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Abstract Review of *Book of Mormon Geography—Mesoamerican Historic Geography* (2006), by V. Garth Norman.

THE LIGHT IS BETTER OVER HERE

Lawrence L. Poulsen

Review of V. Garth Norman. *Book of Mormon Geography—Mesoamerican Historic Geography*. American Fork, UT: ARCON/Ancient America Foundation, 2006. vii + 22 pp., with bibliography and map with gazetteer. \$22.00.

There is an old fable that recounts the story of someone coming upon a man busily studying the ground under a lamppost. He asked the man what he was looking for and offered to help. The man told him that he had lost his pocket watch and graciously accepted the offered help. After searching fruitlessly for some time, the helper asked the man, “Where did you lose the watch?” The man responded, “Over there,” indicating a location about fifteen feet away outside the pool of light shed by the streetlight. Aghast, the helper asked, “Why are you searching here by the lamppost instead of over there where you lost your pocket watch?” The man answered, “The light is better over here.”

Since the publication of John Lloyd Stephens’s book about his travels in Central America, archaeologists and anthropologists have been amassing a growing mountain of data about the Maya.¹ Until recently, most of this information was focused on the Classic Maya culture from AD 400 to 600. However, with the discovery of the Preclassic ruins at San Bartolo, there has been increased interest in the Preclassic period.

1. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1841).

Just as the lamp on the lamppost brightly illuminates the area around its base, all of this information brightly illuminates the nature of the Maya culture and the location of a multitude of Maya ruins and artifacts. With so much light shed on the Maya, it is difficult to resist searching among Maya ruins for signs of Book of Mormon culture. After all, “the light is better over here.” In other words, there is more data and information about the Maya, so let’s look here first.

Unfortunately, the location of Book of Mormon events is lost like the man’s pocket watch. And the authors of the Book of Mormon text, the men who could tell us where those events took place, are not readily available to enlighten us. All we have been told is that it was someplace on the American continent. The only source we have for exactly where is the text itself.

In the letter accompanying this thirty-page booklet and map, V. Garth Norman, the author, describes the booklet as an aid to stimulate reading of the Book of Mormon from “an archeological historic approach.” It contains an annotated gazetteer describing seventy-six Book of Mormon geographic features with the author’s proposed locations indicated on the accompanying map. For each feature, the gazetteer references applicable verses in the Book of Mormon text relevant to its location. It also gives the author’s reasons for each location’s placement on the map.

Based on the assumption that the Book of Mormon culture took place among the ancestral Maya, Norman has certainly packed a large amount of Maya-related data and history into his map and its accompanying descriptive gazetteer. In fact, there is so much information there that it would require an essay several times the length of the original publication to adequately cover all of the information presented. I will, however, limit this review to several of the points that I find problematic. Although Norman cites the Book of Mormon text in connection with each of his proposed locations, he freely admits that it is a work in progress and subject to modification and change with further research.

Some of the areas that I find problematic follow. In a brief description on the back of the map, Norman explains his methodology for

map construction. He defines directions as “north/south/east/west—literal planetary cardinal directions.” Unfortunately, this definition imposes a global geocentric definition of direction on the Book of Mormon text. Clearly this text was written by an ancient agrarian culture and ignores the original concept of direction prevalent in ancient cultures. A study of the origin of the modern word used to denote the cardinal direction east gives the following results:

English: “The etymology of *east* is from a Proto-Indo-European Language word for dawn. Cf. Latin *aurora* and Greek *eōs*.”²

Latin: *oriens* (stem *orient*) “rising, rising sun, east”; from *oriri* “to rise”³

A similar study of the words translated as “east” from native Mesoamerican languages gives:

Classic Maya: *hok' k'in* “sunrise, east” and **k'ah k'in* “sunset, west”⁴

Nahuatl: “As Nahuatl did not adopt Spanish terms for cardinal directions until the mid-seventeenth century, bills of sale initially used such indigenous phrases as *iquiçayampa tonatiuh itzticac*, ‘facing east [literally where the sun rises].”⁵

Quiche Maya: *relibal q'ij* (n) east (“its coming out sun”)⁶

The concept of direction in ancient cultures was centered on the movement of the sun, in particular its movement relative to the individual’s location. This is an anthrocentric rather than a geocentric view of direction. In other words, it is based on personal orientation rather than on contemporary global map orientation.

2. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/East> (accessed 3 December 2007)

3. <http://www.freedict.com/onldict/at.html> (accessed 3 December 2007), s.v. “oriens.”

