lands is most similar to, but slightly larger than, the geography proposed by Delbert Curtis in *Christ in North America*. The narrow neck of land between Lake Ontario and Lake Erie is the narrow neck of land of the Nephites. Ontario is the principal land northward, but a strip of land along the south coast of Lake



Ontario is also a limited land northward—similar to Curtis’s and Olive’s proposals. Western New York and Pennsylvania constitute the land southward. The Genesee River is the river Sidon, and Zarahemla is in the region of Geneseo, New York, east of the Genesee River and southwest of Cumorah. It is on the wrong side of the river, but presumably this problem can be overcome.

As with all LGL proposals, Aston is forced to improvise in identifying the named seas of Book of Mormon lands. The northern portion of Lake Erie is the west sea, and the western portion of Lake Ontario is the sea west, while the eastern part of this same lake is the sea east. Lake Cayuga of the Finger Lakes is the east sea. The sea south is the southern portion of Lake Erie. For the greater land northward, Lake Huron serves as the sea west with its northernmost extremity (Georgian Bay) serving as the sea north. A critical point in this confusing cascade of “seas” is one’s point of reference, whether it be in the land northward or southward. Perspective and point of reference are important issues, but it looks very much like special pleading to have different names for the same bodies of water and the same names for different bodies of water. This undercuts the utility of naming things and referring to them in normal speech.

It is a frequent practice in Book of Mormon geographies, when confronted with an uncooperative claim from the text about the locations of things vis-à-vis one’s proposed geography, to postulate the existence of two different places with the same name. Given Aston’s goal of resolving the problem of two Cumorahs, it is ironic that he must have two lands northward and duplicate seas to pull it off. To me, duplication of place names is a sure sign of trouble with a geography and of overly complex assumptions about how to read the text. Aston’s correlation is implausible. The reason both Curtis and Aston need two lands northward is the awkward fact that the proposed hill Cumorah is east of the Niagara neck, their proposed narrow neck of land. In simplistic internal geographies that read the Book of Mormon as implying a narrow neck of land connecting the lands northward and southward, the existence of the hill Cumorah south or

southeast of the narrow neck places it in the land southward. Unfortunately for these correlations, the Book of Mormon clearly places this hill in the land northward. The hill Cumorah is a later name for the Jaredite hill Ramah, and the Jaredites inhabited only the land northward. We are thus required to place Cumorah in the land northward. Failure to do so is sufficient to dismiss all correlations that identify the Niagara neck as the narrow neck of land mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Having a land northward for the Jaredites and later Nephites that is different from that for the early Nephites is overly complicated and unconvincing.

Correlations of Book of Mormon features and cities with modern geographies are illustrated by maps in the front and back folds of Aston's book (conveniently located and easy to use) as well as fourteen other maps and charts interspersed throughout the text to clarify detailed arguments. Aston places the city of Zarahemla about twenty-five to thirty miles south of Rochester, and he puts the city of Nephi in the very southwestern corner of New York state near Jamestown. As with Olive's geography, his land southward is a compressed micro-geography that leaves little room for the travel distances mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Within its genre, however, *Return to Cumorah* provides the most thorough coverage so far of the archaeology of New York. As discussed by Aston, much of this has been destroyed since initial settlement by European colonists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But much can be reconstructed from early historical accounts. Aston's reconstructed maps of aboriginal settlement patterns for this area are impressive and demonstrate convincingly that this was a fertile land for agriculture that once supported significant populations. As discussed below, Aston uses the archaeological record to show the plausibility of some of his claims, but he fails to pursue these data to their logical conclusions.

In the following discussion of individual arguments, I provide more detailed assessments of pending issues for LGL geographies. I disagree with much of what is offered as evidence in support of

LGL geographies, the interpretation of supposed “facts,” and the logic of many of the arguments. As do Olive and Curtis, Aston relies on rhetoric and innuendo to establish some of his case. Contrary to his claims, the geographic details of western New York do not correlate as well with the Book of Mormon account as do those proposed for Mesoamerica. Aston’s lands are too small and could not, and did not, support the tens of thousands of people described in the Book of Mormon account at A.D. 400. He has to pull and stretch the facts of the Book of Mormon and local New York geography to make them mesh. Moreover, New York does not come close to fulfilling the temporal and cultural requirements of the Book of Mormon. I read Aston’s argument in manuscript form before publication, and I communicated these views to him. He countered that all geographies have problems with archaeological and anthropological details, a point with which I agree. But he dismissed my concerns, I can only suppose, as irresolvable problems. The more appropriate response would have been to consider the possibility that all the geographies are wrong. In the following sections, I work my way through the arguments of Aston’s book, with inclusion of arguments from the other LGL books when appropriate. I accord Aston’s book greater attention here because it is the best of the lot. I have no particular desire to single out this book for hard critique; rather, my purpose is to respond to arguments advanced in the cause of an LGL geography and put them on record. This might serve some readers who want a second opinion as well as model builders who want to avoid the problems identified in the current models for an LGL geography of Book of Mormon lands.

### **An Assessment of LGL Arguments**

#### **Book of Mormon Geography Is Knowable**

Of the books under consideration, Aston’s book comes the closest to being a scholarly production. I address the principal arguments in his book in the order of their original presentation. Thus this review can be read alongside his text. “It is the premise of this book that Book of Mormon lands really can be identified, and experi-

enced, if we are but willing to recognize that the Book of Mormon itself contains sufficiently many clues on features of geography that can clear up our understanding” (Aston, pp. 4–5). Aston notes that a pervasive attitude prevails among church members that Book of Mormon lands cannot be known. I agree with him that the details of the text are sufficient to provide a plausible hope of actually identifying these ancient lands. This has not yet been convincingly done. Aston argues that in attempting to make this identification, priority ought to be given to details of physical geography rather than of archaeology, although the latter should be considered later. This also becomes a decision rule for evaluating proposals. “Thus to the degree that correlation exists between features of geography and the Book of Mormon accounts, confidence can be established” (Aston, p. 3). This can all be accomplished if we have at least one known point in real space on which to tie Book of Mormon geography. All the LGL proposals presume the Hill Cumorah in New York to be that known point.

### One Cumorah or Two?

We can first recognize that the Hill Cumorah, mentioned in Mormon, Chapter 6, is a point of Book of Mormon geography that should be known with certainty, since the Prophet Joseph Smith and the Saints in the early days of the Church accepted its location as indisputable. Therefore this should be the starting point from which to start to begin building an understanding of Book of Mormon geography. (Aston, p. 5)

Such claims are the crux of the debate between those who would place Nephite lands in Middle America and those who would place them in New York. I have dealt with this argument in some detail in my review of Curtis’s book; I call it the “trap of obvious facts.”<sup>9</sup> Given the way many church members treat gossip as information, it is unlikely that this matter can ever be resolved short of the prophet making a clear declaration from the pulpit. The best internal analysis of

9. Clark, “The Final Battle for Cumorah,” 110.



the Book of Mormon text on this matter is presented by Hedengren, but he fails to prove his case. To my knowledge, no one has made a thorough analysis of early statements by church leaders on this matter.

Labeling the Middle America argument as the “two-Cumorah” theory is really an unfortunate use of language. The issue revolves around the probable location of the Cumorah mentioned by Mormon as the depository of the Nephite records and the place of the final battle. No geographer, of any stripe, believes that there are two hills of this description. There is only one Cumorah/Ramah, and it was clearly an integral part of Jaredite and Nephite geography in the land northward, north of the narrow neck of land, and near the East Sea. Likewise, no one questions that the hill near Palmyra was the location from which Joseph Smith obtained the abridged record deposited by Moroni. Moreover, no one really questions that early Saints and even close associates of the Prophet Joseph Smith called the Palmyra hill “Cumorah.” Their beliefs and convictions on the matter, however, do not count as “indisputable” evidence, as Aston believes. That this “fact” has been disputed for over a century raises questions about its indisputability. The issue is whether the Palmyra hill is the same one known by Mormon and Ether. Middle America advocates claim that it is not; LGL advocates claim that it is.

First, the final arbiter of information on Book of Mormon geography ought to be the sacred canon itself, not just hearsay. If Mormon’s Cumorah was in New York, all the facts in the book ought to bear this out. Nothing is wrong with taking this location as a working hypothesis; it is quite another matter, however, to make it a declaration of faith and an issue of scholarly warfare. If the Palmyra hill represents another hill in a distant land given the same name by Moroni after Mormon’s death, then trying to make it conform to the requirements of the Book of Mormon Cumorah should create substantial dissonance with the recorded facts of Nephite geography.

Second, the engraved plates could not contain a description of their own deposition. Why? The book would have been sealed before it was deposited in its final hiding place. The best we could have is



Moroni's thoughts on where he intended to bury the plates, but we do not even have this. Just as one cannot read a sealed book, one cannot write in a sealed book. Moroni's last writings clarified that he did not know the Lord's will with regard to the plates or the reasons for his prolonged survival after his comrades were slain (see Hedengren, pp. 39–46). Why would the final deposition of the plates be any different?

Third, the only evidence in support of a New York Ramah/Cumorah is Mormon folklore. I think it is clear that Joseph Smith Jr. himself did not know the location of Book of Mormon lands. The authors I examine here treat the various accounts attributed to Joseph Smith in different ways. They accept some and reject others. Olive provides a good analysis of Frederick G. Williams's statement about the location of the Lehites' landing attributed to the Prophet, and she dismisses it (pp. 1–16). She also makes a case that the statement written in the *Times and Seasons* about the lands of the Book of Mormon being in Guatemala could *not* have been approved by Joseph Smith, even though he was the editor of this paper, because he was in hiding and incommunicado at the time. Aston makes this same point. So good reasons are found to cast doubt on troublesome statements, and favorable ones are accepted and promoted with little criticism. In short, there appear to be two sets of rules for evaluating evidence; this is self-serving and unacceptable.

I would like to see more evenhandedness in dealing with statements from Latter-day Saints. As a matter of analytical rigor, I think all speculative statements by Latter-day Saints should be dismissed before beginning any serious analysis. Oliver Cowdery's account of the hill full of records, as later related by Brigham Young, is an example. This is supposed to clinch the case for a New York Ramah/Cumorah. I have dealt with this account in my review of Curtis's book.<sup>10</sup> Sufficient ambiguity exists in the different accounts of this supposed event to cause one to wonder whether it was a pedestrian stroll to

10. *Ibid.*, 93–98.

nearby Cumorah or whether the participants were caught up in vision and shown the room full of ancient records and other artifacts. If the latter, this hill could be anywhere. It bears pointing out here that approval of early Mormon traditions of any particular locations by later apostles and General Authorities does not settle an issue. The bottom line is that any statements not fully consonant with or contradicting what is in the Book of Mormon must be treated as speculation. On the other hand, opinions that merely restate the text add nothing to it. The dangerous area is where opinion is thought to clarify ambiguities in the text, of which there are many. The minimal fact that various statements are attributed to Joseph Smith that place cities in different lands suggests that he continued to be interested throughout his life in the location of Book of Mormon lands and, consequently, that it remained an open question for him. If he knew where they were, why did he continue guessing? Should we not be similarly open-minded today? Do we go with the Prophet's early statements or his later statements?

