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Book of Mormon Geographies

Andrew H. Hedges

Of the many unresolved issues facing members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints today, perhaps none has generated as much speculation and controversy as the question regarding where, exactly, the events recorded in the Book of Mormon took place. Beginning in Joseph Smith's lifetime and continuing to the present, scholars and interested members alike have offered a variety of possible locations for the more prominent places mentioned in the text, including the city of Zarahemla, the "narrow neck of land" (Ether 10:20), the river Sidon, and the site of the last battle between the Nephites and the Lamanites. Scores of books, articles, and presentations have taken up the topic, with adherents of different viewpoints pushing the limits of decorum at times in their interactions with one another. In recent years, many have turned to websites, blogs, and YouTube videos to make their cases, thereby eliminating the need to subject their ideas to scholarly peer review in order to gain an audience.

Rather than leading toward some sort of consensus on the topic, however, this free exchange of ideas and evidence has accompanied a virtual flowering of new and different propositions regarding the real-world lands of the Book of Mormon. Variations of the once-popular "Hemispheric" model, which envisioned the whole of North and South America as the setting for the book's events, have been joined in recent decades by more "limited" geographic models that see the book telling the story of a relatively small geographical area. Most prominent among the latter are the "Limited Mesoamerican" model, which places the book's narrative in southern Mexico and Guatemala, and the "Heartland" model,

which situates it in the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys of the United States. Other suggestions include the west coast of South America, the Baja Peninsula, and even the Malay Peninsula or parts of Africa. Still others have suggested that the entire endeavor is a fool's errand, as the destruction that reportedly accompanied Christ's crucifixion so altered the book's described geography as to make it unrecognizable today (see 3 Ne. 8). Remarkably, after years of research, discussion, and debate, the question of where the Book of Mormon played itself out is more wide open than it has ever been, with individuals from all walks of life and educational backgrounds weighing in on the topic.¹

Like many other questions Latter-day Saints grapple with, this one has its basis in taking both Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon at their word. Both claim that the book is, in fact, a real history of real people who lived somewhere in the Americas hundreds of years before its European discovery in the fifteenth century. Smith's account of finding the plates, protecting them from harm, translating them by means of a special instrument that had been buried with them, and finally showing them and other tangible artifacts to some of his close associates all underscore the physical existence of the record and, by extension, the people who created it. So, too, does the language of the book itself, much of which is written in the first-person voice of the ancient prophets who reportedly wrote and compiled it. In addition, hundreds of passages—at least 550 of them by one count²—discuss physical features like cities, villages, rivers, mountains, plains, forests, and seas, all of which fit into a remarkably internally consistent geography that serves as the backdrop for the movements, preaching, and warfare that make up the contents of the book. Neither Smith's account nor the book's internal claims, of course, can be seen as irrefutable “proof” that the Book of Mormon is real history, but they do bring its readers face-to-face with the question of the record's authenticity. And for those who answer in the affirmative, the follow-up question of where, exactly, all these things took place is not an easy one to answer.

The essence of the problem is the simple fact that, with a handful of notable exceptions—all of them, such as Jerusalem and the Red Sea, in

1. For a brief review of proposed Book of Mormon geographies over the years, see Brandon S. Plewe, “Book of Mormon Geographies: 1842–Present,” in *Mapping Mormonism: An Atlas of Latter-day Saint History*, 2nd ed., ed. Brandon S. Plewe, S. Kent Brown, Donald Q. Cannon, and Richard H. Jackson (Provo, Utah: BYU Press, 2014), 190–91.

