Confusion of Tongues and a Map

Brant Gardner

Title Confusion of Tongues and a Map

Author(s) Brant Gardner

Abstract Review of *Mapping the Book of Mormon: A Comprehensive Geography of Nephite America* (2002), by Robert A. Pate.

Confusion of Tongues and a Map

Brant Gardner

In a much thinner book on the geography of the Book of Mormon than *Mapping the Book of Mormon,* John L. Sorenson listed what he considered the most important aspects of defining a geography of the Book of Mormon:

- The overall configuration of the lands
- Topography (land surfaces) and hydrography (streams, lakes, and seas)
- Distances and directions
- Climate, ecology, economy, and population
- The distribution of the civilization
- Nephite history in geographical perspective[1]

While Sorenson's geography spends time on how a candidate geography must meet these requirements in relation to the text, Robert A. Pate deals with such topics only tangentially. As Pate notes at the beginning of his work: "One evening, while looking through a local bookstore, I saw all the books speculating on the location of Book of Mormon cities and

---

1. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 15.

Review of Robert A. Pate. *Mapping the Book of Mormon: A Comprehensive Geography of Nephite America.* Salt Lake City: Pate Family, 2002. xvi + 509 pp., with appendixes, references, and indexes. $19.95.

lands. I asked myself, 'Do I really want to add another book to this collection?' How can I say, 'this book is different'?" (p. 6).

Pate's answer to creating a different geography was to base the bulk of his geographic analysis on toponyms (place names) that he reconstructs from the modern world back to Book of Mormon names from which he believes they derived. Rather than building a geography rooted in physical interrelationships, he roots his analysis in similarity of sounds. He does deal with relative spatial relationships, but mostly as an indication of where to begin looking for the next toponym. In his introduction, he lays out the basic logic of his task:

> Take a moment to look at this list of words: *Yie Lu Sai Leng, E Ru Sa Re Mu, Gerusalame,* and *Orshaleem.* Do you recognize the city to which all of these names apply? They are all names that refer to the city of Jerusalem. We know where Jerusalem is, regardless of the name we use for it, because there is a thread of continuity that has existed from the beginning of that city to the present day.
>
> We would expect that Zarahemla likewise had a thread of continuity that has existed since its beginning to the present day. Unfortunately, that thread has been disturbed in certain significant ways, and, as outsiders, we have not been a part of either the thread or its disruptions. Our challenge is to go back and find where it was broken and where the esoteric pieces now lay. (pp. 8–9)

In contrast to Pate's expectations, the persistence of a toponym typically relates to a continuous occupation of that location. We know where Jerusalem is because it has had a continuous occupation. However, other locations do not have this advantage. William H. Stiebing describes the problem for the Bible:

> Correlating archaeological sites with places known from ancient texts is also not always a sure thing. Cities like Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome have remained occupied since antiquity, so their locations are not in question. But the sites

of many other places must be determined from clues found in ancient written material, and sometimes there are two or three possible archaeological sites for a given town or city. Archaeological excavation occasionally solves such disputes by uncovering on a site written evidence of its ancient identity. But the locations of many ancient cities known from texts remain debatable.[2]

In the case of Mesoamerica, our problem is further complicated by the designations of popular archaeological sites that do not have the advantage of continuous occupation. Only in the last twenty years have we come to recognize that Mutal is the name used by those who lived on the site we now know as Tikal. With the historical variability of place names and the clear evidence that some very important ones did not survive, it becomes a tenuous methodology to base a geography on place names rather than on topographical interrelationships that do not change over time.

 Nevertheless, Pate has armed himself with some maps of Central America, an impressive number of dictionaries of linguistically unrelated languages, and some basic understandings of language that he uses to retie the broken threads. He has selected the same basic area of the world as most serious scholars of Book of Mormon geography have done, so he certainly begins in the right place and guarantees that *something* in the area he has selected might have *some* connection to the Book of Mormon, as other geographies demonstrate more completely.

As Pate begins to add his new perspective to the task, he does bring some important insights to his work. He certainly understands the important distinction between phonology (the way we pronounce words) and orthography (the way we choose to represent those sounds when we write them). Pate recognizes, and depends on, the fact that orthography does not always cleanly represent phonology.