One of the marvels of the Book of Mormon translation is that Joseph Smith gave us a record that surpassed his own understanding. The thrust of all Hugh Nibley's analyses of this text and of others is that the book is full of truths that could not have been known either to any secular scholars of Joseph Smith's time or even to him. One of the best testimonies of the truth of the work is that Joseph Smith did not seem to know the details of the book. The logical obverse of this has been the standard fare of anti-Mormonism from the beginning: If all the details in the Book of Mormon geography were readily at hand in New York and Pennsylvania, this could be seen as evidence that Joseph Smith made the whole thing up. This conclusion does not necessarily follow, of course, but such a correlation would certainly be sufficient grounds for strong suspicion.

Names are important things. It would be interesting to know what Cumorah meant in the language of the Nephites. If it meant something like "record depository," then it could have served as a functional label as well as a place name. I have heard such an etymol-

ogy attributed to the name, but I have not looked for its source or validated this reading. One of the questions here is whether we are seeing the reuse of an honored name. This is a particularly ironic issue for upstate New York and for Latter-day Saints. We do not think of the Old World Palmyra when we use the name in conjunction with Joseph Smith. Nor is the Old World implicated in the names of neighboring New York towns: Syracuse, Geneva, Greece, Hamburg, Holland, Castile, Rome, and Utica. Likewise, we consider it natural for the early Saints in Utah Territory to use honored names for their towns and natural features: Bountiful, Jordan, Nephi, Lehi, Manti, and Moroni. In both situations, the reuse of traditional names was part of colonial expansion into Indian lands and its appropriation by immigrants. Naming was an important part of domesticating the frontier. The New York Cumorah could represent the reuse of a worthy name in a similar manner.

If we are dealing with an original hill and a later hill named in honor of the first, then any archaeological expectations, as inferred from the text, would apply only to the original hill. The most thorough analysis of the physical expectations for the hill Ramah/Cumorah has been provided by David A. Palmer.<sup>11</sup> As noted above, the hill should be located in the land northward, north of the narrow neck of land, and near the east sea. It should also have been large enough to have accommodated two wars of extermination involving tens of thousands of casualties. The area round about would have to have been highly productive agriculturally to sustain the warring Nephites during their few years of preparation.

Finally, we have a plausible expectation of finding evidence of war, whether fortifications, habitations, weapons, or skeletons of victims. This evidence should reasonably date to two different time periods about one thousand years apart. The Palmyra Cumorah does not meet any of these expectations. It is awkwardly located; it is much too small; the area lacked the necessary agricultural potential,

11. David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981).

at least in Book of Mormon times when New York natives still were not using corn; and it lacks the expected archaeological record. Even if defensive trenches, weapons, and bodies were buried, they would still be archaeologically detectable or obvious. Given these deficiencies, is it any wonder that scholars have searched elsewhere for the original hill? The limited archaeological evidence proffered by LGL advocates is all old hearsay about items said to have been found in the Palmyra region. It has not been confirmed, but even were we to give it the benefit of the doubt, the evidence favors other hills, not Palmyra's Cumorah.

### **The Land of Promise**

The books by Curtis, Olive, and Aston interpret the prophecies recorded in 1 Nephi about the "land of promise" as past history. This involves a double ambiguity of taking a general description of a future event and coupling it with posterior guesses as to the events foretold. The most extensive treatments are those by Curtis and Olive. Their readings of the promised-land scriptures are exclusionary. Curtis and Aston read the foretold events of the discovery and population of the promised land by fair gentiles as excluding Mexico and Central America. Olive reads these same scriptures as excluding Canada as well, a position more logically consistent with the proposed narrow interpretation than that of either Aston or Curtis. All these readings are strained, however. The main consequence, and perhaps main purpose, of reading them in this limiting way is to undercut the plausibility of Mesoamerican geographic correlations and make way for an LGL theory as the only surviving alternative. If Mexico is not part of the land of promise, it necessarily follows that Nephite lands could not have been located there, and vice versa. Olive's extensive discussion follows that of Curtis. She makes two points. First, she reads the scriptures of the promised land in order to locate the general lands of the Book of Mormon. Once these are identified within the boundaries of the United States, she then specifies that the lim-



ited lands, or narrative center, of Book of Mormon lands based on the geographic clues were located in western New York.

I have always read these scriptures as New World–inclusive rather than exclusive. The only places clearly excluded are those Lehi and company left behind. I have addressed the issue of conflating prophecy with history in my review of Curtis’s book.<sup>12</sup> As with Cumorah controversies, arguments over the extent of the promised land are irresolvable, short of modern prophetic utterance, because the various positions are decided in advance by prejudices. The main points in favor of a limited identification for the land of promise are that it was to be a land of liberty not subject to a king, a land populated by fair-skinned gentiles, and a land in which the descendants of the Lamanites would be scattered. But parts of the same prophecy are interpreted as referring to Columbus, a gentile moved upon by the Spirit to discover the promised land. Columbus does not fit easily into a limited interpretation for the land of promise, since he never touched the shores of the future United States. Another difficulty with the limited interpretation is the confusion of a “land” for the political territory of a nation-state. Why not, for example, interpret the scripture as referring to the early United States when it had only thirteen colonies rather than to its political territory over a century later? This limited territory would better correspond with the proposed narrative center of Book of Mormon lands described in these books.

It is indeed important to establish that the Book of Mormon narrative occurred in the New World. I have seen an interesting proposal that places the events in Malaysia rather than accepting this inference. Hedengren’s brief analysis on this point works better than either Olive’s or Curtis’s painful exegesis. He quotes the visit of the angel Moroni to Joseph Smith saying that the Book of Mormon gives “an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the source from which they sprang” (Joseph Smith—History 1:34). Because this message was delivered to Joseph Smith in New York,

12. Clark, “The Final Battle for Cumorah,” 82–93.

“this” must refer at least to the North American continent. “Continent” appears to be a much more plausible reading of “land” than is “nation-state.” If so, interpretations of the land of promise probably should not be read as excluding Mexico, Canada, or Central America—or even South America.

The reading of a limited promised land as the contiguous United States involves an irony for any LGL geography. Olive cites the evidence for the New Jerusalem to be built in Jackson County, Missouri, and the scriptural evidence for the location of Adam-ondi-Ahman (p. 21). All of her evidence points to Missouri, but then she argues that the narrated events took place in western New York. Her Cumorah is as distant from Missouri as Mexico is. Why privilege one over the other? As Curtis does, she argues that the Indians in Mexico and Central America were too civilized and organized to be descendants of the Lamanites. This is not a sound argument. In addition to accidental bigotry, it presumes perfect knowledge of the meaning of scripture. Aston summarizes the main points of his argument as follows:

The Lord showed Nephi that “many multitudes of Gentiles” would come “upon the land of promise.” These Gentiles would “prosper and obtain the land for their inheritance.” These Gentiles would be “fair and beautiful.” They had “gone forth out of captivity,” having the power of the Lord with them (1 Nephi 13:14–16). What other people could this refer to, other than those Gentiles, pilgrims, who had come to occupy eastern United States and Canada in colonial times? (Aston, p. 6)

I suspect that this question was not really meant to be answered, but the clear answer is that the scripture refers to all the other people from the Old World who came to the New World, which included Mexico, Central America, and South America. At the end of his argument, Aston throws in the Statue of Liberty and its inscription as confirming and inspirational evidence, as if its existence establishes

the case of the United States as the only land of liberty and prosperity in the New World. I do not accept his arguments, but extensive confrontation on the matter is pointless since no concrete details concerning specific lands are involved. It is sufficient here to suggest that interpretations of the land of promise as only the United States are unwarranted. What we need for finding Book of Mormon lands is clear information about features and the direction and distance between them. Each of the authors provides a list of features that he or she thinks makes the case. I focus on those advanced by Aston.

### Sailing and Landing

The first, immediate consequence of choosing the Palmyra hill as Ramah/Cumorah is that all Book of Mormon peoples must have landed somewhere near there. This identification requires the Lehites to have sailed their craft around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Atlantic Ocean, which counters expectations based on some old hearsay in the Mormon tradition. I agree with the LGL authors that such hearsay evidence of Lehi's landing should not count as real evidence, for reasons already mentioned. The Book of Mormon does not specify the oceans crossed; rather, they have been inferred from internal reconstructions of the geography. Hedengren and Curtis provide evidence of winds and currents that show the physical feasibility of Atlantic crossings for the Jaredites, Nephites, and Mulekites. Other advocates have done the same for Middle American geographies and Pacific Ocean crossings. For the Lehites, the travels of Nephi and his band indicate a landing on the shores of the west sea, with subsequent travels northward and eastward to escape the Lamanites. The sense of the text is that the Lehites suffered a long journey across an immense sea and landed quickly and gratefully on its shore. For me, the Pacific Ocean and a Middle American landing appear the best explanation.

I have little problem with the proposition that some of the Great Lakes are extensive enough to have been called "seas" anciently, in the same sense conveyed by the Sea of Galilee. What I cannot square with



the text is the notion that these terms would exclude the ocean crossed by the Nephites to get to the land of promise. It is hard to imagine being impressed by a lake after spending six months to a year on the ocean. The LGL proposals have all the groups approaching the promised land from the east rather than the west. Hedengren proposes an ocean shore landing for the Lehites in the Chesapeake Bay, but it is southeast of his projected Book of Mormon lands. This does not work. Locating the Jaredites and Mulekites presents other problems, as they settled lands north of the Nephites. Hedengren speculates that they also landed on the Atlantic coast and worked their way inland following rivers until they reached western New York. In contrast, Olive and Aston argue that the Nephite landing was on the eastern shore of Lake Erie. Curtis has the Nephites and Mulekites landing on the southern shore of Lake Ontario. His proposal has the minor advantage of not forcing his people to sail upstream over Niagara Falls, as implied in Aston's and Olive's proposals. These proposed arrival points are a logical necessity, given their commitment to a Palmyra Cumorah and to the Great Lakes as Book of Mormon "seas." But such landings present logistical difficulties. How did the ocean craft sail upstream and over shallows, rapids, and falls to reach lakes hundreds of miles inland? Such a route would have been extremely difficult, and it certainly could not have been the first landing by any stretch of the imagination. There must be a vast literature on the travails of actual peoples who attempted this route. Those who argue this position ought to examine this literature. For the Nephites, and others, it would have required a month or more of additional travel and probably change in water craft and periodic portage to work their way inland from the Atlantic coast, none of which is warranted by the text.

In truth, all LGL geographies have difficulties with the water passages of the text. They have potential seas in all directions but no easy way for their travelers to get to them from the Atlantic Ocean. If some of the seas mentioned in the Book of Mormon really are oceans rather than lakes, then its narrative center is necessarily somewhere in Middle



America, a narrow land flanked by bona fide oceans. Those who wish to believe that Mediterranean peoples landed in the Great Lakes near Kirtland, Ohio, need to show the feasibility of such a trip. So far they have not established a credible case.

### The Narrow Neck of Land

Aside from Cumorah, the next most important feature in Book of Mormon geographies is the narrow neck of land which divided the land southward from the land northward. Both Aston and Curtis identify the narrow neck with the Niagara neck between Lakes Ontario and Erie. Aston provides evidence that Niagara is an Indian place-name that means “narrow or small neck” (pp. 21–22), but he is cautious enough not to take this correspondence as definitive evidence. Olive has to fabricate a narrow neck of land south of Niagara by resurrecting ancient lakes; her proposal is baseless on geological grounds. For his part, Hedengren argues for a stretch of land between two of the Finger Lakes. For Aston, the proximity of this feature to the Palmyra Cumorah settles the matter:

It is remarkable that a narrow neck of land exists not far from a known point of Book of Mormon geography, the Hill Cumorah. Knowledge of this correlation becomes evidence that the narrow neck of land at Niagara is that neck of land mentioned in the Book of Mormon. So compelling is this knowledge, that it becomes strong evidence that the setting for the Book of Mormon took place in nearby lands. This would seem to go a long way toward dispelling theories that there might exist another Hill Cumorah. (Aston, p. 22)

Aston describes how he struggled with his own misconceptions that the hill Cumorah was north of the narrow neck, and how he finally resolved this difficulty. In the process, he claims to resolve other difficult passages involving water. The key is two different meanings for the “land northward,” a solution also arrived at by Curtis. Given

the importance of correctly identifying the narrow neck, Aston's account merits detailed attention.