2. John L. Sorenson, “Mormon's Map,” *Maxwell Institute Publications* 54 (2000): 6.

the Middle East—none of the places mentioned in the Book of Mormon can reasonably be identified with real-world locations today *at the exclusion of other possible locations*. The exceptions are the “valley of Lemuel” (1 Ne. 2:14), “Nahom” (1 Ne. 16:34), and “Bountiful” (1 Ne. 17:5), all three of which are mentioned in the book’s opening chapters in a context that would place them in the northwest, southwest, and southeast reaches, respectively, of the Arabian Peninsula. Recent surveys of the area, combined with careful archaeological work and newly found inscriptions, have identified good candidates for each of these places, all of which are arguably consistent with the directions, distances, and descriptions given in the text itself.³

The situation is very different in the Americas, however. Here, a whole host of places have been identified for each of the major geographical features that made up the Nephites’, Lamanites’, and Jaredites’ home in the “promised land.” The difference between the two areas is a result of knowing where, precisely, the story begins in the Middle East and not knowing where it begins (or ends) in the Americas. With Jerusalem as a starting point (1 Ne. 1:4, 7; 2:4), and the Red Sea as a frequent point of reference (1 Ne. 2:5, 8, 9; 16:14), it is a relatively easy task to follow the early action in a general way through Arabia, even without the benefit of the recent finds. In contrast, we have no idea where in the Americas Lehi and his family landed after leaving the Middle East. Whether it was in North America or South America, on the Atlantic shore or the Pacific, is completely unknown.⁴ The only firm link between a specific location on the ground today and the Book of Mormon is the stack of plates Joseph Smith obtained from the Hill Cumorah in upstate New York. At best, such a link tells us only where Moroni, the ancient Nephite prophet who buried the plates, spent some time at some point after his people had been destroyed. It tells us very

3. See S. Kent Brown, “‘The Place Which Was Called Nahom’: New Light from Ancient Yemen,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8, no. 1 (1999): 66–68; Warren P. Aston, “Newly Found Altars From Nahom,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 10, no. 2 (2001): 57–61; and articles by Lynn M. Hilton, Warren P. Aston, George D. Potter and Richard Wellington, S. Kent Brown, Dave LeFevre, and Jeffrey R. Chadwick in *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 15, no. 2 (2006): 4–76.

4. While some have taken a short note in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams as a prophetic pronouncement indicating that Lehi’s family landed in Chile, careful analysis of the document has shown that it cannot be linked with any certainty to Joseph Smith. See Frederick G. Williams, “Did Lehi Land in Chile?” in *Reexploring the Book of Mormon: A Decade of New Research*, ed. John W. Welch (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1992), 57–61.

little, however, about where he or his people had been prior to that. With places on two entire continents available to pick from—rather than a relatively limited area like the Arabian Peninsula—and with ambiguities in the text giving free reign to creative interpretations, it is little wonder that arguments can be made for a variety of areas throughout North and South America having served as the Book of Mormon’s setting.

While many researchers have overlooked it, the earliest effort to identify a specific real-world location with the events mentioned in the Book of Mormon appears to be a June 4, 1834, letter to Joseph Smith’s wife, Emma, written from Pike County, Illinois, “on the banks of the Mississippi,” as Smith was traveling to Missouri with Zion’s Camp. Purporting to be a letter “dictate[d]” by Smith himself, the letter recounts how he and his companions had been “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally [*sic*] the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity.”⁵ A letter written the same year by Oliver Cowdery to William W. Phelps similarly identifies a North American setting for at least some of what happened in the Book of Mormon—in this case, New York’s Hill Cumorah, where Smith reportedly found the gold plates, as the site of the final battles of the Jaredites and the Nephites.⁶ Following the 1841 publication of John L. Stephens’s *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*,⁷ wherein Stephens vividly described pre-Columbian ruins of an ancient American civilization as advanced as that portrayed in the Book of Mormon, Latter-day Saints close to Smith, and perhaps Smith himself, began linking places mentioned in the book with Central American sites as well. These and other sources suggests that Smith and his contemporaries eventually came to see Central America as the

5. The letter survives today as a copy in Joseph Smith Letterbook 2, written in the handwriting of James Mulholland. It is written in first person and signed “Joseph Smith Jr” in Mulholland’s hand. “To Emma Smith, 4 June 1834,” in *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed., comp. and ed. Dean C. Jessee (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002), 344–46.

