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Abstract Review of *Sacred Sites: Searching for Book of Mormon Lands* (2003), by Joseph L. Allen; and *A New Model for Book of Mormon Geography* (2001), by James Warr.

SEARCHING FOR BOOK OF MORMON LANDS IN MIDDLE AMERICA

John E. Clark

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The Book of Mormon communicates clearly four fundamentals about its setting: its lands were warm, narrow in at least one place, flanked by “seas,” and small. Many inferences flow from these facts, the most salient being that Book of Mormon events occurred somewhere in Middle America. But where? Dozens of correlations have been proposed over the years, with no consensus in sight. In this essay I review two recent proposals and consider their merits against the backdrop of adjacent alternatives. In doing so, I presume that getting the geography right is important for a variety of reasons and that there are clear tests for making the determination. Here I evaluate two models in light of geographical, archaeological, and anthropological criteria. Physical features and city locations need to conform to the claims in the text, sites need to date to the right time periods, and there should be evidence (or a plausible presumption) of the cultural practices mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

My specific objective is to evaluate Joseph L. Allen’s recent publication *Sacred Sites: Searching for Book of Mormon Lands* and James

Review of Joseph L. Allen. *Sacred Sites: Searching for Book of Mormon Lands*. American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003. 108 pp. \$29.95.

Review of James Warr. *A New Model for Book of Mormon Geography* at www.geocities.com/jwarr87480/index2.html. 2001.

Warr's *A New Model for Book of Mormon Geography*, a Web site copyrighted in 2001. After a brief overview of each, I focus on the plausibility of their major claims.

Allen's Sacred Sites

This slim hardback book—lavishly colored with images of wildflowers, maps, sites, peoples, places, and fake artifacts—merits a glance but not a careful read. Its substance evaporates with scrutiny. Although Allen presents himself as an expert with forty years of research experience, a PhD on Quetzalcoatl legends, and more than two hundred tours to Middle America, his expertise is not evident in this publication; this is not his best work. Outwardly, *Sacred Sites* has the form of a book, but it is really an expensive promotional brochure for a Book of Mormon tour, complete with a \$400 voucher on the inside flap. The book privileges impressions over substance and appears designed for travelers with short attention spans and little knowledge. Presentations are shallow, with splashes of color substituting for cogent discussion. *Sacred Sites* is disappointing because it lacks an introduction, a theme, a logical argument, cohesion, relevant and correctly labeled illustrations, competent editing, attribution of information to legitimate sources, complete bibliographic references, and conclusions. Rather, its ten chapters are more akin to disjointed journal entries for different travel stops. The publication presumes the presence of a tour guide who can explain why the issues and illustrations are relevant, interesting, or true. Without a guide, it needs to be supplemented with Allen's earlier, extensive work, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*.¹

Sacred Sites appears designed for durability and usability for those on tour with only a few minutes per day to read. The highlight is its cover (an impressionistic color painting of Izapa Stela 5) and the commissioned illustrations just inside. The front endpapers feature a colorful rendition of Allen's proposed site of Book of Mormon lands in

1. Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, UT: S.A., 1989).

southern Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize—an area known to archaeologists as Mesoamerica. The artwork by Cliff Dunstan conveys a 1950s pastel watercolor look to the maps, time lines, and other graphics. On the back endpapers one finds a chart that juxtaposes chronologies of Mesoamerican cultures and cities and those in the Book of Mormon. Much of the displayed chronological information, however, is imprecise. Site histories are lengthened or shortened by a century or two to fit Book of Mormon expectations rather than chronologies reported by archaeologists. But the reader cannot learn this because sources for critical information are not listed; citation oversights characterize each chapter, and several citations listed lack essential information. There is no indication that facts or precision matter.

Its ten chapters cover the following themes and places: sacred geography, Lehi's landing site, the route up to Nephi, the route down to Zarahemla, the east wilderness, the land of Bountiful, the land of Desolation, Monte Alban, Teotihuacan, the term *dark and loathsome*, and the term *pure and delightsome*. Allen was heavily influenced by M. Wells Jakeman in the 1960s and tries to follow Jakeman's historic approach to early Mesoamerica and geography.

Allen accords archaeology a major role in understanding the Book of Mormon. On the back cover of his publication, he proclaims that “the primary purpose of this book is to bring to life the historical and geographical elements of the Book of Mormon. It will also show how, in most instances, these details can lead us to Christ, which is the ultimate purpose of the Book of Mormon.” In short, Allen is marketing spiritual experiences at sacred sites. These are powerful objectives worth discussing. Surely the claims of capturing ancient spirituality by retracing the steps of ancient prophets depend on being at the right places.

Warr's New Model

Warr argues that Mesoamerica does not fit the tight specifications for Book of Mormon lands from the text and that a much better fit can be found in Costa Rica and adjoining countries of lower Central America. Although his material is found on a Web site, his argument

is more booklike, coherent, and reader-friendly than Allen's book. I did not expect to be impressed with any proposal for a Central America correlation for Book of Mormon lands, but I was. Warr's work is worth contemplating. He proceeds logically with all the information he can muster from various sources. He carefully lays out the requirements for each geographical feature and argues for placing them in Central America rather than elsewhere. His work is broadly comparative and competitive. He has read other proposals that place Book of Mormon lands in the Great Lakes region, South America, or parts of Mesoamerica, and he identifies their deficiencies.²

Warr addresses four categories of topics, arranged hierarchically and accessible as separate topics by clicking the appropriate icon: Book of Mormon lands, populations, cultures, and miscellaneous topics. He considers fourteen places or topics under the category *lands*: the narrow neck, seas, river Sidon, travel distances, comparison of distances, Nephite lands as an island (however, this link is not currently active), Cumorah, and the lands of Zarahemla, Nephi, Gideon, Jershon, Desolation, Bountiful, and those of the Jaredites. In the culture section, he provides an interesting comparison of Nephite and Jaredite cultures and by so doing raises, by implication, the unaddressed question of Lamanite culture, a topic meriting serious investigation. Warr's miscellaneous topics cover a broad range, from Joseph Smith's opinion of Nephite geography to the large stone balls found in Costa Rica. The starting point for his presentation appears to be his conviction that the narrow neck of land is the key for locating Book of Mormon lands. As do others, Warr considers the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrow neck proposed for Mesoamerican correlations such as Allen's, to be much too wide to meet the specifications in the text.

The narrow neck of land is necessarily linked to the identification of the east and west seas of the Book of Mormon account. I agree with Warr that this neck is a key feature of Book of Mormon lands. If we could pinpoint its location correctly, the sites for other features

2. Allen evaluates other geographies also and makes a comparative case for his own in *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*.

and cities would eventually follow. At least six different locations for the narrow neck have been proposed for Middle America (see fig. 1). Identification of this key feature is the starting place in evaluating the plausibility of different proposed geographies.

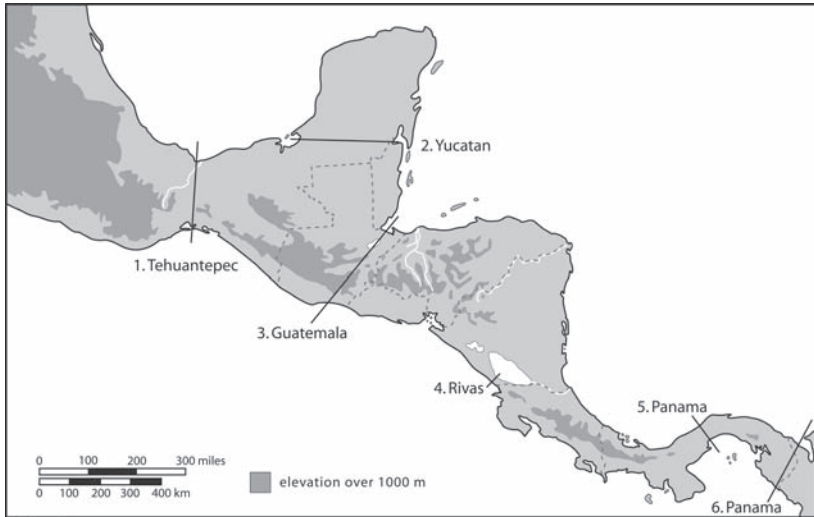


Figure 1. Map of Middle America showing the locations of proposed narrow necks.

The Narrow Neck and the Sea East

For some time now, all presentations of Book of Mormon geography, explicitly or not, have contended with John Sorenson's limited Mesoamerica model.³

The simplification of his model shown in figure 2 illustrates principal relationships among the lands northward and southward, the narrow neck of land at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, and the east and west seas. Figure 3 demonstrates that Allen's geography shares some features with Sorenson's, such as the location of the narrow

3. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985, 1996); Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Sourcebook* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990, 1992); and Sorenson, *Mormon's Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).

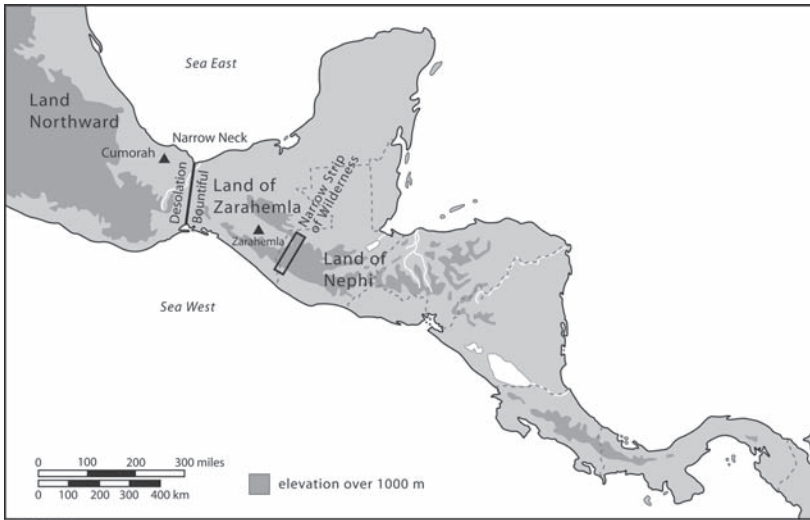


Figure 2. Schematic summary of John Sorenson's limited Mesoamerica model.

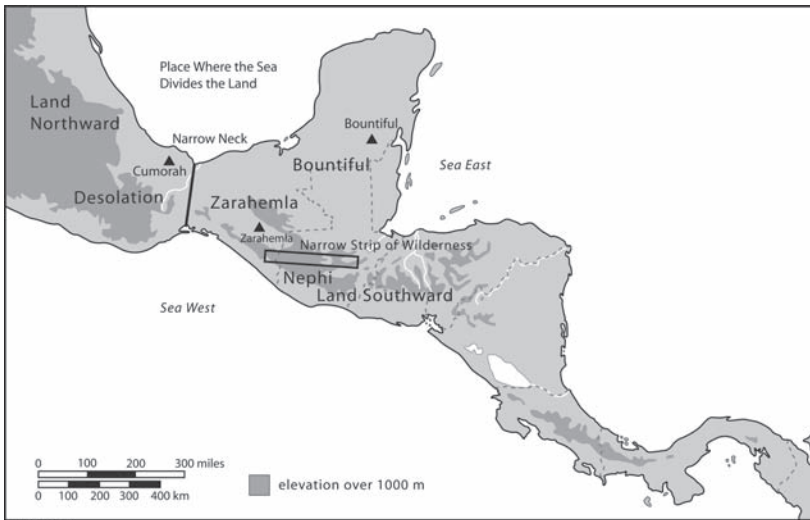


Figure 3. Schematic summary of Joseph Allen's limited Mesoamerica model.

neck of land, but some proposed locations differ significantly in the two proposals. James Warr rejects the Tehuantepec hypothesis and other proposals for the narrow neck in Middle America because, in his opinion, they do not conform to the requirements for the narrow neck specified in the Book of Mormon. He lists at least twelve criteria for identifying this feature:

1. It should be oriented in a general north-south direction (Alma 22:32).
2. It is flanked by a west sea and an east sea (Alma 22:32).
3. It should be located at a place where “the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20).
4. It may have a separate feature called the “narrow pass” (or this may just be another name for the narrow neck; Alma 50:34; 52:9).
5. It could be traversed in 1 to 1 1/2 days (this would make it approximately 15–40 miles wide; Alma 22:32; Helaman 4:7).
6. It was at a lower elevation than the higher land to the south (Mormon 4:1, 19).
7. The combined land of Zarahemla and Nephi, southward from the narrow neck, was almost completely surrounded by water and was small enough that the inhabitants considered it an island (Alma 22:32; 2 Nephi 10:20–21).
8. At one time in Jaredite history the narrow neck was blocked by an infestation of poisonous snakes so that neither man nor beast could pass. (This could only occur if there were a water barrier on both sides; Ether 9:31–34). . . .
9. The city of Desolation was located on the northern portion of the narrow neck (Mormon 3:5–7).
10. Lib, a Jaredite king, built a “great city” at the narrow neck (this may be the same as the city of Desolation; Ether 10:20). . . .