The dilemma that I faced was this: if these north countries were above the narrow neck of land as is typically believed, then why do Book of Mormon accounts not give even the slightest hint that Mormon and his armies crossed the narrow neck of land, coming over to the known location of Hill Cumorah for their last battles (see Mormon 6:2)? The record is silent on such a possibility.

This matter disturbed me for years until I was eventually able to shed some new light on the matter. The solution to this puzzle lies in a different understanding of what is meant by use of the term “the land northward.”

Simply, it means that almost all significant Book of Mormon events, first involving the Jaredites and then the Nephites, took place in lands located below the narrow neck of land, in lands northward to Zarahemla. The land of Desolation lay on the southern seashores of an ancient lake, present-day Lake Ontario. (Aston, pp. 23, 25)

The other land northward is southern Ontario, a land nearly surrounded by water. Aston sees this as a remarkable correspondence to the description in Helaman 3:8, which claims that the Nephites began to cover the whole earth “from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east.” This postulated piece of ground does indeed accord well with Mormon's description—if we are willing to grant duplicate names for seas and if we suppose that Mormon was describing a land not frequented by either Jaredites or Nephites.

Both Curtis and Aston use southern Ontario as their escape hatch for the troublesome scriptures of the cardinal seas, but they have no use for this region otherwise, and they do not place a single city or feature in it or even illustrate it on their principal maps. This second land northward serves no apparent role in Book of Mormon history as they relate it. Recall that this is a land in which all the trees had

been cut down, and the later inhabitants built cement cities—not a likely possibility for Ontario. Aston points out that his interpretation of this land is better than one I suggested in which I considered the language concerning filling the whole earth with peoples, from sea to sea to sea to sea, as effusive and possibly metaphorical.<sup>13</sup> He might be right, but the issue will only be resolved, and can only be evaluated, by taking into account all other correspondences to requirements of the Book of Mormon narrative. Aston further proposes that the Niagara River that bisects the narrow neck is a good candidate for the place where the “sea divides the land.”

I have already pointed out some problems and consequences of this particular case of duplicate naming. The first is that the larger of the lands northward lay inert, for all intents and purposes. Second, the active land northward, the strip of land hugging the southern shore of Lake Ontario (the Ontario Plain), is much too short and far too wide to have served as the northern lands described in the Book of Mormon. We are exhorted to believe that the Jaredites spent over a millennium in this pancaked land northward and never strayed thirty miles south into the land southward.

Consider Aston’s claims quoted above. The first is a case of circular reasoning. The identification of Niagara only becomes plausible by its association with a known point of geography: Cumorah. But Cumorah cannot be taken as a known point, so its conjectured validity cannot be used to support additional claims. A better way to proceed would be to read the text and then look for a hill and a narrow neck that have the physical relationship suggested by the text. As Aston notes, his earlier expectations countered those he finally came to believe after he struggled mightily with the issue. His discussion of Mormon’s movements is another case of fallacious reasoning. The Book of Mormon accounts of the final Nephite wars do provide sufficient evidence that Mormon was in the land northward, and no mention is made of later crossing the narrow neck to get to Cumorah because it was located farther north in the land northward—close

13. Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” 65.

by—rather than to the south. If we start our analysis with a question rather than a conclusion, things become clearer. The geographical distortions necessitated by the belief that the Palmyra hill is Mormon's Cumorah are obvious, and they constitute good evidence that Aston's correlation and identifications simply do not fit. In making this claim, I am giving Aston's dilemma the benefit of the doubt. But he wades into dangerous waters with his claim that failure to mention things in the text is positive evidence that something did not occur. Hedengren uses a similar argument in making his case that Moroni did not wander far from Cumorah/Ramah—because he did not record that he did (p. 43). It is not legitimate to second-guess what the absence of evidence in the text means and then to use one's guess as evidence.

The major challenge for LGL correlations is to find a plausible narrow neck that gives a land northward that is as extensive as its land southward and that has as much evidence for prehistoric population. Unlike the land southward, our historic expectations for the land northward are for evidence of an earlier civilization, up to two thousand years older than the bulk of the Nephite occupation superimposed upon it.

### The River Sidon

Of the four geographies considered here, only Aston's proposes a credible candidate for the river Sidon. He suggests that it is the modern Genesee River; this river is about 110 miles long and runs northward from northern Pennsylvania to Rochester and into Lake Ontario. The Book of Mormon account places the headwaters of the Sidon south of the city and land of Zarahemla. And it specifies a river that could be forded in its upper reaches but which had sufficient current to carry dead bodies out to sea. The most thorough textual analysis of the river Sidon is by John and Janet Hilton.<sup>14</sup> Curtis pro-

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



poses the short Niagara River as his candidate for Sidon. As mentioned, Aston interprets the Niagara River as the place where the “sea divides the land.” Olive proposes Buffalo Creek–Buffalo River as the Sidon. This river is much too short and small to be considered a viable candidate. For his part, Hedengren argues for the mighty Susquehanna River. It appears to be of the right order of magnitude in length and volume, but it flows southward rather than northward, as required by Book of Mormon description. This flaw is so serious as to invalidate his entire scheme. Further, he does not address this issue. Were he to find a good candidate for the Sidon, his geography would be the best of the current crop of LGL geographies. As it stands, Aston’s Sidon is the best of the lot, but his identification is still unsatisfactory, and his argument for making his case is even less acceptable. Consider some of it:

Proximity of the Genesee River to the known Hill Cumorah in the north would seem to suggest that this river was indeed the River Sidon of the Book of Mormon. If so, then the Hill Cumorah was near events associated with the land of Zarahemla. Again, in Alma 2:15 it is noted that the River Sidon ran by the land of Zarahemla.

Referring to the internal maps of Appendix A, please notice that other geographers typically place Hill Cumorah outside of the core of Book of Mormon events, in a land that seems too far northward, too far from the core of Book of Mormon events which occurred at Zarahemla.

It would seem that only the proposed New York geography can make it clear that Hill Cumorah was indeed located not far from the heart of Book of Mormon events. Perhaps for this reason Hill Cumorah was chosen as the site for the last battles of both the Jaredites and the Nephites. (Aston, p. 41)

So much is wrong with this argument that it is hard to know where to begin. If anything, Aston’s claim leads to the opposite conclusion: that his correlation cannot possibly be correct. First, he makes

an assertion and not an argument. What is claimed as a conclusion is really a rewording of his initial premise—that his chosen river must be the Sidon because it is proximate to the known point of the hill Cumorah. This is a repetition of his argument for identifying the narrow neck of land, and it does not work for all the same reasons. More embarrassing is the distortion of the Book of Mormon text necessary to suggest such an argument. The river Sidon is unambiguously located in the land southward, but curiously, its entry point into the sea is never mentioned. Sidon and Cumorah are clearly in different lands and are never mentioned in any passages as being proximate. That Aston would try to make a case for his Sidon in this manner is curious. One can take it as a simple decision rule that any proposed geography that places Cumorah near the river Sidon must be incorrect.

Aston presumes to know the location of Mormon's Cumorah. From this he identifies the river Sidon, in defiance of all geographical relationships in the Book of Mormon. He then uses these two conjectures as a platform to recommend a different reading of the text and for dismissing all other geographies that correctly place Cumorah outside the river Sidon drainage. He further suggests that this provides a key for understanding Jaredite and Nephite military strategies. Cumorah was not proximate to the Nephite settlements in the land of Zarahemla; it was not near the core of the action of early Nephite history. Rather, Cumorah represented a point of distant refuge to which the Nephites fled to gain separation from their enemies in an effort to buy time to prepare for their end game.

Aston's argument is upside down—he uses the physical geography as a basis for creatively rereading the Book of Mormon. This unacceptable practice leads to erroneous conclusions. In no known travel account of warriors or missionaries south (or east) of the narrow neck of land is there any mention of the land of Cumorah or of the hill Cumorah. And we have a rather complete account of the identities of all these lands from all the wars; no empty space is unaccounted for south of the narrow neck of land. Cumorah did not en-

ter Nephite history until the final two centuries (A.D. 200–421), after they were forced into the land northward and had to concede all the land southward to the Lamanites.

Careful attention to Mormon's account of being given charge of the records and of his moving them to safe caves puts the hill Cumorah north of the narrow neck of land, where all internal geographies place it. The same accounts mention the river Sidon only in its headwaters and in its course through the land of Zarahemla. There is no account of anyone traveling along the Sidon north of Zarahemla to the sea, perhaps suggesting that such travel was difficult or impossible. No such impediments characterize the candidates for Sidon considered here.<sup>15</sup>

### Desolation and the Defensive Line

Aston's analysis of the fortified line between the lands of Bountiful and Desolation follows his method of argumentation noted above, with the consequence being "some surprisingly different interpretations of Book of Mormon accounts" (Aston, p. 56), the principal one being his placement of Desolation below the narrow neck. Given his treatment of Cumorah, the narrow neck, and Sidon, this should come as no surprise. The scriptures describe the "line" as a "fortified" line. Aston suggests that this fortified line may have corresponded to a natural feature of the landscape. This interpretation is possible, of course, but nothing in the text supports such speculation. Aston eventually identifies the Niagara escarpment (the strand line of ancient Lake Iroquois) as this line. He presumes he has it correctly identified, of course, with one consequence being that most other geographers are misreading the text and placing Desolation north of the narrow neck. From Niagara Falls this two-hundred-foot-high escarpment runs eastward, paralleling the southern shore of Lake Ontario

15. In putting this last speculation in print, I have violated my own rule of thumb: to avoid making positive inferences from the absence of evidence. So I do not consider this argument serious—only interesting. The known problems with Aston's Sidon are sufficient to negate his hypothesis several times over without recourse to such postulated features.



until it peters out about fifty miles away, halfway to Rochester. The low-lying lands between the escarpment and the modern lakeshore are about seven to eight miles wide. This strip of land is Desolation, the principal lands of the Jaredites and the later Mulekites. Curtis and other LGL geographers make similar claims that this escarpment divided a land northward from Bountiful, just to the south, with Zarahemla just to the south of Bountiful. This is clearly an error of scale. The area in question is slightly smaller than the land in Utah Valley east of Utah Lake and west of the Wasatch Front. There simply is not enough real estate in a land this size to accommodate the Book of Mormon accounts of tens of thousands of people. I doubt that the number of current inhabitants of this New York strip, even with modern cultigens and technology, anywhere approaches the number of people said to have lived in these lands in ancient times. It would have to have been one continuous city to even approach the correct order of magnitude.

Consider some of Aston's arguments on these matters.

Given that the Hill Cumorah of western New York played an important role in Jaredite accounts, and assuming that the Jaredites had occupied lands northward above the narrow neck of land at Niagara, they would be required to eventually travel to Hill Cumorah for their destruction. Then why does the Book of Ether not indicate that Jaredites had ever crossed the narrow neck of land in their final wars?

