

The Overall Configuration

In this and succeeding chapters it is important to keep in mind that we are trying to detect the Nephites' conception of their geography, not to identify actual physical settings that lay behind their ideas. We have no way to recover information on their real-world setting from the book; all we can hope to learn is what Mormon and those of his predecessors from whom he quotes "knew." Because the Book of Mormon writers processed information about their piece of the world through cultural lenses, we must carefully analyze their geographical statements and their implications in order to fully understand them. We will need to discern the geographical data they reveal in their statements, like a person who learns a foreign language by piecing together the tongue by listening alertly and repeatedly to what native speakers say. After much practice in the new language, patterns become second nature. The map that the Nephites used may seem odd to us, like a new language. Another people's conceptions of geography may be distorted by the participant's interests, experiences, and traditions: a Nephite might have cared little and known less about Lamanite territory in the land of Nephi but would have controlled a lot of detail about his own land of Zarahemla. (Consider those humorous maps of the United States "according to a New Yorker," in which the territory west of the Hudson River fades off quickly into a vague "West" that consists of little more than Chicago, Las Vegas, and Hollywood.) Our task will be to sift through the words left to us by Nephite writers in order to reconstruct the mental geography they shared.

What was the overall shape of Nephite and Lamanite lands?

We should begin with the clearest and fullest information in the Book of Mormon text, which comes from Alma 22:32. Mormon explained that "the land of Nephi and the land of Zarahemla," a combined unit constituting almost the entire land southward, "were nearly surrounded by water." This agrees with the statement in 2 Nephi 10:20: "We are upon an isle of the sea." (In the King James Version of the Bible and generally in the Book of Mormon, an "isle" was not necessarily completely surrounded by water; it was simply a place to which routine access was by sea, even though a traveler might reach it by a land route as well.)¹ There was "a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward" that "was only the distance of a day and a half's journey for a Nephite, on the line [that marked the boundary between] Bountiful and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea." The basic shape of the two lands and isthmus are seen on map 1.

No specific information is provided about the shape or extent of the land northward, but we can conclude from its being paired with the land southward (as in Helaman 6:10) that it expanded from the narrow neck to be roughly comparable in scale to the land southward. (See the next chapter for more on the land northward.)

The directional trend of the two lands and the neck was generally north-south. The east sea (six references) and the west sea (twelve references) were the primary bodies of water that bounded this promised land. But notice that the key term of reference is not "land north" (only five references) but "land northward" (thirty-one references). There is, of course, a distinction; "land northward" implies a direction somewhat off from literal north. This implication that the lands are not simply oriented to the cardinal directions is confirmed by reference to the "sea north" and "sea south" (Helaman 3:8). These terms are used only once, in reference to the colonizing of the land northward by the Nephites, but not in connection with the land southward. The only way to have seas north and south on a literal or descriptive basis would be for the two major bodies of land to be oriented at an angle somewhat off true north-south. That would allow part of the ocean to lie toward the south of one and another part of the ocean to lie toward north of the other.

What was the nature of the “narrow neck of land”?

An isthmus, “the place where the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20), connected the two major blocks of land. Alma 22:32 pictures “the land northward and the land southward” joined by “a small neck of land between.” In Alma 63:5 and elsewhere it is labeled the “narrow neck.” This isthmus had sea to the west and to the east (see Alma 50:34; 63:5; Helaman 4:7). These seas had to be the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, respectively, because Lehi₁ arrived from the Old World across the west sea (see Alma 22:28), and the party that brought Mulek from the land of Judah came “across the great waters” (Omni 1:16) to the “borders by the east sea.” The city of Mulek was located in that area and was presumably near the location where they first settled (see Alma 51:26).²

Because there were oceans on either side of the isthmus, a continental divide passed through it along its northward-southward axis. The land of Bountiful stretched across the isthmus. Its chief city, Bountiful, was virtually at sea level (shown by the adjacent beach reported in Alma 51:28, 32), which suggests that the entire isthmus was relatively low-lying as well.

How wide was this narrow neck? One historical anecdote makes clear that it was wide enough that a party passing through it could not detect seas on either side. Limhi’s explorers traveled northward from the land of Nephi trying to locate Zarahemla but wandered on through the narrow neck. When they returned home they thought they had been in the land southward the whole time. Actually, they had journeyed all the way through the neck to the zone of the Jaredites’ final battles (see Mosiah 8:8; 21:25). (Had there been any mountain near their route, they might have climbed it to reconnoiter, seen the sea, and reevaluated their position.) Later, however, after further exploration, the Nephites came to realize that the neck connected two major land masses. Still later, in the fourth century a.d. when Mormon prepared his account of Nephite history, it was well-known among his people that it was “the distance of a day and a half’s journey for a Nephite” across the isthmus (Alma 22:32). (See chapter 5 for what that statement might signify in terms of miles.)