11. It should be an area which would be easy to fortify (Alma 52:9; Mormon 3:5–6).

12. The Jaredites did not inhabit the land south of the narrow neck, but reserved it for hunting. Therefore there should be no remnants of ancient Jaredite cities south of the isthmus (Ether 10:21). (Warr, “The Narrow Neck of Land,” with minor editorial changes and some deletions)

Choosing the Right Neck

Some of these inferences are more secure than others, but for purposes of discussion, I take them at face value to recapitulate Warr’s criticisms of other geographies and his advocacy of his own. Warr’s principal target is the Tehuantepec hypothesis. How does it stack up against his expectations? Tehuantepec has a few things going for it: “It is surrounded by ancient ruins of the classical Maya and Olmec eras. . . . The land below the isthmus (east and south) is largely surrounded by water and could loosely be considered an island. . . . It is at a lower elevation than the land on either side” (Warr, “The Isthmus of Tehuantepec”). According to Warr, however, Tehuantepec fails as the narrow neck of land on eight counts:

1. It is much too wide. It is 140 miles across and would not be considered narrow by the average person. It could not be crossed in 1 1/2 days by the average person, but would take 7 days at 20 miles per day. . . .

2. It is oriented in the wrong direction. It is oriented in an east-west direction rather than the “northward” direction described in the Book of Mormon (Alma 22:32).

3. It is not bordered by a west sea and an east sea, but by a north sea and a south sea (Alma 22:32).

4. It does not have a recognizable feature called the “narrow pass” (Alma 50:34 and 52:9).

5. It is not located at a place where the “sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20).

6. It is unlikely that it could be completely blocked by an infestation of snakes as described in Ether 9:31–34.

7. This isthmus would be difficult to completely fortify against an invading army (Alma 52:9).

8. Assuming that the Olmec and Early Formative people of this area were equivalent to the Jaredites, there are many of their ruins on both sides of the isthmus. However, the Jaredites did not build cities south of the narrow neck and preserved the land as a wilderness (Ether 10:21). This being the case, the area of Chiapas, Guatemala, etc., could not be the land of Zarahemla. (Warr, “The Isthmus of Tehuantepec,” with minor editorial changes)

As outlined by Warr, the deficiencies of the Tehuantepec theory are insurmountable, but not all is as he portrays it. Some of his claims go beyond what the text states and are shaded with cultural assumptions. I will return to Warr’s specific objections after first presenting his proposal for the narrow neck of land on the Rivas Isthmus of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, a narrow corridor between the Pacific Ocean and Lake Nicaragua (fig. 4).

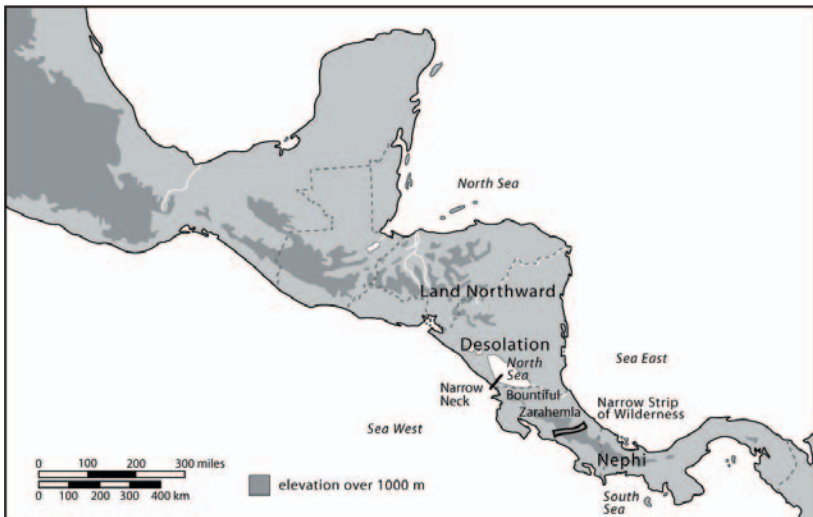


Figure 4. Schematic summary of James Warr’s limited Costa Rica model.

The Isthmus of Rivas is a low-lying strip of land between the Pacific Ocean on the west and Lake Nicaragua on the east. On the western side the isthmus is composed of a low range of coastal mountains paralleling the Pacific coast. These hills reach a maximum height of 1,700 feet. A low-lying plain, about 4 miles wide, and averaging 100 feet above sea level, forms a corridor bordering Lake Nicaragua. . . .

In close association with the Isthmus of Rivas is the adjacent Lake Nicaragua. This lake is the largest freshwater lake in Central America and the dominant physical feature of Nicaragua. The Indian name for the lake was Cocibolca, meaning “sweet sea”; the Spanish called it Mar Dulce. It is oval in shape, has a surface area of 3,149 square miles, is 110 miles in length, and has an average width of 36 miles. It is about 60 feet deep in the center. . . . More than 40 rivers drain into the lake. . . .

How does the Isthmus of Rivas match the criteria . . . for the narrow neck of land? It is oriented in a northwest-southeast direction, bordered on the west by the Pacific (west sea), and on the east by Lake Nicaragua (east sea). Lake Nicaragua divides Pacific Nicaragua from the Caribbean side, hence “the place where the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20). The narrow, level corridor bordering the lake would be the feature called the “narrow pass.” The isthmus is narrow enough to cross by foot in a day.

The isthmus is much lower than the Guanacaste highlands, to the immediate south in Costa Rica. . . . The land mass of Costa Rica/Panama could easily be considered an “isle” and is at least 80–90% surrounded by the Pacific and Caribbean. This is something that the average Nephite would have been visually aware of. By climbing one of the taller mountains in Costa Rica, one can see the oceans on both sides, and possibly Lake Nicaragua and the isthmus as well. . . .

Considering all these factors, it appears that there is a strong correlation between the Isthmus of Rivas in Nicaragua and the narrow neck of land described in the Book of Mor-

mon. (Warr, “The Isthmus of Rivas as the Narrow Neck of Land,” with minor editorial changes)

Evaluating the Necks

Warr agrees with Sorenson and Allen that the narrow neck is an isthmus. The principal disagreements center around the size of the isthmus and its orientation. Most critics of Sorenson’s model focus on his interpretation of directions. Allen criticizes Sorenson’s model for its directional system but agrees with his identification of the narrow neck, the river Sidon, Zarahemla, and Cumorah. In his major work on Book of Mormon geography, Allen advocates two criteria that reveal his “what-you-see-is-what-you-get” method; he phrases it as taking things at “face value.”

1. We must take the Book of Mormon at face value. To alter its directions, as some current literature suggests, or to demand unbelievable distances, as tradition outlines, is unacceptable.
2. We must be willing to accept existing maps at face value. To put water where none exists today, to create a make-believe narrow neck of land, or to alter the directions of the map confuses the issue and does nothing to solve the problem. By following both the Book of Mormon and the Mesoamerica map specifically, we find impressive geographical correlations.⁴

Of course, there is always a possibility that surface appearances are unproblematic, obvious, and correct, but such could only be shown through analysis that explored other options and did not presume a priori the validity of one’s own superficial interpretation. Cultural background passes as epistemology here, and unconvincingly so.

The specific claim of interest is that “some literature” alters directions in the Book of Mormon or on Mesoamerican maps. This is demonstrably untrue. Sorenson’s geography is the real target here. He has preserved the orientation of Mesoamerica in all of his arguments,

4. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, 10.

and he has not, to my knowledge, altered even a single scripture to say that north was west or south was east. What Allen’s loose accusations appear to be trying to convey is that Sorenson does not assume that “northward” in the Book of Mormon is obvious, so it is not something that can be taken at “face value.” The problem resides neither in the manipulation of modern maps nor in ancient scripture but in the rapprochement of the two.

In disagreeing with Sorenson on some issues but agreeing on others, Allen introduces a fundamental inconsistency into his model. He wants to have his European, north-south directions and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, too. If the narrow neck is indeed an isthmus between two seas, and not a landlocked corridor as some authors have claimed, the bodies of water that flanked it are the east and west seas mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Warr and Sorenson are consistent here; Allen and others who follow the Jakeman correlation are not. Notice in figure 3 that Allen’s proposed east sea is not associated with his proposed narrow neck. Allen identifies the Belize coast as the borders of the east sea but places the narrow neck at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec several hundred miles due west. This is poor logic and modeling. He

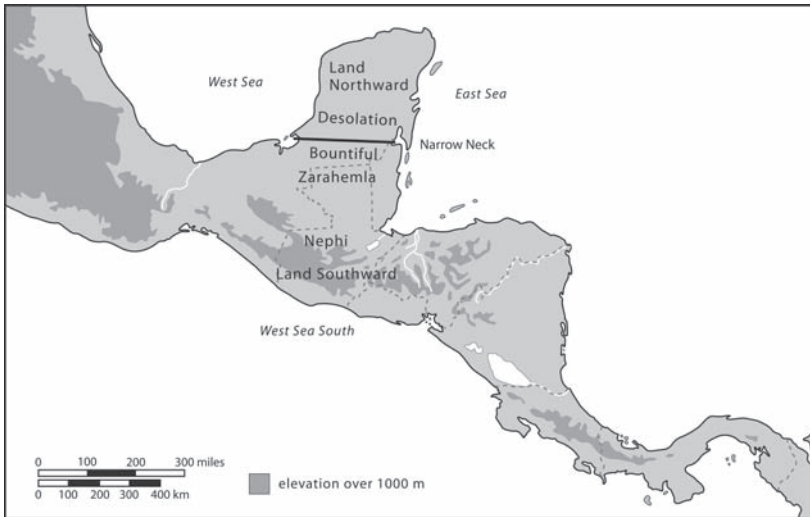


Figure 5. Schematic summary of E. L. Peay’s limited Mesoamerica model.

can't have both. (He labels the sea north of this isthmus as the "place where the sea divides the land.") Given Allen's claims for the Nephite directional system, a more consistent position would be to have the narrow neck at the base of the Yucatan Peninsula, as proposed by E. L. Peay (fig. 5).⁵ But this neck is not narrow now, nor was it in Nephite or Jaredite times. The Yucatan proposal has little going for it other than being oriented north-south on the modern compass. Warr provides a brief criticism of the Yucatan hypothesis. He lists four serious problems; some are more serious and valid than others:

1. "There is no evidence that there ever was a 'narrow neck' at the base of Yucatan. A theory which requires a change in geography is suspect."

2. "There are the seas as required by the text; however, there does not seem to be a place where the 'sea divides the land.'"

3. "The Yucatan Peninsula would be a very limited 'land northward' and would not have contained the tremendous Nephite emigration that the book describes. Even more important it would not have been large enough to house the Jaredite population which inhabited the land northward and which surpassed the Nephite/Lamanite group in size. Also, there are few if any of the older Olmec era sites on the peninsula. . . ."

4. "There is no evidence of the geological changes described in the text for the land northward, which took place at the time of the crucifixion" (Warr, "The Yucatan Peninsula"; this material was available in 2003 but no longer seems to appear on his Web site).

His second criticism is dubious, and most of his third is based on unreliable population estimates and is thus invalid as proposed. The most critical flaw for Peay's model is archaeological. There is no trace of pre-Nephite civilized peoples in the Yucatan Peninsula.

Of the dozen requirements listed by Warr, some lack sufficient specificity to distinguish among the different proposals for the narrow neck. He appears convinced that he has discovered the only viable candidate in the Rivas Isthmus—a precipitous conclusion. I

5. E. L. Peay, *The Lands of Zarahemla: A Book of Mormon Commentary* (Salt Lake City: Northwest, 1993); and Peay, *The Lands of Zarahemla: Nephi's Land of Promise* (Provo, UT: Peay, 1994).

consider Warr's and Sorenson's proposals together in the following comments. The numbers are keyed to Warr's original twelve criteria listed above.