This disparity suggested to me that the land of Desolation lay below the narrow neck of land, and not above as many believe. (Aston, p. 51)

This argument is almost identical to the arguments reviewed for the river Sidon and the narrow neck. It is worth stressing that the "disparities" that Aston confronts *arise only because he presumes to know the location of Ramah/Cumorah*. If he had worked through the Book of Mormon text first, without trying to squeeze the account into a New York setting, he would have continued to favor a placement for



Jaredite lands and Desolation north of the narrow neck of land. It would necessarily follow that Cumorah would be located north of the neck also. Aston's presumption concerning the location of Cumorah forces him to read the scriptures creatively. Thus he wonders why the battle narratives do not mention travels through the narrow neck. The answer that he accepts is that they did not travel through it. From this guess, however, he reaches the erroneous conclusion entailed in his initial premise of knowing the location of Ramah/Cumorah. He presumes that Desolation was necessarily south or east of the narrow neck. The more likely conclusion is that Cumorah was in the land northward, as the majority of readers of the Book of Mormon believe. He is correct that the two lands are contiguous. Desolation takes its name from the ravages of war that culminated at Ramah.

If we approach the riddle of Book of Mormon geography with requisite humility, as a difficult problem, and if we take as our working proposition that we do not really know a priori the location of any of the features mentioned, then we will consistently place Desolation and Cumorah north of the narrow neck and defensive line, and Bountiful, Zarahemla, and the land southward south of this same line. The proof of this claim is the numerous internal geographies that have been constructed. As an aside, the argument quoted above suggests that there was not much Jaredite population on the other side of the narrow neck. This undercuts Aston's earlier argument for a second land northward bracketed by cardinal seas. He concludes, "the Book of Mormon seemed to indicate that Jaredite events mainly took place below the narrow neck of land" (Aston, p. 51). This is simply untrue; the text indicates the reverse. Aston's method consistently leads astray.

### The Narrow Pass and Fortifications

Aston associates the narrow pass mentioned in the Book of Mormon with the defensive line of fortifications. The bulk of his analysis is to present evidence of ancient fortifications along this strand line. Most of the references are to old reports because most of

these fortifications were destroyed in colonial times. Although he suggests that the evidence is possibly confirmatory, Aston is careful not to put too much weight on it. Of the few sites that have been dated by scientific techniques, many postdate Nephite times by one thousand years. It is highly probable that most of the sites are much too late to have been Book of Mormon fortifications. Aston's caution in this matter is commendable, as is his attempt to look at the primary archaeological sources. In doing such research, interested geographers should realize that reports written before 1950 are chronologically weak. A major pending question concerning the reported high density of ancient remains in this area is their date. For this information, one must search the most recent reports. This remains to be done.

### Lessons from Limhi's Lost Messengers

I have claimed that many of the geographies considered here are too small to accommodate some of the travels described for the land southward. Aston analyzes these trips and argues that they sustain his vision for a microgeography of Nephite lands. Of particular interest is the journey of Limhi's scouts/envoys in their search for Zarahemla. "The significance of this expedition is that it clearly demonstrates that Jaredite lands were not all that far from the land of Zarahemla" (Aston, p. 73). The key to this analysis is the "overshot distance" between the distance these scouts thought they had to travel and the distance they actually traveled. All analyses of this expedition rely on conjecture to estimate this extra distance, so none is particularly convincing in and of itself. Here I outline Aston's arguments on these matters. He makes the following points:

1. If Coriantumr was the final survivor of the last battle at Ramah, "this suggests that his discovery by Mulekites probably occurred in the near vicinity of the Hill Cumorah" (Aston, p. 74). This is simply speculation. We do not know where the Mulekites found him.
2. The hill Ramah is mentioned in Ether in conjunction with Omer's travels. "This certainly suggests that the Hill Ramah/Cumorah

must have played some kind of central role in Jaredite geography, from the very beginning of the Jaredites in America” (Aston, p. 74). This inference seems unfounded and unnecessary. All we can infer is that it was a known point of geography during later Jaredite times and that it was in Jaredite lands.

3. “Because of the wickedness of the Jaredites, Jaredite lands became occupied by the Mulekites (see Ether 13:21). Now, since Jaredite lands included the Hill Cumorah, then lands of the peoples of Zarahemla (Mulekites) also included the Hill Cumorah” (Aston, p. 74). This is a particularly beguiling claim based on inattention to the Book of Mormon account. The scripture makes no such claims. The Mulekites’ first landing was in Jaredite lands, but they settled in the land of Zarahemla to the south. There is no evidentiary basis to confound Mulekite lands with Jaredite lands and on that basis to infer the presence of Cumorah in Mulekite lands (that is, Zarahemla). The “other people” referred to in Ether 13:21 who would inherit Jaredite lands were most likely the Nephites rather than the Mulekites.

4. “The account of the Limhi expedition states that they found ‘bones’ and ‘ruins of buildings,’ those that once belonged to the Jaredites. Thus the expedition missed its target at Zarahemla, overshoot its mark and discovered lands previously occupied by the Jaredites. An important issue is that the over-shot distance was not all that much, in contrast to much greater distances typically proposed by other Book of Mormon geographers” (Aston, p. 75). The first statement here is correct, but Aston’s claims for the overshoot distance do not logically follow and are mere speculation aided and abetted by his view of the possibilities of his geography. As he has it set up, it would not be possible to overshoot Zarahemla by much without hitting the shore of Lake Ontario. Had this occurred, the Limhites would surely have realized they were lost. Even so, Aston, and others such as Curtis, must propose a zigzag trip for the Limhites and other travelers between the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla to even come close to the number of days consumed by this journey—up to forty days for the truly disoriented.

5. “If travel had been through wilderness areas, heavily forested, with steep hilly terrain, people could have easily gotten disoriented and lost. Actual path distances could have easily been double the scale amounts” (Aston, p. 75). This is certainly possible, but it does not accord well with our notions of peoples attuned to their environmental circumstances. This statement is another assumption posing as analysis. To make such arguments work, we must assume some diminished capacity on the part of the peoples involved. The simple point is that the closer Nephi was to Zarahemla, the more difficult it would have been to remain ignorant of the actual route between them. Aston argues for an extremely short distance and thus needs natives of limited capacity. In his brief analysis of four other journeys between Zarahemla and Nephi, Aston makes the point that Limhi’s people must have had a good idea of the general direction and distance. I agree. Armed with such knowledge, and assuming that Limhi sent some men with woodsman capability to protect and guide the emissaries on the trip, it is remarkable that they would become lost or were in situations in which they could not ask directions along the way. Aston’s argument is that, knowing the approximate distance, the Limhites would not overshoot their mark too much. If true, then Ramah/Cumorah and Desolation must have been close to Zarahemla. John Sorenson uses similar logic but accords the Limhites more diligence in travel once they suspected they might be lost. He presumes that they would not have traveled much more than twice the distance they originally expected. Thus, he argues for a longer distance which would have carried the unknowing Limhites into the land northward, as required by all other clues of Jaredite geography.<sup>16</sup>

6. “Coriantumr and his people were destroyed at Hill Ramah/Cumorah, hence the vicinity of hill Ramah/Cumorah was the most likely place where Ether would have left the twenty-four gold plates of Jaredite history, so that the Limhi expedition would eventually find them (Ether 15:33)” (Aston, p. 78). This inference does not nec-

16. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 14.



essarily follow from the facts, but with a relaxed notion of what “vicinity” might mean, it is a plausible expectation. I would like to see more critical thinking on this matter. Why did other people not find these plates before the Limhites did, especially if the bulk of Mulekite/Nephite population was so close by?

7. “Now, from all the above considerations, it does not seem reasonable that the Limhi expedition would have missed their mark, the land of Zarahemla, by a huge distance factor as is typically thought. In Journey No. 3 above, it took sixteen strong men forty days of wandering to travel from the land of Zarahemla, to the land of Nephi. According to Map A, this might have involved a ‘crow flight’ distance of something like 110 miles. Thus when the Limhi expedition overshot the land of Zarahemla, and ended up near or at Hill Cumorah, this might have meant an overshoot of about twenty-five miles. This distance is quite reasonable and seems consistent with the idea that the land of Zarahemla was not located very far from Hill Cumorah, and it was located *below* the narrow neck of land” (Aston, p. 80, emphasis in original).

The bulk of this fallacious argument is what Aston considers “reasonable” to believe. Why is it reasonable? In his Journey No. 3, for example, he has vigorous men progressing at a speed of 2.75 miles per day. This seems unreasonable. Even the Saints traveling to Winter Quarters made better time than this. The only way to accommodate this slow speed would be to have considerable lateral movement for every foot of forward progress. With such exaggerated zigging and zagging, however, it would be even more of a wonder that the Limhites did not chance upon some Nephite settlements before coming to the land of Desolation. The minimal overshoot distance of twenty-five miles is not at all credible either. This would be a slow or normal day of walking, depending on conditions. In Aston’s scheme, the land would have been relatively flat. If we presume that the Limhites followed trails, even game trails, they would have made good time. The most objectionable part of this whole analysis is the final line that pretends to be a conclusion but is really an assumption of what is

“reasonable” to believe. Aston guesses at the overshoot distance and then uses his guess as a fact to claim that Cumorah was close to Zarahemla, from which he derives the further fact that it was south of the narrow neck. This is merely speculation. The bottom line is that the Limhi expedition does not offer proponents of any of the geographies any facts on distance. The one interesting point is the capacity to get lost and lose the trail. I suspect that this potentiality provides an important clue on relative distance, but it is not precise information. A later description of travel from Zarahemla to Desolation and the land of many waters states: “And they did travel to an exceedingly great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers” (Helaman 3:4). This description counters Aston’s claims for these lands.

8. In his final footnote to this chapter, Aston compounds his difficulties: “It is ironical that an analysis of the Limhi expedition was a factor in helping geographers see that Book of Mormon events took place within a ‘local geography.’ Had that local geography been recognized as being centered around Hill Cumorah in western New York, there never would have arisen a need for a second Hill Cumorah” (Aston, p. 82). Aston’s arguments about alternative Cumorahs portray it as a matter of logical necessity—that scholars went looking for another hill once they realized that Book of Mormon lands were small, having already been convinced that ancient civilizations of Central America were involved. The two premises could not be reconciled, so something had to give. In some instances this may be true. The question, which Aston does not adequately address, is why the New York hill has not been seen to conform to the requirements of the text by most scholars. Why do most scholars give up on New York in favor of Middle America? A second, more important question to ask is why the early Saints and Joseph Smith did not realize that Book of Mormon lands were so small and were restricted to New York. Why is this only now being “recognized” by investigators such as Curtis, Aston, Hedengren, and Olive? Implied in Aston’s claim is the presumption that Joseph Smith did not know the loca-

tion of Book of Mormon lands, a point with which I agree, but one I doubt he realized he was making.

I will outline my last claim in more detail because it has possible implications for eliminating rhetorical excesses in future debates about Book of Mormon geography. Take the following: (1) Each of the proposed LGL geographies considered here is presented by its author as a novel and important proposal. (2) The need for LGL views arose because all parties of the geography debate now accept as an indisputable fact that Book of Mormon lands were localized, at least in their narrative center. (3) Each of these proposals differs from some traditional Mormon views on geography, including views ascribed to Joseph Smith by his closest associates. (4) The traditional views of Book of Mormon geography cannot be correct because the scale is wrong. If all of these are true, it follows that early Saints, including Joseph Smith, did not know the true extent of Book of Mormon lands or their precise parameters. It further follows that one would be ill-advised to take traditional correlations of Book of Mormon places as fact, including those of the Prophet and his early followers. This last claim does not necessarily follow from the preceding facts because it is possible to know a few points of geography with certainty, such as Cumorah, without understanding their implications for a complete geography. But this subtlety of logic creates difficulties for the books considered here. Although it falls short of logical necessity, it certainly is poor scholarly form to claim that a witness does not know the complete facts but indeed knows one essential fact.

