

# The Surface of the Land

Each time we seek to discover what the Book of Mormon says on a new topic, we essentially have to comb the whole text anew, because it is not possible for a person to focus on many objectives at one time. Now that we have established the broad configuration of Nephite lands in chapter 3, we will next examine what the account tells us concerning topography—the relative elevations of portions of the land—and the closely associated data on bodies of water and streams.

Since the Book of Mormon account is historical, its geographical data come from different periods of time. The Nephites' mental map would have changed somewhat—matured or filled in—over time. The notions held by Nephi<sub>1</sub> and his brother Jacob in the sixth century B.C. would have been limited and incomplete compared with the geographical knowledge of Alma<sub>2</sub> centuries later. Mormon, of course, could draw on all the Nephite records from the past, and his own extensive travels gave him unparalleled firsthand knowledge of geography. Because Mormon is the source of most of the language in the record as we have it, we can suppose he resolved any geographical inconsistencies that were due to lack of knowledge on the part of earlier writers. (We wish that Moroni<sub>2</sub> had done as much for us in regard to the geography of the book of Ether, but he left many questions unanswered in his brief treatment.)

When we read the record, we must keep in mind that some terminology changed over time. The land of Zarahemla, for example, is not the same area throughout the Book of Mormon. In the book of Omni, the name was applied only to a local area around the city of Zarahemla (see 1:13; Mosiah 1:10; 2:1). By the time Alma<sub>2</sub> made his missionary circuit to Gideon, Melek, Ammonihah, and Sidom, a major part of the Sidon River basin was included in the land of Zarahemla, and a little later the borders by the east sea also came under the umbrella term “land of Zarahemla” (see Alma 50:7, 11).

## **What were the main variations in elevation in the land southward?**

The land of Zarahemla was well above sea level; Mormon's basic sketch of the geography says that from the first landing place of the people of Zarahemla, which would have been at sea level, “they came from there up into the south wilderness” (Alma 22:30–31), where Mosiah<sub>1</sub> found them (see Omni 1:13–14). That is a fairly obvious but little noted point; the river Sidon at the city of Zarahemla was not far distant from its headwaters, so it still had a long way to flow—downhill—before it reached the sea (see Alma 22:27; 50:11; 56:25).

When we compare what the record says about the two major segments of the land southward, a major topographic contrast comes to light. The Nephite possessions in the land of Zarahemla are distinctly and consistently said to be lower in elevation than Lamanite-occupied highland Nephi. The book of Omni first shows this when it reports the Nephites' discovery of the people of Zarahemla: “Mosiah, . . . being warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken unto the voice of the Lord . . . , came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla” (1:12–13). Shortly after, “a certain number . . . went up into the wilderness to return to the land of Nephi” (Omni 1:27). This relationship is reaffirmed dozens of times. (The pattern of referring to topography in terms of “up” and “down” had, of course, been manifested from the beginning of Nephi<sub>1</sub>'s record; his family went “down” from the Jerusalem area to near the shores of the Red Sea [1 Nephi 2:5], and he and his brothers later returned “up” to Jerusalem [1 Nephi 3:9].)

The difference in elevation between the two major territorial divisions—Zarahemla of the Nephites and Nephi of the Lamanites—is again shown in the account of a party who went to the land of Nephi to find out what had happened to the people of Zeniff. Zeniff’s group had been gone for decades, and now the search party “knew not the course they should travel in the wilderness to go up . . . therefore they wandered many days in the wilderness” (Mosiah 7:4). The sons of Mosiah<sub>2</sub> and their companions faced similar hardship traversing the same route (see Alma 17:5–8). The abrupt topographic contrast travelers faced led the Nephite writers to use the specific expression “narrow strip of wilderness” (Alma 22:27) to label this transitional stretch. The “head [waters] of the river Sidon” lay within this rugged mountain band (Alma 22:29; 43:22).