6. Oliver Cowdery, “Letter VII: To W. W. Phelps, Esq.,” *Latter Day Saints’ Messenger and Advocate* 1, no. 10 (July 1834): 158–59. Cowdery also identified this same hill as the site of the Jaredites’ final battles, as well as the place where other Nephite records, in addition to the Book of Mormon, had been buried (see Morm. 6:6).

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

center of Book of Mormon civilization, with sites in the Midwest and eastern United States coming into the picture toward the end of the narrative.⁸

Following the lead of Orson Pratt, a more fully hemispheric Book of Mormon geography came into vogue in the latter half of the nineteenth century. According to this model, the southernmost reaches of ancient Book of Mormon lands—especially the “land of Nephi” and the city Zarahemla—were in northern South America, while the Isthmus of Darien was the book’s “narrow neck of land” that led into the land northward. New York’s Hill Cumorah, several thousand miles to the northeast, continued to be the Hill Cumorah of the Book of Mormon where the last battles were fought. While some researchers continued to propound this model well into the twentieth century, others began to suggest the possibility that Book of Mormon lands were much more limited in extent. Although differing in the details of their respective models, proponents of the latter view believed that the events of the entire book, including the last battles at Cumorah, took place in a Central American context. By the mid- to late twentieth century, researchers favoring some variation of this “Limited Mesoamerican” model of Book of Mormon geography far outnumbered those adhering to the more expansive, hemispheric model that Orson Pratt had proposed a hundred years earlier.⁹ The fact that so few Native Americans had joined the Church in North America when compared to the numbers beginning to accept its teachings in Central America during the latter half of the twentieth century may have contributed to the increasing popularity of this model during this time. So, too, did the growing realization that the pre-Columbian Americas were home to a tremendous diversity of peoples, cultures, and languages and that the traditional assumption that the Book of Mormon was “the” history of “the” Native Americans failed to take into account the complexity of the cultural landscape. Seeing the Book of Mormon as an expanded and extensive “family history” of sorts, rather than as the history of an entire hemisphere, seemed a better fit for the evidence.

8. See Andrew H. Hedges, “Book of Mormon Geography in the World of Joseph Smith,” *Mormon Historical Studies* 8, nos. 1 and 2 (2007): 77–89.

9. John L. Sorenson, “The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Sourcebook,” *Maxwell Institute Publications* 38 (1990): 13–35. See also Matthew Roper, “Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations,” *FARMS Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 225–75.

By the 1980s and 1990s, David A. Palmer and John L. Sorenson had emerged as the new Limited Mesoamerican model's most articulate supporters. Careful analysis of their research shows that their arguments hinged on two main points. First was their belief that the geographical descriptions in the text of the Book of Mormon itself absolutely require that the final battles of the Nephites and Jaredites took place relatively close to each civilization's center near the "narrow neck of land" mentioned in the text. Second was their contention that the hill where Joseph Smith found the gold plates does not match the text's description of the hill where the final battles took place.¹⁰ Building on this foundation, Palmer, Sorenson, and others have argued that only in Central America do we find all of the geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon occurring in a more-or-less limited area whose archaeological remains are consistent with the sophisticated level of civilization described in the text.¹¹ The argument has perhaps found its ultimate expression in Sorenson's *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book*, published in 2013.¹²

For all its popularity, the Limited Mesoamerican model is not without its critics. Even without having an alternative location in mind, some have questioned the argument that the Book of Mormon text requires a limited geography in the first place or a hill vastly different from New York's Hill Cumorah as the setting for the final battles.¹³ Others have accepted the idea of a limited geography but have placed it in a North American rather than Central American setting. As with the Limited Mesoamerican model in its early phase, early proponents of this idea—first proposed by Delbert W. Curtis in 1988—varied in where, precisely, they believed individual geographical features mentioned in the Book of Mormon were located, but all agreed that the book's narrative ran its course in a relatively limited area that included upstate New York. All agreed, too, that Joseph Smith's Hill Cumorah was the hill of the Book

10. See David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidence for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981); John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book; Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985).