Within the neck was what can only have been a specific geological structure called the “narrow pass” or “narrow passage” (Alma 50:34; 52:9; Mormon 2:29). It lay toward the east side of the isthmus, not in the center (see Alma 51:30, 32; 52:9).³ This feature was so focused and localized that the Nephite military leader Teancum positioned his army at the entrance to the pass, which was precisely the point where he knew fugitive Morianton and his people would head in order to get to the land northward (see Alma 50:34–35). No other route existed that allowed passage for a large group into the easterly side of the land northward, which is where the mass of Nephite colonists in the land northward apparently located. By holding this narrow pass, later Nephite forces could keep the Lamanites from getting “possession of any” of the Nephites’ lands northward (see Mormon 3:5–6). Subsequent events showed that those lands were exclusively on the eastern side.

Did the lands northward and southward together constitute the entire “promised land”?

Yes, in terms of Nephite thinking. Nephi₁ reported that his party “did arrive at the promised land” and “did call it the promised land” (1 Nephi 18:23). This landing point was in the land southward, “on the west in the land of Nephi, in the place of their fathers’ first inheritance . . . by the seashore” (Alma 22:28). But the Jaredites “did land upon the shore of the promised land” (Ether 6:12) in the land northward (see Ether 10:21).

That the two lands were conceived by the Nephites as a single “promised land” is underlined by the words of Captain Moroni, when he “named all the land which was south of the land Desolation, yea, and in fine, all the land, both on the north and on the south—A chosen land, and the land of liberty” (Alma 46:17).⁴ The essential unity of

the combined territory was reemphasized by events occurring shortly before the crucifixion of the Savior. Third Nephi 3 tells of the grave threat robber groups posed to the consolidated society of the righteous Nephites and Lamanites. The problem became so great that Lachoneus, the leader of the defenders, ordered his people to assemble “together their women, and their children, their flocks and their herds, and all their substance, save it were their land, unto one place” (3 Nephi 3:13). The proclamation to gather “had gone forth throughout all the face of the land,” directing the beleaguered believers to dwell “in one land and in one body” (3 Nephi 3:22, 25). The designated refuge zone proved to be small enough that enemy forces could surround and besiege it (see 3 Nephi 4:16). To that appointed spot in the northern portion of the land southward all the Nephites and their Lamanite supporters gathered from all parts of the land southward as well as from the colonies in the land northward (see 3 Nephi 3:23–24). Later, when the situation was resolved, these people “did return to their own lands and their possessions, both on the north and on the south, both on the land northward and on the land southward” (3 Nephi 6:2). This all makes sense only if they were talking about a unified settled territory, partly south of the narrow neck and partly to the north. Further confirmation that they considered the domain designated as “the promised land” to be relatively compact, continuous, and complete in itself comes from the finality and brevity of the statement in Helaman 6:10: “Now the land south was called Lehi, and the land north was called Mulek.” The preceding verses connote that when the Nephites referred to these paired lands, they meant nothing was left over—at least nothing that interested them.

The possibility exists that they knew of other lands but simply did not consider them relevant. For example, Nephites extensively colonized the land northward (see Alma 63:4, 9; Helaman 3:3–12), even to include part of the west sea coast. Yet the final military movements in the Nephites’ last decades occurred in an area within a limited distance of the narrow pass—the specific city and land of Desolation and lands nearby, including Cumorah, all of which were located toward the east sea side of the land northward. Nothing in Mormon’s account suggests any “ups” or “downs” within the Nephite land northward. The area of the Jaredite settlements and wars, on the other hand, encompassed major changes in elevation between the land of Moron and the more easterly areas of the land northward. It seems that the Nephites were simply not concerned with the uplands of the land northward, although they surely knew of their existence.

The Nephites’ interest was selective, we know. Take the case of the shipbuilder Hagoth. He provides an interesting footnote, but his colonization of the west coast of the land northward had little or no effect on Nephite history. Only four ships are actually mentioned, and the fate of two of those is left doubtful (see Alma 63:5–10), as is the fate of the colonists they bore northward. After heading by sea to the new colony to the north, Alma₂’s son Corianton seems not to have been heard from again, and Mormon’s account of the final Nephite decades omits any information about involvement of west-coast folks with the main body of Nephites. The possibility thus exists that some territories connected with what the Nephites conceived as the promised land proved neither interesting nor significant to the main history of that people. (Just as, for example, the history of Israel as recorded in the Old Testament ignores nearly all events in such close-at-hand areas as Arabia, Sinai, and Syria.)

