

Did Lehi Land in Chile?

Frederick G. Williams

1 Nephi 18:23 “We did arrive at the promised land.”

From the earliest days of the Church, the site of Lehi’s landing in the New World has been a topic of discussion. Much of the debate has centered around the origin of a statement written by Frederick G. Williams, stating that Lehi “landed on the continent of South America in Chile thirty degrees south Latitude.”¹ This idea was so popular during the nineteenth century that Orson Pratt included it in his notes to the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon and in several other publications. Where did this idea come from? A recent comprehensive examination of the original documents yields some new answers.

Franklin D. Richards, it seems, was the first author to attribute the specific Williams statement to Joseph Smith and to revelation. In 1882, Richards published a statement nearly identical to the wording of Williams’s handwritten copy, adding the title “Lehi’s Travels—Revelation to Joseph the Seer.”

There is no solid historical evidence, however, attributing this statement to Joseph, let alone to revelation, and the assumption that such information was received by revelation is inconsistent with other evidence. An editorial in *Times and Seasons* gives another landing site for Lehi’s party: “Lehi . . . landed a little south of the Isthmus of Darien,”² or modern Panama. If Joseph had received a revelation concerning Lehi’s landing only a few years earlier (or if he knew of someone else’s receiving such a revelation), it is unlikely that he would have allowed this contradictory statement to be published. Given the variety and sparsity of statements about Book of Mormon geography during Joseph’s lifetime, it seems that, at least in his mind, the location of Lehi’s landing remained indefinite.

The Williams handwritten document is the prime source of information about its own origin. His statement about Lehi’s travels is found at the bottom of that sheet. The three items above it are separated by lines drawn across the page. Together, they give a possible context to the statement about Lehi’s travels. The first item on the sheet, known today as Doctrine and Covenants 7, is a revelation given to Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery regarding John the Beloved. It was received in 1829 and published in 1833. The second item is entitled “Questions in English, Answers in Hebrew.” It quotes from Jacob 5:13 (“For it grieveth me that I should loose [sic] this tree and the fruit thereof”) and 7:27 (“Brethren, I bid you adieu”), and then below each statement gives “An[swers],” translating the English into rough Hebrew. The third item, headed “characters on the book of Mormon” and “the interpretation of Languages,” gives two characters under each. The statement about Lehi’s travels is then the fourth item on the sheet.

It appears likely that these statements were part of what was being studied at the School of the Prophets in Kirtland, since the first three deal with translation. This idea is corroborated by another known document, virtually identical to the second and third items on the Williams paper, with the signature “written and kept for profit and learning—by Oliver.” The Cowdery paper, like the Williams document, appears to contain notes, written only for “profit and learning” as these men studied together in the School of the Prophets, sometimes held in the Kirtland Temple.

On the back of the Williams paper are other characters and a statement written by Ezra G. Williams, Frederick's son. It reads: "G. S. L. City, April 11, 1864. This paper is in the hand writing of my father, Fred G. Williams. The *characters* thereon I believe to be a representation of those shown to him at the dedication of the Kirtland Temple." This statement discloses several important facts: (1) While Ezra knows that the page is in his father's handwriting, (2) he only believes the characters had something to do with the dedication of the Kirtland Temple. (3) Nothing ties Ezra's statement on the back to any of the four items on the front (indeed, it makes no sense to link Doctrine and Covenants 7 from 1829 to the dedication of the Kirtland Temple in 1836). Furthermore, Ezra does not attribute the statement about Lehi's travels (4) to Joseph or (5) to revelation.

It is easy to understand, however, how the context of the statement on Lehi's travels could have been misunderstood. The error can possibly be traced innocently to the partial copy, made in 1845, of Joseph Smith's inspired translation of the Bible. John M. Bernhisel wrote the same statement on the last sheet of his copy, preceded by several blank pages. The isolated statement is given no context, heading, or comment, and it is not attributed to Joseph or anyone else. The mere fact that it was copied at the back of the Joseph Smith Translation, however, may have led people to assume that the Lehi statement was also an inspired statement by Joseph Smith. Bernhisel's source, however, appears to be the Williams document, since Bernhisel's copy has the identical wording and nearly the same spelling, capitalization, and punctuation as the Williams copy, with both misspelling the word "latitude."

As early as 1909, B. H. Roberts doubted that the statement about Lehi's travels came from Joseph Smith. Even before that, George Q. Cannon, First Counselor in the First Presidency, issued a statement in the *Juvenile Instructor* urging students of Book of Mormon geography to avoid contention and confusion, and to exercise caution in "drawing all the information possible from the record which has been translated for our benefit."³ If we had certain knowledge from a revelation of Book of Mormon geography, including Lehi's landing site, there would be neither speculation nor the need for such a caution. As it is, there is both.

This July 1988 Update, based on recent research by Frederick G. Williams III was followed by an extensive treatment of this topic by Williams, edited by John W. Welch and John L. Sorenson, entitled "Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1988). Further information may also be found in John L. Sorenson, "The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1990).

Footnotes

1. For full documentation, see Frederick G. Williams III, "Did Lehi Land in Chile? An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1988).

2. *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842): 922.

3. George Q. Cannon, "The Book of Mormon Geography," *Juvenile Instructor* 25 (January 1, 1890): 19.