If one questions the credibility of one's own witnesses, he or she ought to proceed with caution concerning the reliability of their actual testimony offered in evidence. In more concrete terms, it is poor form to imply that Joseph Smith did not know the extent or location of Book of Mormon events and, in the same analysis, to base one's geography on his purported beliefs about the location of the hill Cumorah. This compromised position is only exacerbated with claims of capturing the high moral ground by rescuing the hill Cumorah from its so-called detractors. *By the very scholarly exercise*



*of publishing a local geography, each LGL advocate makes an implicit claim that Joseph Smith did not understand Book of Mormon geography. Yet each starts his or her analysis by taking the location of the New York hill as the place of the one and only true Cumorah of the Book of Mormon as identified by Joseph Smith. Each LGL advocate, then, is logically compromised by having to disbelieve some early statements (e.g., the extent of Book of Mormon lands) while accepting others (e.g., the location of Cumorah). This leads to the important, unresolved question: Why believe Smith's claims for the location of the hill Cumorah if his views are found unacceptable on other points of geography? And if one chooses to believe that Joseph Smith held the view attributed to him, and, further, to take this as evidence, how can the accuracy of one's belief be substantiated? The only recourse is to work with details in the Book of Mormon and to compare internal reconstructions and expectations to real-world settings. It is worth stressing that the *only way* in which claims for Cumorah can be evaluated seriously through nonprophetic means is if we begin our analyses with the presumption that its location is unknown and must be demonstrated. Middle American geographers take this position; LGL geographers do not. These latter scholars begin with a preconceived notion that diffracts all subsequent observations and bends them toward their bias. As a result, all the proposed LGL geographies have irreparable flaws caused by assuming what they should have been demonstrating: the location of Cumorah/Ramah.*

### Archaeological Correspondences and Challenges

Sooner or later, every proposal for a real-world setting for the Book of Mormon narrative must confront archaeological issues. Aston takes on the archaeological challenge toward the end of his book—thus the placement of my commentary here. All the LGL books treat the archaeological record of the greater Great Lakes area ambivalently. Each author finds evidence to support his or her views and, even more importantly, reasons for discrediting large chunks of the



same record. By my scorecard, all these books fail the archaeological test. One problem lies in faulty reconstructions from the Book of Mormon; others concern logical weaknesses. But the greatest problem is the archaeological record of the proposed area itself. It simply does not fit the requirements of the Book of Mormon.

One's arguments for archaeology cannot supersede the sources exploited, so a brief note on these is appropriate. I do not count previous Mormon geographical treatments of archaeological matters as legitimate sources. Of the four authors showcased here, Hedengren considers the widest range of archaeological sources, some of them rather specialized and obscure. The breadth of his coverage is difficult to gauge, however, because he does not provide footnotes or a bibliography, so his references have to be tracked down within his text. I hope he makes future versions of his geography more user-friendly by providing unimpeded access to the sources cited. Currently, few general works for the archaeology of Pennsylvania or New York exist, so serious students are forced to consult local histories, articles, and technical reports for details. These are particularly difficult to read and interpret. Curtis considers summarily only one very old but excellent source for New York.<sup>17</sup> For their parts, Aston and Olive both consider about five to eight reputable sources for archaeological matters, and Aston includes the main synthetic reference for New York archaeology by William A. Ritchie,<sup>18</sup> a source passed over by the others. Overall, the paucity of published sources and archaeological projects in western New York and Pennsylvania suggests a lack of interest in this region by the archaeological community at large. Perhaps one reason for the shabby treatment and lack of interest is that the archaeology of this region, for the time periods in question, is relatively dull compared to that of adjacent regions to the south and west. This, in itself, is rather telling. This circumstance involves considerable

17. E. G. Squier, *Antiquities of the State of New York* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Derby, 1851).

18. William A. Ritchie, *The Archaeology of New York State* (Garden City, N.Y.: Natural History, 1965).

irony because western New York was one of the first regions to receive archaeological attention in the early 1800s, the time of the Smiths' residence there.

The essential, supporting archaeological case for a New York setting for Book of Mormon lands was encapsulated above in a quotation from Olive. Early settlers' accounts of upstate New York describe numerous trenched and walled fortifications, weapons, and mass graves of disorderly bones—the latter presumably casualties of war. Some of the skeletons are said to have been exceptionally large, and the artifacts, fortifications, and mounds are said to have occurred in high frequencies. Case closed! Both Olive and Curtis quote extensively from McGavin and Bean's 1948 study—still the best secondary source for the early accounts.<sup>19</sup> Olive argues that additional support comes from evidence for domesticity (parched corn, storage pits, and spun cloth), the arts (ceramic pots and figurines, clay pipes, and pearls), and small, inscribed stone tablets (pp. 294–300). In his treatment of correspondences, Hedengren draws attention to corn, pearls, fortifications, cloth, metal artifacts, architecture, armor, stone tablets, writing, stone boxes, wooden buildings, stone walls, conch shells, and panpipes. This is a long miscellany of items that lacks a coordinating, linking argument to Book of Mormon matters. Aston discusses cattle, horses, “seeds of every kind,” cement, wooden cities, and fortifications. The mere presence or absence of these items is thought to be sufficient for the authors' presentations. But they do not add up to much. Throughout, there is an astounding disregard for temporal placement of these items and features. For Book of Mormon lands, the question is not simply “Where?” but “When?” and “What?” Aston makes a significant advance in his attempt to show a system of settlement. The number of sites, their placement in his hypothetical Nephite territories, and the nature of the sites (towns vs. forts) are said to correspond to the spatial and demographic requirements of the Book of Mormon.

To their credit, all authors represented here realize that the archaeological case for their LGL correlations is not good, and each

19. McGavin and Bean, *Geography of the Book of Mormon*.

appropriately spends some time explaining away the failure to meet expectations. Each author is aware of such deficiencies because his or her geography was written as a challenge to Middle American geographies, which appear to be doing well when it comes to archaeological evidence. Whether this is actually true or not is beside the point; Great Lakes archaeology looks two inches tall beside the colossus of Central America. As if in harmonious chorus, the LGL authors claim that much of the evidence has either been destroyed or would not have survived normal processes of decay to the present day. Olive makes a particular point concerning the lack of evidence for temples patterned after the Temple of Solomon (pp. 301–2). These were built of wood and would not be expected to withstand normal decay. Alternatively, most of them would have been burned when the Lamanites destroyed Nephite lands. A nice explanation, but it does nothing to allay my anxiety concerning Lamanite temples; perhaps Olive presumes that they did not have any. “Temples built of timber decay, and we should not be confused by the lack of these monuments found in the area” (Olive, p. 302).

Curtis argues that much of the evidence for early fortifications, battlefields, weapons, and war dead was destroyed when the lands in question were brought under cultivation. The plow destroys the sword in this case. He also advances several novel arguments that support his position. The most interesting is his claim that the disparity between New York and Central American archaeology decides the case in favor of New York because the Central American ruins are too complex to fit the bill for Book of Mormon lands.<sup>20</sup> Accepting his argument requires commitment to several supporting hypotheses. Curtis argues that the Nephites had all things in common during the era of peace and communalism after Christ’s appearance (ca. A.D. 33–200); there were no rich and poor distinctions, and, therefore, they did not build architectural monuments such as are found in Mesoamerica. After A.D. 200, groups were small and contentious and

20. Delbert W. Curtis, *Christ in North America* (Tigard, Ore.: Resource Communications, 1993), 167.



did not have the resources or motivation to erect such buildings. Nor did they worry about putting up buildings in the terrible time of the last war. Rather, the constructions we should expect to find are fortifications, something that western New York has in abundance. For their part, the Lamanites were too lazy to have worried about putting up big buildings, so we should not expect to find evidence of them in ancient Lamanite territories. (This latter claim for Lamanite underachievement hardly squares with references to Lamanite palaces.) In short, according to Curtis, there was very little evidence to begin with, and it has long since been destroyed.

For almost 300 years the “Gentiles” have systematically pillaged, leveled, plowed, and cultivated the land of northeastern United States of America. Almost all of the mounds, the wasted cities, and the trenches filled with bones, and the mounds of bones with a very thin cover of earth have been obliterated. Yet there is still enough evidence to show that a people with a high degree of civilization lived and died there.<sup>21</sup>

What we should be looking for are the remains of fortified cities and of a people at war, not great pagan temples and burial mounds built by a people united and at peace.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Aston provides more specific arguments concerning the archaeological problem presented by New York. Given the importance of this issue, he deserves to be quoted at length:

*The Archaeology of New York State*, a classic 1965 work by William Ritchie, is an important archaeological work on New York. Yet his findings on the archaeological picture of western New York seem to be devoid of the kind of picture that one might think the Book of Mormon had painted, and seems to ignore the findings of the many historians who had recorded the discoveries of ancient earthworks, fortifications,

21. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

22. *Ibid.*, 174.



and archaeological evidences discovered in western New York by its earliest observers.

The archaeological record of the New York area seems quite misleading when one looks at sites that have been radiocarbon dated. Ritchie's sample collections show a huge gap in time, wherein there is practically no data. Surprisingly, almost nothing is dated within the time period 500 B.C. to A.D. 400, the period of the Nephites.

Noticing this can lead one to think that western New York never had a Nephite population. It would be easy to fail to understand why this is misleading, and to not comprehend the significance in this. Only after much research on the matter did this gap in archaeological knowledge become clear.

It seems obvious that the great bulk of the archaeological sites, covering the time period of the Nephites, were destroyed by the spade and the plow of the early colonists. Also, those few sites that remain are unacceptable for study because they were pilfered and badly damaged. The sites had been ravaged by people who destroyed most of what they found and often made errors in describing and interpreting their findings.

Many of the artifacts discovered were either pilfered, destroyed or lost. Then too, in some cases forgeries were involved, and unless the artifacts were discovered undisturbed in their original locations by competent professionals, the findings were considered difficult to interpret.

Advancing "civilization" has produced devastating effects on the archaeological record of western New York. Towns were built over former sites, farmers plowed over earthworks, digging up skulls and artifacts by the bushel basketful, and treasure hunters pilfered and destroyed most of the archaeological sites.

McGavin and Bean, in their 1948 book on *The Geography of the Book of Mormon*, report that many ancient grave sites were within the Book of Mormon lands proposed in

this book. It turns out that almost all of those wonderful ruins were destroyed, or rendered useless. (Aston, pp. 86–87)

While Aston laments this situation, it appears from my perspective to have provided LGL advocates with the best of both worlds: the lack of evidence becomes their best evidence. This becomes an excuse for avoiding serious archaeological research. The early reports, those I consider old hearsay, give glowing accounts of wonderful finds—and of the destruction of the sites from which they came. Aston, Curtis, and Olive accept these reports but consider Ritchie’s tedious and detailed catalogue of facts to be “misleading.” Aston claims to have come to his conclusion “after much research on the matter,” but his research is nowhere apparent. He does not produce one reference. He appears to be saying that he thought about the disparity apparent in matching Ritchie’s account of ancient New York with Book of Mormon requirements and found an escape route in McGavin and Bean’s claims.