1. General north-south direction. Sorenson's argument about directional systems is that they are cultural and not necessarily transparent. Soliciting directions in a sun-centered system is like asking someone to identify the shady side of a tree. This simple request should elicit more questions because shade pivots with the sun through the day and across the year. That celestial-dependent directions such as east and west are a bit sloppy—seasonally, topographically, latitudinally, and culturally—is such an anthropological commonplace that I have difficulty understanding why Sorenson's proposal for directions has become so controversial. Sorenson's critics, among them Allen and Warr, insist that directions are universal absolutes that conform to American common sense. In this regard it is worth stressing that "common sense" is cultural code for culturally dependent knowledge that makes little sense outside one's own time or place. Likening scriptures to oneself does not come with license to flatten cultural distinctions. The issue of directions pervades all aspects of Book of Mormon geography and not just the identification of the narrow neck. To the degree that Mormon's descriptions of directions conform to those for rural Utah today, Warr's proposal will prove superior to Sorenson's on this criterion—and vice versa.

We may be tempted to think automatically that "northward" and "southward" label directions that are the same as "north" and "south." But "northward" signals a different concept than does "north," something like "in a general northerly direction." By their frequency of using the *-ward* suffix, we can infer that Mormon and his ancestors used a somewhat different cultural scheme for directions than we do. However, we cannot tell from the Book of Mormon text exactly how their concepts differed from ours, because all we have to work with is the English translation provided through Joseph Smith.⁶

6. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 80–81.

2. Flanked by a west sea and an east sea. This criterion is also dependent on directional systems and naming, both of which make sense only from a particular vantage point. One's point of reference is critical. It is obvious to everyone that Mesoamerica around the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has oceans to the north and south rather than to the east and west. But from the point of view of the Lehites and the Mulekites leaving Jerusalem, the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans were eastward and westward paths to the promised land. The designations of these seas appears to be tied to these original, arduous journeys across oceans and the receding direction of their forfeited homeland.⁷ That the directional name might not be an accurate descriptor for every inlet, bay, or stretch of beach is a different matter.

The directional trend of the two lands and the neck was generally north-south. The east sea (six references) and the west sea (twelve references) were the primary bodies of water that bounded this promised land. But notice that the key term of reference is not "land north" (only five references) but "land northward" (thirty-one references). There is, of course, a distinction; "land northward" implies a direction somewhat off from literal north. This implication that the lands are not simply oriented to the cardinal directions is confirmed by reference to the "sea north" and "sea south" (Helaman 3:8). These terms are used only once, in reference to the colonizing of the land northward by the Nephites, but not in connection with the land southward. The only way to have seas north and south on a literal or descriptive basis would be for the two major bodies of land to be oriented at an angle somewhat off true north-south. That would allow part of the ocean to lie toward the south of one and another part of the ocean to lie toward north of the other.⁸

7. "These seas had to be the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, respectively, because Lehi, arrived from the Old World across the west sea (see Alma 22:28), and the party that brought Mulek from the land of Judah came 'across the great waters' (Omni 1:16) to the 'borders by the east sea.' The city of Mulek was located in that area and was presumably near the location where they first settled (see Alma 51:26)." Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 20.

8. *Ibid.*, 18–20.

In terms of semantic domains, the text conveys a sense of equivalence between the two seas, indicating that they are the same kinds of bodied water and of similar magnitude. Sorenson's model preserves semantic similarity, but Warr's does not. He would have one sea be the Pacific Ocean and another a large lake.⁹ Many Book of Mormon "geographers" entertain the notion that large lakes could have been called "seas," but these designations ignore the fact that the seas were also crossed to get to the new "promised land." I find Sorenson's model more consistent on this criterion than Warr's.

3. A place where "the sea divides the land." Warr's interpretation of Lake Nicaragua as "dividing the land" is really innovative but, I think, implausible. At best, this criterion is extremely ambiguous and unhelpful. Most proposals I have seen argue that it is a place in the narrow neck where the water comes in, such as a river mouth or a bay, rather than being an inland division. This criterion does not favor either proposal.

9. Warr's position on seas is ambiguous. In a quotation cited above, he calls Lake Nicaragua the "east sea," and he so labels it on the map to be found listed with item 4 under "Summary of Proposals." In contrast, on his maps 1 and 1a he shows Lake Nicaragua as the north sea and the Caribbean Sea as the east sea. In the section under "Seas in the Book of Mormon" he describes them as he labels them on these latter maps. I do not know whether these differences represent a change of view that has not been completely edited out of earlier versions of his Web site or merely muddled thinking that remains to be clarified. As it stands, he labels Lake Nicaragua as the north sea for some purposes and as the east sea for others. Likewise, he is willing to find other candidates for these two seas at a larger scale of analysis: "The model I am proposing can include four seas, and is one of the few places on the continent where such a match does occur. The west sea, of course, would have been the Pacific, and the east [sea] the Caribbean. From southern Costa Rica and eastward into Panama, the Pacific is actually the southern sea, and was so called by the Spaniards and the Indians. There are two possibilities for the north sea (and both may have been correct in their respective settings). In a limited sense, Lake Nicaragua is the north sea for Costa Rica to the south. On a larger scale, and speaking of the land northward, which is what the Book of Helaman was referring to, the Gulf of Honduras is the north sea" (Warr, "Seas in the Book of Mormon").

With all its touted advantages, then, we end up with the same situation as with other geographies that propose different names for the same body of water, or the same name for different bodies of water. This may indeed be how different Book of Mormon writers used the terms through time, but on its face, the hypothesis proposed by Warr lacks any advantages of parsimony on this score over the alternatives he rejects.

4. The “narrow pass.” This feature is equally ambiguous and nondifferentiating. Warr’s claim that the Tehuantepec model does not handle this is incorrect. Warr’s commentary only makes sense if one agrees with him that Sorenson’s description of the narrow ridge of high ground through the lowlands of Tehuantepec is not a legitimate interpretation of the “narrow pass.” But this is an argument about the meaning of the text rather than over the presence or absence of a viable, physical feature. This criterion does not favor either model.

5. “The distance of a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite.” Warr’s proposal for the narrow neck has an advantage over all others (fig. 1 no. 4) in being significantly narrower, thus providing an easy, “literal” reading for the short journey for “a Nephite.” He argues that this distance should be in the range of fifteen to forty miles. Warr muddies the water extensively in his comments on his proposal by putting restrictions in the text that simply are not there. The “Nephite” mentioned in the Book of Mormon becomes “an average person” or “an average Nephite” in Warr’s exposition. This is probably wrong. B. Keith Christensen argues that the context and phrasing suggest something significantly different. He proposes a distance upwards of a hundred miles, with the “day’s journey” occurring under military conditions and with a special courier, being at least eighteen hours of travel per day, and probably on a horse.¹⁰ This accords with his proposed geography shown in figure 6. Personally, I think the wider distance crossed by military personnel a more likely interpretation. In fairness, however, the description of distance is ambiguous and provides ample latitude for contravening interpretations. In his effort to resolve the problem of wide isthmuses, I think Warr has erred on the narrow side. His narrow neck is too small. It is not even a day’s travel wide for an “average” walker on a short day. By highlighting this one geographic feature at the expense of others, Warr fails to account for

10. B. Keith Christensen, “The Unknown Witness: Jerusalem, Geology, and the Origin of the Book of Mormon” (manuscript, 1992), 147–59. Bringing horses into this issue adds an unnecessary and unhelpful complication since horses in an American setting are problematic and require their own explanation. I think foot travel distances are a more plausible reading of the verses in question. Special travel conditions or aids are not mentioned.

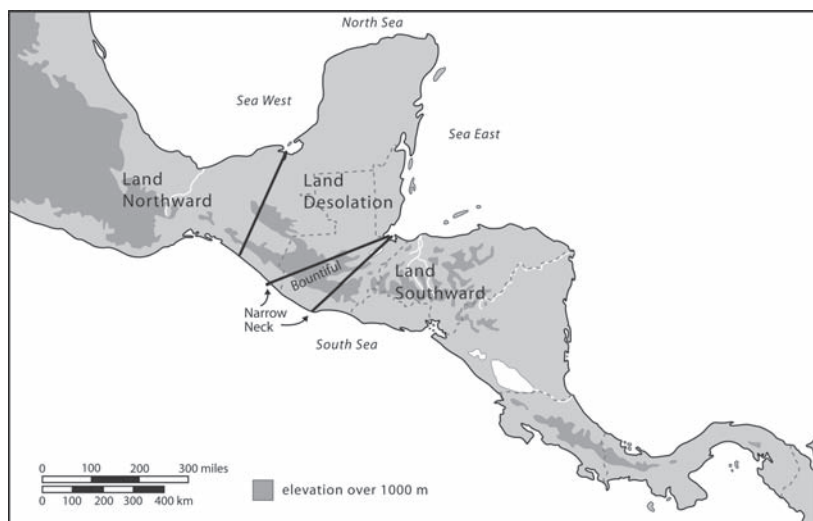


Figure 6. Schematic summary of B. Keith Christensen's limited Central America model.

other significant observations. For instance, Sorenson's argument is that the narrow neck had to be wide enough that people on the ground such as Limhi's group could pass through it without realizing it.¹¹ This would have been nigh impossible for the Rivas Isthmus, given its narrow width, long length, and the advantageous viewing conditions from its crest. Curiously, the Limhi episode did not make Warr's list of twelve criteria, but it is very significant. In sum, the touted scalar advantage of the Rivas peninsula over other proposals for the narrow neck is actually a critical weakness. Like the old Grinch's heart, the

11. "How wide was this narrow neck? One historical anecdote makes clear that it was wide enough that a party passing through it could not detect seas on either side. Limhi's explorers traveled northward from the land of Nephi trying to locate Zarahemla but wandered on through the narrow neck. When they returned home they thought they had been in the land southward the whole time. Actually, they had journeyed all the way through the neck to the zone of the Jaredites' final battles (see Mosiah 8:8, 21:25). (Had there been any mountain near their route, they might have climbed to reconnoiter, seen the sea, and reevaluated their position.) Later, however, after further exploration, the Nephites came to realize that the neck connected two major land masses. Still later, in the fourth century AD when Mormon prepared his account of the Nephite history, it was well-known among his people that it was 'the distance of a day and a half's journey for a Nephite' across the isthmus (Alma 22:32)." Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 21.

Rivas neck is several sizes too small. I give the Tehuantepec proposal the advantage on this criterion.

Before leaving this issue, it is worth mentioning that some proposals narrow the distance across the neck by suggesting raised sea levels in Book of Mormon times. M. Wells Jakeman and his principal disciple, Ross T. Christensen, argued that in Book of Mormon times the seas came much farther inland in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, thus significantly reducing the width of the narrow neck at this place.¹² Jerry L. Ainsworth's recent proposal (fig. 7) adopts this line of argument.¹³ Archaeologically, though, we know of early and late sites near the current

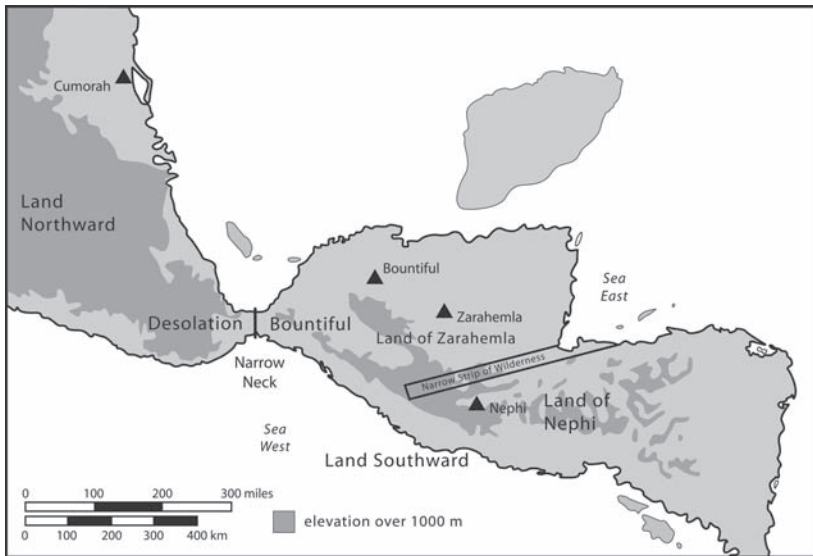


Figure 7. Schematic summary of Jerry L. Ainsworth's limited Mesoamerica model.

12. I learned this theory as an undergraduate from classes I took from Jakeman and Christensen. Summaries of Jakeman's model can be found in Sorenson's *Geography of Book of Mormon Events* (1992), 99–100; Allen's *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (1989); Ross T. Christensen's "Geography in Book of Mormon Archaeology," *Newsletter and Proceedings of the SEHA* no. 147 (1981): 1–4; and M. Wells Jakeman's "The Book-of-Mormon Civilizations: Their Origin, and their Development in Space and Time," in *Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology*, ed. Ross T. Christensen (Provo, UT: BYU Press, 1963), 81–88.