The primary land of Nephi was also consistently “up” in relation to the seas on either side. The east sea formed one boundary for the general land of Nephi (see Alma 22:27). From the Lamanite capital, the city of Nephi, the Lamanite army came down to attack the city of Moroni beside the east sea (see Alma 51:11, 22). On the western side of the land of Nephi a progression of lands staircased from the coast upward: from the Lamanite king’s unnamed homeland near the sea, to Shemlon, to Shilom, and then to the local land of Nephi (see Mosiah 20:7, 9; 24:1–2). Highland Nephi remained the Lamanite base from which they launched most of their attacks on the Nephites from the days of King Benjamin (see Omni 1:24) to the time of Mormon five hundred years later (see Mormon 1:10; 3:7). Naturally enough, the topography of the uplands of the land of Nephi was broken. Alma<sub>1</sub> and his party were able to escape discovery for a number of years in a mountain valley that they called the land of Helam. Eventually they were discovered by an army of Lamanite soldiers who could not find their way back to their base at the city of Nephi. Wandering about, these lost Lamanites accidentally stumbled on two isolated peoples: the Amulonites, who also did not know how to get to Nephi, and then Alma<sub>1</sub>’s folks.

A strip of wilderness paralleled the west sea coast all the way from the land of first inheritance on the southerly extremity, where Lehi<sub>1</sub> and his family first landed, to near the narrow neck (see Alma 22:28–29). Forested coastal lowlands as well as a mountain range must have constituted that wilderness. That area was apparently not occupied by Nephites, for the record tells of no settlements there. They considered it occupied only by barbaric Lamanites who had filtered up from the south, and even when the Lamanites living there were eliminated (see Alma 50:11), the Nephites failed to settle that western strip seriously until near the end of their history. The text names no Nephite lands there until Mormon’s day, when the retreating Nephites occupied a land called Joshua at the northerly end of the west strip (see Mormon 2:6).

### **What are the distinguishing features of the topography of the land of Zarahemla?**

Just inland from the west coastal strip rose a mountain chain that formed the west side of the basin of the one major river talked about in the Book of Mormon, the Sidon. That basin was a major feature of the landscape in the land southward. The river’s headwaters, as we have seen, were up in the rugged mountains that separated the lands of Zarahemla and Nephi.

The east side of the river basin was formed by elevated lands of which the mountain valley or land of Gideon was part (see Alma 2:17–20; 6:7). The rise on the east side of the river was quite abrupt; according to Alma 2:15, the river Sidon ran “by,” not through, the land of Zarahemla, implying that most of the Nephite settlements were west of the river. No named cities are mentioned on the east side of the Sidon within the land of Zarahemla proper except for Gideon. This picture of higher land lying close on the east side of the river is also suggested by Alma 15:18. From the land of Sidom (which was likely on the river, given the similarity of the names Sidom and Sidon, plus the emphasis on baptizing there), Alma<sub>2</sub> and Amulek ended their preaching and “came over to the [local] land of Zarahemla.” Since there is no hint elsewhere in the text of an elevation between Sidom and Zarahemla that

would account for the use of “over” if their route had been along or west of the river, it appears that they climbed up from the river, passed through the eastern upland, and then descended to reach the city of Zarahemla. Farther upstream the same situation of traveling southward over an elevation east of the river can be seen. Both the cities of Zarahemla and Manti lay beside the Sidon River, yet the regular route between the two detoured through the mountain valley of Gideon, as shown by Mosiah 22:11, 13; Alma 17:1; 27:16.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, from the land of Zarahemla a person “went” over (Alma 30:19; traveling the opposite direction a person “came” over, 35:13) an intervening elevation to reach Jershon in the lowland borders by the east sea; logically the elevation that was surmounted would have constituted the easterly side of the Sidon basin. These journeyings and the silence of the record about Nephite settlements on the east of the river confirm that the Sidon basin closed in directly on the east side of the stream.

On the west side of the river Sidon there was more open space. For example, to go westward from Zarahemla to the land of Melek, Alma<sub>2</sub> took “his journey over into” the latter land (see Alma 8:3–5). This sounds like a more involved trip than going to Gideon on the east side, which was no more than a day distant (see Alma 6:7; see also 2:15–20). Also on the west, adjacent to the wilderness that bounded the land of Zarahemla on the west, were the cities of Ammonihah and Noah (see Alma 8:6; 15:1; 49:12). Judea and the southwest frontier cities of Cumeni, Zeezrom, and Antiparah (see Alma 56:13–14, 25, 31) were also west of the big river, in the southwestern quadrant of the land of Zarahemla. Clearly, most of the territory the Nephites had settled in the land of Zarahemla lay west of the Sidon River.