If the Nephite writers knew of connecting lands northward or southward beyond what they considered the Nephite promised land, we have only ambiguous indication of the fact. Lehi₁’s blessing on his sons warned that “this land” would be kept “as yet” from a knowledge of other nations, but “when the time cometh that they shall dwindle in unbelief,” the Lord would “bring other nations unto them” (2 Nephi 1:8, 10, 11). That sounds as if other groups were just off stage but would show up no later than when the Nephites were exterminated. The Jaredite prophet Ether knew “concerning a New Jerusalem [to be built] upon this land” (Ether 13:4; see 13:6, 8), which we interpret these days to refer to North America, but he did not relate the area he envisioned to events among his own people or the Nephites. The Savior prophesied of the same future city “in this land” (3 Nephi 20:22), although

the great destruction of cities his voice proclaimed in 3 Nephi 9 can be identified as occurring in the lands southward or northward or else are plausibly associated with them. (But at least some of the Nephite prophets seem to have understood that the original promised land, and its promises, could be extended to encompass more distant territory, probably in the same manner as we use “America” to refer not only to the United States but also to North and South America together).

Mormon’s expression in Alma 22:32 about the land southward being “nearly” surrounded by water leaves the possibility open that southward from the Lamanites and northward from the Nephite zones, connecting lands existed, even though they might not be discussed in the history contained in Mormon’s record. The record mentions no specific lands or cities that lay southward beyond the land of Nephi or the land of first inheritance. At the northerly extremity of Nephite holdings, relationships are also left vague. Dissidents under a man named Jacob at one time fled to “the northernmost part of the land” (3 Nephi 7:12). They would not have gone far, however, for their intention was to accumulate strength there in order to return and seize control of the main Nephite lands from which they had fled. Moreover, when the voice of the Lord announced that Jacob’s city, Jacobugath, had been destroyed in the great catastrophe, it was listed as simply one among the cities destroyed in the overall promised land, not as though it lay at some great distance. While the possibility cannot be ruled out that land stretched farther north than “the northernmost part,” we must suppose that whatever was there was of no interest to the Nephite historians or was beyond the range of their knowledge. Thus on both the north and south extremities, we end up marking any reconstructed Nephite map “unknown.”

Where were the major ethnic, social, or political groups based in the promised land?

Shortly before their demise, the Nephites were driven entirely out of the land southward (see Mormon 2:29), but in preceding centuries their heartland had been the northern part of that land. Mormon summarized their distribution in the crucial and most fully reported middle era (see Alma 22:27–29, 33–34). The Lamanite king’s domain stretched from the capital city, Lehi-Nephi, “even to the sea, on the east and on the west.” The main block of this territory lay southward of Nephite holdings, although some Lamanites “were spread through the wilderness on the west, in the land of Nephi” from “the place of their fathers’ first inheritance” northward along the west coast of the land of Zarahemla “even until they came to the land . . . Bountiful.” That extension along the west sea coast was matched on the east sea side of the land of Zarahemla; there, we are told, Lamanites inhabited a strip of wilderness that extended northward along the coast as far as the land Bountiful. Thus at this point in time the Nephite land of Zarahemla was surrounded on three sides by Lamanites. (See map 2.) But under Captain Moroni in the early part of the last century B.C., the Nephites expelled the Lamanite squatters along both coasts, driving them southward into the land of Nephi proper that was the traditional Lamanite possession (see Alma 50:7–11).

The main Nephite stronghold in the center of the land along the river Sidon was separated from the Lamanites by “a narrow strip of wilderness” (Alma 22:27); it was composed of rugged mountains within which lay the headwaters of the river Sidon. The Nephites sat in the land of Zarahemla, just northward from that transverse strip of wilderness and southward from the narrow neck, like a cork in a bottle. The expansionist Lamanite rulers kept up pressure on them from the south, but the Nephite defenders held them off for a long time by inhabiting “the land Bountiful [and Zarahemla], even from the east unto the west sea . . . that thereby [the Lamanites] should have no more possession on the north” of what they then held. Nephite strategy was to keep their enemies “hemmed in” so that “they might not overrun the land northward” (Alma 22:33). The Nephites wanted to be able, if worst came to worst, to “have a country [the land northward] whither they might flee” (Alma 22:34). Conversely, the Lamanite leaders were obsessed with finding a way to pop the cork and gain access to the land northward in order to surround their traditional enemies completely and thus “have power to harass them on every side” (Alma

52:9). The Lamanite-Nephite wars, which went on for centuries, from Benjamin's day (see Omni 1:24) to Mormon's (see Mormon 5), turned on the key geographical fact that the Nephites held a relatively secure position in their Zarahemla heartland as long as they could blunt the Lamanite probes and keep them from reaching the neck. Amalickiah was almost successful on the east coast, getting within a few miles of the land northward (see Alma 52:27–28). Coriantumr₂ led a disastrous Lamanite assault through the middle of the land of Zarahemla, which proved that this route merely played to Nephite strength (see Helaman 1:18, 22–27; compare Alma 60:19). Lamanite armed excursions along the west sea coast were no more successful in reaching the coveted isthmus (see Alma 16:2; 49:1–9).

