



Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011

Volume 16 | Number 2

Article 12

6-1-2004

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Gardner, Brant A. (2004) "An Exploration in Critical Methodology: Critiquing a Critique," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon 1989–2011*: Vol. 16 : No. 2 , Article 12.

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Title An Exploration in Critical Methodology: Critiquing a Critique

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Reference *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 173-223.

ISSN 1550-3194 (print), 2156-8049 (online)

Abstract Review of “Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events” (2002), by Earl M. Wunderli.

AN EXPLORATION IN CRITICAL METHODOLOGY: CRITIQUING A CRITIQUE¹

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The geography of the Book of Mormon is not explicitly outlined in its text, but numerous individuals have attempted to fill that void. In 1990, John L. Sorenson published his *Geography of the Book of Mormon: A Source Book*,² which describes sixty-eight different models for the geography of the Book of Mormon by author, date, and the care with which the model was created. Since the publication of that work, the speculation has not abated, and new models have been proposed (usually a variation on one of the existing types of geographies).³ The

1. The title is an intentional allusion to *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon: Explorations in Critical Methodology*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993). Wunderli's perception of the Book of Mormon appears to be similar to many articles in that volume, and it is Wunderli's assertion that he is applying a type of critical analysis to the text.

2. John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1990).

3. For example, see Edwin G. Goble and Wayne N. May, *This Land, Zarahemla and the Nephite Nation: Only One Cumorah* (Colfax, WI: Ancient American Archaeology Foundation, 2002); and Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Tribes of the Book of Mormon—the Rest of the Story: A Correlation between the Nephite Nation and the Mound Builders of the Eastern United States* (Springville, UT: Bonneville Books, 2001).

Review of Earl M. Wunderli. "Critique of a Limited Geography for Book of Mormon Events." *Dialogue* 35/3 (2002): 161–97.

models examined in Sorenson's *Source Book* indicate that those prior to 1917 assumed that the Book of Mormon took place over the entire Western Hemisphere. Beginning in 1917 models that were more limited in scope began to appear.⁴

The history of the development of geographical models for the Book of Mormon is also fascinating because of the nature of the data used to create them. The earliest models appear to have their basis in the folk understanding of the Mound Builders, with the Book of Mormon simply being presumed to support those ideas without any critical analysis. Orson Pratt developed one of the more complete hemispheric models in 1866. Sorenson notes, however, that Pratt is inconsistent with the text in several of his placements, having Bountiful south of certain cities where the text of the Book of Mormon clearly has it to the north.⁵ This literature, taken in chronological order, makes it apparent that what began as an assumption came under greater and greater scrutiny over time. The shift around 1917 was part of this more serious investigation of the text.

Earl M. Wunderli argues that the text actually requires the larger hemispheric interpretation rather than the more limited models. To his credit, Wunderli tackles the best articulation of the limited geography model as argued by John L. Sorenson.⁶ "Of the various models," according to Wunderli, "the only one to have gained a following is that of John Sorenson, now emeritus professor of anthropology at Brigham Young University" (p. 161). It is important to understand, however, that Wunderli is critiquing Sorenson's model, not defending the hemispheric model. Although Wunderli proposes that the text

4. Louis E. Hills presented a model based on Mesoamerica in 1917, which he elaborated in later publications. Willard Young, sometime before 1920, presented a model that focused on northern Central America. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 101 and 221. 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.

5. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 159.

6. If not already obvious, my personal studied preference is for Sorenson's model of a limited geographic scope for the Book of Mormon.

requires a hemispheric model, he also does not believe that the hemispheric model is scientifically tenable. In his conclusion he notes:

A limited geography model could solve other problems raised by the Book of Mormon text, including, as mentioned at the outset, the presence of large populations of other peoples that cannot be explained by reproduction rates of the Book of Mormon peoples alone. It relieves the Nephite text of dealing with Asian migrations across the Bering land mass long before the Jaredites arrived thousands of years later. These migrations in turn explain the 1500 or so Indian languages that could not all have derived from Lehi's Hebrew in a mere thousand years. These earlier settlers become the pre-existing peoples that the Nephites and Lamanites encounter and incorporate (but without scriptural mention) thereby accounting for the large implied populations in the Book of Mormon. A limited geography located in Mesoamerica also satisfies the clues in the book about distances, climate, terrain, directions, and other geographical factors. Indeed, LDS scholars can even correlate archaeological findings with cities, rivers, mountains and other geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon. These issues have certainly never been reconciled with the traditional understanding of hemispheric scope. (p. 197)

Wunderli acknowledges that the limited geography model of the Book of Mormon fits better with real-world data than does a hemispheric geography. His unstated but obvious conclusion is that the limited geography model might be nice, but if the text *requires* a hemispheric model by the way it describes its internal geography, then all of the problems with known scientific data come crashing back on the Book of Mormon. This essential disbelief in the historicity of the Book of Mormon colors the way Wunderli argues his case. It also forms a fundamental contradiction in his premise. If one of the criteria for determining what the text requires is to see it as representing a real-world context, then Wunderli admits that the text would require a limited geography, which contradicts his stated hypothesis. Only because he argues that

the Book of Mormon has no relationship to history can he advance his hypothesis. If he were to accept the real world as an indication of textual meaning, he would already have invalidated his argument.

Although Wunderli's article was published before the debate about DNA evidence and the Book of Mormon, it is nevertheless a key component in the argument that DNA evidence disputes the Book of Mormon.⁷ The argument that DNA evidence contradicts the Book of Mormon is plausible only if the text is viewed as an account of every pre-European who lived on the North or South American continents. DNA data contradict that assumption. Therefore, if Wunderli is correct, then the DNA argument is strong. If Wunderli is not correct, then the DNA argument becomes much ado about nothing.⁸

All authors approach a subject with a potential bias for finding a particular answer. To separate sound argumentation from bias-directed conclusions or from circular reasoning, we must clearly understand both the methodology and the nature of the arguments presented so that we can discover whether or not the care taken in the examination is stronger than the bias that might otherwise in-

7. The most public beginning of the discussion of the relationship of DNA to the Book of Mormon came with the publication of Thomas Murphy's article: "Lamanite Genesis, Genealogy, and Genetics," in *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon*, ed. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), 47–77.

8. The following articles represent the Latter-day Saint response to the DNA issue. These articles generally accept the limited geography of the Book of Mormon and point out the inapplicability of current DNA studies for the Book of Mormon in that setting. Many agree that the hemispheric reading of the text is untenable. That does not mean, however, that there is not a strong case to be made for the historicity of the Book of Mormon in the context of a limited geography and a limited migrant population into a larger established people. In the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003), see John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, "Before DNA," 6–23; Michael F. Whiting, "DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective," 24–35; John M. Butler, "A Few Thoughts from a Believing DNA Scientist," 36–37; D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, "Who Are the Children of Lehi?" 38–51. In the *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003), see Daniel C. Peterson, "Prolegomena to the DNA Articles," 25–34; David A. McClellan, "Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probably, or Not?" 35–90; Matthew Roper, "Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations," 91–128; Matthew Roper, "Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy," 129–64; Brian D. Stubbs, "Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing," 165–82; and John A. Tvedtnes, "The Charge of 'Racism' in the Book of Mormon," 183–97.

form it. For this reason, I begin by examining the way Wunderli builds his case.

Methods and Assumptions

Wunderli makes a division between two types of approaches, one external and one internal:

Scholars have challenged Sorenson's model based on archaeological and other external evidence, but lay people like me are caught in the crossfire between the experts. We, however, can examine Sorenson's model based on what the Book of Mormon itself says. One advantage of this approach is that this internal evidence is fixed, readily available, and easily verifiable, unlike external evidence, which is always subject to change and is not always easily accessible for verification. (pp. 161–62)⁹

Wunderli proposes to ignore the external sources altogether. This not only means that he will not argue archaeology, but it also appears to mean that he will also argue his point under the assumption that the Book of Mormon has no relationship to reality. As he constructs his arguments on distances, for instance, he completely ignores any relationship that real people might have with geography.

Wunderli suggests, rather, that the case may be made entirely on internal data. The idea that the text should be a significant player in

9. Wunderli suggests that "scholars" have been critical of the limited geography theory on the basis of archaeology. In spite of attempting to give the appearance that the weight of scholarly opinion contradicts the geography, he cites only Deanne G. Matheny, "Does the Shoe Fit? A Critique of the Limited Tehuantepec Geography," in *New Approaches to the Book of Mormon*, ed. Brent Lee Metcalfe (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1993), 269–328. He correctly notes that Sorenson responded to Matheny in John L. Sorenson, "Viva Zapato! Hurray for the Shoe!" *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 6/1 (1994): 297–361. He does not discuss any points that might tilt the discussion in favor of either of these two writers. Rather, he simply uses Matheny as evidence that the model is questioned and extrapolates her views to assume multiple scholars are sympathetic, thereby giving readers the impression, without any analysis whatsoever, that the argument is strong. Since he is concentrating on the textual data, this approach would be forgivable—save for the disingenuous implication that "scholars have challenged."

the discovery of its meaning is unquestionable. However, the supposition that “this internal evidence is fixed, readily available, and easily verifiable” would appear to be contradicted by the fact that he and Sorenson are both reading the same text with very different results. We are therefore left with the same issue he has when two archaeological specialists argue data. Although we certainly have the text readily available, if two presumably competent readers can read the same text differently, who is reading it correctly? Unfortunately, he has placed himself in the precise position he hoped to avoid by discussing the text alone without an external context.

Wunderli’s statement that one should examine the text may imply to some that Sorenson somehow missed this vital step. But Wunderli understands that he did not. In fact, Wunderli is quite generous in his praise of at least the breadth of Sorenson’s textual examination: “[Sorenson] thus starts over with the basics by identifying every statement in the Book of Mormon that bears on its geography and proceeds to construct a geography that meets all the requirements of the Book of Mormon” (pp. 165–66). Not only did Sorenson examine those verses, he displays them with commentary in his *Source Book*, with which Wunderli is familiar.¹⁰ Since it is clearly not *what* Sorenson and Wunderli are reading that is at issue, their differences must stem from how they interpret what they read.

Wunderli never discusses the crucial issue of methodology. He does not criticize Sorenson’s methods (though he certainly criticizes his conclusions), and he does not establish his own basis for textual understanding. Without a firm methodological foundation, we are left with no stronger support for a position than Wunderli’s opinion. His “conclusion is that the internal evidence not only favors a western hemisphere model, but challenges *any* limited geography model” (p. 162). I will examine Wunderli’s arguments to determine whether or not they support this opinion.

10. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*. Wunderli is familiar with this work and cites it in the footnote for his statement of Sorenson’s method. Wunderli is therefore aware that both he and Sorenson are reading the text.

We confront the first problem with his analysis in the very supposition that the text itself will favor a hemispheric model. Since Sorenson uses that same text to come to a diametrically opposite position, Wunderli begs the question of how his reading is superior to Sorenson's. We are given no hint as to how we should understand the text so that we might choose between the two. To determine that answer for ourselves, two issues must be examined. The first is whether Wunderli and Sorenson have adequately mined the text for data, and the second is how to settle differences of opinion on what the text means.

In the examination of the text, Wunderli concedes that Sorenson has identified "every statement in the Book of Mormon that bears on its geography and proceed[ed] to construct a geography that meets all the requirements of the Book of Mormon" (pp. 165–66). In contrast to Wunderli, Sorenson does provide some indication of the method that he uses to analyze the text: "Some of the text's scale requirements are quite specific. They are also tied together in intricate relationships. It is impossible to solve just part of the problem of locations and distances, for, as in a jigsaw puzzle, *all* the features must interlock. I find that they fit neatly together."¹¹ It is hard to argue with a general methodological statement that suggests that all data should be examined and that a solution should be found that accounts for all available data. What Sorenson does not explicitly state is that the geographical data must also make sense for real humans in real conditions. Wunderli's method is both more limited in scope and in reasonable restraints. Where Sorenson examines all statements dealing with geography, Wunderli analyzes selected passages. Where Sorenson assumes a connection between such things as distances and the ability of human beings to travel those distances, Wunderli reads the text unburdened by what an actual human being might be capable of doing.

A comparison between Sorenson's and Wunderli's respective data sets is instructive. Sorenson lists each of those passages that he carefully compares in his *Source Book*, of which there are 475.¹² Wunderli,

11. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1985), 23.

12. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 232–328.

on the other hand, uses 18 passages as part of his analysis of geography proper, 4 more when he argues that the Book of Mormon concept of a “land of liberty” refers to North America, and 6 more when he discusses directions (3 of which refer to the Old World, not New World geography).¹³ While other scriptures are mentioned, they are explicitly part of his description of Sorenson’s methodology and therefore represent Sorenson rather than Wunderli. Although the sheer weight of numbers is impressively on Sorenson’s side, that would not count for much should Wunderli’s arguments be compelling. Nevertheless, if Sorenson can reasonably claim that he finds consistent interrelated connections among all 475 passages (which include those Wunderli examines) and he finds them consistent with a limited geography, Wunderli must have compelling data to show that Sorenson is misreading the passages upon which Wunderli bases his analysis.¹⁴

Even a superficial comparison of the approaches Sorenson and Wunderli take demonstrates a fundamental flaw in Wunderli’s position. Wunderli’s implicit assumption is that if the meaning of the text appears obvious to him, it is therefore the intent of the text. For instance, he contends: “That North America rather than Oaxaca and southern Veracruz was their promised land is further suggested by repeated descriptions of this land as ‘choice above all other lands,’ the same language used by Nephi and Lehi in more specifically describing North America” (p. 175). First, Wunderli assumes that “choice above all other lands” *must* refer to North America rather than Oaxaca or southern Veracruz. There is no particular reason given why this must

13. Used in his own geographic analysis: 1 Nephi 2:20; 13:12–19 (quoted in footnotes as well); 14:2; 17:13–14; 18:23; 22:7–8; 2 Nephi 1:3–11; 10:10–11, 19; Mosiah 8:8; Alma 22:30–32; 37:38, 44–45; 63:5–6, 9; Helaman 3:3–8; 4:6–7; 3 Nephi 20:14, 28; Mormon 6:2–4; Ether 2:8–12, 15; 10:28. Argument for “land of liberty”: Mosiah 27:2–3; 29:25–32; Alma 1:17; 30:7. Directional system: 1 Nephi 2:5–6; 16:13–14; 17:1; Ether 9:3, 31–32; 10:19–21.

14. Wunderli makes no attempt to deal with all the verses, and most of them cover specifics such as interrelationships among cities. Nevertheless, from the data Sorenson accumulates comes a fairly detailed picture of consistent distance relationships. Rather than argue any of these points of distance or interrelationships specifically, Wunderli makes assertions that some verses may not be specific. He presents his reading but does not examine the other verses that would counter his argument.

be so. It has certainly been a traditional reading, but the words of the text do not actually indicate a geography, only a qualitative description. Wunderli fills in the geography and then uses his supposition as evidence for his reading. His second "evidence" is that Nephi and Lehi "more specifically" describe North America. However, since neither Nephi nor Lehi ever mentions North America specifically, we are once again given a circular reference in which Wunderli's assumed meaning is proof of his reading.

The history of biblical exegesis should give us pause in accepting Wunderli's circular evidences. Rather than agree that there is a clear meaning to any given text, biblical exegesis recognizes great complexity. In a somewhat humorous introduction to the discipline of scriptural exegesis, Bruce Corley describes this very issue:

In the first class of my first semester in [theological] seminary, the professor wrote the word *exegesis* on the chalkboard and told us that one of these research assignments was due in two weeks. I had no idea what he meant. As it turns out, not many others have claimed to know what he meant and those who have seem to disagree. *Exegesis*, like its well-traveled partner *hermeneutics*, "is a word that is forever chasing a meaning." The scholarly debate has featured a baffling array of linguistic insights, philosophical critiques, and competing theories of interpretation—all about the "meaning of meaning."

Meanwhile, theological students everywhere, still working to produce acceptable papers, continue to enter the strange world of exegesis and hermeneutics. The puzzled looks and bewildering talk that usually follow are reminiscent of an oft-repeated story, the dispute between Alice and the contemptuous Humpty Dumpty, who with delight turned "meaning" on its head:

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

Alice was too much puzzled to say anything.

Like Alice who did not know the language games of a nonsense world, the alert student could wish for a bit of help in grasping what words really mean, especially when their masters stretch them beyond recognition.¹⁵

The words themselves may be fixed and readily available, as Wunderli suggests, but it is their meaning that is important. In determining meaning, Wunderli does not analyze how the text uses phrases. He uses his own understanding—his bias and conclusions—to provide evidence to support his understanding.

On top of the methodological problem of such circular reasoning, the problem of meaning is compounded when a text is read ahistorically, as Wunderli does.¹⁶ Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey explain this problem:

Now reading always entails that readers bring their own understandings of the world to their reading in order to enable an author, who presumably shares the same understanding of the world, to rearrange what readers bring to the reading. Considerate authors always take their readership into account and presume to share identical scenarios of how the world works. When the readers and the author share the same perception of the world, then the readers can readily understand the author. However, if the readers have an understanding of

15. Bruce Corley, “A Student’s Primer for Exegesis,” in *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, ed. Bruce Corley, Steve Lemke, and Grant Lovejoy (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 1–2, citing Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* (1872), chap. 6. Bruce Corley is professor of New Testament and Greek at the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

16. Although he does not explicitly state his belief that the Book of Mormon is a nineteenth-century fabrication, he certainly uses that assumption as the basis of argument. For instance, in n. 44 he remarks: “If the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith’s thinking as an author . . .” Wunderli begins with the “if” and then uses that assumption as the basis of argumentation without attempting to demonstrate that assumption. Clearly, in his mind, it is more of a given than a point to be demonstrated.

the world very different from that of the author, then misunderstanding, or "non-understanding" occurs. To have modern readers reading ancient authors is an instant recipe for misunderstanding and "non-understanding" of those authors and their original audiences.¹⁷

Because Wunderli's approach to the text begins with a bias against its historicity, Wunderli reads the text in precisely the way that Malina and Neyrey suggest leads to "non-understanding." Throughout Wunderli's critique of the limited geography theory, his analysis will prove convincing if and only if one begins with the assumption that the Book of Mormon is ahistorical. The moment one supposes that it might be historical, different methods and means of interpretation are required. Even in his loose methodology, Wunderli creates a circular argument in which his conclusion depends upon accepting his original unproven premise.

When Wunderli attempts to provide support for his opinions, he does so by an appeal to the traditional reading. As noted at the beginning of this review, the hemispheric interpretation of Book of Mormon geography was common for nearly one hundred years after the publication of the Book of Mormon. It is true that those who understood the Book of Mormon hemispherically saw evidence in the text that supported that idea. Wunderli appears to suggest that they must have been correct.

He observes, "Joseph Smith himself seems to have believed, at least in the early years after the publication of the Book of Mormon, that the events recorded in the Nephite account covered all of North and South America"¹⁸ and remarks that Sorenson agrees that this has been the traditional reading (p. 163). Wunderli sets up an expectation that the traditional reading is tied to Joseph Smith and is therefore prophetically determined. He further hints that this prophetic declaration takes

17. Bruce J. Malina and Jerome H. Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul: An Archaeology of Ancient Personality* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 8–9.

18. Wunderli provides this citation from Melvin Thorne on p. 163. The reference is to Melvin J. Thorne, "Complexity, Consistency, Ignorance, and Probabilities," in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*, ed. Noel B. Reynolds (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1997), 182–83.

precedence over any subsequent scholarly interpretation. If correct, it might be a strong argument. But is this premise correct?

Sorenson has studied the history of geographical theories of the Book of Mormon and fully understands the historical development of such geographies. The problem isn't whether or not there has been a tradition, but whether or not that tradition is, or should be, normative for the interpretation of the text. Wunderli believes that it is and presents a brief argument in support of that assertion. "Sorenson can more easily challenge Joseph Smith," he says, "if Smith simply assumed a hemispheric geography rather than learning of it by revelation, as he arguably did from the angel Moroni" (p. 164 n. 9).

Wunderli hints that the hemispheric tradition may be traced directly to divine revelation. Therefore, if Sorenson discounts it as opinion, his view would be contrary to revealed doctrine. However, Wunderli's suggestion is only an inference. He suggests that the information about a hemispheric meaning of the text "arguably" came "from the angel Moroni" (p. 164 n. 9). In spite of the tacit admission that it is a point to be argued, he does not offer evidence. He simply allows the "arguably" to stand as though it were firmly documented.¹⁹ Since this is such a fundamental issue, we must fill in Wunderli's gaps to determine whether or not it is reasonable to argue that Joseph Smith received divine instruction on the geography of the Book of Mormon.