4. Brian Stross, “Classic Maya Directional Glyphs,” *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 1 (1991): 97.

5. Rebecca Horn, “Nahuatl and Spanish Sources for Coyoacan.” Available at <http://whp.uoregon.edu/Lockhart/Horn.pdf> (accessed 8 November 2008).

6. Allen J. Christenson, “K’iche’-English Dictionary,” s.v. “relibal q’ij.” Available at www.famsi.org/mayawriting/dictionary/christenson/index.html (accessed 8 November 2008).

Figure 1 shows a compass rose depicting the modern geocentric concept of directions on the outer rings and the anthrocentric Mesoamerican concept in the center and in the ring next to the center with the Cholan words for directions.

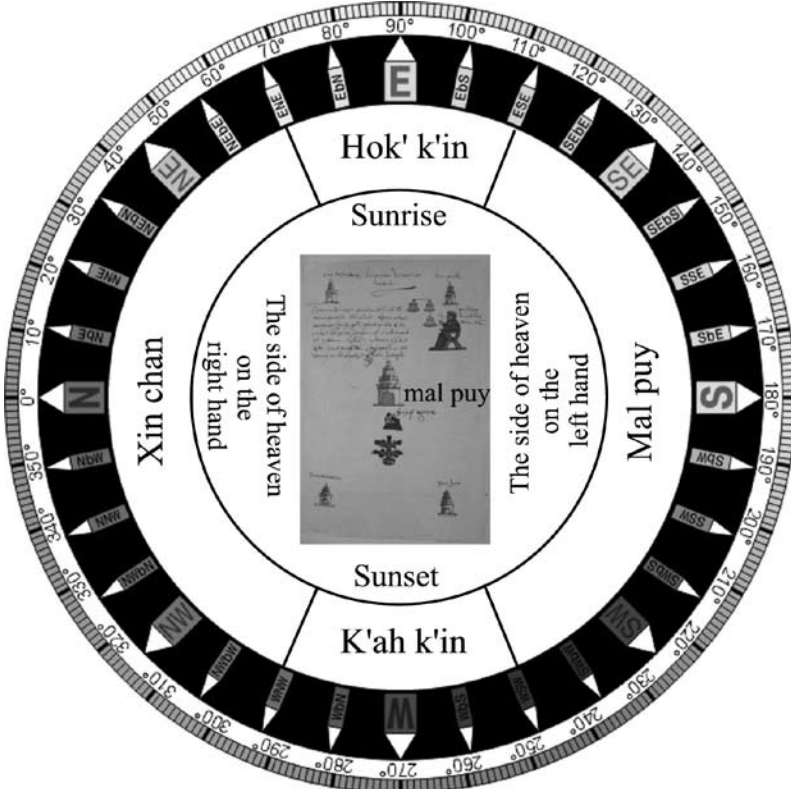


Fig. 1. Combined geocentric and anthrocentric compass rose⁷

Norman's use of a global orientation leads him to designate both the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico as the east sea of the Book of Mormon. He then designates the Gulf of Mexico as the north sea as

7. Adapted by Lawrence Poulsen from "A Mesoamerican compass rose," available at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Compass_Card.png (accessed 8 November 2007). The Mesoamerican concepts are based on Brian Stross, "Classic Maya Directional Glyphs," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 1 (1991): 97–114, and on the Cholan words for directions. The figure in the center is from a map in the Codex Osuna (1565).

well, a contradiction in his use of directions that he explains by saying this is required by the Book of Mormon.

The Book of Mormon tells the story of two civilizations, the Nephite/Lamanite civilization and the Jaredite civilization. Based on the anthropocentric view of directions, it is possible for these two different cultures to have had different concepts of the direction toward the various seas surrounding Mesoamerica than we currently have. The book of Ether offers no information on seas in the New World other than a reference (Ether 9:3) to a seashore located to the east of the Jaredite settlement area where it is recorded that the last battles occurred, this being the location of the Hill Ramah (known as Cumorah by the Nephites). Here again, Norman locates the Hill Cumorah at Tres Zapotes (a site where ruins have been found) rather than further north where the Gulf coast is actually located to the east. Recent publications about the Tamtoc ruins found in eastern San Luis Potosi indicate that an Olmec-like culture existed in this area about 2000 BC with a written language differing from those found further south. Although this culture is designated “Olmec-like,” there is still some question as to whether it was part of the same culture found in eastern Veracruz.⁸ Based on the text of the book of Ether, I find this to be a much better location for the Jaredite culture and the Hill Ramah. This would make the Gulf of Mexico the east sea of the Jaredite culture but not the east sea of the Nephite-Lamanite culture.