13. Jerry L. Ainsworth, *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* ([Murray, UT]: PeaceMakers, 2000), 49.

beach lines, so the ocean margins must have been at their current positions by about four thousand years ago, with only minor fluctuations of a meter or two since then. In short, recourse to catastrophic geology will not do for slimming the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

6. Lower elevation than the land to the south. Both proposals do equally well with this requirement.

7. Almost completely surrounded by water. Warr muddies the water a bit on this one, too, by claiming “that the inhabitants considered their land an island.” What the book says is that “the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were nearly surrounded by water” (Alma 22:32), being an “isle of the sea” (2 Nephi 10:20). Sorenson clarifies that “in the King James Version of the Bible and generally in the Book of Mormon, an ‘isle’ was not necessarily completely surrounded by water; it was simply a place to which routine access was by sea, even though a traveler might reach it by a land route as well.”¹⁴ Warr scores this criterion equally for the Rivas and Tehuantepec proposals; I agree. This is an ambiguous requirement of little distinguishing power.

8. Serpent barrier. The description of poisonous snakes blocking passage to the land southward in Jaredite times is one of the more unusual claims in the Book of Mormon. I agree with Warr that the incident indicates warm climes and favors the interpretation of the narrow neck as an isthmus rather than a corridor. Beyond this, there is not much that we can wring from this description. John Tvedtnes suggests that the snakes could have been associated with drought and infestations of small rodents,¹⁵ something that could have occurred in either area. Poisonous snakes are probably prevalent in both proposed areas. For now, this criterion does not favor either proposal. For his part, Allen reads these passages metaphorically to refer to secret societies; he claims that a literal reading is nonsensical.

And there came forth poisonous serpents also upon the face of the land, and did poison many people. And it came to

14. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 18.

15. John A. Tvedtnes, “Drought and Serpents,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 6/1 (1997): 70–72.

pass that their flocks began to flee before the poisonous serpents, towards the land southward, which was called by the Nephites Zarahemla. (Ether 9:31)

A careful reading of this verse may cause questions to arise. Neither serpents nor flocks behave in the manner described here. That is, poisonous serpents do not pursue animals; they defend themselves against intruders including animals. Additionally, if in reality the flocks represent sheep or cattle, it is contrary to the way these animals react. They simply do not travel hundreds of miles just to get away from snakes. . . .

If the serpents and flocks represent groups of people instead of animals, the scripture in Ether 9:31 takes on an entirely different meaning. The poisonous serpents may be symbolic of the secret combinations, which did “poison many people” (Ether 9:31). This is exactly how secret combinations work. They spread their deadly poison among the people. They draw them away by false promises for the sole purpose of obtaining power over the masses and to get gain. Hence, the flocks could represent a righteous group of people who retreated to the Land Southward to escape the wickedness that had come upon the land. The word “flocks” is used in many instances in the scriptures to represent a righteous group of people. Indeed, the Savior is the Good Shepherd who watches over His flocks (Alma 5:59–60). (Allen, p. 25)

The logic in this exposition defies analysis but is typical of assertions in Allen’s book. He is basically making the claim that if things don’t mean what they appear to mean, their meaning is different. There is no indication in the text that this verse should be read metaphorically to refer to secret combinations. Allen extends the simple claim that there was an infestation of snakes in the narrow neck to mean that the snakes chased the animals over a hundred miles into the land southward. The long distance is necessitated by his geography correlation rather than the text, which simply states that flocks “began to flee before the poisonous serpents” toward the land southward. If a literal

interpretation does not work in Allen's scheme, perhaps the problem lies with his scheme and not with the Book of Mormon account. Since people and their "flocks" are mentioned in this same verse, "flocks" cannot refer to people. The description here is evocative rather than necessarily ecologically precise. I don't imagine the prophet who recorded this account was actually in the field moving to and fro in the serpent patch to record specific reactions of man and beast and tagging the serpents to see how far they traveled during the year.

9. City of Desolation. This is actually a secondary criterion and relies on the prior identification of the narrow neck to derive its identification. The placement of this city and others around the narrow neck is not precise. Our expectation is that ancient sites near the neck should date to late Jaredite and Nephite times. Sorenson's proposal certainly works here, as Warr acknowledges. For the Rivas hypothesis, however, there are certainly sites of Nephite age, but it is not clear that there are large sites (that would qualify as cities) in the right area, or any of Jaredite age. For the moment, Sorenson's proposal has the edge here.

10. City of Lib (same comments as for 9).

11. Easy to fortify. Warr's claim here goes beyond the text. The Book of Mormon describes a fortified line in the narrow neck. Whether it was easy or difficult to fortify is not stated, only that it was done and therefore was possible and useful to do. On general principles, neither model has an advantage here. Warr phrases things so he can deal with environmental possibilism rather than archaeology. He would have readers believe they should look to the ease of fortifying a particular stretch of ground, with the implication being that the shorter distance would be easier to handle. I have no quarrel with a shorter distance being easier to defend than a longer one, all other things being equal. But the Book of Mormon makes no such claim. Warr's claim is just a guess passed off as textual inference. What would be more significant would be to find defensible sites along a line in the area thought to be the narrow neck. I know of none for either proposal, but neither area has been investigated comprehensively by archaeologists. Identified sites should date to the middle and late Nephite times. More archaeol-

ogy will have to be done in the two areas proposed before we can judge this criterion for either proposal.

12. Jaredites, Olmecs, and occupation in the land southward. I have long considered this a possible weakness of the Sorenson model. Many “ifs” are in play with this criterion, however, and it involves a reversal of previous logic that relies on locating the narrow neck to identify correctly the lands northward and southward. Reversing the logic requires one first to identify the land northward and then use this knowledge to home in on the narrow neck. As many Latter-day Saint authors have argued, the Olmecs are the best candidates for Jaredites. *If* one assumes that the Olmecs were Jaredites, as Warr does, and *if* one further assumes that the Jaredites stayed in the land northward and only ventured into the land southward for hunting trips, as the text implies, *then* the land southward would have to be south of known Olmec occupations. Because Olmecs lived on both sides of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, all the way to El Salvador, it follows that Tehuantepec cannot be the narrow neck of land. I give Warr’s proposal the edge on this criterion, as he has set it up. I consider this a serious criticism that needs to be addressed, but it rides on many “ifs.” When real-world expectations do not accord with textual expectations, we can derive one of several conclusions: first, that we have focused on the wrong region or, second, that we may be interpreting the text incorrectly.¹⁶ I expect to see some movement on Warr’s criticism in the future.

I will make two observations for the record to move this issue forward. First, Sorenson avoids the blanket equation of Jaredites with Olmecs. Rather, he argues that some Olmecs may have been Jaredites, but not all of them.¹⁷ This means that Warr’s assumptions do not apply to Sorenson’s model as framed. There remains the observation that the land southward was blocked off for a time and at a later time became

16. Of course there are other theoretical possibilities—that the text is wrong or untrue in diverse ways and for various reasons. I do not consider possibilities of textual error or inauthenticity here. All proposed Book of Mormon geographies necessarily embrace the fundamental premise that the book is an authentic ancient account, a premise I follow.

17. John L. Sorenson, “Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!” *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 355–57.

a hunting reserve. Given what little is known of Jaredite settlement, we need to be careful not to imagine that we know more than we do. Second, the text states that the land southward was opened up during the days of King Lib. It is worth pointing out that the explosion of Olmec influence east of Tehuantepec (Sorenson's land southward) occurred after 900 BC, with only spotty influence before. I think the text can be read as indicating that the south lands opened up at this time, with colonization being part of the package. Sorenson dates King Lib to about 1500 BC,¹⁸ so Olmec/Jaredite occupation south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec after this time is not a problem for his model, contrary to Warr's critique.

The criterion of settlement history involves extremely slippery issues about other peoples, the nature of the Book of Mormon narrative, and so on. In discussions of Nephite demography (see following section), it is now commonplace to make the observation that Lehités and Mulekites were not alone on the continent. The same was true for the Jaredites. Thus, for Sorenson there is no necessary one-to-one correspondence between Jaredites and Olmecs. Some Olmecs may have been Jaredites, others may not. Claims in the Book of Mormon that Jaredites did not occupy a land, therefore, are not equivalent to claiming that the lands were unoccupied. All parts of North, South, and Middle America have been occupied since at least 3000 BC. Presumably *non-Jaredites* occupied most of these places for millennia, including the land southward, before Jaredites ever got there. So, as with all Nephite/Lamanite questions, one must sort out time, place, and culture in making an archaeological identification of Jaredites.

It is worth noticing that Book of Mormon geographies positing restricted lands and the presence of different peoples on American soil ignore the killing flood of Noah's day. Some authors appear not to realize the implications of their claims. Allen, for example, seems unaware that some of his proposals rest on the proposition that Noah's flood was not universal (in a literal, physical sense), and others on the proposition that it was. He writes about the Jaredites as if they came to

18. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 117.

empty land after the flood, as in the traditional view of Book of Mormon geography, and he discusses the Nephites as if the flood never happened and that Book of Mormon lands were full of strangers. He cannot have it both ways.

Summary Evaluation of Proposed Necks

In preceding comments I dismissed three proposals for a Middle America narrow neck without much discussion (namely, a partially submerged Tehuantepec, the Yucatan Peninsula, and any slice of Panama in a hemispheric view of Book of Mormon geography) and have evaluated seriously only Sorenson's proposal for Tehuantepec and Warr's for the Rivas peninsula. Of the twelve criteria listed by Warr for the narrow neck, four were too ambiguous to help in distinguishing between the Rivas and Tehuantepec proposals, and three others worked equally well for both. Of the five remaining criteria, I gave Sorenson's proposal the nod on four (seas, size of the neck, and the cities of Desolation and Lib) and Warr's proposal a possible advantage on the remaining question of Jaredite occupation of the land southward. As noted, this is not an issue in Sorenson's model because he does not strictly identify the Jaredites with cultures that archaeologists currently consider Olmecs.¹⁹

One additional test is available. The narrow neck of land relates to the overall configuration and scale of Book of Mormon lands. The text makes claims for their occupation by various peoples at different times and even provides some clues about total population. Therefore,

19. The appropriate use of the term Olmec to distinguish archaeological cultures is one of the most controversial topics in Mesoamerican archaeology, with a range of opinions available. Those trying to match claims in the Book of Mormon to archaeology frequently fail to realize that archaeological claims are inherently problematic and labile. Archaeological knowledge is a rapidly moving target, so those making correlations must keep this in mind. At the moment there is no consensus or core of mutual understanding on who the Olmecs were or where they lived in Mesoamerica. For a range of views, see David C. Grove, "Olmec: What's in a Name?" in *Regional Perspectives on the Olmec*, ed. Robert J. Sharer and David C. Grove (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 8–14; Kent V. Flannery and Joyce Marcus, "Formative Mexican Chiefdoms and the Myth of the 'Mother Culture,'" *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 19/1 (2000): 1–37; and John E. Clark, "The Arts of Government in Early Mesoamerica," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 26 (1997): 211–34.

the plausibility of different candidates for the narrow neck of land can be roughly assessed by looking at comparative demographic histories for the different sectors, a claim implicit in Warr's last criterion about the Jaredites and Olmecs.

Book of Mormon Peoples, Populations, and Lands

Why is knowledge of population size in the Book of Mormon important? First of all, such knowledge would give us clues relating to the geography of the Book of Mormon and enable us to infer the size of the Nephite homeland; a large population would be necessary to inhabit a continent, while a smaller population would be sufficient to fill a more compact area such as Mesoamerica (or Costa Rica, which I have proposed for the land southward). Second, knowledge of population size would allow a better comparison between the Nephite and Jaredite cultures. Third, awareness of population sizes would allow more accurate projections of anticipated archaeological sites and ruins and permit a more precise focus on their possible locations. Fourth, such knowledge would permit inferences on possible inclusions of outside groups into Book of Mormon populations. (Warr, "Book of Mormon Populations," with minor editorial changes)

As noted above, Warr relied on this first use of population size to dismiss Yucatan as the land northward because, in addition to its 230-mile wide neck, the land is not big enough, in his opinion, to have housed the Jaredites in their heyday. Admittedly, relying on population estimates as surrogate measures of territory is a crude method, but useful nonetheless. In this section I explore its potential further, after first providing a minimal case for population sizes of Book of Mormon peoples.