Wunderli provides the statement he is using to make this important judgment. It comes from the Wentworth Letter, a letter penned by Joseph Smith to describe the new religion to Mr. John Wentworth, the editor and proprietor of the *Chicago Democrat*. Joseph Smith relates:

I was also informed concerning *the* aboriginal inhabitants of *this country*, and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a

19. Wunderli provides the paragraph he uses for his statement in n. 8, but it too is allowed to stand as though it were obviously self-interpreting only in the way he reads it.

people, was made known unto me.²⁰ (p. 163 n. 8, emphasis by Wunderli)

The use of italics shows what Wunderli believes to be the telling data supporting the divine declaration of a hemispheric geography. Wunderli clearly reads “this country” and sees that as evidence that the angel declared the Book of Mormon to have taken place in the United States. That is a big assumption for such a generic statement. It is certainly one way to read the data, and it fits with Wunderli’s reliance on tradition. However, a more careful examination of the history behind this statement suggests that we should not put so much weight on it. I will discuss the issue of the meaning of *land* in the Book of Mormon below, but at this point we will examine the nature of this particular piece of evidence.

Apart from the inference about the meaning of “this country,” the quoted statement clearly parallels the event that was described by Joseph Smith’s mother, Lucy Mack Smith. The following is from the account recorded in 1844–45, with spelling and punctuation as in the original:

In the course of our evening conversations Joseph would give us some of the most amusing recitals which could be imagined he would describe the ancient inhabitants of this continent their dress thier maner of traveling the animals which they rode The cities that were built by them the structure of their buildings with every particular of their mode of warfare their religious worship—as particularly as though he had spent his life with them.²¹

The Wentworth Letter was written in 1842. While Lucy’s comments were written in 1844–45, they reference an event from 1824. We first note that Wunderli’s firm emphasis on “this country” becomes more

20. *History of the Church*, 4:537.

21. Lucy Mack Smith, *Lucy’s Book: A Critical Edition of Lucy Mack Smith’s Family Memoir*, ed. Lavina Fielding Anderson (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2001), 345 (following the 1844–45 version).

generic in Lucy Mack Smith's account, where it is "this continent." The geographic reference is not as clearly tied to the United States as Wunderli proposes.

The next important issue relating to these statements as evidence is that they refer to an event nearly twenty years prior to the statement about the event. Any recollection that long after an event must be questioned, and in this case, it is precisely the nature of the intervening time that tells us how we must read both of these passages.

The common data, and that which we would assume would be most fixed in either Joseph Smith's or in his mother's mind, is the nature of the details that were provided. Examining the specifics, we have Lucy Mack Smith saying that he described dress, manner of traveling, animals they rode, cities, and mode of warfare. Joseph Smith lists "who they were, . . . whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity."²² Neither account explicitly mentions geography. What is described is consistent with receiving a vision. Joseph Smith indicates that he was "*shown*" these things. This is an important piece of information, for it corroborates the types of data listed. This was a vision of the people, *showing* their dress, cities, and manner of warfare. This was a vision *showing* where they had come from, but not specifically *where they were*. Reconstructing the event behind the two statements, we can easily hypothesize a vision, but that does not allow us to infer that a vision would necessarily determine geography. Although Joseph could be shown a city, and would likely have seen the land around buildings, there is no way that seeing that land would translate into knowing its location or that seeing a single area would extrapolate into a vision of the entire hemisphere.

What about the use of phrases such as *this country* (by Joseph Smith) or *this continent* (by Lucy Mack Smith)? The logical explanation for the occurrence of those phrases is the very tradition to which Wunderli appeals. The earliest assumption of the Saints was that the Book of Mormon was hemispheric, and they quickly adopted a vocabu-

22. *History of the Church*, 4:537.

lary following that assumption. By 1842, when the Wentworth Letter was written, this tradition was firmly in place. Therefore, it is historically easier to see the references to "this country" and "this continent" as a reflection of an established tradition rather than as a reflection of what the angel Moroni actually said, did, or *showed* eighteen years earlier. Sorenson explains the conceptual world that produced this earliest tradition:

Given the level of secular knowledge manifested by Joseph Smith and his associates at that time, we are safe in supposing that their combined knowledge of the geography of the western hemisphere was limited and probably unclear. That was true of virtually all Americans, of course, and those living on the frontier had even less knowledge than others. Even the form and character of the territory that would become the continental United States over the next two generations was vague to all but a few scholars, and "Oregon" and "California" were barely conceived of as real places, let alone Peru, "Darién" (Panama) or "Guatemala."

To the saints, the one sure fact was that the plates had come out of the hill in New York, therefore, it was felt, that must have been the scene of the final Nephite battle. Furthermore, there is no evidence that early Latter-day Saints, any more than other frontier people of the time, differentiated among "Indians." An Indian, anywhere in the United States and by extension anywhere in the hemisphere, was considered generically pretty much like any other Indian (a view that still prevails in the 20th century among a substantial portion of the American population). Consequently, a Lamanite was a Lamanite to a Book of Mormon believer in the 1830s. Ignorance of the actual ethnological variety among New World peoples that later research would reveal left the early saints confirmed in their vague unitary, hemispheric geography. Meanwhile, nothing in the revelations to Joseph Smith (e.g., Doctrine and Covenants 28:8; 32:2; 49:24; and 54:8), given to the Church members "after the manner of

their language” and understanding (D. & C. 1:24), gave them reason to question their assumptions of Lamanite/Indian homogeneity and hemispheric unity.²³

While Wunderli has presented a statement that he reads as supporting evidence, a reading of that same text in the greater context of the history that produced it tells us that we should not place the emphasis on it that he does. It is more likely a result of the tradition than evidence for the tradition. By citing such a late text, Wunderli again presents a circular argument in which a text that uses the vocabulary of the tradition is used to suggest a cause of the tradition. It is an unconvincing argument on the face of it, but when combined with the evidence that the original event was a vision, it appears unlikely, if not impossible, that Joseph Smith would have been able to discern geography. Added to the official statements after that time, Wunderli’s case for a divinely revealed geography melts away entirely.

If Wunderli supposes divine declaration of Book of Mormon geography, the church itself does not. John E. Clark, in his article on Book of Mormon geography in the *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, explains: “Although Church leadership officially and consistently distances itself from issues regarding Book of Mormon geography in order to focus attention on the spiritual message of the book, private speculation and scholarship in this area have been abundant.”²⁴ Wunderli recognizes that the church has no official position on Book of Mormon geography (p. 164). He admits that he and Sorenson both read the text differently, a position undermining his assumption that the text would clearly tell us which geographic model to use. Then he assumes a divine decree for geography, which, he knows, is not an accepted teaching of the church. Even had his evidence been stronger, he would be in the position of attempting to declare his opinion normative instead of that of the official church position.

If the church does not officially support any specific geographic reading, all statements about geography are nonbinding on the mem-

23. Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 10–11.

24. John E. Clark, “Book of Mormon Geography,” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 1:176.

bership. Wunderli is therefore basing his analysis on the logic that the tradition should be considered the arbiter of meaning, but he neglects to provide any support for that hypothesis. He leaves us with only his opinion as the basis of his readings.

Setting the Stage for His Critique

As he begins his discussion, Wunderli describes the hemispheric model and then gives a brief explanation of the limited geography model. His description of the limited geography model is fascinating because he elaborates on why it is a more powerful explanation of the text than the hemispheric model. Rather than present the hemispheric model as superior to the limited geography model, he does the exact opposite and suggests that the text really does not fit the hemispheric model. He suggests that there are three reasons why the hemispheric model does not correlate well to the real world:

First, the geographical clues in the Book of Mormon do not match a hemispheric geography. . . . Second, the distances inferred from the travel times mentioned in the Book of Mormon imply a limited geography. . . . Third, the large explicit and implicit population sizes in the Book of Mormon suggest that other peoples were already in the western hemisphere and mixed with the immigrant Israelites. (pp. 166–67, examples removed)

Each of the three points that he presents and clearly accepts (perhaps because they came from a critic of the church rather than an apologist)²⁵ provides a reason why the text contradicts a hemispheric theory, not why the text requires it. This is now the third contradiction in his own argument. Perhaps because he does not believe the hemispheric model, he feels free to critique it as well, but presenting evidence that is directly contradictory to his premise is a poor way to establish a point.

25. The "problems" are extracted from a quotation from "critic Robert Anderson" (p. 166).

His only statement about the relationship between the limited geography model and the text is the claim that Sorenson “starts over with the basics by identifying every statement in the Book of Mormon that bears on its geography and proceeds to construct a geography that meets all the requirements of the Book of Mormon” (pp. 165–66). This too would appear to contradict the premise that the text dictates a hemispheric geography. Since he certainly understands that Sorenson built his model on the text, he cannot be saying that the limited geography model has no relationship to the text. He must therefore be suggesting that Sorenson’s reading of the text is faulty, but he presented information that appears to support Sorenson and undermine his own premise.

In his section describing the limited geography model, Wunderli offers a criticism among the reasons he presents in favor of the model. He tosses off a single issue and moves on. “One question arises immediately with a Mesoamerican geography. If all Book of Mormon events took place in Central America, how did the plates get buried in a hill in New York State?” (p. 169). Does this question show that the text requires a hemispheric reading, which is his ultimate premise? Consider the problem of the hemispheric reading compared to the limited geography. Most of the Book of Mormon takes place south of the narrow neck of land, with the Nephites moving above the narrow neck only at the end of the Book of Mormon. Mormon himself is easily able to travel to Zarahemla (which is located south of the narrow neck of land) with his father when he is eleven years old (Mormon 1:6), at which time the final wars begin. What the text tells us is that no matter what theory of Book of Mormon geography one adopts (hemispheric or the Mesoamerican limited geography), the problem of distance from the narrow neck to Cumorah is virtually the same. In fact, in the hemispheric model the problem is worse because the narrow neck is usually considered to be the Isthmus of Panama, which is further south than the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (the narrow neck in Sorenson’s model). Both models have the same “problem,” but the

hemispheric model actually has a greater distance to travel in the same amount of time.

What can we make of this criticism? It certainly doesn't tell us that the text requires a hemispheric reading since any problem presented by the limited geography is compounded in the hemispheric geography. This is therefore not evidence for Wunderli's thesis, but simply an argument against a limited geography. Wunderli probably does not see it as contradictory to his position because he does not believe that the Book of Mormon represents actions of real people and that, therefore, issues of distance can be dismissed.