Norman dismisses the Grijalva River as the river Sidon on the basis of a lack of any significant ruins that could be identified with the city of Zarahemla and problems with John L. Sorenson’s view of directions (p. 15). The seeming lack of an identifiable ruin for the city of Zarahemla is also applicable to Norman’s model. Although he places the city in the locality of Palenque, he writes, “Classic Palenque is not Zarahemla, but Late Preclassic ceramics in the region with unexcavated large mound sites qualifies” (p. 21). Although the site at Santa Rosa lacked imposing ruins, the two-colored nature of the excavated floor might suggest the possibility of a relationship with the Book of

8. “Mexican monolith could change history,” found at <http://ancientx.com/nm/anviewer.asp?a=81&z=1> (accessed 3 December 2007).

Mormon city of Zarahemla. There are at least four geographic features that identify the location of the city of Zarahemla: (1) it is north of the head of the river Sidon and the narrow strip of wilderness, (2) it is on or near the west bank of the river Sidon, (3) it is south and east of the wilderness of Hermounts, and (4) it is south of the narrow neck.

The description of the narrow strip of wilderness in Alma 22:27 includes the phrase “by the head of the river Sidon, running from the east towards the west.” Norman identifies two rivers that form part of the Guatemala-Mexico border and that have headwaters in the Cuchamatán mountains as the narrow strip of wilderness. A ridge similar to the Continental Divide results in one of the headwaters running from east to west and the other running from west to east. Both rivers exit the mountain range to the north. Norman and others favoring the Usamacinta as the river Sidon, whose headwaters run from west to east, choose to either ignore this phrase or claim that the phrase is a redundant description of the mountain range. On the other hand, as pointed out by Patrick L. Simiskey,⁹ correct English parsing of the citation shows this phrase to be a modifier of the noun *river Sidon*. Assuming the parsing is correct, then the river Sidon is identified as the Grijalva River, and Zarahemla must be located in the highlands somewhere between the narrow strip of wilderness and the wilderness of Hermounts.

Norman and most advocates of a limited geography identify the Isthmus of Tehuantepec with the narrow neck spoken of in the Book of Mormon. The eastern edge of the passage through the Isthmus of Tehuantepec is formed by an uninhabited mountain wilderness. This wilderness is sparsely inhabited even now. Melesio Ortega Martínez, in his *Reseña Histórico de Tehuantepec*, recounts the origin of the word *Tehuantepec*.¹⁰ It is derived from the Nahuatl words *tecuaní* and *tepec*. *Tecuaní* has the meaning of “wild beast,” and *tepec* translates as “hill.” According to the Nahuatl dictionary, *tecuaní* also means “man-eating

9. Patrick L. Simiskey, *The Zarahemla Puzzle*, vol. 1, *A Study in Nephite Geography* (Decorah, IA: Amundsen Publishing, 2002), 169–70.

10. Melesio Ortega Martínez, *Reseña Histórico de Tehuantepec* (Oaxaca, Mexico: H. Ayuntamiento Constitucional de Tehuantepec, 1998), 5.

beast.” The composite has the meaning “Hill of the Fierce Beasts.” Alma 2:36–38 describes the fate of a Lamanite army after its defeat by the Nephites:

And they fled before the Nephites towards the wilderness which was west and north, away beyond the borders of the land; and the Nephites did pursue them with their might, and did slay them. Yea, they were met on every hand, and slain and driven, until they were scattered on the west, and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts; and it was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts. And it came to pass that many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts and also the vultures of the air; and their bones have been found, and have been heaped up on the earth.

The almost exact correlation in meaning for *Tehuantepec* and *Hermounts* suggests that the wilderness of Tehuantepec is an ideal candidate for the Book of Mormon wilderness of Hermounts. A line drawn from this wilderness to the headwaters of the Grijalva River intersects with the Grijalva River near the ruins of Santa Rosa and never comes near the Usamacinta River except at its headwaters. The probable identification of Tehuantepec with Hermounts gives strong support to Sorenson’s identification of the Grijalva River as the Book of Mormon river Sidon.¹¹

Figure 2 depicts the relationship between the borders of the Nephite quarters and a pathway between the center of the land and Hermounts (based on a three-dimensional view of the Grijalva basin using Google Earth).