Warr summarizes some of the basic discussion of Book of Mormon population size published in other sources.²⁰ The best information

20. The basic sources on demography are by James E. Smith, "Nephi's Descendants? Historical Demography and the Book of Mormon," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 255-96; and Smith "How Many Nephites? The Book of Mormon at the

comes from the battles of extermination. Nephite deaths at Cumorah totaled at least 230,000; it is not clear whether this number included all Nephites or only soldiers (see Mormon 6:10–15) or that units were at full capacity.²¹ I favor the view that it is a comprehensive tally, but to be on the safe side, if only soldiers were counted and units were at full capacity, the total Nephite population would have been about one million, with the Lamanite population being considerably greater than this, at least double the Nephites in the field and more, counting the homeland.²² For the earlier Jaredite tragedy, the death estimate comes in at conveniently rounded numbers of two million men, women, and children for Coriantumr’s people. Supposedly, the people of Shiz would have constituted a population of comparable size. Counting both factions, or peoples, gives an overall estimated population of about four million.

Warr calculates maximum Jaredite population at forty to eighty million, an estimate exaggerated by at least one order of magnitude, and then some. He derives this estimate by assuming that the two million deaths reported by the prophet Ether (see Ether 15:2) were only 10 to 20 percent of the male population. “This would result in a total male population of 10 to 20 million. Multiplying this by an average family size of 4 would give us a total population of 40 to 80 million” (Warr, “Book of Mormon Populations”).²³ Warr’s estimate generously exceeds

Bar of Demography,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 255–93.

21. This number is only an estimated maximum. Daniel Peterson, in personal correspondence, 28 October 2004, comments that “this estimate is reached by adding up ‘units’ of 10,000. How can we know that these were not merely theoretical numbers? A Roman ‘century’ could, as I recall, include 40–100 soldiers. An American army division can range—at least it could during WWII, if I remember what my father told me—between 6,000 and 15,000 troops. Our First and Second Quorums of Seventy have far fewer than seventy members each.”

22. Warr estimates the total combined Nephite and Lamanite population in AD 385 at two to ten million—at least two million Nephites and four million Lamanites (Warr, “Book of Mormon Populations”). I think these are within the correct order of magnitude, but I opt for lower numbers.

23. This is a classic case of creating future problems for archaeological confirmation where they need not exist. There were not this many people living in all of the Americas two thousand years ago. These are the sorts of interpretive exaggerations easily avoided and the kind that provide fuel for detractors.

any information in the text. Ether’s repetitious description notes that “there had been slain two millions of mighty men, and also their wives and their children” (Ether 15:2). Earlier in the same verse they are described as “nearly two millions of his [Coriantumr’s] people.” It is clear that women and children were armed and part of the conflict (Ether 14:31; 15:15), and I suspect they are represented in the same global statistic. The text’s ambiguity allows room to push the death estimate to eight million or to confine it to two million; in the following speculations, I go with an estimate of four million Jaredite dead in the final years of battle. In sum, my working estimates for the final battles are about one million Nephites and more than twice as many Lamanites. The Jaredite total is on par with the combined total of Nephites and Lamanites. These estimates are portrayed in figure 8 as proportioned squares. The area of each square represents relative population and, by extension, territory size.

The squares show orders of magnitude rather than fine distinctions. The proposition that population reflects territory size assumes that people had to eat to live, that they had comparable dietary requirements, and that most of their food came from cultivated crops, principally grains. If one presumes similar population densities in an agrarian setting, then population becomes a direct measure of the land under cultivation and, thus, territory size. In checking these predicted relationships in a real world setting, however, the actual size of different lands should be expected to have varied according to local conditions of terrain, cultivable ground, rainfall, and so on. Based on the



Figure 8. Relative sizes of Book of Mormon populations.

population boxes, my expectation is that Jaredite lands (basically the land northward) were comparable in size to Nephite-Lamanite lands in about AD 300 (basically the land southward). The land southward was divided into two sectors by a narrow wilderness strip, with the land of Zarahemla located northward of this wilderness and the land of Nephi to the south. In terms of exercises with maps, my expectation is that the land of Zarahemla was about a half or a third the size of the land of Nephi. Figure 9 displays these relationships schematically. It is important to remember that the land of Bountiful was a part of the greater land of Zarahemla and that the land of Desolation was in the land northward; the narrow neck divided Bountiful from Desolation. As evident in figure 9, the land northward and the land of Nephi, southward, were open-ended, so they could have accommodated more population by extending boundaries. The land of Zarahemla, on the other hand, was bounded on the east and west by seas, on its northerly margin by the narrow neck, and on its southerly edge by the narrow strip of wilderness. Because it was completely bounded and has the most precise population statistics, it is the most useful datum for

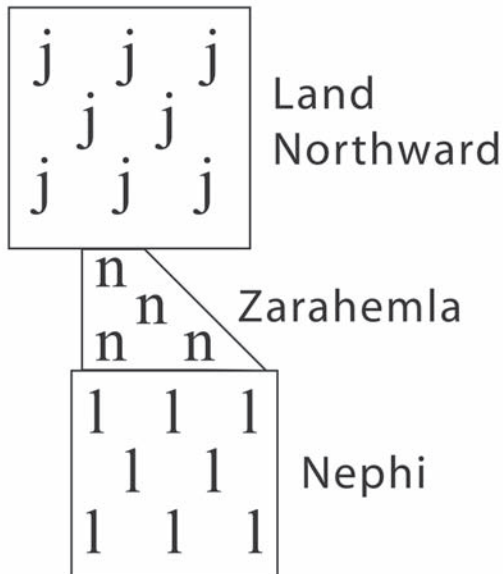


Figure 9. Relative territory sizes of Book of Mormon lands.

assessing the validity of speculated geographies. In evaluating various proposals, one should look for a land of Zarahemla that could have supported (and did) about a million inhabitants in the fourth century AD and that had simple agriculture.²⁴

All geographies proposed in the past have fussed over the configuration of lands and the distances between cities and geographic features, but they have not been as concerned with territory sizes and the lands' capacity to support human populations. Warr's analysis brings this issue to the fore. As argued above, I estimate the ratio of maximum populations, and thus of occupied territories, as roughly 4:3:1 (Jaredite:Lamanite:Nephite). How do the different Book of Mormon geographies proposed for Middle America compare to these estimates? Before attempting to answer this question, it will be useful to add two more provisos to the mix. If population densities were equal for all Book of Mormon peoples, one could use population as a direct measure. But population density in the real world would have related to the quality of cultivable land and not just simple acreage. No one would expect the average population densities of Nevada or Alaska to match those for Iowa or Indiana, for example. As a rough estimator of land quality for each part of Middle America, I take as a ballpark measure their populations at 1850, the era before the advent of mechanized agriculture and industrialization, but three centuries after the Spanish conquest and the demographic collapse this brought in its wake (table 1).²⁵

24. A case can be made that the maximum Nephite population during the final battles was the reported 230,000. If accurate, our expectations for the lands of Zarahemla and Nephi would have to be scaled down to a significant degree. This would widen the disparity between Lehite and Jaredite lands and populations.

25. This and other simplifying assumptions I employ here come with severe limitations. Some areas of Mesoamerica (especially the northern part of Guatemala) supported much higher densities of people in pre-Columbian times than even today, so the 1850 census data will be a low estimate. My intent in this exercise is not to offer a fine measuring instrument; rather, I am looking at gross distinctions that can absorb numerous quibbles. Should my rough use of this information show promise, the population requirements can be refined with archaeological data. Eventually, ancient population estimates for each region of Middle America need to be based on competent archaeological research of the number and size of settlements for each century. Data taken from www.library.uu.nl/wesp/populstat/Americas (accessed 20 October 2004).

Table 1. Estimated populations, territory sizes, and population densities of Central American countries ca. 1850.

Country	1850 Population	Km ²	People/Km ²
Belize	26,000	22,965	1.132
Guatemala	835,000	108,889	7.668
Honduras	308,000	112,090	2.748
El Salvador	520,000*	21,393	24.307
Nicaragua	335,000	130,000	2.577
Costa Rica	115,000	51,500	2.233
Panama	138,100	75,517	1.829

*The population in El Salvador for 1845 is listed at 480,000 and at 600,000 for 1855. I estimate 520,000 for 1850.

The other proviso is the assumption that archaeology can identify different ancient groups and find evidence of the kinds and intensities of interactions among them. The division of lands proposed by different Book of Mormon geographers ought to correspond to archaeological differences. For instance, Allen proposes a different mountainous sector of Guatemala for his narrow strip of wilderness than does Sorenson (compare figs. 10A and 10B). How do these rival proposals stack up with the archaeology? Sorenson's division accords with predicted archaeological differences, and Allen's does not.

Sorenson's Tehuantepec Model

This model does not need further commentary. It complies with the simple requirements of relative territorial sizes remarkably well. The reason Sorenson's model has become the industry standard is because it constitutes a strong correlation between Book of Mormon requirements and real world geography, anthropology, and archaeology.

Allen's Tehuantepec Model

Allen's model makes some of the same identifications as Sorenson's, such as the narrow neck at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, but things quickly diverge from there because Allen wants to preserve his

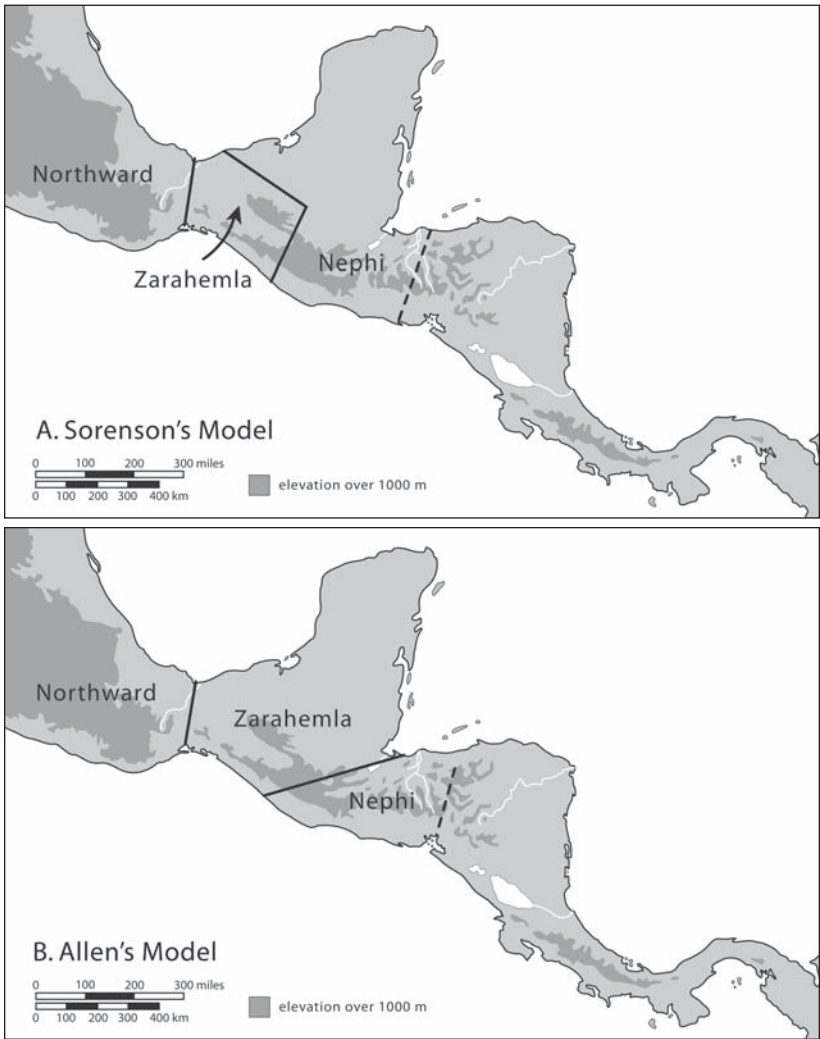
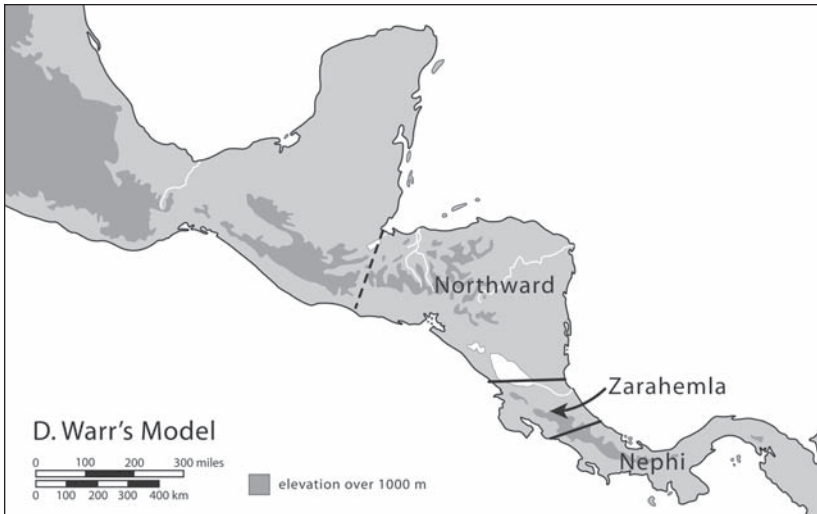
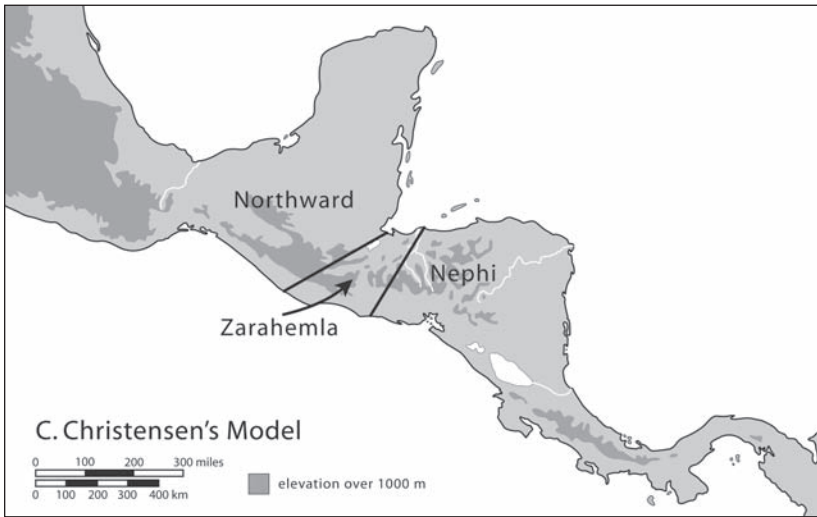


Figure 10. Relative territory sizes in Middle American models of Book of Mormon lands.