Numerous problems are inherent in Aston’s argument, but I will address only the most serious. Why did the destruction of sites affect only those of the Nephite era? Urban sprawl is no respecter of archaeological sites and cannot edit the archaeological record in this manner. Ritchie provides a complete archaeological sequence for New York, with nothing missing. He relies on acceptable techniques of dating materials through radiocarbon and through changes in artifact styles. The so-called gap suggested by Aston does not exist. Ritchie’s account is thought to be problematic and misleading only because the Nephite-equivalent period in New York is one of relatively low population, and *Aston believes these to be Book of Mormon lands*. In short, the fault is not inherent in the archaeological report but in the assumptions dictating the reading of it. As shown below, subsequent research in New York is substantiating the historic patterns described by Ritchie. When a detailed archaeological record fails to validate one’s hypothesis, this should provoke reexamination of the hypothesis rather than rejection of the record of archaeological findings.

The issue of site destruction is at the center of all LGL claims. I address it from the perspective of an archaeologist with three decades

of field experience. Archaeologists are rather hasty with claims of “destruction.” But we do not use this term with the same meaning that it is being given in LGL arguments. For archaeologists, the ideal site is “pristine,” meaning that it remains “undisturbed” by various natural agents (tree falls, rodents, hurricanes, earthworms, forest fires, etc.) or cultural forces (such as farming, looting, mining, and urban sprawl) until we get a chance to take it apart carefully, layer by layer. If archaeological sites were eggs, we would prefer them boiled rather than scrambled. For most archaeologists, scrambled sites lose most of their interpretive value, as Aston points out. When a site is plowed, looted by clandestine diggers or “avocational” archaeologists, or cut through by sewer lines or road right-of-ways, the pristine “order” of artifacts and features such as floors, fire hearths, and post molds is destroyed and scrambled. What is lost in pristine context, however, is partly compensated for by the increased visibility of the site. This is the critical point. LGL advocates use the term *destroyed* to mean “wiped off the face of the earth, obliterated, expunged, or erased.” Archaeologists use *destroyed* to mean “altered, transformed, messed up, or scrambled.” Even after enormous damage, these sites still exist, and their artifacts still exist, albeit in smaller pieces; however, the spatial relationships which once obtained among the various artifacts and features are obliterated.

The thrust of Aston’s argument is that destruction has removed all traces of the sites in question, and this is the reason, according to his speculation, that they are not represented in Ritchie’s master work. But the opposite is true; sites that are destroyed have *increased visibility*, are easier to find, and are generally overrepresented in synthetic works. LGL arguments are 180 degrees off the mark. Sites dating to the Nephite era are represented in Ritchie’s work, perhaps in frequencies greater than they deserve. There simply are not that many of them.

Many times, the only way buried sites can be found is when they are partially destroyed during normal urban or rural activities, such as a sewer line encountering burials in downtown Salt Lake City. Archaeologists are drawn to land disturbance like moths to a light

because they have a chance to view what is beneath the surface without digging blindly. Opinions among archaeologists on the benefits of destruction, such as those voiced by Squier in the opening lines of his early study on fortifications in western New York, are not uncommon:

The Indian tribes found in possession of the country now embraced within the limits of New England and the Middle States have left few monuments to attest their former presence. The fragile structures which they erected for protection and defence have long ago crumbled to the earth; and the sites of their ancient towns and villages are indicated only by the ashes of their long-extinguished fires, and by the few rude relics which the plough of the invader exposes to his curious gaze. Their cemeteries, marked in very rare instances by enduring monuments, are now undistinguishable, except where the hand of modern improvement encroaches upon the sanctity of the grave.<sup>23</sup>

True, many features of these sites, such as posthole patterns and earth embankments, can eventually become too scrambled to detect—but evidence of the site will not vanish. The issue here is of visibility vis-à-vis site disturbance. Those who have collected arrowheads know that the best places to look are plowed fields, erosion channels, and other sites where surface vegetation is removed and where subsurface deposits are exposed or churned to the surface. The same principle applies to site visibility. Weekend collectors and pot-hunters tend to search for artifacts and then preserve and display them in collections. Such artifacts are removed from sites but not from sight—quite the opposite. In his study of New York, Ritchie makes frequent use of observations from private collections. Aston knows this but perhaps has not appreciated its implications for his argument.

The other excuse for dodging the archaeological implications of the dismal New York record is to claim that the evidence would not

23. Squier, *Antiquities of the State of New York*, 7.



be preserved. This is a more appropriate claim than blaming everything on plows and spades. One should not expect silk, linen, roast beef, perfume, honey, feathers, or lemonade—or their like—to survive long in the archaeological record under New York conditions. In turn, stone, bone, gold, copper, and shell survive under most conditions. The issue that Book of Mormon geographers must address is the following: Given the cultural features and events described in the Book of Mormon, what kinds of archaeological evidence would be preserved? Which of these things were made of stone, shell, wood, gold, or cement? And, where should we find them on the Book of Mormon landscape, and for what time periods? Curtis argues that many geographers are searching for all the wrong things in all the wrong places. I agree with his general sentiment, but not with his specific claim concerning cities and large buildings. The current geographies are quite reasonable in most of their expectations. Avocational Book of Mormon scholarship appears to have outgrown the era of looking for wheels, roads, and white Indians. Much grief could further be avoided were greater attention accorded the material expectations of past events before plunging into archaeological reports. For example, Olive argues away temples by claiming they were made of wood. Granting her improbable expectation, her argument still does not work completely because the archaeological record of New York is full of evidence for wooden structures, as she should have realized when looking at the pictures in Ritchie's book. Of course, most of the evidence consists only of floor plans as marked by postholes of ancient buildings rather than the superstructure. Hedengren, by contrast, uses such evidence to demonstrate the former presence of wooden buildings in his chosen area, and thus to establish the validity of the Book of Mormon account (p. 149).

A useful argument that no one has employed is the possibility that sites simply have not been found. If we were to take the observation about archaeological visibility to heart, and if we still desired a good reason for explaining away the discrepancy between the sacred account of Nephite lands and current understandings of New York

archaeology, then a more reasonable claim would be that most sites have not been discovered because they have not had the good fortune of being partially destroyed. No archaeological record is completely known, so there are always sites, or features at known sites, yet to be discovered. An important concern in dealing with an archaeological record is its representativeness. Do sites of the various periods have an equal chance of coming to the attention of the archaeological community or being reported in print? No. Archaeological reporting is clearly biased in direct relation to archaeological visibility. Large sites are easier to find than small ones, and most mound sites are easier to identify than nonmound sites. Sites with pottery and chipped stone are easier to find than those without such diagnostic artifacts. Sites with exotic artifacts and burials are reported more rapidly and frequently than those without. Sites in areas of frequent human activity are easier to find than those in remote places; thus sites located in valleys, along river flood plains, on lakeshores, or on tilled land are easier to find because of increased human disturbance. Knowing these things, one can compensate for underrepresentation of some sites in assessing the ebb and flow of regional histories. Most places within the continental United States, however, have now had sufficient archaeological activity that the basic outlines of prehistory are known. Future efforts will be directed to filling in details and making minor adjustments. In short, what we see in the New York archaeological record is probably a representative sample of what there was.

I have tried to make a simple case for removing the escape routes of LGL advocates so that a useful dialogue on substantive issues of history and archaeology can ensue. Rather than approach the archaeological record with excuses, we should begin to pay attention to what it tells us. I am not an expert on New York archaeology, nor am I likely to be, but I took a few hours to peruse some of the literature to see what LGL advocates have available for making their case. The general course of prehistory outlined for New York fits comfortably and logically with the histories of adjacent regions, and it makes good anthropological sense. The inferences made from the archaeo-

logical observations appear reasonably supported in the known facts. In making a match between Book of Mormon claims and a particular archaeological record, we must heed three basic parameters: space, time, and content. LGL authors have focused disproportionately on the spatial requirements of Book of Mormon lands, with some attention to cultural content, but with almost complete disregard for the book's temporal claims. Only by ignoring time have they been able to fit Book of Mormon lands into the Great Lakes mold. When we pay attention to time and to cultural context, it becomes clear that the events described in the Book of Mormon do not seem to have occurred in the Great Lakes area.

The Book of Mormon makes hundreds of clear cultural and chronological claims. Here it will suffice to touch on just a few principal ones. The dates inserted at the bottom of each page of the Nephite account in the Book of Mormon provide the needed chronological frame. As to cultural practices, the Book of Mormon describes for all its peoples, even the Lamanites, a sedentary lifestyle based on cereal agriculture, with cities and substantial buildings. Thus we should be looking for city dwellers, permanent populations, kings, farmers, and grains. These should start in the third millennium before Christ and persist at least until the fourth century after his death. There should be some climax and nadir moments in developments, and these should occur in specific places on the landscape. New York lacked cities and cereal agriculture until after A.D. 1000 and is thus not the place. We are not missing evidence of Great Lakes peoples, their settlement patterns, or subsistence practices for the time periods under consideration. These are reasonably well known for each period from a variety of evidence; they simply do not fit the specifications.

The largest Nephite cities and towns of the Book of Mormon narrative were located in valley settings, necessarily in areas with good agricultural land. Some areas were occupied for centuries of periodic building. Some had temples and other religious structures, walls, gates, and dwellings. In archaeological terms, these sites should be spatially extensive and thick, with significant stratigraphy. These



are the types of archaeological sites with the highest potential for visibility and the greatest probability of being located and consistently reported. We would not expect evidence of their size or date to be annihilated, even with several centuries of plowing. Rather, such activity would make them easier to find—more visible. They should have been part of the early settlers' descriptions. New York and Pennsylvania lack sites that fit this description. Finding a two-to-four-thousand-year-old city in New York would be so novel that it would be reported quickly in all scientific outlets. It has never happened. The most likely locations for such cities are already archaeologically well known because they are also the prime locations for modern occupation.

What does Great Lakes archaeology have to offer in terms of our expectations? As Hedengren and others note, the archaeology of the midcontinental and northeastern United States covers a long time period. The Book of Mormon time period corresponds to the archaeological phases of the Late Archaic (Jaredite), Adena (Jaredite and Nephite), and Hopewell (Nephite) periods. There is sufficient evidence of peoples in all the lands proposed as candidates for Book of Mormon lands, but we must question if they lived in the manner described in the text and if the content is right. It is essential to make a clear distinction here between archaeological evidence for occupation and evidence of a people's cultural attainments. All the LGL books considered here blur this distinction and take evidence of human occupation in the New York area as evidence of past civilizations. *Civilization* is a technical term with a special meaning in archaeology, usually meaning societies complex enough to have lived in cities and to have had kings—a basic requirement for the Book of Mormon. The term is an appropriate interpretation of the text but not for northeastern archaeology. For this area, the Adena and Hopewell cultures are particularly attractive candidates for Book of Mormon peoples because they represented the most sophisticated cultures on their time horizon in the United States. They were the first cultures in this area to build burial mounds and mound enclosures, they engaged in long-distance trade, and they fabricated artistic items which they buried with select individuals. Hedengren and Olive both report



that some were buried with thousands of pearls. Adena and Hopewell peoples lived in Pennsylvania and western New York, but this region represented the impoverished fringe or cultural backwater of their culture. This last observation raises an interesting question: If these were indeed Book of Mormon peoples, as some claim, why did their cultural center not correspond with the proposed LGL narrative center of the Book of Mormon? The Book of Mormon indicates that one archaeological expectation should be that its narrative center needs to correspond to the cultural center of Nephite occupation (but not necessarily the cultural center of the Lamanites, which could have been greater than that of the Nephites given their longer flirtation with, and deeper commitment to, ostentatious pagan practices).

