

# Does Geography in the Book of Mormon Matter?

The Book of Mormon has been called “the keystone of our religion,”<sup>1</sup> and for Latter-day Saints it thus deserves no less than the deepest understanding of it we can obtain. Brigham Young has suggested the level of understanding we should aspire to: “Do you read the scriptures . . . as though you were writing them . . . ? Do you read them as though you stood in the place of the men who wrote them?”<sup>2</sup> What advantages do we have if we follow Brigham Young’s advice?

The Book of Mormon was given to us through a very real artifact—a set of gold plates that were seen and “hefted” by a dozen or more witnesses. In contrast, the Bible reached us via generations of unknown hands, and we must wonder which portions of it were shaped by the human instruments through whom it was transmitted. We place high value on the Nephite scripture because of its tangible origin. Yet the sense of reality and concreteness we feel is weakened in part by the fact that Latter-day Saints as a body of believers have not been prepared to say where particular Nephite cities and mountains and streams are located. We can visit Bethlehem’s hills and feel that we are standing where the Jewish shepherds did when the angels spoke to them, but on tours to “Book of Mormon lands” we are unable to say with confidence, “Here Alma and Amulek were imprisoned,” or “Through this valley tramped Helaman’s two thousand warriors.” Would not our sense of the reality of the Nephites and their sacred book be enhanced if we could share with Mormon his map of the scenes where the events he wrote about took place? The sense of reality with which we envision the events, scenes, and characters in the Book of Mormon can be intensified to the degree that we pin down the geographical setting.

The Nephite scripture promises its readers sacred knowledge that can transform their personal lives. To receive that blessing, we as readers must connect ourselves as forcefully as possible to what the ancient writers of the scripture tell us. Only by relating intimately to them and their words can we receive the power they sought to convey to us. The scriptures are meant to cause us to “lift up [our] hearts and rejoice” (2 Nephi 11:8), and we cannot fully do that without penetrating as thoroughly as possible what was in the hearts and minds of the scripture makers at the time they wrote. We cannot be impacted to the maximum by their message unless we can empathize with their pains, puzzle over their problems, and join in their joys. The ancient prophets have something of great value to confer on people across all generations and cultures because they, more clearly than most humans, have identified and wrestled with the frustrations, despairs, and pains that afflict us all: What is this seemingly senseless life really about? Is death the end? How can I achieve the greatest happiness? Why am I hated, in pain, starved, depressed? These ancient prophets stir our interest and awaken our hopes because, while they were each a fallible everyman, like us plagued with questions, they testify boldly that they found answers.

But we cannot fully share the light that transformed their lives until we grasp in specific terms, not just in vaguely theoretical ones, what the questions meant to them. We cannot fully “liken” the sacred texts to ourselves (2 Nephi 11:8) until we liken the concrete problems of the prophets’ lives—their dilemmas and how they were delivered from them—to those we feel in our own lives. The more detail we know about who those ancient holy men and women were and what went on in their lives, the more perceptively we will be able to see how God’s dealings with them can be applied to our relationship with him.

Geography, as much as history or culture, is an essential feature of life’s problems. Many problems faced by the Nephite prophets and their people, and from which the hand of the Lord saved them so often, were shaped decisively by their geographical setting. To what degree did harsh physical conditions trigger the complaints of

Lehi<sub>1</sub>'s party in the Arabian desert (see 1 Nephi 16:19–20, 35–36)? What strategic concerns worried Captain Moroni about the rebellion and flight of Morianton (see Alma 50:30, 32)? Why were Moroni<sub>1</sub> and Pahoran<sub>1</sub> even more angry and concerned over the dissenters who seized power in the center of Nephite lands than they were over the powerful Lamanite armies on the periphery (see Alma 60–62)? How was geography central to the defeat of the robbers of Giddianhi (see 3 Nephi 3–4)? How many times did flight and relocation save Nephite groups from slavery or extinction (see, for example, Omni 1:12–13; Mosiah 24:17–21)? Geographical factors are pivotal in the Nephite experience. In fact, the title page of the Book of Mormon praises the “great things the Lord hath done for their fathers,” and we can appreciate those “great things” so much better when we know of the places where they unfolded. Significantly, one of Nephi<sub>1</sub>'s key teachings to his brothers was how the Lord uses geography to accomplish his ends (see 1 Nephi 17:23–26, 32–38).