Utah sense of direction. I have pointed out that his proposed east sea borders the Belize coast rather than the narrow neck. In his attempt to follow directions, Allen distinguishes between a land northward—the same as that identified by Sorenson—and a separate land north. The Yucatan Peninsula directly north of the land of Zarahemla is considered to be the land of Bountiful and, thus, part of the land southward.



Allen pins his interpretation on one ambiguous scripture that may indicate a difference between the lands northward and southward with the lands north and south.²⁶ According to 3 Nephi 6:2: “And they did all return to their own lands and their possessions, both on the north and on the south, both on the land northward and on the land southward.” This verse does distinguish lands from directions but does not

26. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, 215–36.

mention the north lands. The few verses that mention north lands refer to Jaredite lands, so the land north is used for the most part in the same manner as the land northward. Allen's case for a different land north from a land northward is extremely weak. Sorenson suggests a more subtle difference:

“North country” and “north countries” seem to me from the contexts to be applied only to the inhabited lowland portions of the land northward that were reached from “the south countries” overland via the narrow pass. But neither “north countries” nor “north country” is used in regard to the colonies along the west sea coast, which are described strictly as being in the “land northward.”²⁷

In Allen's model, the land of Bountiful is more important and larger than the land of Zarahemla. I see no support in the Book of Mormon for this proposition. Figure 10B shows a simplification of the Allen model. Of greatest interest here is that Allen inverts the specified relations among territories, with Nephite territories being four to five times more extensive than Lamanite lands. Allen's Nephite territories are on a par with those of the Jaredites in the land northward. This constitutes a fundamental flub and sufficient reason for rejecting his model outright. Other fatal flaws could be listed, but the few mentioned suffice to disqualify Allen's model as a credible correlation of Book of Mormon lands.

Allen's and Sorenson's models represent the two principal competitors for a limited Mesoamerican geography centered at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The remaining candidates for the narrow neck of land are located in Central America. Starting with Guatemala, Central America is shaped like a long, narrowing funnel that pinches together at the juncture between Panama and Colombia, the place once thought to be the narrow neck linking the northern and southern hemispheres in the traditional view of Book of Mormon geography. This fact of physical geography means that proposed necks and lands necessarily decrease in size as one moves south toward Panama. The past several

27. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 77.

decades of scholarship have demonstrated conclusively that a hemispheric model contradicts Book of Mormon claims,²⁸ so this original candidate for the narrow neck in Panama has long since gone to its eternal rest. If one excludes South America from consideration as a viable land southward, as one ought, then another consequence of moving the narrow neck and Book of Mormon lands southward in Central America is that the potential size of the land southward also shrinks, and the requirements for land sizes, or scale, become increasingly difficult to fulfill.

B. Keith Christensen's Guatemala Model

In a copyrighted but unpublished manuscript, B. Keith Christensen looks to geology (plate tectonics and vulcanism) to sort the puzzle of Book of Mormon geography. He proposes a narrow neck 150 to 225 miles wide that crossed eastern Guatemala in two places as shown in figures 6 and 10C. I have already cited him to the effect that the narrow neck was probably not so narrow and that the distance may have been traversed on a horse.²⁹ Christensen actually proposes two distances across this narrow region—one line is a day and a half's journey long, and another is a day's journey. The shorter distance is comparable to the as-a-crow-flies distance across Tehuantepec, so Christensen cannot be faulted for proposing an unreasonable distance for his narrow neck. What is not apparent on maps, however, is that the terrain across eastern Guatemala is difficult, so it would have taken many more days to traverse than a comparable distance in Tehuantepec. I believe Christensen has identified the most viable candidate in Central America for the narrow neck, but in terms of travel time, it is over twice the distance of Tehuantepec. How does it fare with Warr's land test?

Christensen's proposed Book of Mormon lands are shown in figure 10C. His lands of Bountiful, Zarahemla, and Nephi are small. He proposes that the limited land of Zarahemla was the Uluá River Valley

28. See Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," in this number of the *FARMS Review*, pages 225–75.

29. See note 10, above.

of Honduras. He does not discuss Nephi or the greater land of Nephi in his text, but he appears to confine it largely to El Salvador. His greater land of Zarahemla is comparable to or slightly larger than his land of Nephi. On the other hand, his land northward is enormous, including Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize. Nonetheless, these disparities may be viable in terms of relative populations. As table 1 shows, El Salvador's population density is at least triple that of any other Central American country. If El Salvador was the location of the land of Nephi, it is possible that the disparate numbers of Lamanites compared to Nephites related to their superior and larger tracts of agricultural land. Even so, the lands appear too small. Christensen's land of Zarahemla takes in less than a third of Honduras, so the total 1850 population of this place would have been less than 200,000 people, close to the absolute minimum estimate for the number of Nephites killed at Cumorah. In sum, using the 1850 census as a close estimate of pre-Columbian population provides a possible correlation with the Book of Mormon account, but only if the slaughter at Cumorah was a quarter of a million Nephites rather than a million. Given the funnel shape of Central America, it is unlikely that any proposed geographies to the south of Guatemala and El Salvador would qualify.

James Warr's Rivas Model

I have already found Warr's model wanting on one criterion, the narrow neck of land. The model is also deficient in terms of scale. His quotation introducing this section indicates that Costa Rica is his candidate for the land southward. In his model, half of Costa Rica comprised the former lands of Zarahemla and Bountiful, or greater Zarahemla, and the other half was the land of Nephi. This bifurcation yields two small, equal-sized lands. To meet the population expectations of the Book of Mormon account, he can always toss in Panama as a southern extension of the land of Nephi, but even adding all of Panama's population does not resolve his population problem. The rough population estimates in table 1 list the total population of Costa Rica in 1850 as 115,000. I will not argue the archaeological merits of this number, but I think it is a reasonable estimator of pre-Columbian

populations 1,700 years ago. In Warr's model, half this population would have been Nephites and the other half Lamanites, yielding a total estimated Nephite population of less than 60,000. This figure can't even account for the absolute minimum Nephite population of 230,000 dead at Cumorah in AD 387, and it creates even greater problems for the Book of Mormon narrative and the requirement that Lamanites significantly outnumber Nephites. Recall that Warr estimates the total population of Nephites and Lamanites at eight million.³⁰ This estimate exacerbates his problem because it is four times the total population of all of Central America in 1850.

Warr does not consider the situation as dire as I do, of course, or he would not have advanced his model and method. He provides the following summary of his population expectations:

To get some idea of comparable modern populations on the proposed land mass, let us look at current and pre-conquest populations of Central America. Nicaragua had an estimated pre-conquest Indian population of 600,000. Panama's pre-conquest population was estimated at 200,000. Modern populations are as follows: Mexico, 105 million; Guatemala, 14 million; Honduras, 7 million; El Salvador, 6.5 million; and Nicaragua, 5 million. These combined countries would form my proposed Jaredite land northward with a total combined population of 137.5 million. Modern populations in Costa Rica and Panama are respectively 4 million and 3 million for a combined total of 7 million for my proposed Nephite/Lamanite area. So it appears that the populations I have suggested for the Nephites and Jaredites could easily fit into the proposed areas with plenty of room to spare. On the other hand, the projected population would not have been sufficiently large to reasonably settle substantial portions of the North or South America land masses. (Warr, "Book of Mormon Populations")

This argument is patently fallacious and internally self-defeating. Warr marshals population figures that meet his estimates for 80 million

30. See note 22, above.

Jaredites and 8 million Nephites/Lamanites. He does so by projecting modern populations back in time and ignoring technological change and modern medicine. This is akin to estimating the pre-Mormon population of Utah at several million Utes because that is how many people reside in Utah today. Obviously, several factors in the last several centuries have encouraged unprecedented population growth and density, and these same factors have led to the high populations in Mexico and Central America.

The more important figures Warr provides are those for preconquest populations. Nicaragua's preconquest population was 12 percent of its modern population, and Panama's preconquest population was 6.7 percent. By adjusting modern populations to this preconquest standard, the central error of Warr's argument stands revealed. Taking 9 percent as a useful constant, the total population for Warr's land northward would be this fraction of 137.5 million, or 12,375,000 people.³¹ This is more than enough to comply with the Jaredite requirement. Taking the preconquest data available for Panama and adding an estimate for Costa Rica of 360,000 people (9 percent of 4 million), yields a total of 560,000 people, with the estimate for the Nephite portion being 180,000 people. This approximates the 230,000 minimum but not the 2 million estimated and expected by Warr. His model fails by his own criteria and method. His proposed Book of Mormon lands are several sizes too small.

A Panama Model

I have become aware of a limited Panama model proposed by Patrick L. Simiskey that identifies a narrow neck in the middle of Panama (see fig. 1 no. 5).³² Because his work is still in progress and unpublished, it is not appropriate that I comment on its details. For purposes of my con-

31. This percentage averages the two estimates and is actually generous because the estimated preconquest populations represent the Postclassic period, a period of high population, especially for Nicaragua. Earlier populations of the Nephite era were smaller. It is worth noticing that the estimates of preconquest populations are within the same order of magnitude as the 1850s populations listed in table 1.

32. I have available a draft of a manuscript entitled: "The Zarahemla Puzzle, Vol. 1: A Study in Nephite Geography" (November 2002). Information on its content and how to obtain it are posted on the Web. See www.zarahemlapuzzle.com (accessed 20 October 2004).

sideration of Middle American candidates for narrow necks, it suffices to judge Simiskey's proposal solely in terms of population and territory size. The land southward in his model is that between the narrow neck in the middle of the country and the narrow neck bordering Colombia at its southern extremity. The greater land of Zarahemla is roughly half this land southward, or one fourth of Panama, with the land of Nephi being the same size. The 1850 population of Panama was less than 140,000 (table 1), so by my crude calculations, the estimated Nephite and Lamanite populations would have each been about 35,000. As cited, Warr lists a prequest population of Panama of 200,000 (a suspiciously round number), a fourth of which would give an estimated total Nephite population of 50,000—still far short of the casualty list of Cumorah. If these estimates are anywhere close to fourth-century AD populations, this limited Panama model is off by one order of magnitude, and then some.

Summary of Evaluations of Scale

The preceding evaluations are based on the simple proposition that total population relates directly to the extent of productive land. I have not attempted to finesse any of the information or to introduce qualifying variables. Comparing the relative size of various proposed Book of Mormon lands to nineteenth-century census data provided a rough measure for evaluating five models. Sorenson's limited Mesoamerican model preserves the population ratios claimed in the Book of Mormon and can account for the absolute totals. Allen's Tehuantepec model does not because his Nephite lands are much bigger than those for the Lamanites. I did not point out the known archaeological fact that the lands he designates as Nephite enjoyed higher population densities during the critical fourth century AD, so the disparity in territory sizes indicated in figure 10B would actually have been much greater when considered as population sizes. If Allen's identification of Nephite lands is accurate, then the Lamanites were always attacking vastly superior forces, something flatly contradicted in the text.