When we realize that a river basin formed the core of the land of Zarahemla, a number of other statements in Mormon’s record become clear. For instance, the people of Ammon, whom the Lamanites wanted to destroy, were placed in the land of Melek so that they would need no special military protection. Evidently, the Nephites considered that spot to offer maximum safety from enemy attack (see Alma 35:10–13). Why so? It was located “on the west of the river Sidon, on the west by the borders of the wilderness” (Alma 8:3). Twice Lamanite armies passed northward along the west coast wilderness strip, undetected and unopposed by Nephite forces, it seems. Both times they came “in upon the wilderness side” (Alma 16:2; see 49:1, 12) to target the city of Ammonihah, crossing “over” (Alma 25:2) the western edge of the Sidon basin from the west sea coast. Why did the Lamanites not cross “over” to attack the hated, undefended people of Ammon in Melek, three days’ journey to the south of Ammonihah (see Alma 8:6)? The only evident reason is that the west wilderness was such a difficult barrier in the Melek area that the Lamanites did not consider an attack feasible. The mountains forming the western edge of the basin must have constituted a high, wide barrier through which there was no practical access near Melek.

We learn of two crossing points—mountain passes—between the west sea and the interior land of Zarahemla: (1) the one near Ammonihah, which the Lamanites twice sneaked through without being detected (the Nephites must have considered an attack there so unlikely that it did not occur to them to keep a regular watch), and (2) an access in the extreme southwestern quarter of the land. At this second point Helaman<sub>1</sub> and his 2060 young warriors lured the Lamanites out of the fortress city of Antiparah by appearing to skirt it “as if we were going to the city beyond, in the borders by the seashore” (Alma 56:31). Helaman<sub>1</sub>’s men had come southward from their homeland in Melek to reinforce Judea, then had ascended past the cities of Zeezrom and Cumeni to reach Antiparah, the westernmost outpost held at that moment by the Lamanites (and apparently sited at or near the summit). Immediately westward lay the southern pass, from which the route descended to the city by the seashore (see Alma 56:31–32). Nowhere between this southern pass and the one near Ammonihah does there appear to have been any other established route through the mountain chain. The Ammonites in Melek were thus in a perfectly secure position behind the western mountain rampart. All this must have been so plain to Mormon that he saw no point in giving his readers further geographical explanation about the basin’s obvious structure.

The existence of a pass into the basin near the city of Ammonihah explains another historical situation. During their final retreat under the command of young Mormon, the Nephites were unable to find any strategic position within the relatively open land of Zarahemla to block their Lamanite assailants (see Mormon 2:2–5). They gained an advantage, however, when they moved out of the basin into “the land of Joshua, which was in the borders west by the seashore” (Mormon 2:6). Joshua was on the seaward side of the mountain pass the Lamanites had gone “over” centuries before. At this point the Nephites were able to hold the Lamanite armies back for fourteen years. The reason quite surely was that the Lamanites were unable to break out of the newly conquered land of Zarahemla, the Sidon basin, through the heavily defended pass to get at the main body of Nephites in Joshua down in the coastal borders.

Finally, when we appreciate the fact that the relatively isolated and defensible Sidon basin formed the Nephite homeland, Captain Moroni’s angry words to Pahoran<sub>1</sub> make sense. Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s armies had been fighting a bruising war along the east coast of the Nephite domain while Helaman<sub>2</sub>’s armies had been repelling the enemy threat in the southwest. Commander in chief Moroni<sub>1</sub> wrote a harsh letter to the chief judge, Pahoran<sub>1</sub>, demanding support for the war effort out on the actual battle fronts. Among his charges he wrote, “Is it that ye have neglected us because ye are in the heart of our country and ye are surrounded by security?” (Alma 60:19). We have seen that the people in the capital city indeed had reasons—geographical reasons—for supposing that they were secure in their basin stronghold.

For a comprehensive view of the topography see the map Physical Features on the inside back cover of the book.