Some may contend that we know enough about this topic already, but the actual extent of our knowledge is limited and unsystematized. Our copies of the Bible include a superb set of maps to which good teachers and wise students of the scripture turn frequently for clarification. After many years of doing without maps to inform us about key events and places mentioned in the Doctrine and Covenants, we finally received help in that regard starting with the 1981 edition of the scriptures. But our copies of the Book of Mormon still lack even the most basic map to clarify the complicated goings and comings reported in our keystone scripture. It appears that there is much yet to learn about the topic of Book of Mormon geography.

### **What is the status of the study of the geography in the Book of Mormon?**

In the 170 years since the Book of Mormon was first published, its geography has been given comparatively little attention. Remarkably, what logically would seem to be one of the first steps in a systematic investigation—to construct a map of the American “land of promise” based solely on statements in that scripture (at least 550 passages are relevant)—seems not to have occurred to anyone during the church's first century. The first attempt appeared in print only in 1938.<sup>3</sup> In fact, a good deal of suspicion about and opposition to studying Book of Mormon geography has been manifested among Latter-day Saints, and this can in part be credited to the generally poor quality of the research and logic in previous investigations. The idea that as a church we have neglected the Book of Mormon<sup>4</sup> can apply to all aspects of the Book of Mormon, including geography.

A tiny minority of LDS (and RLDS) people have, nevertheless, been fascinated by the intellectual challenge and inspirational possibilities of a geography. At least eighty versions of a Book of Mormon map have been produced.<sup>5</sup> Most start with the writer confidently identifying some American area as the center where the Nephites lived and then distributing cities, lands, or other features named in the text to more or less agree with the original “solution.” Ideas have ranged from identifying the promised land as the entire hemisphere to limiting the scene to a small portion of, say, Costa Rica or New York. Few of these writers have been knowledgeable about the range of elements that would go into a comprehensive and critical statement of the geography (such as language distributions, ecological zones, or archaeological finds). The result has been tremendous confusion and a plethora of notions that holds no promise of producing a consensus.

### **Didn't church leaders long ago settle the question of Nephite geography?**

The simple answer to this question is no. Historical documents fail to indicate that church authorities have ever claimed that the lands of the Nephites were located in any particular place.

To explain more thoroughly, more than one view of where the Nephites lived was held in the early days of the church. It is possible to conclude that to the first readers of the Book of Mormon it seemed obvious that North America was the land northward and South America was the land southward, with the narrow neck of land at Panama. Because the angel Moroni first showed the plates to Joseph Smith at the hill near Joseph's home in New York State, church members supposed that the final battle between the Nephite and Lamanite armies occurred there too.<sup>6</sup> (Actually, what the account says is that while Mormon buried all the other records of the Nephite people in the hill Cumorah of the final battle, he gave the set of plates on which he had written his abridged history to his son Moroni<sub>2</sub> [see Mormon 6:6]. Moroni<sub>2</sub> still had those records in his possession thirty-five years later, after wandering "whithersoever I can" [Moroni 1:3] for safety from his enemies [see Mormon 8:4, 14; Moroni 10:1-2]. Moroni<sub>2</sub> did not tell us where he finally buried them. Perhaps the primary reason that he lived so long after the final battle was to deliver the plates to New York personally.)

In 1842, the church leaders in Nauvoo were presented with a newly published book<sup>7</sup> that spurred a new interpretation of Book of Mormon geography. A best-selling volume by explorer John Lloyd Stephens reported his dramatic discovery of great ruins in Central America, and it was reviewed enthusiastically in the *Times and Seasons*, Nauvoo's newspaper.<sup>8</sup> The author of the review is not known, but John Taylor was managing editor of the paper and Joseph Smith had declared six months before that "I alone stand responsible for it [the paper]."<sup>9</sup> The Nephites, the newspaper said, "lived about the narrow neck of land, which now embraces Central America." Furthermore, "the city of Zarahemla . . . stood upon this land." Of course, that would make the land southward, which included Zarahemla, a part of Central America ("several hundred miles of territory from north to south"),<sup>10</sup> not South America as had been thought.