Of the three proposals for Book of Mormon lands in Central America—Warr's, Christensen's, and Simiskey's—only Christensen's comes close to matching the requirements in the text, and then only

barely. It has other serious problems besides its low populations, however, such as an improbable narrow neck of land. His model merits future consideration but, for the moment, is not a serious rival to Sorenson's. Candidates for Book of Mormon lands in Costa Rica and Panama are not credible because they fall far short of required population—in terms of absolute numbers as well as relative numbers. The archaeological and cultural details do not fit either. The bottom line of my quick analysis is that Sorenson's model is the only credible one in terms of physical geography and archaeology. These are not the only criteria that ought to be considered, however. Allen stresses in his work that multiple lines of evidence, or independent witnesses, should be considered in identifying Book of Mormon lands, a point with which I agree and to which I now turn.

Matters of Book of Mormon Culture

Allen follows M. Wells Jakeman's approach to Book of Mormon or sacred geography in pursuing a combination of archaeology, ethnohistory, and anthropology, an approach he calls the law of witnesses. "This simply means that if we make a Book of Mormon geographical hypothesis, we ought to test that hypothesis against the archaeological, cultural, and traditional history of the area. In the absence of these two or three witnesses, I feel we stand on rather shaky ground."³³

Part of the frustration of *Sacred Sites* is that Allen jumps all over the place supplying tidbits from each "witness" without wrapping up their testimony in a coherent fashion, or more important, without demonstrating the validity of his claims or questions. He does not evaluate sources critically (there is no cross-examination in his court). The desirability of multiple lines of evidence and witnesses is beyond question, but it loses much in Allen's application. He raises some good points, most taken from other authors. For example, he points out that Mesoamerica is the only area of the Americas where people could read and write, an absolutely fundamental requirement for Book of Mormon peoples. The Costa Rica and Panama models fail this simple test.

33. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, 181–82.

As before, the industry high standard has been established by John Sorenson. He provides excellent discussions of Book of Mormon cultural details in various books, with the most accessible being his *Images of Ancient America*.³⁴ This book is a comprehensive introduction to Mesoamerican culture, with superb and carefully chosen color illustrations. When I first saw Allen's *Sacred Sites* and its over 100 color illustrations I thought he was trying to emulate Sorenson's book, but there is no comparison in the quality of the illustrations or the arguments. Sorenson's *Images of Ancient America* has raised the stakes in publishing, with the most obvious effect being the trend to color illustration. Sorenson's book was followed by Jerry Ainsworth's generously illustrated but substantially flawed *The Lives and Travels of Mormon and Moroni* and then by Joseph Allen's *Sacred Sites*. Covenant Communications also has a companion picture book on the market similar to *Sacred Sites*: S. Michael Wilcox's *Land of Promise: Images of Book of Mormon Lands*.³⁵ In comparison with Allen's book, the photographs and illustrations in *Land of Promise* are significantly better. Wilcox is committed to Mesoamerica as the location of Book of Mormon lands, but, unlike Allen and Sorenson, he does not appear to be committed to any particular correlation. Similar to Allen's book, *Land of Promise* uses images of Mesoamerican archaeology and cultures as a platform for sermonizing rather than explaining details of the Book of Mormon, and the book's content is inferior to its graphics. Of Covenant's two contributions, *Land of Promise* is the superior product.

In the course of writing this essay, I have read parts of Allen's books dozens of times and have derived a simple rule of thumb: To the degree that Allen cribs from Sorenson, his arguments are sound; to the degree he does not, caveat lector (let the reader beware). When he proposes novel arguments, Allen invites trouble. Space permits consideration of only one spot of trouble per witness.

34. John L. Sorenson, *Images of Ancient America: Visualizing Book of Mormon Life* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1998). See also his *Ancient American Setting* and his *Nephite Culture and Society* (Salt Lake City: New Sage Books, 1997).

35. S. Michael Wilcox, *Land of Promise: Images of Book of Mormon Lands* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2003).

Archaeology: The Lehi Tree of Life Stone

Allen continues to follow Jakeman in considering Stela 5 (aka the Lehi Stone) at Izapa, Mexico, as one of the most convincing pieces of archaeological evidence for the authenticity and truth of the Book of Mormon, so much so that this stone received pride of place on the cover of *Sacred Sites*. It is telling that all the details are blurred and presented in false color; details don't seem to matter in Allen's presentations. But any serious argument about the meaning of carved images needs to deal with crisp data. All the monuments Allen had redrawn to grace his publication were transformed from sharp line drawings to blurred globs of color, clearly a move in the wrong direction. I recently presented a new and better drawing of the details of Izapa Stela 5 and what I consider strong arguments, based partly on this drawing, for why it does not deserve reverence from Allen or his Mormon tour groups.³⁶

The only convincing parallel between the scene on the monument and Lehi's dream (as recorded in the Book of Mormon) is the presence of a fruit tree and water. This falls several miles short of a strong case for correlation. The scene, its arrangement, and style are purely Mesoamerican and derive from themes prevalent among earlier cultures dating back before Lehi was born. Allen is aware of my arguments but dismisses them summarily by soliciting other opinions (from Bruce Warren and Richard Hauck, archaeologists, but not qualified experts) that claim the correspondences are there. The argument should not hinge on expert testimony—mine, Allen's, Warren's, or that of others. Rather, it should be a matter of accepted facts and their ramifications. For the moment, Allen's arguments constitute a fallacious appeal to authority.

In his book, Allen provides another twist to his argument for Old World (aka Book of Mormon) connections to the stone. He proposes that the scene on Stela 5 is laid out as a visual chiasm. In an earlier chapter, he presents a visual analysis of a carved panel from the Classic Maya site of Palenque, Chiapas, to show its chiasmic structure. This

36. John E. Clark, "A New Artistic Rendering of Izapa Stela 5: A Step toward Improved Interpretation," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/1 (1999): 22–33.

argument is absurd and self-defeating. What Allen has identified is not chiasms but mirror imagery and the bilateral symmetry of some sculptures, a feature common to art the world over and therefore of no particular analytical merit by itself. As is typical with most of his arguments, Allen does not pursue the obvious implications of his own assertions. For example, if the representations on Stela 5 were indeed pure mirror symmetry, then the seated woman on the lower left of the panel (aka “Sariah” seated behind “Lehi”) would have a female counterpart on the far right of the panel (i.e., the figure behind “Nephi”). There is a figure, holding a parasol, in this position that Jakeman identified as “Sam.” This figure is eroded but does appear to represent a female. So the symmetry of Stela 5 is indeed impressive, but it eliminates “Sam” from Lehi’s family gathering. Of greater difficulty, the new drawing has identified additional human figures on the stone not accounted for in Jakeman’s/Allen’s account. Their interpretation flounders in light of new details. Stela 5 portrays Mesoamerican kings worshipping their gods and conducting sacred ceremonies—and not Lehi’s dream. It is interesting that a world tree or tree of life is involved, but it does not constitute direct evidence of the Book of Mormon. What it does demonstrate, however, is that other Mesoamerican peoples living alongside the Nephites shared some of the same metaphors and images as the Nephites. In other words, the Nephite record is not out of place in this cultural setting.

Culture: Weights and Measures in the Guatemala Highlands

For years now Allen and his colleagues have been making much of the small, nested brass weights used in Indian markets in highland Guatemala because the graduated weights parallel the weight ratios mentioned in Alma, chapter 11, for units of monetary exchange. Pictures and explanations of these weights are now being published as verified knowledge and as corresponding with the Book of Mormon.³⁷

37. See Wilcox, *Land of Promise*, 4–5, and Thomas R. Valletta, ed., *The Book of Mormon for Latter-day Saint Families* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1999), 294.

The weights are supposed to be an example of how paying attention to Indian culture leads to confirmation of the Book of Mormon narrative and, thus, to gospel insights and testimony of the book's authenticity. But the whole claim comes from jumping to conclusions at the expense of analysis. The brass weights are not pre-Columbian. The highland Maya got these weights from their Spanish conquerors. Consequently, if there is a connection between these weights and Book of Mormon traditions, it has nothing to do with ancient indigenous traditions, as Allen claims. I confess that I have not done the research needed to trace them historically, but I would suggest starting in southern Spain. The technology appears to be Moorish. If there is a historical connection to Lehigh traditions, I suspect it is very old in the Arabian Peninsula and only recently reintroduced into the Maya area. If so, any parallel here would be an accidental historical (re-)convergence, at best. The brass weights may be significant, but we will only know after someone conducts some serious historical research. The current argument about weights and measures is misleading and quite possibly false.

The problem with most of Allen's cultural evidences is that he takes things at "face value" and does not investigate their history to see whether they are indeed native traditions or adopted traditions. He does the same with the names of archaeological sites. He accords special attention to those with Book of Mormon-sounding names, such as Lamonai in Belize. Some of these names were made up by modern archaeologists and have nothing to do with native traditions. The source of the site names makes a huge difference. The same propensity to superficial analysis is also apparent in Allen's area of expertise: early myths and legends.

Tradition: The Jaredites in Aztec Lore

A promising feature of Allen's book is a parallel account of the first settlers in the New World. Seven columns of claims are considered for three sources: The Book of Mormon, Mesoamerican archaeology, and sixteenth-century historical sources. I remain unconvinced by some of the details as currently expounded, but Allen's method and intent holds promise. A focus on early Spanish accounts of the

myths and legends of Mesoamerican peoples was Jakeman's forte, but it is an area that Sorenson has left virtually untouched. Jakeman never produced his promised synthesis, so this is an obvious project for a capable scholar with language and history training.

Allen takes an account of the founding of Mesoamerica from the early Catholic convert, Fernando de Alva Ixtlilxochitl. An English translation of some of his writings was first published by Milton Hunter and Thomas Ferguson in *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon*.³⁸ Hunter and Ferguson's book juxtaposed passages from the Book of Mormon with those from Ixtlilxochitl to reveal obvious parallels between these two independent sources. Allen's contribution is to add another parallel account from archaeology; this still needs work. The little critical discussion in Latter-day Saint circles of Ixtlilxochitl's account has concerned its accurate translation from Spanish to English, not the more pressing concern about original sources and their treatment. The critical step was Ixtlilxochitl's use of Aztec sources and their translation into Spanish.

One example of the promise and difficulties with this approach will suffice. The second column of Allen's parallel analysis ("2. The Great Tower and the Pacific Route") consists of the following entries:

The Jaredites came from the tower of Babel at the time of the confusion of tongues, and yet the Lord did not confound their own. As near as can be determined, their route of travel brought them through China across the Pacific Ocean, where they were on the water for 344 days. "No monster of the sea could break them, neither whale that could mar them" (Ether 6:10-11).

. . . While there is not enough evidence at this time to support that the Olmecs originated from the tower of Babel, there is an engraved stone located at the outdoor La Venta museum that supports an ocean crossing and the concept that "no monster of the sea" could destroy them. The engraved monuments

38. Milton R. Hunter and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Ancient America and the Book of Mormon* (Oakland, CA: Kolob Book, 1950).

and calendar structure also manifest a direct tie to China, which would suggest a Pacific crossing. (Allen, p. 78)

A stela, or stone monument, taken from the site of La Venta and now situated in the outdoor La Venta Museum in Villahermosa, contains inscriptions that perhaps depict that first voyage. It is a sculpture showing people traveling a great distance—from the west. They traveled in the ocean and were protected, as is reminiscent of Moroni’s statement in the Book of Ether [6:10].³⁹

I assume that Allen is using “inscriptions” in this statement idiosyncratically to refer to low relief carving rather than the carving of individual glyphs and writing because the monument in question lacks glyphs, writing, or inscriptions of any kind. It shows a man and a sharp-toothed creature carved in low relief on one side, and a crocodile seen from a bird’s eye view on the back side (this is unreported and unnoticed by most observers). There is no indication that voyaging was being portrayed or that the people came from the west. All these claims are devoid of merit. The actual account of Allen’s discovery of this information indicates he got the idea from a tour guide at the archaeological park—always a highly suspicious source of competent information. Allen’s account gives a flavor for the depth and accuracy of his analysis:

We may, however, have a hint of the first settlers crossing the ocean from a monument discovered at the Olmec site of La Venta in the State of Tabasco, Mexico. . . .

In the year 1980, as we were conducting a group of people through the museum at La Venta [he must mean La Venta Park here and not the archaeological site, which is located 60 miles distant], one of the members of the group asked if a pamphlet was available describing the various monuments in the park. I asked the gentleman at the curio shop if such a pamphlet had yet been published. He informed me that he had a draft of a

39. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*, 217.

guide booklet that he was working on but that it was in Spanish. He said he would let me take it if I would return it.