11. For examples other than Palmer and Sorenson, see Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Orem, Utah: S. A. Publishers, 1989); F. Richard Hauck, *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1988).

12. John L. Sorenson, *Mormon's Codex: An Ancient American Book* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2013).

13. For example, see Andrew H. Hedges, "Cumorah and the Limited Mesoamerican Theory," *Religious Educator: Perspectives on the Restored Gospel* 10, no. 2 (2009): 111–34.

of Mormon's final battles, while the Great Lakes served as the various "seas" mentioned in the text, and constrictions between the Great Lakes or the Finger Lakes answered to the book's "narrow neck of land." Each author also had the Nephites reaching the continent's eastern seaboard by crossing the Atlantic, though they differed on where, precisely, the group had debarked.¹⁴

Given the momentum the Limited Mesoamerican model had at the time, several supporters of the North American model included reasons for rejecting a more southerly location for the Book of Mormon's setting. For most, early Church publications by Joseph Smith's close associates that identify the Hill Cumorah in New York with the Hill Cumorah of the book's final battles have been key. If the two were one and the same, as people like Oliver Cowdery clearly believed they were, and a limited geography fits the textual and cultural evidence better than a more expansive one does, then a relatively limited area that includes upstate New York must be the setting for the book. For many, too, the prophecy that the Nephites' "promised land" would be a "land of liberty unto the Gentiles," free from kings, bondage, captivity, "and from all other nations under heaven" (2 Ne. 10:11; Ether 2:12), is an important consideration because the United States seems to fit that description better than more politically unstable countries to the south.

Not surprisingly, the North American model has drawn a strong response from the Limited Mesoamerican camp. Questioning the underlying assumptions about the location of the hill Cumorah and the identification of the Book of Mormon's "promised land" with the United States, supporters of a Mesoamerican location have argued that the region is a poor fit for the Book of Mormon's internal geography and directions. They have also objected to it on archaeological grounds, contending that the archaeological record in the upper Midwest and Northeast simply doesn't attest to a pre-Columbian civilization anything like that portrayed in the Book of Mormon, with its extensive agriculture, written language, and large population centers housing hundreds of thousands of individuals. Nowhere in the eastern half of the United

14. See Delbert W. Curtis, *The Land of the Nephites* (American Fork, Utah: D. W. Curtis, 1988); Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: A Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, Utah: Bradford and Wilson, 1995); Duane R. Aston, *Return to Cumorah: Piecing Together the Puzzle Where the Nephites Lived* (Sacramento, Calif.: American River, 1998); Paul Hedengren, *The Land of Lehi: Further Evidence for the Book of Mormon* (Provo, Utah: Tepran, 1999); and Phyllis Carol Olive, *The Lost Lands of the Book of Mormon* (Springville, Utah: Bonneville Books, 2000).

States, they concluded, do the book, the geography, and the archeology come together as well as they do in Central America.¹⁵

As strongly worded as the criticisms against this North American model have been, they have done little to dissuade its supporters. Led by Rod L. Meldrum, proponents of the “Heartland” model, as it has come to be called, have responded to the critics’ objections by willingly and creatively adjusting their proposed geography to better match the descriptions in the text. Where the Mesoamerican model understands the text’s narrow neck of land to be an isthmus, for example, proponents of the Heartland model, noting that the text fails to explicitly mention a “sea” as the neck’s eastern border (see Alma 22:32), understand it to be a short stretch of ground between Lake Michigan—the text’s “west sea”—and some not-too-far-distant point to the east. Other adjustments include having Lehi’s party first landing in the vicinity of today’s New Orleans before moving north and east up the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys, and identifying the Book of Mormon peoples with the relatively advanced, agricultural, mound-building Adena and Hopewell cultures that lived in those areas during Book of Mormon times. Less scrupulous about evidence than trained historians, scientists, and archaeologists might be, Meldrum draws on a variety of sources to offer real-world, visually compelling locations and remains for a variety of phenomena described in the Book of Mormon, including such traditional conundrums as elephants, horses, and Hebrew writing.¹⁶