---

2. William H. Stiebing Jr., *Out of the Desert? Archaeology and the Exodus/Conquest Narratives* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1989), 34.

We can easily observe this problem in English with George Bernard Shaw's well-known phonetic spelling of "fish" as *ghoti.* You simply use the *gh* from *tough,* the *o* from *women,* and the *ti* from *nation.* The English orthography represents those sounds, but obviously only in certain words. Regardless of the letters used to represent "fish," it is pronounced the same whether written *fish* or, more whimsically, *ghoti.* Orthography is less constant than phonology.

Pate is even acquainted with some of the more interesting phonemes of certain languages. He speaks frequently of the glottal stop, which is the closure of the glottis to stop sound. We make a silent glottal stop when we say "uh oh." The break between the two words is a glottal stop. In English it is accidental, but in many languages it functions as a consonant and makes a difference between two words in which one is pronounced with the glottal stop and the other without. It can occur at the beginning of words, in the middle, or at the end. Pate is even aware that many orthographic systems have trouble with the glottal stop and represent it in different ways (such as a *g, h,* or even *t*).

He also understands that languages change over time and that words can shift in their phonology. He uses all this information to piece together these threads that will tie modern toponyms back to their "original" Book of Mormon names.

Unfortunately, Pate's understanding of these important linguistic features is superficial at best, and he misses the more rigorous understanding of how languages change, how they relate to each other, and, in particular, how sounds can shift. Without a reading knowledge of any of the languages he analyzes (save English and Spanish), he ends up with a confusion of tongues that rivals the aftermath of the Tower of Babel.

The foundation of Pate's New World geography is the identification of Kaminaljuyú as the "thread" that leads back to the Book of Mormon's Ammonihah. This initial "discovery" anchors the rest of the geography—it is of such importance that his argument should be quoted:

Sorenson postulates that Kaminaljuyú was a likely site for the land of Nephi. But if one makes an effort to pronounce that name with the appropriate Spanish twist, it comes out something close to Ka-mi-nal-who-you. Dropping the leading *K*, which may have been nothing more than an orthographer's way of spelling the sound associated with a glottal closure on a leading *a*, the sound is A-mi-nal-who-you. And, given the tendencies in Mesoamerican orthography as discussed previously, this sound is very close to Ammonihah, the great city in the Book of Mormon that Alma 8 describes as being three days' journey north of Melek, a land west of the river Sidon by the borders of the wilderness. This was not in the land of Nephi. (p. 55)

This discovery that Sorenson's geography misses the land of Nephi entirely will cause Pate's geography to slide south on the map. Without discussing any of Sorenson's geographic and archaeological reasons to place his geography where he did, Pate uses these toponymic threads to reconceptualize the geography of the Book of Mormon. The problems with his correlations begin with this anchoring discovery.

The first analytical problem is the blithe dropping of the initial K. Because this is crucial to his analysis, I will cite his train of thought in full:

Dropping the leading *K* is appropriate as explained in the American Heritage Dictionary, which shows the Phoenician, Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Modern characters at the beginning of each alphabetical section. Under the letter *a* there are three different Phoenician symbols all of which look like the letter *k*. This quote follows:

Around 1000 BC the Phoenicians and the other Semitic peoples began to use graphic signs to represent individual sounds instead of syllables or words. They used a symbol in the forms [of *k*] to represent a consonant, the glottal stop, and called it ʾ*aleph*, the

word of "ox," which begins with a glottal stop (repre-
sented in modern transliteration by ʾ). Adapting the
Phoenician alphabet, the Greeks, who did not have
a glottal stop sound in their language, used ʾaleph
to represent the sound of the vowel "a." They also
changed its shape [to a symbol like the current capital
A] and altered its name to ʾalpha. (American Heritage
Dictionary 1976, 65).

To understand what a glottal stop is, one need merely say
the English word ox and keep track of the three vocal mo-
tions, aw-ka-ss. The middle motion, ka, is the glottal closure
found in the Semitic and Mesoamerican languages.