If it is not a serious critique of the limited geography model, is it a serious critique of the Book of Mormon? As with most issues of geography, Sorenson has considered this question. His response has much more substance than Wunderli's criticism:

As a matter of fact, we do have a striking case of a trip much like the one Moroni may have made. In the mid-sixteenth century, David Ingram, a shipwrecked English sailor, walked in 11 months through completely strange Indian territory from Tampico, Mexico, to the St. John River, at the present border between Maine and Canada. His remarkable journey would have been about the same distance as Moroni's and over essentially the same route.²⁶

Comparing the two authors, it should be clear that Sorenson's argument based on a historical precedent is much stronger than Wunderli's suggestion, which does not even recognize its own self-contradiction.

When Wunderli begins his critique in earnest, he suggests that there are two types of evidence in which the text requires a hemispheric reading rather than the more limited geography Sorenson proposes: "The Book of Mormon itself challenges two major aspects of the limited geography model: first, the validity of any model smaller than a hemispheric model; and second, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the narrow neck of land" (p. 172). I will examine these two challenges.

26. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 45.

A Textual Insistence on a Hemispheric Model?

Wunderli asserts that the text of the Book of Mormon challenges “any model smaller than a hemispheric model” (p. 172). He begins with the obvious declaration that there is no geographical feature in the text that retains its name or has a clearly continuous presence from Book of Mormon times to modern times. He indicates that this requires a reconstruction based on internal data. His critique begins with a discussion of distance, which is appropriate since this is the foundation of Sorenson’s proposal of a limited geography. “Since the Book of Mormon provides no distances whatever, they must be calculated by how long it took to travel from one place to another” (p. 173). This is an interesting statement because it confirms Sorenson’s methodology. Wunderli never contradicts Sorenson’s method nor the specific calculations derived from it. What he does is argue by insinuation against rather than by direct confrontation of Sorenson’s data: “Sorenson uses this distance and other clues to calculate, *with increasing speculation*, how far it was between other places such as Zarahemla” (p. 173, emphasis added). Wunderli does not provide any counterdata. He does not suggest where Sorenson might have gone wrong. He simply inserts his opinion that Sorenson is increasingly speculative without describing any of the speculation, why it might be incorrect, or the degree to which the “speculation” distorts the data in the text. While the arguments are built upon multiple readings of the text, Sorenson provides as solid an analysis as the text allows. Wunderli owes us more evidence of the increasing speculation than he gives us. Since Sorenson’s calculations and methods are readily available²⁷ and Wunderli only suggests without any evidence that Sorenson’s method is “increasingly speculative,” we are once again required by the force of data to side with Sorenson. As he did earlier, Wunderli undermines his own position because he specifically states: “Sorenson’s calculations are not unreasonable” (p. 175). In other words, even with the “increasing speculation,” Wunderli concedes the reason-

27. Ibid., 8–23, and John L. Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000).

ableness of Sorenson's calculations. This acceptance again directly contradicts the point he is trying to make.

What does Wunderli provide to bolster his proposal that the text requires a hemispheric reading since he admits that Sorenson's reading of a limited geography is "not unreasonable"? Right after that concession, he continues: "but *they do not at all preclude* a hemispheric geography" (p. 175, emphasis added). Before we examine his defense of this amazing statement, we need to understand it completely. At the end of Sorenson's discussion of dimensions in *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, he declares:

The data in the Book of Mormon and our assumptions that have led to these conclusions are of course not perfectly clear cut. Playing with the information in the text may yield slightly different results. If someone concludes that Nephi to Zarahemla was 25 percent longer than I have said, I would be interested in hearing the argument; perhaps that is right. But anyone who claims that the distance between the two cities was, say, 400 miles instead of the 180 suggested here could not make a plausible case out of the Book of Mormon statements. Some of the text's scale requirements are quite specific. They are also tied together in intricate relationships. It is impossible to solve just part of the problem of locations and distances, for, as in a jigsaw puzzle, *all* the features must interlock. I find that they fit neatly together.²⁸

While Sorenson clearly leaves room for different distance calculations, he does indicate that they would have to fit with the rest of the data. Wunderli's counterargument is just that they "do not at all preclude a hemispheric geography." One wonders if Wunderli understood Sorenson when he read the argument. Wunderli clearly knows that Sorenson limits the distance from Nephi to Cumorah to 450 miles because he quotes that passage (p. 174). Under the hemispheric model, those

28. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 22–23.

450 miles would have to stretch to over 4,000 miles.²⁹ Without any analysis or explanation, Wunderli simply suggests that this expansion to 4,000 miles is “not precluded.” Unfortunately though, this is precisely what Sorenson’s calculations (remember that they are “not unreasonable”) strongly preclude. More important, it is precluded by the internal evidence of the text itself. One of the time-to-distance ratios Sorenson notes is 11 miles per day for a group of people traveling with families and their belongings. If Sorenson’s 450 miles represents 11 miles per day, then Wunderli’s distance represents 98 miles per day, every day. Ninety-eight miles per day is historically attested, but it is obviously exceptional and far exceeds the more typical distance per day of any of the populations that generated Sorenson’s distances.³⁰ If we believe the text, Wunderli’s assertion is most definitely precluded. This becomes heavily ironic when Wunderli moves to a consideration of the narrow neck of land and considers Sorenson’s calculated distances to be too high.³¹ He gives no explanation why Sorenson could so dramatically undercalculate north-south distances but severely overcalculate east-west distances. The answer is, of course, that Sorenson does not. By ignoring the text that he is attempting to use as his argument, Wunderli finds himself in yet another contradiction of his methods and assumptions. He strains at a 120-mile gnat and swallows a 4,000-mile camel.

Since Wunderli has conceded the more typical way of determining textual distances by creating interrelated calculations, what does he use to support his position that the text *requires* a hemispheric reading? He explains his conclusion:

29. Four thousand miles is an approximation of the distance using Microsoft Streets and Trips to calculate the distance from Palmyra, New York, to Mexico City, Mexico, and then using that same program’s scale to estimate the distance from Mexico City to Panama City. In the hemispheric model, the city of Nephi would be south of the narrow neck of land, hence even farther than this estimated distance.

30. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 8–9.

31. “It seems doubtful that what can hardly be described as a ‘neck’ on a map would be considered a ‘neck’ by the Nephites, let alone a ‘narrow’ neck when it is 120 miles wide” (p. 185).

Most of the Nephite history does indeed take place within a relatively confined area south of the narrow neck where missionaries can preach and armies can skirmish from city to city. Indeed, the Nephites have little to do with the land northward except for their eventual expansion into it and their final battle at Cumorah. The issue is whether the land northward is the entire North American continent standing empty and available for the Nephite expansion and final battle or whether, as Sorenson insists, the land northward was limited to southern Mexico with indigenous peoples living beyond that area. (p. 175)

This argument places him in logical trouble. While agreeing that most of the events take place south of the narrow neck of land, he suggests that "the issue is whether the land northward is the entire North American continent standing empty and available for the Nephite expansion and final battle or whether, as Sorenson insists, the land northward was limited to southern Mexico with indigenous peoples living beyond that area" (p. 175). While Wunderli may attempt to see that as the issue, it is not and cannot be. Wunderli has raised a question of distance, and it is impossible to answer a question of distance with a discussion of an empty or inhabited land. Whether or not the land is populated can never tell us *where* it is or the *distance* from any other location. One might as well attempt to answer a problem in mathematics with a dictionary.

Wunderli does not attempt to use the text to support his requirement of relative distances but rather changes the subject to a completely different issue that would be the same in either the hemispheric or limited geography models. Wherever the land northward might be, it might be either occupied or empty—such an issue does not and cannot tell us anything about distances and therefore cannot determine whether or not the text requires the land north of the narrow neck to be all of North America.

Wunderli recognizes that he needs to argue distance because he says: "The matter to be explored here is the extent of the land northward" (p. 175). However, rather than argue the extent of the land

northward based on distances, he elects to argue that the land northward must include the North American continent based on prophetic statements about the land of promise. This is the extension of his earlier assertion that “this country” required a hemispheric interpretation. The nature of his reasoning is established in his first point on this subject:

To begin with, the Jaredites would have been the first people in the western hemisphere under the literal, biblical account of history, which is embraced by the Book of Mormon. God leads the Jaredites from the tower of Babel to the New World, “into a land which is choice above all the lands of the earth” (Ether 1:42). God promises to bless them in this “land which is choice above all the lands of the earth” and to make of them “a great nation,” indeed, the greatest nation on earth (Ether 1:43). This hardly describes the Jaredites as a colony in southern Mexico. Spread throughout North America, however, “as numerous as the hosts of Israel” (Mosiah 8:8), they were arguably the greatest nation on earth, although isolated from and unknown to the rest of the world. (p. 175)

This argument must be unpacked to be understood. His first contention is that “the Jaredites would have been the first people in the western hemisphere under the literal, biblical account of history.” This statement is presented as though it were true and unarguable. According to Sorenson’s reading, it is certainly not true, and the difference between the two authors clearly tells us that it is arguable. Wunderli even knows that Sorenson does not believe this statement because he discusses the limited geography model’s advantage of being able to handle the archaeological presence of people in the New World prior to the time of the Book of Mormon (p. 167). Wunderli posits a statement as a firm conclusion when he knows that the underlying assumptions are not completely accepted.

After citing several passages from the Book of Mormon, Wunderli’s analysis concludes: “This hardly describes the Jaredites as a colony in southern Mexico” (p. 175). While this claim is given as though it were obvious, I do not find it nearly as obvious as he does. I would

doubt that Sorenson does either. Is it so obvious? Let's examine the statements that Wunderli believes so clearly describe something other than "a colony in southern Mexico":

And when thou hast done this thou shalt go at the head of them down into the valley which is northward. And there will I meet thee, and I will go before thee into a land which is choice above all the lands of the earth.