Aston points out in the passage quoted above that Ritchie's account of New York does not provide the needed archaeological support for his LGL model. Two immediate possibilities may account for this. First, Ritchie's account may be deficient for a number of reasons—the option Aston chooses. Second, New York might not be the place where the Book of Mormon narrative occurred—the option I believe that follows from the evidence. What is the basic cultural scheme for this region? I take the following succinct summary statements of cultural periods and their typical cultural practices from a masterwork on Pennsylvania archaeology:<sup>24</sup>

- Archaic period (7000–1000 B.C.): “Bands of hunters and gatherers, following patterns of restricted seasonal wandering.”
- Transitional period (1800–800 B.C.): “Far ranging bands of hunters and gatherers, occupying temporary hamlets; heavy dependence on riverine resources.”
- Early Woodland (1000–300 B.C.): “Bands of family units living in scattered households; persistence of hunting and gathering, with a possible shift in some areas to semi-sedentary settlement due to a more stable economic base.”

24. Barry C. Kent, Ira F. Smith III, and Catherine McCann, eds., *Foundations of Pennsylvania Prehistory* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1971).

- Middle Woodland (500 B.C.–A.D. 1000): “Incipient tribal village life in western Pa., supported by horticulture, hunting and gathering; bands in eastern Pa. living in scattered hamlets, practicing hunting and gathering.”

- Late Woodland (A.D. 1000–1550): “Seasonally sedentary tribes; villages and hamlets (some stockaded villages); horticulture, hunting and gathering.”<sup>25</sup>

For the Genesee Valley, the location of Aston’s land of Zarahemla, Neal L. Trubowitz gives detailed information from an intense survey carried out in conjunction with the construction of a recent highway.<sup>26</sup> Hedengren is aware of this report, but Aston seems not to be. For the wide strip of land involved, there is one hundred percent coverage, so the information for relative changes in occupation is unusually good, as such things go in archaeology. Trubowitz’s information is more recent than Ritchie’s summary.

Hunting and gathering as a way of life continued into the Early Woodland Period, with land use still centered on the valley slope above the Genesee-Canaseraga junction as in the previous period. Very few data have been found on flood plain or lake plain sites during this time period. There are a number of camps recorded for the upland, though the site density there is still the lowest. The population probably remained stable. . . . The basic stability in lifestyle continued despite the adoption of new technology (including ceramic pots and smoking pipes) and ideology (as seen in the elaboration of mortuary ceremonialism of the Middlesex and Meadowood phases in line with influences reaching the Genesee Valley from the Adena Tradition heartland in Ohio).

This pattern continued and intensified during the following Middle Woodland Period. Subsistence of the Point

25. Ibid., 4.

26. Neal L. Trubowitz, *Highway Archeology and Settlement Study in the Genesee Valley*, Occasional Publications in Northeastern Anthropology, no. 8 (George’s Mills, N.H.: Occasional Publications in Northeast Anthropology, 1983).

Peninsula Tradition was still based on hunting and gathering, and mortuary ceremonialism reached its fullest expression in exotic grave goods left in burial mounds of the Squawkie Hill phase, patterned after those found in Ohio (Hopewell Tradition). Verified mound sites are all on the valley slope overlooking the flood plain, as is often the case for contemporary mounds found in the Illinois and Ohio Valleys. Although only one site was found on the lake plain in the highway sample, others did exist in the lower Genesee River basin. . . . Point Peninsula site density was greatest on the flood plain as opposed to the valley slope. This could show a shift in subsistence focus, but small sample size may be a controlling factor here. However, the number of known sites and total site density drops from the Early Woodland Meadowood and Middlesex phases to the Point Peninsula Tradition and Squawkie Hill phase. This implies that a population decline took place during the Middle Woodland Period.<sup>27</sup>

These findings support Ritchie's earlier reports for New York but are in direct contradiction with Aston's hopes for the land of Zarahemla. The population of the Genesee Valley was always small and dispersed in small bands. The food quest involved hunting and gathering of wild plants, fruits, nuts, and berries. During the key time period (ca. A.D. 100–400), the Genesee Valley suffered a decline in an already sparse population. No large sites are found here for any time period. Corn agriculture did not become a significant factor here or elsewhere in the midcontinent or the United States southeast until after A.D. 1000. With the commitment to corn agriculture, population increased, village sizes increased, and so did tensions. All the known fortified sites and villages in New York date to the latest time periods, the Late Woodland. All the LGL authors make a fuss about fortifications in this region. Clearly there were many, and reports of them go back to the beginning of colonization, with the best report being

27. *Ibid.*, 144–45.

Squier's 1851 study, complete with maps. It bears emphasizing that these fortified knolls and spurs were all quite small and would have accommodated only about one to four hundred people each. They really do not fit our expectations for the Book of Mormon populations, even if they were of the right period. Fortifications are found associated with mass graves and large storage pits, some of which still had evidence of stored maize. These are all known features of late occupation. Yes, they are in the "right" area for LGL models, *but they do not date to the right time period*. Therefore, they are not, and cannot be, confirmatory evidence or even correspondences. Hedengren demonstrates how some of these fortifications correspond to descriptions in the Book of Mormon and then concludes that "we find in the region proposed as the site of Lehite habitation a tradition of constructing fortifications precisely like those described in the Book of Mormon" (p. 112). True—but the tradition started in A.D. 1100.

Aston's arguments are similar:

It is well known that prehistoric western New York was covered with sites of fortification, evidence that some previous inhabitants engaged in battles using these forts. It is generally believed that these forts were erected by the Iroquois Indians, who are supposed to have occupied the area only as far back as the 11th or 12th centuries A.D.

But some of the more recent anthropologists hold that the "Iroquoians go back to Archaic times . . . before 2500 B.C." Latter-day Saints might find this interesting to contemplate, as the Book of Mormon relates a continuous possession of the land, from the Jaredites to the Mulekites and Nephites, spanning back into this same time period. . . .

Because Nephite fortifications described in the Book of Mormon correspond so well with those once occupied by Indians of the New York area, it can be inferred that these Indians quite likely were Lamanite descendants who retained the Nephite practice of fort-building, over many generations. (Aston, pp. 130–31)



This is another pair of fallacious arguments offered in support of a New York correlation. Of particular interest is Aston's awareness of the basic archaeological facts outlined above, coupled with his choice to ignore them. The suggestion that Iroquoian peoples and their fortifications might go back to 2500 B.C. is particularly misleading. One certainly cannot retrodict cultural accomplishments to one's progenitors. All the New York fortifications date to late times, and, yes, the people who built them probably descended from peoples who formerly inhabited the area centuries before, but this does the ancestors little good. The shift from Nephites to Lamanites in the second quotation serves no clear purpose since the evidence of fortifications postdates both the Nephites and Lamanites by nearly eight hundred years.

Aston provides one additional argument about his archaeological difficulties to round out this section.

It appears that when both the Jaredites and the Nephites came to lands set aside for them by the Lord, they found an empty Promised Land, not occupied by other nations. After the demise of the Nephites, these lands remained hidden from the world until the coming of the Colonists. The scant archaeological record seems in keeping with the ways of the Lord that our testimony of the Book of Mormon remain a matter of faith, and not based upon external proofs found from archaeology. (Aston, p. 89)

I encounter such arguments frequently among the Saints. It should be clear that this is a theological argument rather than an evidentiary one. It also constitutes a possible reason why the desired evidence fails to make an appearance. I find the claim troublesome on a number of grounds that do not merit discussion here. I am particularly uncomfortable with secular arguments that introduce theological factors to make their case. As a matter of fact, the archaeological record for New York is not "scant," nor can it be used to argue for a previously unoccupied land or for a land forgotten after the period

of Book of Mormon population. It is a long record of small bands of hunters and gatherers (berry eaters) who lived there for millennia. The record is clear, and we have no recourse but to accept it as it stands.

In summary, the archaeology of New York is persuasive evidence that Book of Mormon peoples did not live there. This conclusion follows from a few basic points and assumptions. First, I presume that the archaeology of New York State, as currently published (2002), is a fair representation and adequate sample of what is there, and particularly that the evidence for some periods has not been systematically destroyed. Second, I presume that the evidence published for the various regions and time periods is accurate—that is, that the majority of archaeologists working in this region are competent and academically honest in terms of their archaeology. Third, I assume that additional research and discoveries will not significantly alter current understandings of the times or places of prehistoric occupation nor of the cultural practices involved; rather, it will lead to minor changes in some of the details of prehistory. Fourth, said archaeological record lacks evidence for cities, sedentism, corn agriculture, fortifications, and dense populations during Archaic, Early Woodland, and Middle Woodland times. Therefore, New York is not Book of Mormon country, and we should be looking elsewhere for “the lost lands of the Book of Mormon.”

### Demographic Concerns

I have already noted that LGL correlations were too small to have accommodated the populations enumerated in the Book of Mormon. Aston is aware of this problem, and he has an argument for it that deserves some consideration. To begin with, he suggests that the notion that the “Nephites were a very numerous people, building large cities of impressive stone structures” is a misperception (Aston, p. 83). He believes the Book of Mormon indicates otherwise: “The Nephites were a people who lived in a vast wilderness area, built cities made of

wood, and struggled against vast hostile Lamanite populations that inhabited the wilderness areas” (ibid.).

The first difficulty is to come to grips with the demographic inequality between Nephites and Lamanites. To read the text, the Lamanites appear to have enjoyed exceptionally high fertility rates and the Nephites the reverse. Aston argues that the Lamanites were migratory, were “blood-thirsty,” dwelt in tents, and wandered in the wilderness. He fails to mention, however, how these characteristics led to population disparities. Before moving forward with Aston’s argument, it is worth stressing that all descriptions of the Lamanites and Nephites have to be adjusted for time period. Time and cultural content should be as much of a concern with the text as with the archaeological record. Otherwise, no match will ever be possible. Book of Mormon peoples did not remain the same for a thousand years. Thus, Enos’s description of some Lamanite bands cannot be projected to the time of Alma, or vice versa. The Book of Mormon clearly describes the Lamanites as living in cities with kings and slaves and as having an agricultural economy. Aston assumes that Nephites were more sedentary than the Lamanites, and this is part of his explanation for why there were more Lamanites. This is exactly backward from anthropological understandings of reproductive rates and incentives. Sedentary peoples have higher fertility rates precisely because they are not forced to wander. Nomadic peoples typically wander in small groups.

Aston’s argument for mobility works more for his notions of mobilizing troops rather than for birth rates. He suggests that for their wars the Lamanites drew upon all their populations.

If there was to be a battle, every blood-thirsty Lamanite wanted to be included in the action. In this way, huge Lamanite armies were quickly assembled, moving quickly on foot over the entire geographic region of Book of Mormon lands. The less mobile Nephites, city dwellers and protectors of their



cities, thus had smaller populations than the numerous roving Lamanite hordes. (Aston, p. 84)

Here again is another weak argument; the Nephites' living in cities and desiring to protect them would not seem to lead to their population being smaller. Aston does better in his second possibility for the disparities in population. He suggests that the Lamanites became more numerous because "the descendants of Laman and Lemuel, starting from the very beginning, began to intermarry with other peoples who may have occupied neighboring lands. These people could have been the ancestors of those whom we know today as the Indians" (Aston, p. 85). I think this is indeed the only sound explanation, and it is a fundamental idea in most Book of Mormon geographies. People already resided in the land of promise before any of the Old World groups came over, and substantial intermarriage occurred. Aston does manage to muddy the waters somewhat with his last claim about Indians. In a previous argument he talked of empty lands. In this one, he allows for the possibility of other peoples. Moreover, he has the Lamanites intermarrying with these people, but he also has the ancestors of the Indians retaining their separate identities until the present day. Why, from a Nephite narrative center perspective, would these people not all have been considered or have become Lamanites?