Over twenty years ago, Sorenson carefully documented the textual, geographical, and anthropological data that supported his conclusion that the Nephite culture was located in the Chiapas highlands

11. See John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985), 33–36.

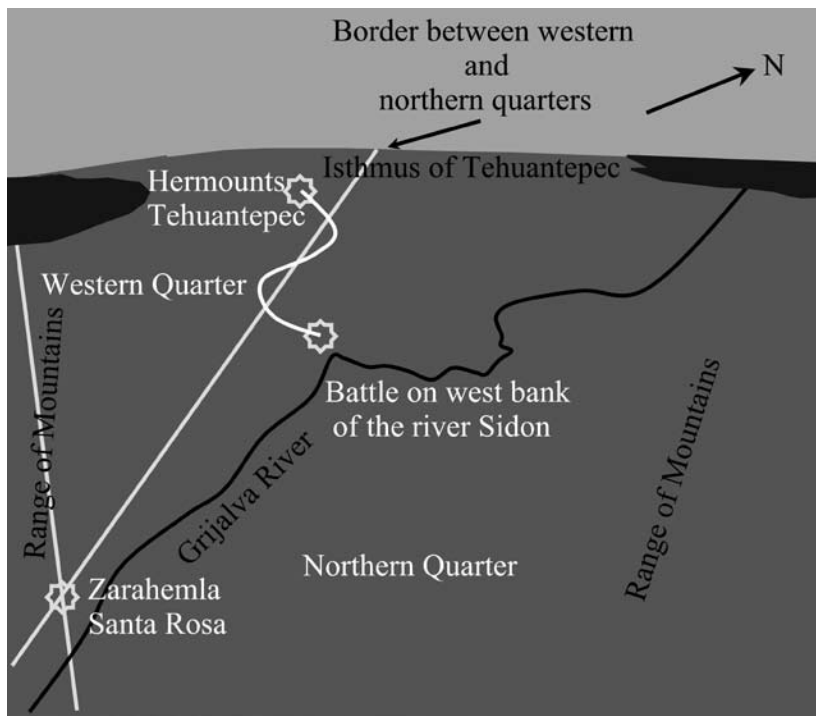


Fig. 2. Grijalva River basin with proposed Book of Mormon geographical correlations. Courtesy of the author.

and not in the Maya lowlands.¹² Since then, Norman and others have discounted his conclusions and continued attempting to equate the Nephites with the Maya in the lowlands. They often use the review of John Lloyd Stephens's discovery and description of the Maya ruins in Guatemala and eastern Mexico published in the *Times and Seasons* as support for this conclusion.¹³ They mistakenly attribute this review to Joseph Smith, although it is unlikely that he wrote it, because he was in hiding, as reported in the same issue. John Taylor probably wrote it.¹⁴

Norman's conclusions about the relationship of Nahuatl place-names with Hebrew and biblical place-names are in most cases a

12. See, for example, Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 33–38, 41–42, 342–43.

13. "Zarahemla," *Times and Seasons* 3/22 (1 October 1842): 927–28.

14. See Matthew Roper, "Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations," *FARMS Review* 16/2 (2004): 243–48.

stretch, and in the case of Tehuantepec, they are completely erroneous (see the above definition of *Tehuantepec*). Norman claims to derive it from *tehuan* rather than *tecuani*. In addition, Robert M. Carmack has used the Popul Vuh and other historical documents to show that Nahuatl arrived in the Maya lowlands no earlier than AD 800, well after the demise of the Nephite culture.¹⁵ Although it was customary for surviving cultures to gloss geographic features with names from their own language having similar meanings to an earlier name, Norman's attempt to equate this word with a Hebrew place-name is highly unlikely in light of the known derivation of the word.

These problematic areas in Norman's publication suggest that perhaps he, like the man who lost his watch, is looking in the wrong place merely because "the light is better over here."

Norman suggests that we use his map as a jumping-off point for further conversations about the Book of Mormon. I agree, but in doing so we should be careful not to take everything he says as proof that his views are correct; but if we are to better understand the geography of the Book of Mormon, we should examine multiple models including this one and compare them to the text. As John Clark has admonished, we should take care to ask the right questions and make the right assumptions.¹⁶

15. Robert M. Carmack, *The Quiché Mayas of Utatlán: The Evolution of a Highland Guatemala Kingdom* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1981), 45, 128.

16. See John Clark, "A Key for Evaluating Nephite Geographies," *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 1 (1989): 20–70; see especially 20–22.