Thus, not only is dropping the k on Kaminaljuyú justi-
fied, it is a piece of evidence linking the origins of names like
Kaminaljuyú and Ammonihah to the Phoenician/Semitic ori-
gins indicated in the Book of Mormon. (pp. 55–56)

Pate does not understand the difficulty of porting the informa-
tion about the glottal stop from one orthographic system to another
time and place. The issue is not whether anyone else might have
used a *K* as a representation of an initial glottal stop, but whether the
Spanish orthographic system did so. It did not. The Spanish ortho-
graphic system does have the expected difficulty of representing a
sound in a system that has no symbol for that sound, but the variabil-
ity does not show up with an initial glottal stop, but rather with the
internal or terminal glottal stops. The most typical treatment of an
initial glottal stop would be to leave it off entirely since most of the
Spanish fathers did not hear the glottal stop when they wrote their
grammars and dictionaries. From the very beginning of his analysis,
we are on shaky linguistic grounds, and there is no compelling reason
to assume that the initial *K* represented a glottal stop. Second, there is
no reason to posit the *addition* of a glottal stop to Ammonihah, as-
suming that the English orthography of that word does not include a
silent (and unrepresented) glottal stop.

We then have the rather interesting nonanalysis of the change of the rest of the word from –*aminaljuyu* to –*ammonijah* (to attempt to use the same orthography for both). We have only one syllable that is precisely the same, and that one is the same only because of the excision of the leading *K*. There is no easy way to use the rules of phonological change to alter the first group of syllables into the second. To cover this lack of specific analysis, Pate simply refers to the previous explanation of "Mesoamerican" orthographic tendencies. That earlier discussion (on pp. 28–30) relies heavily on evidence from Nahuatl, a language unrelated to the Mayan language from which the name Kaminaljuyú stems, and is not a linguist's description of that language.[3] In spite of a complete misunderstanding of the linguistics involved, he nevertheless uses his analysis as the keystone for a new geographic orientation: "Assuming we have correctly identified the location of Ammonihah, the mappings of Palmer (1987), Hauck (1988), and Sorenson (1989, 2000) can be adjusted into a new frame of reference" (p. 57).

Languages do change phonetically over time. A parent language can split into daughter languages that retain similarities to the parent language but are still distinct languages from other language genealogies. Historical linguistics is the discipline that reconstructs these parent languages from the evidence of the sound shifts that have marked the divisions into the daughter languages. Linguists trace these shifts because there are known ways in which sounds change over time. The reconstruction of the parent language begins by looking at the forms

---

3. Pate argues for Nahuatl: "Note the disproportionate number of words starting with the letter *t*. Their language includes the letters *l* and *u,* but no words starting with those letters are found in their dictionary. Instead, words that would otherwise start with *l* are spelled starting with *t*. Thus *Laman* would have been written *Tlaman*, or possibly *tlamani,* which means 'captor or hunter' (a lamanite [*sic*] in Nahuatl?)" (pp. 29–30). Pate appears to be noting the occurrence of the *tl* cluster in Nahuatl and assuming an inability to pronounce initial *l* sounds. He does not understand that this cluster is a specific single sound in Nahuatl, written with two letters. It is similar to the *ch* cluster in English and other languages using the Roman alphabet. The *ch* similarly denotes a single sound even though it is written with two letters. Pate uses his analysis to add and subtract initial *t*'s at will, with no understanding of the reconstructed time-depth of the words he alters.

in the daughter language and by positing the way the original would have to have sounded in order to produce the daughter words. This is a technical and very rigorous process, but it is not the process Pate uses. Armed with dictionaries of languages he does not know and a vivid imagination, he lays out the geography of the Book of Mormon on the maps of modern archaeological sites based on his declaration of the similarity of the names. Nothing indicates an understanding that many of the languages he cites are completely unrelated to one another. Nevertheless, he frequently uses words in one language to "interpret" phonemes in an unrelated language. The most common linguistic problem of this type is his heavy use of Nahuatl in reconstructing the threads that lead to Book of Mormon names. Nahuatl is related to other languages in the American Southwest but not to languages indigenous to Mesoamerica. Nahuatl speakers migrated south into Mesoamerica after the end of the Book of Mormon period, yet Pate asserts that Nahuatl derives from the Hebrew spoken by Lehi's family.[4]

As this process plays out through the nearly five hundred pages of this book, meanings in one language are grafted onto the same syllables in another. Unrelated languages are used to explain or define each other. Languages that did not occur in the same place at the same time are used as proofs of the Book of Mormon. Pate's lack of expertise with the languages he is using leads to some difficult readings. As an example, Pate uses the same word in Nahuatl in two different ways in his text.