In his final argument, Aston asserts that Nephite lands would not have been densely populated, so New York would work well archaeologically. This is another example of interplay between a real-world setting and the text, with interpretive adjustments made to each. The gist of his argument is that one cannot extrapolate from the number of Lamanites slain in battle to calculations of Nephite numbers because fifty Nephites could stand against thousands of Lamanites (taken from Mosiah 11:19), perhaps because of superior weapons and armor. Here again, a specific circumstance is promoted to a racial characteristic for the rest of time. This claim is simply wrong, as all other battle narratives in the book attest. The other problem is continuing chronological blindness. Whenever we are presented with information



about the Nephites or Lamanites, our questions must include “When?” and “Where?”

### Nephite Lands

I have reviewed some of the basic features of Aston’s proposed Nephite lands. He presumes to know the location of Cumorah, and from there he identifies everything interesting and close by as a Book of Mormon feature. All his arguments begin with proximity to Cumorah and end with claims of clarifying the Book of Mormon narrative, while conveniently and simultaneously disproving Middle America correlations. He finds further clues substantiating his views in the location of former Indian settlements. He plots these on a wonderfully elegant map that shows the locations of waters and wilderness vis-à-vis sites, and he differentiates the types of sites according to fortifications, unfortified sites, and earthworks or mounds. His map reveals a relatively dense occupation in the Genesee Valley, his candidate for the land of Zarahemla. Many settlements are also found in his proposed location for the land of Nephi, near Lake Chautauqua, New York (near the shore of Lake Erie). I will not address the details of his argument here because he ignores the dates of the sites he places on this map. They do not date to Book of Mormon times, and they therefore cannot count as evidence for his model. His map is superb (Aston, p. 97, map 9.1) but irrelevant because it has the appearance of evidence without being so. Were Aston to take the same map and concept, do the hard work of wading through archaeological reports that provide information on time period and site characteristics, and then plot these sites by time period and site type, he would have a useful and clear picture of occupation for Book of Mormon time periods. This would be the first time this had been done. As it stands, all Aston’s timeless map proves is that the best land for agriculture in western New York had more and larger sites than did the adjacent forested high ground. This is expected. Unfortunately for his proposal, New York peoples of the time period of interest did not practice agriculture or erect these sites.

## Nephite Cities

Aston makes specific proposals for the approximate placement of important Nephite cities and lands. He starts from his known point of Cumorah and works from there to locate the waters of Mormon, the land of Helam, cities in the southwest, the eastern cities, Moroni, Mulek, Nephihah, and the hill Onidah. Placement of these cities and features depends on the locations of the major features described above. I have already given my reasons for rejecting Aston's spatial claims for Cumorah, the narrow neck, and Sidon. I therefore need not deal with his specific proposals. Rather, I will mention just a few points of additional interest: First, his placement of cities that, according to the Book of Mormon record, were sunk under water at the time of the crucifixion is problematic because the geology and hydrology of western New York do not seem suitable for such catastrophic events. Aston claims that Jerusalem was located on the shores of Lake Erie (p. 111). He suggests that the unusual feature known as Presque Isle Bay may have been formed when this city sunk. He does not speculate on any possible natural causes for its sinking or present any geologic evidence that might provide a simpler explanation for the bay. He locates the city of Moroni on the southern tip of Cayuga Lake, his east sea, but he fails to mention that this city was sunk under the sea. The possibility of such an event must surely be taken into account in trying to determine this city's location. Aston does not correlate any of these cities with archaeological sites. This is a serious deficiency, especially after all his attention to settlement patterns. His treatment of sites is generic and noncommittal. His allocation of Book of Mormon place-names across western New York appears driven solely by his reconstruction of the geography. However, this may be more an analytical necessity than preference, due to the annoying absence of any spectacular sites in this region for the late Nephite period. He really does not have much to work with on the archaeological side.

Aston notes the similarity between the names hill Onidah and Oneida. "This is a uniquely New York name found in the Book of

Mormon (Alma 32:4; 47:5). The name may have been carried down through the centuries by Lamanites, to later generations of Indian peoples” (Aston, p. 120). “The Oneida Indian name, according to historians, originated from the name ‘*Oneota*,’ the name of the large stone found on the ‘*highest eminence*,’ (hill Onidah?), in the territory of their ancestral lands” (ibid., emphasis in original). Folk etymologies of this sort are always fun, but single instances should not be taken seriously because they occur among all languages. These are the sorts of arguments that Joseph Smith’s detractors use to debunk the Book of Mormon in their attempts to prove he fabricated it from the tools and knowledge readily at hand.<sup>28</sup>

Detractors focus on fortifications, word similarities, and descriptions of northeast Indians and customs which conform to those described for the naked, painted, and bloodthirsty Lamanites. Aston, Hedengren, Olive, and Curtis do much the same thing and even supply the pictures of northeast Indians. There is a curious symmetry between LGL accounts and anti-Mormon attacks on the Book of Mormon. None of the LGL authors appears to be familiar with standard arguments against the Book of Mormon; otherwise, I suspect they would have been more cautious in repeating each one. Their failure to check this literature is hardly a surprise, however, because most do not even cite previous studies of Book of Mormon geography by fellow church members; Aston’s consideration of geographies is the exception. The principal difference between the two approaches is that the LGL authors take the supposed correspondences between the sacred narrative and the archaeology, anthropology, and linguistics of New York to be proof positive of the Book of Mormon’s authenticity. The insufficiency of their arguments is most readily apparent in that detractors marshal all the same evidence and correspondences as proof against a divine origin for the book—and as an accusation

28. For example, see David Pursuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1985); and Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon: Religious Solutions from Columbus to Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986).



against Joseph Smith Jr. The same evidence cannot logically lead to such divergent conclusions. Something is seriously wrong with either the evidence or the modes of argumentation. If everything in the Book of Mormon occurs in New York, then detractors have a possible case. As arguments, however, both genres of LGL proposals are equally unsuccessful and unconvincing. Most of the correspondences are forced, accidental, or erroneous and cannot count as evidence, pro or con. Before leaving this point, it is worth stressing that LGL geographers have to deal seriously with the older anti-Smith literature that makes many of the same arguments they propose in his favor. They should forget about targeting Mesoamerican geographers for a moment and focus on their true opponents.

### Summary Evaluation

I have not attempted here to address every argument in the four LGL books; rather, I have focused on key arguments and claims. Although there are some interesting ideas and opinions, overall, I find all the books to be deficient. I have identified the prominent weaknesses so others may avoid such pitfalls in the future. A major problem of all the studies is a faulty and compromised method of working dialectically between the Book of Mormon text and a real-world setting. This technique is a recipe for misreadings of the text and of the archaeology because one has to “bring them together” and to “close the gap” in order to forge desired correspondences. This license for illogic is most readily apparent in Aston’s book but is clearly evident in the others as well. The overriding feature appears to be the assumption that the Palmyra hill is the one and only hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon. Other fallacies and failures follow this unnecessary first leap of faith. All the authors use geography and archaeology to “understand” textual details. This is backward. One must work out an internal geography first and then start looking for its ancient setting. None of the current authors took this first and most important step. An equally serious consequence of this procedure is that none works with a complete geography. Rather, each



treats a handful of geographic details and ignores the rest. The most glaring example of this is Hedengren's river Sidon, which flows in the wrong direction. By what possible reasoning would one even seriously consider this to be the Book of Mormon feature, let alone expend years of effort fabricating an entire geography around it? Curtis's and Aston's treatments of the land northward exhibit this same deficiency.

Most of the interpretations of spatial relationships and real-world correlations in these books are forced, and the proposed geographies are overly complex. As noted, Olive has to postulate large lakes that have not licked a shore for over ten thousand years. Not far behind are the proposals by Curtis, Hedengren, and Aston for duplicating named lands and seas to preserve the tenuous coherence of their Book of Mormon narratives vis-à-vis their proposed Nephite lands.

All authors ineptly handle archaeological and anthropological details of the text and of the real-world setting. Their arguments are not plausible and sometimes not even logical. Poor argumentation is the most avoidable of scholarly sins. Also, the authors use double standards when it comes to interpretation, most clearly evident in the treatment of Mormon folklore and traditional understandings of Book of Mormon geographical matters. Why insist that the Prophet believed in the Palmyra hill as Cumorah on the one hand, while on the other disbelieving that he made a statement about a ruin in eastern Guatemala (Quirigua) as being in the ancient land of Zarahemla? The authors employ too much selective belief and disbelief when it comes to handling both statements by General Authorities and scientific information. Whatever one's rules of inference, these need to be stated and applied equitably to all materials. One cannot believe geologists' reconstructions of ancient lakes and then choose to disbelieve the dates given for them. One cannot take early settlers' accounts of the wonderful archaeological finds in New York as positive evidence and then turn around and discard the statements of the most knowledgeable archaeologist to have ever worked in the state. Such a

procedure reveals that a researcher already has a conclusion in mind and is only harvesting sound bites from authorities to back his own claims—to lend them an appearance of credibility rather than seeking for the reality. None of these books passes the test of competent scholarship, nor would they pass normal scholarly review.

To summarize my assessment: None of the geographies deals convincingly with the spatial details of features and cities in the Book of Mormon. The proposed geographies distort the text and are unconvincing. Consequently, I reject each proposal purely on its handling of the internal details of the Book of Mormon. I also reject each proposal on methodological grounds. They all put the cart before the horse; they use real-world settings to adjust the meaning and reading of the text itself. The proposed geographic correlations to bodies of water, hills and valleys, and other natural features are not plausible. Thus I can discover no good reason to accept any of these correlations as they stand. As discussed, the archaeology of the New York–Pennsylvania region fails to correlate in terms of the spatial distribution of sites, of the temporal distribution of sites, and of the cultural content of sites. Likewise, the anthropology of these proposals comes up short. For many of the arguments in these books to be plausible, one has to presume unacceptable levels of ignorance or incompetence on the part of past peoples to make the events described in the book work in the proposed setting in the manner imagined. If we accord the ancients full rationality in our models, many of the claims appear dubious. To conclude, none of these geographies works at any level, so I reject them all. If these are the best arguments that can be advanced for an LGL geography, then it is clear that the Great Lakes are not Book of Mormon lands.

Unfortunately, Pursuitte's observation about Book of Mormon apologetics appears particularly apt for the current crop of LGL proposals: "Published works purporting to prove *The Book of Mormon* true often demonstrate the two weaknesses of very liberal interpretation of archaeological findings and misrepresentation or apparent ignorance of relevant facts."<sup>29</sup>

29. Pursuitte, *Joseph Smith and the Origins of the Book of Mormon*, 239.

This is a damning truth from the pen of one who wishes us ill. Geography aficionados can do much better than this if they follow the rules of competent scholarship and resist the temptation to force Book of Mormon lands into places where they do not belong. To bring matters home to the pocketbook and a practical question affecting us all: If one wanted to tour Book of Mormon lands, where should he or she go? Clearly, not to New York, Pennsylvania, Ontario, or Delaware. Go south, young man!