Sorenson, Palmer, and other proponents of a Mesoamerican geography have generally made their case in peer-reviewed journals and academic presentations, where they have directed their research toward university-trained specialists in history, archaeology, and anthropology. Through derivative publications, they have also reached a significant number of other Latter-day Saints, some of whom have helped develop a small tourism industry for various archaeological sites in Central America that seem to correspond to places mentioned in the Book of

15. See, for example, David A. Palmer, Review of Delbert W. Curtis, *The Land of the Nephites*, in *Review of Books on the Book of Mormon* 2, no. 1 (1990): 67–73; John E. Clark, “Evaluating the Case for a Limited Great Lakes Setting,” *FARMS Review of Books* 14, no. 1 (2002): 9–77.

16. For example, see Meldrum’s use of Cahokia—site of the largest pre-Columbian earthworks in North America, but they date to several hundred years *after* the Book of Mormon’s Nephites and Lamanites. Rod L. Meldrum, *Exploring the Book of Mormon in America’s Heartland: A Visual Journey of Discovery* (New York: Digital Legend, 2011), 114–17.

Mormon. A similar industry has developed around proposed Book of Mormon sites in the Heartland model, with the internet, image-oriented publications, and convention-style conferences and presentations serving to spread the word in place of more academic venues. The result has been the development of two worldviews, essentially, whose ties to one of Mormonism's foundational texts on the one hand and tourism industries on the other have moved the study of Book of Mormon geography into realms of faith, orthodoxy, and finances that transcend the mere differences of opinion or interpretation that characterize more abstract academic questions. One need only attend a conference put on by either camp or search the internet for "Tours of Book of Mormon Lands" to see how serious a business, both emotionally and financially, the whole thing has become for some.

While most interested Latter-day Saints appear to support either the Limited Mesoamerican or Heartland models, other explanations of Book of Mormon geography, offering very different locations as the book's setting, are still being actively developed and defended today. One, for example, drawing on a variety of geographical and archaeological evidence, argues for Chile, Peru, and Bolivia as the land of the Book of Mormon.¹⁷ Another, arguing from an almost purely geographical position (since any supporting archaeology appears to be almost entirely lacking) suggests Baja California.¹⁸ Still others reject the Americas entirely and posit a location on the Malay Peninsula in Southeast Asia or in Africa—possibilities which handily account for the Book of Mormon's elephants, perhaps, but run afoul of Joseph Smith's report that the book is a history of people who lived somewhere in the Americas.¹⁹ Whatever their strengths and weaknesses, none of these more recent propositions has, at least so far, garnered the attention and support currently enjoyed by the Heartland and Mesoamerican models.

Popular or not, the very fact that new ideas on the question are still being propounded underscores the basic problem that plagues all proposed Book of Mormon geographies, including those that can count hundreds or even thousands of supporters. For all the evidence

17. See George Potter, *Nephi in the Promised Land: More Evidences That the Book of Mormon Is a True History* (Springville, Utah: Cedar Fort, 2009).

18. See "Home," A Choice Land, accessed May 26, 2021, <http://www.achoiceland.com/home>.

19. See Ralph A. Olsen, *A More Promising Land of Promise for the Book of Mormon* (Logan, Utah: Vivid Volumes, 2006); Embaye Melekin, *The African Bible: The Record of the Abyssinian Prophets* (Bloomington, Ind: AuthorHouse, 2011).

that each may be able to marshal in support of its position, no one has yet found any remains outside the Middle East that can be definitively linked to the Book of Mormon. Such remains could take any number of forms, although at this point it seems that they would have to include some sort of textual component—some inscription or record found *in situ*, dating to Book of Mormon times, that makes an unambiguous allusion to a person, event, or location (and preferably all three) discussed in the book itself. Until such a “Welcome to Zarahemla” signpost is found, the geography of the Book of Mormon seems destined to remain more a topic for discussion and debate than a real-world location on the ground.

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