Can this enthusiastic pronouncement be considered a revelation that defines the geography once and for all? No such claim was made. The active minds among the leaders were simply doing research. "We are not agoing to declare positively," the article said, "that the ruins of Quirigua [Guatemala] are those of Zarahemla, but when the land and the stones, and the books tell the story so plain, we are of opinion," that is, they inferred, that the site must be "one of those referred to in the Book of Mormon."<sup>11</sup> Additional comment in the next issue of the paper further reflects the intellectual ferment at work: "We have found another important fact." Clearly, they did not think that this new interpretation of the geography, or the original one, had settled matters, let alone been a revelation. They were doing what the Lord had instructed Oliver Cowdery to do in 1829: "You must study it out in your mind" (D&C 9:8). Apparently, they never reached a conclusion that satisfied everyone, because some of the leaders and most of the Saints, who were not privy to the thinking Stephens's book stirred among the small group around Joseph, continued to hold the two-continents interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that the geography question had not been settled authoritatively was confirmed by an 1890 statement from George Q. Cannon, counselor in the First Presidency: "The First Presidency have often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared even to suggest [a map]. The word of the Lord or the translation of other ancient records is required to clear up many points now so obscure."<sup>13</sup> Around 1918 or a little before, church president Joseph F. Smith underlined the point. He "declined to officially approve of [any map], saying that the Lord had not yet revealed it."<sup>14</sup> By 1950 nothing had changed; apostle John A. Widtsoe said, "As far as can be learned, the Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon

activities occurred. Perhaps he did not know. However, certain facts and traditions of varying reliability are used as foundation guides by students of Book of Mormon geography.”<sup>15</sup>

No, the geography question has not been answered by church authorities, nor have the opinions worked out by geography hobbyists yet led to agreement. In 1947 it was still possible to hope that “out of the studies of faithful Latter-day Saints may yet come a unity of opinion concerning Book of Mormon geography,” as Elder Widtsoe put it.<sup>16</sup> But in the half century since, confusion has grown. Few have sought consensus, while many have defensively adhered to individual notions based on selected “facts and traditions of varying reliability.”

A different approach seems to be called for if we are to gain a better understanding of Book of Mormon geography and the benefits associated with that.

### Notes

1. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1946), 4:461.

2. *Discourses of Brigham Young*, ed. John A. Widtsoe (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1941), 128.

3. See Lynn C. Layton, “An ‘Ideal’ Book of Mormon Geography,” *The Improvement Era* 41 (July 1938): 394–95, 439.

4. See Ezra Taft Benson, “A New Witness for Christ,” *Ensign*, November 1984, 6–8.

5. Summaries of seventy of these maps are included in my *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1992), 37–206.

6. See Orson Pratt, *Divine Authenticity of the Book of Mormon* (Liverpool: R. James, 1850), 22; Orson Pratt, in *Journal of Discourses*, 14:298. See also Orson Pratt’s footnotes in the 1875 edition of the Book of Mormon, particularly 1 Nephi 18:23 n. k.; Omni 1:12 n. g; and Omni 1:13 n. h.

7. See John Lloyd Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* (London: John Murray, 1841).

8. See “Extract from Stephens’ ‘Incidents of Travel in Central America,’” *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842): 914–15, 921–22.

9. “To Subscribers,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 March 1842): 710.

10. “Zarahemla,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 October 1842): 927. Elder John A. Widtsoe observed, “The interesting fact . . . is that the Prophet Joseph Smith at this time was editor . . . and had announced his full editorial responsibility for the paper. This seems to give the . . . article an authority it might not otherwise possess.” *Evidences and Reconciliations: Aids to Faith in a Modern Day* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1951), 3:96.

11. “Zarahemla,” 927.

12. For example, Parley P. Pratt, *Key to the Science of Theology: A Voice of Warning* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1978), 15, said that “Lehi and Nephi came out with a colony from Jerusalem . . . and finally landed in safety on the

coast of what is now called Chile, in South America.” Pratt was absent from Nauvoo in the fall of 1842, and at that same time his brother Orson was also out of touch by virtue of his brief excommunication over the issue of polygamy.

13. George Q. Cannon, “Editorial Thoughts: The Book of Mormon Geography,” *Juvenile Instructor* 25/1 (1 January 1890): 18.

14. George D. Pyper, “The Book of Mormon Geography,” *The Instructor* 73 (April 1938): 160.

15. John A. Widtsoe, “Evidences and Reconciliations: Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” *The Improvement Era* 53 (July 1950): 547.

16. John A. Widtsoe, foreword to *Cumorah—Where?* by Thomas Stuart Ferguson (Oakland: Author, 1947).