And there will I bless thee and thy seed, and raise up unto me of thy seed, and of the seed of thy brother, and they who shall go with thee, a great nation. And there shall be none greater than the nation which I will raise up unto me of thy seed, upon all the face of the earth. And thus I will do unto thee because this long time ye have cried unto me. (Ether 1:42-43)

From these two verses Wunderli selects the phrase "land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" as a significant passage. He presents two arguments that this choice land must be North America. One is from Sorenson and the other is his own. Before we examine Sorenson's argument, we will examine the one that Wunderli considers to be conclusive:

Their promised land is even more clearly North America although, once Mesoamerica is transcended, the entire western hemisphere follows easily. The Lord tells Nephi while he is still in the Old World that if he keeps the Lord's commandments, he will be led to a "land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a land which is choice above all other lands" (1 Ne. 2:20). Presumably this is the same "land which is choice above all other lands" that the Jaredites were given, even though the Jaredites lived in the land northward and the Nephites, for most of their history, in the land southward. The promised land is, thus, more than either of their immediate lands.

Nephi later describes more specifically this "land which is choice above all other lands." While Nephi is en route to the promised land, he beholds in a vision a "man among the

Gentiles” [Columbus] who “went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren [Native Americans], who were in the promised land” (1 Ne. 13:12). He foresees other Gentiles going “forth out of captivity, upon the many waters [pilgrims]” and “many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise,” who “scattered” and smote the Lamanites (1 Ne. 13:13–14; cf. 15, 17, 19). The angel tells Nephi that after the Book of Mormon comes forth, if the Gentiles “harden not their hearts against the Lamb of God . . . they shall be a blessed people upon the promised land forever” (1 Ne. 14:2; cf. 22:7–8). These passages all clearly, if not explicitly, identify the promised land with North America. (pp. 176–77)

Wunderli is correct that the choice land seems to include the lands of the Nephites and the Jaredites, but Sorenson’s geography places those in a limited area. That the choice land might refer to both does not in itself require a hemisphere. It requires only that it cover the area occupied by the Nephites, the Lamanites, and the Jaredites.

How accurate is his conclusion that “these passages all clearly, if not explicitly, identify the promised land with North America”? Let’s take the first one, 1 Nephi 13:12. Note that he helpfully includes his reading of the oblique reference of the passage. Accepting Columbus as the reference is not surprising, but it is surprising to use Columbus as a proof that the promised land is North America. Columbus arrived in Central America. His voyages of discovery were south of North America. Wunderli never tells us why the reference to Columbus points toward North America. He clearly assumes it, but that does not make for a compelling argument. Columbus never set foot on North America, and if we use him as the arbiter of location we are back to the limited model, not the hemispheric one. As in other places, Wunderli presents evidence contrary to his position.

His second passage is likewise helpfully annotated with “pilgrims,” where the text itself simply says Gentiles. Wunderli is reading the phrase “went forth out of captivity” as a reference to the Pilgrims leaving for religious reasons, but that is his interpretation of the text, which is not as clear or explicit as he suggests. This is particularly

true since his identification with the Pilgrims' arrival does not correspond with the "many multitudes of the Gentiles upon the land of promise, who scattered and smote the Lamanites" as he rephrases the passages. Historically, Gentiles did scatter and smite the Lamanites, but not necessarily in connection with the Pilgrims. The arrival of the Pilgrims was rather late in the process of scattering and smiting Lamanites, which began with devastating effect with Hernán Cortes in 1519. If we read the text itself and remove Wunderli's ethnocentric insistence that it must refer to what he thinks it refers to, the Book of Mormon text describes events in Central America with far greater accuracy than it does North America.

Ironically, the stronger argument for linking the promised land with North America comes from Sorenson, who clearly does not support it. Wunderli examines Sorenson's proposal that the promised land must include North America in Ether 13:2–4, 6, and 8 because it is connected with the New Jerusalem that other scriptures place in North America. Does Sorenson believe that this passage contradicts the limited geography? Note the passage that Wunderli cites:

Were "this land" taken in a narrow ("literal") sense as that where the Nephites and Jaredites of the record lived, the New Jerusalem would have to be near the narrow neck of land, but there is no LDS expectation of anything like that. The alternative is that Moroni, or Ether, is *here* speaking in general terms of the whole continent, which accommodates the prophecies in the Doctrine and Covenants. (p. 176)³²

The difference between the way Sorenson and Wunderli read the text is that Sorenson does not expect that the phrase *this land* should always be read the same literal way in every instance. Wunderli does. We return to Wunderli's mistaken hypothesis that the "fixed, readily available" text must therefore have a simple—or in Wunderli's case, traditional—reading. Since Wunderli makes such an issue of the meaning of the land of promise in the Book of Mormon, how should

32. Citing Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 312, emphasis added.

we understand that phrase? Careful examination of the text itself will tell us that the term is used in multiple ways, as suggested by Sorenson, rather than in the single meaning upon which Wunderli not only insists, but upon which he builds his case.

There are two important cultural time periods in the Book of Mormon; the first briefly occurs in the Old World, and the second is the longer period of time spent in the New World. While there is a continuity of one family between the two cultural contexts, there is yet a possibility that the New World usage of terms and concepts might change. Therefore, both should be examined.

In the Old World context, *the land* is a designation referring to a limited geography that is associated with a political unit:

Now this he spake because of the stiffneckedness of Laman and Lemuel; for behold they did murmur in many things against their father, because he was a visionary man, and had led them out of *the land of Jerusalem*, to leave *the land of their inheritance*, and their gold, and their silver, and their precious things, to perish in the wilderness. And this they said he had done because of the foolish imaginations of his heart. (1 Nephi 2:11)

There are two usages of *the land* in this verse. The first refers specifically to Jerusalem, and the second to the land of their inheritance, which appears to be related to the specific landholdings of Lehi's family.³³ In neither case does the term *the land* have a universal aspect. *The land* is a particular defined area attached to some "ownership" whether by the political entity of Jerusalem or by the economic entity of Lehi's family.

33. See Jeffrey R. Chadwick, "Lehi's House at Jerusalem and the Land of His Inheritance," in *Glimpses of Lehi's Jerusalem*, ed. John W. Welch, David Rolph Seely, and Jo Ann H. Seely (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2004), 81–130. Chadwick uses a close reading of the text combined with historical data to provide information about both the household location and the location of the "land of inheritance." To the point of this discussion, Chadwick sees the "land of inheritance" as a particular plot of land (*ibid.*, 110–13).

The use of *land* obviously was not tied to a specific concept of size, as it could pertain to the holdings of a city or of a family. Likewise, it could refer to the holdings of an entire country:

And they were also led out of captivity and out of the land of Egypt, by that same God who had preserved them. (1 Nephi 5:15)

Finally, the use of *the land* might not even be a recognized division, as is the case when the Lehites arrive in Bountiful:

And we did come to the land which we called Bountiful, because of its much fruit and also wild honey. (1 Nephi 17:5)

In the case of Bountiful, *the land* is still a limited geography, but not necessarily one that anyone outside of Lehi's family has recognized (at least by that name). It is simply an area that they are able to define (in this case by its difference in vegetation from the wilderness) and name.

Once the Lehites arrived in the New World, they continue to make references to *the land*. They appear to use the concept in virtually the same multiplicity of meanings as they did in the Old World:

And it came to pass that after we had sailed for the space of many days we did arrive at the promised land; and we went forth upon the land, and did pitch our tents; and we did call it the promised land. (1 Nephi 18:23)

As they did with Bountiful, they arrived in a location, and named it. In this verse, however, the extent of the land that they named "the promised land" is not necessarily clear. They might possibly have referred to the entire hemisphere. Did they? One of the clues to this question is Nephi's apparent perception of the extent of "the land":

nevertheless, we have been driven out of the land of our inheritance; but we have been led to a better land, for the Lord has made the sea our path, and *we are upon an isle of the sea*. (2 Nephi 10:20)

In spite of the impossibility of Nephi's understanding the geographic dimensions of South America, he still insists that they are upon an "isle of the sea." There is no physical way he could have circumnavigated his "land" in order to determine that it was an "isle of the sea." He is likely using a more ancient meaning of the phrase. Nephi evidently shared the biblical understanding of "isles of the sea," meaning any land whose principal access was by the sea, even though a land route was also available.³⁴ The LDS Bible Dictionary indicates that the word *isles* "is frequently used to denote any lands washed by the sea, especially the islands and coasts of the Mediterranean (Gen. 10:5; Ps. 72:10; Isa. 20:6; 24:15; 66:19)."³⁵

At this point we have two different readings of the same text, and the only way to judge between them would be to accept one premise or the other. If the book were modern, then we could read "nearly surrounded by water" as South America (as Wunderli does when he argues this point). If it were ancient, then it could not have that meaning. Does the text itself help us? Yes. Nephi also notes:

But great are the promises of the Lord unto them who are upon the isles of the sea; wherefore as it says isles, there must needs be more than this, and they are inhabited also by our brethren. (2 Nephi 10:21)

In this verse Nephi is citing promises to those on the isles of the sea and specifically notes that, because it is in the plural, it must indicate "more than this." Nephi clearly believes that they are on one of the isles of the sea and also speaks of their scattered brethren on *other* islands of the sea. How many other South Americas might be intended? How much world geography would Nephi have to have known to have suggested that scattered Israel might be on continents other than the two of which he had direct knowledge? The text implies other isles, and that contradicts the expectation that the intended geography is South America.

34. Sorenson, *Mormon's Map*, 18, and 131 n. 20.

35. Bible Dictionary of the LDS edition of the Bible, 1981, s.v. "isles."

There is still more to our issue of the land, however. How is *land* used in other verses? We find an important case in Jarom:

And now, behold, two hundred years had passed away, and *the people of Nephi had waxed strong in the land*. They observed to keep the law of Moses and the sabbath day holy unto the Lord. And they profaned not; neither did they blaspheme. And the *laws of the land* were exceedingly strict. (Jarom 1:5)

After two hundred years had passed, Jarom can speak of the laws of "the land" and link them to the observance of the law of Moses. Clearly this is a Nephite definition. There are Lamanites living close enough to wage war continually on the Nephites, but they are obviously not obeying the laws of "the land." Thus "the land" is once again a very limited conception tied to a political unit. As the Book of Mormon narrative continues, "the land" becomes even closer to the Old World usage, as units are described as "the land of Zarahemla" (Omni 1:12), "the land of Lehi-Nephi" (Mosiah 7:4), and "the land of Shilom" (Mosiah 7:5).

In this early definition, is it even conceivable that "the land" might include North America? We have two candidates for a narrow neck, Panama and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Both are rather significantly south of the bulk of North America. The Nephites are in "the land," but they have never been north of the narrow neck, hence have never been into the area we conceptualize as North America. This is important because of the way Wunderli reads "promised land."