In the first instance, Pate finds that the Toltecs worshiped Jehovah:

---

4.   Pate misses the opportunity to support his hypothesis with a stronger linguistic case by neglecting to cite Brian Stubbs's work on reconstructing Hebrew in the Uto-Aztecan family. Brian Stubbs, "Elements of Hebrew in Uto-Aztecan: A Summary of the Data" (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1988). While Stubbs's argument is essentially the same as Pate's, it is argued on much more solid linguistic grounds. However, there is no wide acceptance of this hypothesis by linguists, and it certainly does not fit the way in which Pate uses his sound correspondences.

The very next paragraph in Sahagún's work says: "To them went speaking the one they worshiped." This is then followed by footnote 95, which states:

> Following *quimoteutia* (worshiped), the Acad. Hist. MS contains this statement, which has been crossed out: **yehoã** *tlayacana y tolteca ca yzxquich yea in acico y chichimecatlalli ipã aocmo vel mol-namiq' y quezqui xivitl neneque.* . . .
>
> Note that the next word after worshiped is **yehoã**, which is clearly recognizable as the Hebrew name Jehovah, or *Yahweh.* (pp. 80–81)

Because Pate does not read Nahuatl, he uses his sound-alike sense to render *yehoa* as Jehovah. However, one who reads the language recognizes it as the word for "he." Because Pate is not really familiar with Spanish orthography, even though he has some awareness of it, he does not notice when he again misuses this same word.

> Sahagún says that the Toltecas were dispersed all over the region. He mentions some wonderful devices that were entrusted to this people. The Nahuatl text says, *ca ie vel ie-hoan intlatqui.* Remembering that Sahagún had difficulty separating words, it is interesting to note the letters *liehoan* in this text. They are quite similar to liahona. (p. 426)

It should be emphatically stated that Sahagún had no such difficulty in separating words, particularly when the words were so familiar to him. The words *yehoã* and *iehuan* are different spellings of the same sound,[5] and Sahagún simply would not miss the phonetic boundaries around such a familiar word. The creative rebreaking of the words to make something that looks like it sounds like Liahona is simply incorrect.

---

5. The initial *y* and *i* before the *e* are two different attempts to represent the same initial sound. The *y* sound is more understandable for English readers, but Spanish orthography used both. The *ã* is an abbreviation, and the tilde represents the unwritten *n* sound. This is a frequent aspect of the Spanish writing system.

Pate's inexperience with his material extends beyond linguistics. As part of his discussion of the name Nephi, he uses visual evidence from the Codex Aubin. The graphic is reproduced on page 389 of his text so we can follow his explanations. Pate identifies the four figures as Laman, Lemuel, Sam, and Nephi (on the far right). Even though Pate recognizes that "Nephi" is dressed in a skirt (he explicitly notes a character on "Nephi's skirt"), he fails to notice that the figure is female. While many might similarly miss the visual clues, no one accustomed to drawings of Aztec men and women could fail to notice not only the clothing, but also the rather distinctive female hairstyle. Needless to say, there is little chance that a picture of a woman would represent Nephi.

Pate's examination of Book of Mormon geography is exhaustive, and the language similarities arrive on almost every one of the book's nearly 466 pages. Interspersed with the phonetic legerdemain are references to historical documents that are handled in a similar fashion without any understanding of the time depth of the cultures and events depicted. *Mapping the Book of Mormon* is a monument to one man's faith and excitement of discovery. It can be read as a very long and complex testimony. Unfortunately, it cannot be read for solid information on toponyms, languages, or cultural history.