The gentleman further informed me that he was an archaeologist and that he had assisted in several projects in the area. As we parted, he asked me to pay particular attention to Stela No. 12, . . . as it provided information regarding the crossing of the ocean by the original settlers to the New World.

The interest of the group was high as we proceeded through the park examining the several monuments, most of which date from 1200 to 600 BC [850–500 BC is more accurate], the Jaredite time period. As we arrived at monument No. 12, we discovered that the resident archaeologist was detailed in his analysis.

He said that the lines flowing from the back of the individual's head represented sun rays—suggesting that the first settlers came from the west where the sun sets. He noted that the footprints suggest that the people traveled great distances to arrive at their destination. And he pointed out that the sculpture's giant sea monster with jaws opened[,] together with the main character's warding off of the sea monster[,] suggests that the people crossed the ocean in their journey.

Needless to say, our interest was aroused at the experience of Monument No. 12. Jay Rawlings, an associate of mine, then responded by saying, “As I flew from Mexico City this morning, I was reading an event in the Book of Ether that may tie in with the sea monster carving on the stela.” Jay then read the account of Jared and his brother's crossing of the great waters:

And thus they were driven forth; and *no monster of the sea could break them*, neither whale that could mar them; and they did have light continually, whether it was above the water or under the water.

And thus they were driven forth, three hundred and forty and four days upon the water. (Ether 6:10–11)⁴⁰

40. Ibid., 55.

This claim does not merit much commentary. I see factors of serendipity, possibly of revelation, but no analysis. It is not clear which of the two images on the stone has the sun rays, but I assume the “individual” alluded to is the man in the lower register of the monument who is wearing a feather headdress. This does not indicate the sun or any direction. If one wants to go with the sun rays, why not the rising sun in the east rather than the setting sun in the west? As to footprints, they are not shown on this monument. They are on a different monument (no. 13), which does indeed show some simple glyphic signs or inscriptions. But even if footprints were indicated, why would they signify sea travel?

Ixtlilxochitl reported that after the Flood, the people . . . began again to populate the earth. They built a high tower to protect them from a second destruction and “their language became confounded, such that they did not understand one another and they were scattered to all parts of the world.” Ixtlilxochitl continues: “The Tultecas (referring to the first settlers), consisting of seven men and their wives were able to understand one another, and they came to this land having crossed many lands and waters, living in caves and passing through great tribulations. Upon their arrival here, they discovered that it was a very good and fertile land.” That they crossed the Pacific Ocean is consistent with Jaredite and Olmec history. Ixtlilxochitl wrote, “They came from the great Tartary (China) and were part of those who came from the division of Babel.” (Allen, p. 78)

The passage as it appears in Hunter and Ferguson’s book is as follows:

And (the Tulteca history tells) how afterwards men, multiplying made a very tall and strong Zacualli, which means the very high tower, in order to shelter themselves in it when the second world should be destroyed.

When things were at their best, their languages were changed and, not understanding each other, they went to dif-

ferent parts of the world; and the Tultecas, who were as many as seven companions and their wives, who understood their language among themselves, came to these parts, having first crossed large lands and seas, living in caves and undergoing great hardships, until they came to this land, which they found good and fertile for their habitation.⁴¹

Allen mentions that the people came from the “division of Babel.” Hunter and Ferguson translate this as the “division of Babylon,”⁴² so there is some slippage in Allen’s transcription.

Allen’s interpretation of the Book of Mormon account is sound, but his archaeological and historic witnesses require further formulation. His interpretation of the Olmec monument from La Venta (Monument 12) as evidence of an ocean crossing lacks plausibility. The monument portrays a sharp-toothed, saurian creature and a kneeling man grappling with its tail, but no boat. Mesoamerica deities took monster forms, but these do not indicate anything about ocean voyaging. The only connection in Allen’s argument is the mention of “monsters” in the Jaredite account and the portrayal of a monstrous creature on an Olmec monument. The images on the stone give no indication that an aquatic setting or origin myth was being evoked—rather, it looks markedly terrestrial. In short, Allen’s archaeological parallel is weak. And he is on only slightly firmer ground with his allusion to the parallels between Mesoamerican calendar systems and those from southeast Asia. There may have been some contact between peoples of Mesoamerica and others across the Pacific, but at the moment there is no compelling archaeological evidence.

The strongest part of Allen’s argument is the parallels to Ixtlilxochitl’s sixteenth-century account of the first humans in the Americas, but even here difficulties remain. Many of the early Spanish accounts of first peoples have them crossing the sea in seven boats and landing on the coast of northern Veracruz. This would bring them across the Atlantic Ocean and not the Pacific. In short, most accounts contradict

41. Hunter and Ferguson, *Ancient America*, 24–25, emphasis deleted.

42. *Ibid.*, 25.

the standard interpretation of the Jaredites' Pacific voyage. Hunter and Ferguson published the following version from Fray Bernardino de Sahagun (the most important source of Aztec traditions) in 1950:

Concerning the origin of these peoples, the report the old men (of central Mexico—where Sahagun lived many years) give is that they came by sea from the north (i.e., down the Gulf Coast of Mexico), and true it is that they came in some wooden boats but it is not known how they (the boats) were hewn, but it is conjectured by a report found among all these natives that they came from seven caves, and that these seven caves are the seven ships or galleys in which the first settlers of this land came, as gathered from likely conjectures.

The people first came to settle this land from the direction of Florida, and came coasting along the coast disembarking in the port of Panuco, which they call Panco, which means “place where those arrived who crossed the water.” This people came in search of the terrestrial paradise, and they had as a family name Tamoanchan, which means, “we are looking for our home.”⁴³

This is extremely interesting commentary, but it contradicts some of Allen's claims—in particular, his argument that native traditions remember their ancestors crossing the Pacific Ocean. Ixtlilxochitl's account can be interpreted to mean the Pacific Ocean, as Allen claims, but this does not square with other sources. For most of us, the clear tradition of an oceanic crossing in seven boats is remarkable. To go beyond this gem, careful historical study will be required in which the various sources are evaluated and their claims balanced. For example, a potential problem with Ixtlilxochitl's account is that it shows clear evidence of biblical influence, such as his mention of Babylon. Is his claim about the confusion of languages at the great tower indicative of Catholic influence as well, or did it indeed come from native traditions? I have not seen this claim in any other native source, so I

43. *Ibid.*, 30–31, emphasis deleted.

consider it suspect. Allen follows the lead of Hunter and Ferguson and accepts it as indigenous knowledge.

It could never be maintained successfully that Ixtlilxochitl learned from the Spaniards that the language of the group of people who migrated to America from the Tower of Babel was not confounded. There is only one conceivable way that he could have learned such a fact and that way was through the traditions and histories of his forefathers. Ether, the last Jaredite prophet, recorded the foregoing fact in the Book of Ether; and their knowledge of it came down from age to age through the Nephites and their successors, the Lamanites, to the Mexican historian, Ixtlilxochitl.⁴⁴

If this was the case, then this information should show up in the early sources that Ixtlilxochitl had at his disposal. In my reading to date I do not remember seeing this claim anywhere else.

Summary

Cultural and historic parallels between the Book of Mormon account and indigenous peoples of Mesoamerica need to be determined with caution. Hundreds have been proposed by various authors for Mesoamerica, and many of them are compelling and lend credence to the proposition that it is the New World location of Book of Mormon lands. Allen's treatment of culture in *Sacred Sites* covers many topics of interest and shows some of the promise for this approach. Some of his arguments are better than others. The same can also be said for some of Warr's and Sorenson's claims of cultural parallels. Making a convincing case of cultural parallels is hard work, and for the most part, the work remains to be done. The lessons to be learned from Allen's unconvincing or erroneous examples is that tedious historic research will be required to document the recent history of contemporary customs before they can be shown to be indigenous traditions or to derive from Book of Mormon peoples.

44. *Ibid.*, 29–30, emphasis deleted.

Searching for Sacred Geographies

I remain ambivalent about many of the arguments presented by Allen and Warr in their publications. My purpose here has been to consider a few broad issues of geography that may be useful in sorting through the different limited Book of Mormon geographies proposed for various parts of Middle America. Of those showcased here I consider Sorenson's limited Mesoamerican model the best fit. I reject both Allen's and Warr's models. But there is an even larger question. Thus far I have not addressed the principal issue raised by Allen and implicit in the title of his publication. Are the sites sacred? If so, why? And what benefits accrue from visiting them? It is well to remember that Allen is a tour director and, from his offering a discount on his tours to purchasers of his book, one might conjecture that his objective is to sell tours. His most astonishing promise is to provide a spiritual experience. I retain a primal aversion to anyone selling spirituality, so I must in fairness go on record as being biased against statements along these lines. Here is Allen's claim in his own words:

If one of the major keys to understanding the Book of Mormon lies in our knowledge of its history, culture, and geography, then learning more about each of these elements is invaluable. And that is the primary purpose of this book—to bring to life the historical and geographical elements of the Book of Mormon. It will also show how, in most instances, these details can lead us to Christ, which is the ultimate purpose of the Book of Mormon. For this reason, it is sacred geography. (Allen, p. 3)

This is a claim I cannot touch because it involves people's personal experiences and the Lord's mysterious ways. But it creates a dilemma that troubles me. If Allen's geography is incorrect in essential details, such as the location of the city of Bountiful, which it is, then how can true testimony be gained by visiting these places? What is the appropriate analogy for gaining spiritual experience, the Sacred Grove or Carthage Jail? Is it sufficient to just be in the general area of a past transcendental event, as in wandering the paths of the Sacred Grove,

or does one have to be in the precise spot, such as the upper room of the Carthage Jail? Can one gain the insights of Liberty Jail through stopping by Kansas City? Can one garner the experience of Nauvoo and Carthage by dining in Quincy? Allen's tours are of the "close-but-not-there" variety.⁴⁵ Given his objectives, the most holy spot on his tour ought to be the city of Bountiful in the land of Bountiful. These are described in the Book of Mormon as adjacent to the narrow neck of land, but in Allen's geography over 200 miles separate his proposed narrow neck and the city Bountiful. His identification is not even close. What implications must follow from this mistake? How can erroneous detail lead to Christ?

Assessing the spiritual quotient of ancient sites goes well beyond archaeology and carries one into New Age crystal gazing and Mormon tourism. The attribution of "sacredness" in these two cases differs significantly. For New Agers, sites are inherently holy because of the spirits of their past inhabitants—regardless of the comportment in life of the long dead. In contrast, I think Allen is claiming that sacredness inheres in places once frequented by righteous, holy individuals such as Nephi, Mormon, Moroni, and even Christ. If true, then not all ancient places are holy, and one would be well advised to make the distinction—and make the effort to visit the right sites. As a basic point of logic—but not of personal revelation—I would think one would have to be in the right place to derive the full instructional benefits from being there. My principal concern with Allen's laudatory objective of bringing souls to Christ is how it can be done with erroneous facts. Can true faith grow from error? I well understand how following the footsteps of prophets, or visiting places that Christ frequented, may foster redemptive contemplation. But how would visiting Lamanite cities or the Gadianton holdout (postulated sites on Allen's tour) work to this end? I suppose that even the locations of wickedness and gross

45. Given current ambiguities and the lack of precision involved in identifying Book of Mormon cities and lands, it is fair to assert that all geographies and Book of Mormon tours share this deficiency. The main point of my comparative analysis in this essay is that some geographies are farther afield than others. Allen's geography has more problems than Sorenson's, and Warr's has more problems than Allen's, and so on down to Panama.

paganism could be instructive if they validated details in the Book of Mormon record, with the overall effect being a greater appreciation of its authenticity and truth. If so, the details can only really matter if they are correct and true. My assessment of Allen's proposal for the location of Book of Mormon lands is that most cannot possibly be correct. For those inclined to search for Book of Mormon lands, I recommend other books—first and foremost, the Book of Mormon.

Having raised the issue, I must close with a necessary clarification. It is not appropriate that I affect a person's livelihood. My comments have implications for Allen's tours, but I have not commented on others in the same business. The foregoing comments address the validity of Allen's correlation of Book of Mormon lands and not the quality of his tours or their spirit—matters of which I remain ignorant and in which I am uninterested. No Book of Mormon tours, to my knowledge, frequent the specific places mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Because the precise locations have yet to be demonstrated convincingly, it follows that the best that one can manage at the moment is to get to the correct area. My evaluation of various Middle American correlations indicates that Mesoamerica is the right place and, more precisely, that southern Mexico and Guatemala are the most likely locations of Nephite and Lamanite lands. Beyond this, things remain imprecise. If those going on tour remember this caveat, they can indeed benefit from touring Book of Mormon lands.