If the explanation of the keys to Nephite geography seems thus far cast in unduly military terms, keep in mind that our account comes through Mormon, a military commander and strategist through all his adult life. He saw clearly that the problems faced by Captain Moroni and other earlier Nephite commanders in protecting their people against the Lamanite invaders were essentially the same as those that faced him four centuries later. The strategic geography had not changed over the generations, and the problems it posed were in the forefront of his thinking all his life. Mormon's mental map of the promised land was a military one, so as we reconstruct it we must frequently refer to the intricate Nephite-Lamanite military history.

Where were the Jaredites located?

The Jaredites' major settlement area was the land northward (see Ether 10:20–21). From shortly after their landing on the coast (whether they came by the east sea or the west sea is not clear, but the latter seems somewhat more likely), their political center was the land of Moron, and it remained crucial until the end of their history (see Ether 7:5–6, 11; 12:1; 14:6, 11). Moroni₂ reports that the land of Moron was in the land northward "near" (Ether 7:6) the land that the Nephites called Desolation. The final Jaredite wars were fought in the same Cumorah area as the final Nephite battle (see Ether 9:3). We are also told that the Jaredites built a great city at the narrow neck of land, yet they did not (at least not specifically) settle in the land southward (see Ether 10:20; see also 9:31–35).

Where did the Mulekites settle?

The city of Mulek was in the borders by the east sea. We can suppose that this was one of the Mulekites' earliest settlements (note that the Nephites named cities after their original founder, and the Mulekites probably did the same; see Alma 8:7). Further, the Mulek group discovered the final Jaredite ruler, Coriantumr₁, shortly after the Jaredites' final struggle, and that had to have taken place near the east sea (see Omni 1:21; Ether 9:3). The Mulek party is reported to have first arrived in the land northward (see Helaman 6:10), then some of their descendants "came from there up" to where the Nephites found them, in and around the city of Zarahemla on the upper Sidon River (Alma 22:30–31; see Helaman 6:10).

Summary

The Nephites, including Mormon, conceived of the lands of concern to them as centered in the isthmian zone that connected two larger territories, the land northward and the land southward. The land southward was "nearly surrounded" (Alma 22:32) by ocean waters, and the land northward was also bounded by oceans; the original immigrant parties arrived from the Old World across these waters. The Nephite writers did not see their land of promise as merely a segment within and surrounded by a continental land mass, and we shall establish later that the dimensions of their geographical picture were far smaller than those of any continent.

While all details of the configuration of lands cannot be settled definitively from the statements we have available, what is said fits together consistently if we consider the basic shape of the lands to be rather like an hourglass.

Notes

1. See, for example, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, s.v. "island," meaning 1a. The Hebrew term read in English as "isles of the sea" was used in the Bible to denote any lands that were "washed by the sea," including both the islands and coasts of the Mediterranean Sea (see LDS Bible Dictionary, 707), even when land access to those existed. Also see B. H. Roberts, "Remarks on the Foregoing Article," *The Improvement Era* 7 (February 1904): 267–79. Before Columbus's day, a Moorish noble referred to the Iberian peninsula as "this Island of Spain." L. P. Harvey, "Yuse Banegas: Un Moro noble en Granada bajo Los Reyes Católicos," *Al-Andalus* 21 (1956): 301.

2. They also encountered Jaredite survivor Coriantumr near the east sea (see Omni 1:21; compare Ether 9:3; 15:11).

3. The easterly position of the narrow pass is confirmed in references to the position of Teancum. It "lay in the borders by the seashore; and it was also near the city Desolation (Mormon 4:3; see 4:2). In fact, it was adjacent to the city Desolation, which was at the narrow pass (see Mormon 3:5–6; 4:6–8, 13–14). Thus the city Desolation and the narrow pass were just one city away from the borders by the seashore, apparently only a short march distant. (While no statement is made that this was the east seashore, the geographical context points consistently toward that location but never toward the west seashore.)

4. Someone might claim that Moroni¹ was designating by these words all of North and South America, but the context provided by his situation and concern at the moment when he made the statement confirms the narrower meaning.