God leads the Jaredites from the tower of Babel to the New World, "into a land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" (Ether 1:42). God promises to bless them in this "land which is choice above all the lands of the earth" and to make of them "a great nation," indeed, the greatest nation on earth (Ether 1:43). This hardly describes the Jaredites as a colony in southern Mexico. Spread throughout North America, however, "as numerous as the hosts of Israel" (Mosiah 8:8), they were arguably the greatest nation on earth, although isolated from and unknown to the rest of the world.

That North America rather than Oaxaca and southern Veracruz was their promised land is further suggested by repeated descriptions of this land as “choice above all other lands,” the same language used by Nephi and Lehi in more specifically describing North America. (p. 175)

According to Wunderli’s argument, the Nephite land of promise—the land choice above all other lands—must perforce be a location they have never visited. This promise of a choice land comes even before the Lehites leave the Old World:

And inasmuch as ye shall keep my commandments, ye shall prosper, and shall be led to a land of promise; yea, even a land which I have prepared for you; yea, a *land which is choice above all other lands*. (1 Nephi 2:20)

Nephi could not have understood this promise in any way except that the location where he and his family would be would constitute this promised land, this choice land. Yet Nephi never set foot above the narrow neck of land. Therefore the text precludes North America as the “choice land” of the Nephites. Wunderli again ignores the explicit requirements of the text in favor of his traditional assumption.

What of the promise that the Lehites would be kept from other nations?

Wherefore, I, Lehi, have obtained a promise, that inasmuch as those whom the Lord God shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves. And if it so be that they shall keep his commandments they shall be blessed upon the face of this land, and there shall be none to molest them, nor to take away the land of their inheritance; and they shall dwell safely forever. (2 Nephi 1:9)

The important phrase here is “that they may possess this land unto themselves.” Even in the context of the Nephites, this was never true

of the entire continent because the Lamanites and Nephites existed simultaneously and the Lamanites certainly did not keep the commandments by any definition the Nephites recognized. Thus in one sense there was only a very limited time before the brothers split into two groups that would even qualify for such a global promise. If we insist on reading this prophecy hemispherically, it was invalid as soon as Nephi and his followers fled from Laman and Lemuel.

Again, the test of meaning is the text, not our assumptions about the text. Let us examine Wunderli's argument concerning this promise:

Thus, Lehi's seed will inherit at least the North American continent, which would equate the Lamanites with the American Indians.

Lehi continues with respect to his own times, that "it is wisdom that this [promised] land should be kept as yet from the knowledge of other nations" or other nations would overrun it (2 Ne. 1:8); the Lord promises that if those whom he "shall bring out of the land of Jerusalem shall keep his commandments, they shall prosper upon the face of this land; and they shall be kept from all other nations, that they may possess this land unto themselves" (2 Ne. 1:9); but "when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief," the Lord "will bring other nations unto them, and he shall give unto them power, and he will take away from them the lands of their possessions, and he will cause them to be scattered and smitten" (2 Ne. 1:10–11). This surely sounds like North American history from a Euro-American perspective, in which the Lamanites (Indians) lived by themselves but because of their unbelief, other nations came and took the land and "scattered" and "smote" them. (p. 179)

The extent of his analysis of the texts is the simple declaration that "this surely sounds like North American history from a Euro-American perspective."³⁶ It cannot be disputed that it sounds like that

36. Wunderli footnotes his material on the promised land with an oblique argument that he proposes is indicative of Joseph Smith's authorial relationship to the text. He

to Wunderli, but is that what the text says or is this simply another of his own ethnocentric readings? The answer can only come from doing what Wunderli purports to do, but does not do. We must ask the text what it means. The following are examples in which the text invokes this promise of protection from other nations:

And thus being prepared to meet the Lamanites, they did not prosper against us. But the word of the Lord was verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will keep my commandments ye shall prosper in the land.

notes: "If the Book of Mormon reflects Joseph Smith's thinking as an author, he was obviously enthusiastic about his country" (p. 178 n. 44). He concludes: "Even though Joseph Smith was little-educated, he apparently absorbed the enlightened political ideas of his time, many of which are found in the Book of Mormon, including the appointment of leaders by the voice of the people; the rule of law; a system of checks and balances for dealing with errant judges; majority rule; a land of liberty and equality; men possessed of rights (Mosiah 29:25–32); and religious freedom (Mosiah 27:2–3; Alma 1:17; 30:7)" (p. 179 n. 44).

While the text may certainly "sound like" these synopsis statements in Wunderli's method of reading the text, the reality of the Book of Mormon is much more complex and displays significant divergence from anything Joseph Smith would have understood. Richard L. Bushman describes his attempt to discover the democratic and republican features of the Book of Mormon: "When I was asked to give some talks in Utah during the bicentennial of the American Revolution, I decided to examine the political principles embodied in the Book of Mormon and make some application to our Revolution and Constitution. I thought this would be simple enough because of the switch from monarchy to a republic during the reign of Mosiah. I was sure that somewhere in Mosiah's statements I would find ideas relevant to the modern world. With that in mind, I accepted the invitation to talk, but not until a few months before I was to appear did I get down to work. To my dismay I could not find what I was looking for. Everything seemed just off the point, confused and baffling. I could not find the directions for a sound republic that I had expected. . . . I long ago learned that it is better to flow with the evidence than to compel compliance with one's preformed ideas. So I asked, instead, what does the Book of Mormon say about politics? To my surprise, I discovered it was quite an un-republican book. Not only was Nephi a king, and monarchy presented as the ideal government in an ideal world, but the supposedly republican government instituted under Mosiah did not function that way at all. There was no elected legislature, and the chief judges usually inherited their office rather than being chosen for it." Richard L. Bushman, "My Belief," *BYU Studies* 25/2 (1985): 27.

When one does what Wunderli purports, which is to allow the text to determine meaning, one arrives at conclusions significantly different from those Wunderli proposes. This is because he is not really allowing the text to speak but rather assuming that the traditional readings must be normative.

And it came to pass that the prophets of the Lord did threaten the people of Nephi, according to the word of God, that if they did not keep the commandments, but should fall into transgression, they should be destroyed from off the face of the land. (Jarom 1:9–10)

Behold, it came to pass that three hundred and twenty years had passed away, and the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed.

For the Lord would not suffer, after he had led them out of the land of Jerusalem and kept and preserved them from falling into the hands of their enemies, yea, he would not suffer that the words should not be verified, which he spake unto our fathers, saying that: Inasmuch as ye will not keep my commandments ye shall not prosper in the land.

Wherefore, the Lord did visit them in great judgment; nevertheless, he did spare the righteous that they should not perish, but did deliver them out of the hands of their enemies. (Omni 1:5–7)

And now, my brethren, I would that ye should do as ye have hitherto done. As ye have kept my commandments, and also the commandments of my father, and have prospered, and have been kept from falling into the hands of your enemies, even so if ye shall keep the commandments of my son, or the commandments of God which shall be delivered unto you by him, ye shall prosper in the land, and your enemies shall have no power over you. (Mosiah 2:31)

Now the Nephites were taught to defend themselves against their enemies, even to the shedding of blood if it were necessary; yea, and they were also taught never to give an offense, yea, and never to raise the sword except it were against an enemy, except it were to preserve their lives.

And this was their faith, that by so doing God would prosper them in the land, or in other words, if they were faithful in keeping the commandments of God that he would prosper

them in the land; yea, warn them to flee, or to prepare for war, according to their danger. (Alma 48:14–15)

Blessed art thou and thy children; and they shall be blessed, inasmuch as they shall keep my commandments they shall prosper in the land. But remember, inasmuch as they will not keep my commandments they shall be cut off from the presence of the Lord.

And we see that these promises have been verified to the people of Nephi; for it has been their quarrelings and their contentions, yea, their murderings, and their plunderings, their idolatry, their whoredoms, and their abominations, which were among themselves, which brought upon them their wars and their destructions. (Alma 50:20–21)

Every one of these invocations of the Nephite foundational promise comes long before the possibility that any of them refer to any kind of “North American history from a Euro-American perspective.” Every one of them refers to an immediate conflict with enemies, and the prospect of losing their protection because of iniquities is an imminent problem, not one for some future date. Note also that the text from Jarom originates in the land of Nephi and that the rest of the quotations from the land of Zarahemla. The Nephites were not preserved in their first “promised land,” so they were aware that this promise applied very directly to the place where they lived. According to the text, this promise of the land moved with the Nephites (from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla) and therefore is tied to the people, not the place. It was invoked multiple times with a current enemy, not the future peoples Wunderli reads into the text from his own Euro-American perspective. The text does not support Wunderli’s reading but rather contradicts that reading.

Wunderli next presents attempts to bolster his argument that the text requires North America to be the land northward with more fascinating assertions based on an idiosyncratic reading of the text, which he simply presents as proof without any analysis. For instance:

All other references to the land northward are consistent with its being North America. For example, Bountiful "bordered upon the land which they called Desolation, it being *so far northward* that it came into the land which had been peopled and been destroyed, of whose bones we have spoken" (Alma 22:30, emphasis added); "so far northward" seems to describe the distance to Cumorah in New York at least as well as Sorenson's calculated one hundred miles to Cumorah in southern Mexico. (p. 180)

It is instructive to compare Wunderli's analysis of the phrase *so far northward* with David A. Palmer's analysis of that same phrase:

McGavin and Bean (1949) argue that Cumorah is a great distance north. "Whenever the Book of Mormon writers describe Ramah-Cumorahland, it is always described in a similar tone—a land far to the north, a land richly endowed with all the natural bounties; a land of many waters, fountains and streams." What does the Book of Mormon really say?

"Therefore, Morianton put it into their hearts that they should flee to the land which was northward, which was covered with large bodies of water, and take possession of the land which was northward." (Alma 50:29) Now two questions can be posed: (a) how far northward was it, and (b) was it the same area where the land of Cumorah was located? Those are open questions at this point. A clue to the first question is in the next verse. "And behold, they would have carried this plan into effect, (which would have been a cause to have been lamented) but behold . . ." Why would it have been lamentable for that group of contentious people to exile themselves by several thousand miles from the land of the Nephites? That would have been advantageous to the Nephites.

The insertion by Mormon suggests that they would still have been close enough to cause shifts in the strategic balance in the area of Bountiful. Otherwise, the Nephites would have said, "Good-bye! Good riddance," instead of sending a key

army to head them off at the narrow pass which led through the isthmus.

The second Book of Mormon account is similar. About twenty years after the first incident, there were planned migrations into the land northward, possibly due to tensions arising from overpopulation in the land southward. (Helaman 3:1–5)

... there were an exceeding great many who departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth unto the land northward to inherit the land. And they did travel to an exceeding great distance, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers. Yea, and even they did spread forth into all parts of the land, into whatever parts it had not been rendered desolate and without timber, because of the many inhabitants who had before inherited the land.

It is unlikely that they would go so far as to cut off all kinship ties, and they apparently didn't go beyond the land inhabited previously by the Jaredites and Mulekites.³⁷

When Wunderli reads the phrase *so far northward*, he simply accepts it as an indication of a great distance. Palmer asks the question “What does the Book of Mormon really say?” and proceeds to analyze the textual evidence. That is precisely what Wunderli proposed to do, but eschews in favor of asserting meaning on the most “traditional” of readings.

In addition to Palmer's arguments, we have Sorenson's calculated distance that Wunderli has elsewhere stated to be “not unreasonable” (p. 175). Wunderli deals with this in a similar manner to the way he analyzed *so far northward*. He understands that one of the important facts upon which a distance to Cumorah is based is the journey of the scouting party that leaves the city of Lehi-Nephi to attempt to find Zarahemla. They get lost and find the land Desolation instead, this

37. David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981), 78–79.

land that is "so far northward." How does Sorenson come up with his distances?

Ruling over a people in bondage in the land of Nephi, Limhi sent explorers to relocate the Zarahemla from which their grandfathers had come nearly 50 years earlier (Mosiah 8:7–8). His messengers were to ask the people in Zarahemla for help in throwing off the Lamanite yoke. Unfortunately, their route somehow bypassed Zarahemla, took them through the "narrow neck of land" without their even realizing it, and brought them to the final battleground of the earlier people, the Jaredites. There they found ruins and a set of 24 gold plates left by the last Jaredite prophet, Ether (Ether 15:33; Mosiah 21:25–27). Sorrowfully, the explorers returned to their home in Nephi to report to Limhi, mistakenly, that the remains they had found must have been those of Zarahemla destroyed. The exploring party would have known approximately how long it had taken their fathers to travel from Zarahemla to Nephi only two generations earlier, so by the time they had gone, say, twice as far as the normal distance to Zarahemla, they must have wondered about their position and probably would not have gone much farther.

From Nephi to Zarahemla, on a direct line, was about 180 miles. Twice that distance would have taken them to the "line" (Alma 22:32, logically a river) separating Bountiful from Desolation, the beginning of the land northward. At such a distance from home they would have thought of turning back. Surely diligent men such as the king would have sent on this mission would not have pressed on much farther. So it is unreasonable that the battleground of the Jaredites where Limhi's explorers ended up would have been more than 100 miles into the land northward from the "line" at the neck.³⁸

How does Wunderli respond to Sorenson's logic? "A journey from Panama to New York seems no more problematical than Limhi's story

38. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 13–14.

on which Sorenson relies” (p. 180). I am at a loss as to why a journey of four thousand miles and a journey of one hundred miles are remotely similar. If Sorenson’s calculations are wrong, Wunderli might argue the point and demonstrate a better calculation. He never does. Wunderli simply asserts that it is “no more problematical” than Sorenson’s analysis.

Sorenson explains what real people would do when they cannot find a location at an expected distance. Wunderli discounts the idea that the text must be tied to the actions of real people. Therefore he can have this party wander eight thousand miles instead of perhaps two hundred (they must find the location and return). Using Sorenson’s calculation of approximately eleven miles per day, this would take about a year and nine months. Sorenson’s calculation of the number of days of travel from the city of Lehi-Nephi to Zarahemla is around 21 days at the most.³⁹ Someone who is lost might spend more than 21 days searching for his desired destination, but stretching a round trip of a little over two months into a massive journey of one and three-fourths years is a lot less reasonable than Wunderli so blithely asserts.

Wunderli continues this analysis-by-assumption in his next textual “proof.”

Just a few years later, “there were an exceeding great many who departed out of the land of Zarahemla, and went forth into the land northward to inherit the land”; “they did travel to *an exceeding great distance*, insomuch that they came to large bodies of water and many rivers”; “they did spread forth into all parts of the land”; and “they did multiply and spread, and did go forth from the land southward to the land northward, and did spread insomuch that they began to cover the face of the whole earth, from the sea south to the sea north, from the sea west to the sea east” (Hel. 3:3–8 emphasis added).

This describes North America far better than southern Mexico. (p. 181, emphasis in original)

39. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

Wunderli continues to rely on his assumption that phrases like *an exceeding great distance* must somehow be larger than what Sorenson calculates, even though Sorenson's calculations are based on data reported for human populations that have traveled. Rather than providing any analysis of the interrelatedness of geography, Wunderli simply states that "this describes North America far better than southern Mexico." That is clearly his opinion, but Sorenson obviously does not share it. Given the comparative care with which the two analyze the same text, I must agree with Sorenson. Wunderli's analysis based on what the text "sounds like" or "seems like" is much less powerful than Sorenson's critical examination of times, distances, and interrelationships in a real world.

The Critique of the Narrow Neck

Wunderli's second area of geographical criticism deals with the famous narrow neck of land in the Book of Mormon. He begins his analysis of Sorenson's reading of the narrow neck as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec by discussing Alma 22:32:

And now, it was only the distance of a day and a half's journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea; and thus the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla were *nearly surrounded by water*, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward. (Alma 22:32)

Wunderli's conclusion about this passage provides his reading of the text:

If South America was the land southward, it meets the requirements of Alma 22:32 precisely. It is surrounded by water except where Panama, a narrow country, links South America to Costa Rica and the rest of Central and North America. Thus, South America is "*nearly surrounded by water*, there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward," which alone prevents it from being

completely surrounded by water. It is as if Joseph Smith all but named South America as the land southward. (p. 184, emphasis in original)

Wunderli reads the Book of Mormon as a modern text, as if the author could turn to an available map of South America in order to know that the South American continent was “nearly surrounded by water.” But this reading does not accurately represent the real world, as it would be highly unlikely that the new immigrants would be aware of the shape of their hemisphere. The question is not whether a modern map-oriented reader could see that phrase and assume South America, but whether the text requires it. The text would require it only if there were no plausible way that an ancient text could conceive of this new land as nearly surrounded by water. Unfortunately, Wunderli never attempts to follow through on the logic of his suggestion. He opts for his opinion of the text as normative for the text.

It never occurs to Wunderli that the area described in the limited geography theory is also “nearly surrounded by water.” If we allow the possibility that the Book of Mormon was written by real people, it would be impossible for them to claim that South America was “nearly surrounded by water” because they could not have sailed around it to have known. In the area of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, however, they could tell that they were “nearly surrounded by water” by climbing mountains near the narrow neck and visually scanning the horizon. With a legitimate alternate reading there is no reason one must accept Wunderli’s premise that the text requires the reading he proposes.

Directions

Wunderli’s final criticism has to do with directions. He argues that, since the limited geography model interprets north differently from true north, it is therefore a distortion of the text. Wunderli suggests that north is true north and that the text therefore precludes Sorenson’s model because it violates that constraint from the text. Of course, Sorenson himself is aware of the skewed directions:

Many features of south and central Mexico and Guatemala seem to match up decisively with the requirements for the Book of Mormon territory, except perhaps for one major anomaly. The Book of Mormon writers talk about their geography in terms of "north" or "northward" and "south" or "southward," while Mesoamerica seems skewed from those standard compass directions.⁴⁰

Wunderli does not deal with any of Sorenson's explanations of why the directions might be skewed. What he does is note that the text uses common directional terms:

There is little in the Book of Mormon from which to determine what the directional model is. Like a hemispheric geography, however, the directional system may not be transparent, but everything in the text is consistent with "north" meaning our north. First, the "land northward" and the "land southward" match North and South America so well, as do the east and west seas the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, that readers assumed a hemispheric geography from the beginning. (p. 190)

Similar to Wunderli's other analyses of the text, his method is to read a word and simply accept it without any critical examination of the text. He then bolsters the simple reading by appealing to tradition. It is true that the text uses the words *north* and *south*. It is true that many have read them and applied these terms to cardinal directions. Neither of those two statements generates any argument. They may be posited as true. However, that is not the same as saying that the *text* requires a hemispheric interpretation, which is what Wunderli set out to prove. At best Wunderli might hope to discredit the alternative, but he cannot use this evidence to prove his beginning point that the text requires nothing less than the hemispheric reading.

One of his textual "proofs" is that "the Jaredites and the Nephites seemed to have had the same directional system" (p. 191). This is also

40. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 36, 38.

a truism and hardly an issue for discussion. Unfortunately, Wunderli fails to distinguish the essential difference between a consistent system and one that requires that *north* have only the meaning he ascribes to the word. When John E. Clark (who is both a well-respected archaeologist and a Latter-day Saint) examined the geography of the Book of Mormon, he noted:

I assume that the Nephite directional system was internally consistent and that this consistency persisted throughout the period of their history. I do not pretend to know how Nephite “north” relates to the north of today’s compass, and such information is irrelevant for my present purpose of reconstructing an internal geography. I do assume, however, that regardless of what any “real” orientation may have been, Nephite north was 180 degrees from Nephite south, and both were 90 degrees off of east and west. The directional suffix “-ward” is here loosely interpreted to mean “in the general direction of.” Thus, I read “northward” as “in a general northerly direction.” Finally, all directions are directions from “somewhere.” I assume the central reference point was the city of Zarahemla, located in the “center” of the land of Zarahemla (Helaman 1:24–27).⁴¹

Clark suggests that the text is consistent, regardless of the directional system. Wunderli suggests that the consistency dictates the directional system. It does not take much experience with Mesoamerican texts to prefer Clark’s approach.

The Maya are the most well-known culture from the general area where the Book of Mormon took place according to the limited geography model Sorenson proposes. They were keenly interested in the movements of heavenly bodies. As perceptive observers of the world, they literally built the sky into their public buildings.

41. John Clark, “A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies,” review of *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon*, by F. Richard Hauck, *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 25.

Epigrapher Linda Schele describes a series of discoveries connecting myths, symbols, and buildings to the stars. She says: "With that discovery, I realized that every major image from Maya cosmic symbolism was probably a map of the sky."⁴² The complexities of their astronomical observations assure us that they understood perfectly where north is—except that it is in a different place than our north. Most modern Westerners understand north as a direction of travel along the face of the earth. The Maya conceived of north as up. Not up as in toward the top of a map, but up toward the sky.⁴³ Susan Milbrath, an anthropologist, suggests that "just as all roads led to Rome in classical antiquity, all directions lead to the sun in Maya cosmology."⁴⁴ She also notes: "Analysis of Chamula [a Maya people] astronomical concepts indicates that the primary axis is an east-west direction based on the sun's daily path. Even though they recognize that the zenith position is overhead, the east is visualized as the 'up' direction and the west as 'down.'"⁴⁵

In addition to different peoples visualizing "up" as a different direction, the locations of the important directions are conceived slightly differently. Our Western concept of directions arranges the four quadrants with a vertical line running north and south and another perpendicular to it running east and west. For the Maya, the important linear designations are at the intercardinal (i.e., northwest, etc.) points. Milbrath explains:

When speaking of the cosmic directions, there is disagreement as to the location of the "corners" of the cosmos. Ulrich Köhler notes that among the Tzotzil, Lacandón, and Quiché, the sky-bearers hold up the heavens at the four intercardinal directions. . . . In Quintana Roo, the Yucatec Maya of X-Cacal

42. Linda Schele, "The Hearth and the Tree," in David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker, *Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the Shaman's Path* (New York: Morrow, 1993), 87.

43. Susan Milbrath, *Star Gods of the Maya: Astronomy in Art, Folklore, and Calendars* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 19.

44. *Ibid.*, 17.

45. *Ibid.*, 17, 19.

place the great Chacs at the corners of the world associated with true cardinal directions, but an informant from the village of Tusik describes the corners of the sky as being located at the intercardinal points. The Maya of Yalcobá, Yucatán, say that the corners of the cosmos are located at the intercardinal directions, whereas the cardinal directions refer to the sides of heaven.⁴⁶

These conceptions of world directions are directly relevant to the issue of directions in the Book of Mormon. There are four issues at play in this problem of directions. The first is that Wunderli simply assumes that because we understand where true north is that this is “real” north. Second, he assumes that north is on the Western-conceived quadrants arranged around the directions pointing to the north, east, south, and west. Both Wunderli and Clark are correct that the directional system is internally consistent. The difference is that Wunderli is locked into the modern Western mind-set, and Clark is familiar with archaeological cultures and the variability of directional systems.

At this point the third part of the problem becomes apparent. The Book of Mormon is the translation of a document from a culture with which Joseph Smith was not familiar. We have evidence that Joseph dictated “north.” What we do not have evidence of is what the text on the plates said. While Wunderli makes the assumption that the translation necessarily uses vocabulary in precisely the way he expects it to be used, this is actually a task to be submitted to the text rather than to be assumed. As Clark noted, the system is consistent. We know that the English words are used to describe a consistent system that always has north as the opposite of south. What we do not know is what was on the plates and what the relationship of the English words to that text might have been. Does the text, as the translation it proclaims to be, allow for the difference in directions?

In the Mesoamerican model, the conceptual universe is an “x,” not a “+.” When a Mesoamerican travels north, is “north” only along the straight line, or is it inclusive of the “pie” shape formed by the

46. *Ibid.*, 19.

opening of the intercardinal lines? How does one translate the conception of north as "up" or "overhead" to a world that sees north as the top of a paper map?

The fourth problem with directions is related to the difference between celestially and terrestrially oriented directions. The sky can be used for quite precise directions when one can see it. However, in most cases travelers follow topographic features, not the more open path of the sky. I lived for a number of years in Albany, New York, which is oriented to the Mohawk River. Streets do have a rough overall grid pattern, but they tend to run more northwest/southeast rather than east/west. Nevertheless, people tend to "straighten" the orientation, and will tell another to go "two blocks west" when the true direction is northwest. Some form of regularization of directions is witnessed in Maya monumental texts where the Maya refer to rulers of Teotihuacán as "western lords." On a map, Teotihuacán is north northwest of the Maya cities. Nevertheless, they consistently describe them as "western." Directly west is the Pacific Ocean. Between the Maya view of directions that orient them to the intercardinal points and the perceptual directions created by following natural topography rather than maps, we can understand how the Maya can understand the heavens so well, yet use a directional reference that appears wrong to modern Western readers.

The issue of cardinal directions in Sorenson's model is important, but it has become a popular criticism largely on the basis of a Western inability to conceive of the world differently. We expect that "north" must mean precisely what we think it means. When this notion is combined with the equally erroneous idea that the text of the Book of Mormon is a perfect rendition of the underlying text, it is easy to understand how even someone with Deanne Matheny's background might suggest: "Making this shift in directions creates its own set of problems, however, because in such a Nephite directional system the sun would come up in the south and set in the north."⁴⁷

The astronomical sophistication of the Mesoamerican cultures tells us that it would be impossible for them to assume that the "sun

47. Matheny, "Does the Shoe Fit?" 277.

would come up in the south and set in the north.” However, that is not what the Book of Mormon text is telling us. Although the English text of the Book of Mormon subconsciously encourages us to read our own cultural perceptions into directional terms, the text’s internal consistency tells us that the directional system works. If we allow the hypothesis that the text is a translation of an ancient document, then the modern assumption of directions is the problem, not the presentation in the Book of Mormon.

At the end of his discussion of directions in the Book of Mormon, Wunderli adds a criticism of Sorenson that is not specifically related to directions but is perhaps located at this point in his argument because it deals with the Jaredites, whom he had recently mentioned as having the same directional system as the Nephites. He argues:

Finally, in the Jaredite history, Omer “came over and passed by the hill of Shim, and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, and came to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore, and there he pitched his tent” (Ether 9:3). “The place where the Nephites were destroyed” was at the hill Cumorah. If the hill Cumorah was in New York State, Omer could clearly have traveled from there eastward to a place called Ablom on the Atlantic coast. Sorenson, however, identifies Cumorah as Cerro El Vigia in the Tuxtla Mountains of southern Veracruz. On his study maps, Sorenson shows these mountains right on the shore of the Bay of Campeche. Traveling Nephite east (our north) from the Tuxtla Mountains would put Omer in the water. (p. 191)

He confirms his impression that Cerro el Vigia sits on the coast in his footnote to this paragraph (p. 191 n. 71). Unfortunately, he consulted only Sorenson’s study maps to come to this conclusion. Since they are at such a scale that it is difficult to see the precise relationship of the hill to the coast, Wunderli simply assumes that it is right on the coast. He would have been better served to use David A. Palmer’s map of the area in his *In Search of Cumorah*, where he made the argument for Cerro el

Vigia as a candidate for Cumorah. That map clearly shows the hill inland from the coast.⁴⁸ While not distant from the coast, it is still not on the coast, as Wunderli assumes. Since Sorenson bases his acceptance of Cerro el Vigia on Palmer's work,⁴⁹ Wunderli could have saved himself this erroneous position had he examined the original argument.

Conclusions

Wunderli ends his article with a bold statement:

Critics of the Book of Mormon have challenged the limited geography model on various grounds, but so far as I know, no one has challenged it based just on what the Book of Mormon itself says. And, in fact, what the book says seems to have been largely disregarded or misconstrued by the limited geography theorists. (p. 197)

Compared to the careful analysis of a significantly larger number of texts by John L. Sorenson, however, it is Wunderli's frequently contradictory analysis that distorts the text, not the limited geography model.

Wunderli began his analysis with two assumptions that handicapped his results. First, he expected that the meaning of the text was obvious⁵⁰ and second, that it was to be interpreted by appeal to tradition. As noted above, biblical exegetes would hardly agree with the first premise, and his second contradicts the officially declared position of the church on Book of Mormon geography.

Wunderli proposed to show how the text required a hemispheric setting. Rather than analyzing the text for its internal meanings, he extracts phrases to which he may assign meanings. Those meanings have nothing to do with any analysis of the text itself, as is most obvious in his discussion of distances, where he accepts Sorenson's distances

48. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah*, 256–57, map 4.

49. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 350.

50. He criticizes Sorenson for not seeing the "obvious" meaning of the text: "His model wanders far afield from what the Book of Mormon straightforwardly describes" (p. 197).

as “not unreasonable” but then believes a distance of 4,000 miles to be “reasonable” (where Sorenson calculates only 450 miles).⁵¹ Rather than deal with the issue of calculated distances, he simply declares his dramatically larger distance reasonable. He fails to see the contradiction to his assertion when he attempts to claim that Sorenson’s calculation of the width of the narrow neck isn’t narrow enough.

Wunderli’s arguments consistently eschew careful analysis of the text in favor of a simple declaration that his reading should be correct. Note the type of analysis indicated in several of his sentences that summarize his conclusions from his reading of the text (emphasis added).

- “Sorenson’s calculations are not unreasonable, but *they do not at all preclude* a hemispheric geography” (p. 175).

- “This *hardly describes* the Jaredites as a colony in southern Mexico” (p. 175).

- “These passages all *clearly, if not explicitly,* identify the promised land with North America” (p. 177).

- “This *surely sounds like* North American history from a Euro-American perspective” (p. 179).

- “‘So far northward’ *seems to describe* the distance to Cumorah in New York at least as well as Sorenson’s calculated one hundred miles to Cumorah in southern Mexico” (p. 180).

- “This *describes North America far better* than southern Mexico” (p. 181).

- “*If South America was the land southward,* it meets the requirements of Alma 22:32 precisely” (p. 184).

For an analysis that purports to analyze what the text says, these conclusions are remarkably distant from the text. The idea that the text “sounds like—seems like” is not an analysis of the text. It is an imposition of a reading on the text. Similarly, the firm statements about what the text says are all dependent upon reading them in only the way Wunderli does. Sorenson reads them differently. I read them dif-

51. This is the more generous comparison. As noted above, the four-thousand-mile problem may also be compared to a distance Sorenson calculates as only 180 miles (Zarahemla to Cumorah).

ferently. Of course, Wunderli finds that the Book of Mormon "sounds like North American history from a Euro-American perspective" (p. 179). Malina and Neyrey warned us that "reading always entails that readers bring their own understandings of the world to their reading."⁵² They are describing precisely what Wunderli has done. By applying assumptions based upon the "Euro-American perspective," his reading is so heavily colored by those perceptions that he believes that the text is dictating that meaning rather than his own reading.

52. Malina and Neyrey, *Portraits of Paul*, 8.