### **How did “the borders by the east sea” relate to the land of Zarahemla?**

The most attractive route for the Lamanites who aimed to capture the narrow neck lay along the east sea coast. (We shall see in a later chapter that the shortest distance for them to traverse was along the east sea.) What is said about the military action in that sector contributes to our knowledge of the topography. Not long after Moroni<sub>1</sub> became the Nephites’ military commander (see Alma 43:16–17), he was so concerned about the vulnerability of this area that he “caused that his armies should go forth into the east wilderness . . . and [they] drove all the Lamanites who were in the east wilderness into their own lands, which were south of the land of Zarahemla” (Alma 50:7). One reason for Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s concern had to have been that this coastal area was wide enough that it was hard to defend against a northward Lamanite attack that would ultimately target the narrow neck. Moroni<sub>1</sub> sent settlers to settle, farm, and garrison the area that had just been cleared of Lamanite squatters, and as part of this effort, he constructed a series of fortified “instant cities.” He also installed fortifications farther south, along a “line between the Nephites and the Lamanites” (see Alma 50:9–11). Clearly, he was dealing with a sizable territory that was quite unlike the narrow pass at the neck, where defenders could easily focus on an area small enough to allow them to intercept an attack (see Alma 50:34). Sure enough, when Amalickiah’s Lamanite army did attack (see Alma 51:22–26), they had enough maneuvering options to break through Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s defense scheme. The coastal plain was sufficiently wide that the Lamanite army could drive forward “down by the seashore” while bypassing Nephite strong points farther inland: Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s base camp and the city of Jershon, and perhaps the city of Nephihah (see Alma 51:25).<sup>2</sup> Amalickiah’s attack route can be seen on map 3.

The width of this coastal territory is made clear in another incident, the flight of Morianton and Teancum’s pursuit of him (see Alma 50:33–35). The accounts of Moroni<sub>1</sub>’s defenses and Teancum’s pursuit agree that at least two bands of settlements and trails paralleled the shoreline. Morianton’s group followed a route toward the narrow

pass nearer the coast, only to discover that Teancum's force had beaten them to their destination by going a wholly different way. The geography of the Morianton incident is shown on map 4.

The best confirmation of the sizable scale of the borders by the east sea comes from Helaman 4. Lamanite armies drove the Nephites "into the land Bountiful," but after a time the Nephites counterattacked and regained "even the half of all their [traditional] possessions" (Helaman 4:6, 10, 16). The prophet-brothers Nephi<sub>2</sub> and Lehi<sub>2</sub> then proceeded to work through the reconquered territory from the north, preaching repentance as they went. Beginning at the city Bountiful, the pair went through Gid, Mulek, and "from one city to another, until they had gone forth among all the people of Nephi who were in the land southward" (see Helaman 5:14–16). That is, when taken together with the land of Bountiful, the lands possessed by the Nephites in what they called the borders by the east sea actually constituted half of their original land-southward possessions. Clearly, the lowlands toward the east sea were a large stretch of real estate. The theater for all this action could not have been a strip of land only, say, five or ten miles in width; it had to have been thirty or forty miles across to make these statements credible.

The nature of the area between the coastal "borders by the east sea" and the mountainous "narrow strip of wilderness" is unclear in the Book of Mormon text, but it involves an important question: Why were the Nephites not concerned about the Lamanites' attacking their homeland by coming out of the wilderness to the south of the lands of Jershon and Moroni and to the east of Manti? Alma 43:22–24 lays out the question. Lamanite armies under one Zerahemnah intended to attack the people of Ammon, who then lived in the land of Jershon, but they were foiled by the armor with which Moroni<sub>1</sub> outfitted the Nephite defenders. Not daring to face such odds, they "departed out of the land of Antionum," their base near the east sea, "into the [east] wilderness, and took their journey round about in the wilderness, away by the head of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti and take possession of the land" (Alma 43:22). Spies followed them for a distance and reported to Moroni<sub>1</sub> where they seemed to be headed. The Lamanites' trek to the new target "round about in the wilderness" (Alma 43:24) took them a long time, for Moroni<sub>1</sub> had time to send messengers to the prophet Alma<sub>2</sub> in Zarahemla to ask him for a revelation on the precise enemy objective, receive the response, then march an army from the east lowlands through the land of Zarahemla to the Manti area, where he laid a trap (see Alma 43:23–25). The likely relationships are displayed on map 5.

On the basis of information about the distances involved in these maneuvers, we can say that the Lamanite march "round about in the wilderness" took weeks. They were in no hurry; they assumed the Nephites would not know where they were headed anyway (see Alma 43:22). But could they not have found a shorter way to get at the Nephite homeland? Why couldn't they have moved from Antionum straight to Gideon and then gone down to Zarahemla in much shorter order? The only reason apparent is that "the wilderness" they were traversing, or skirting, was effectively impassable. Any route they took had to go over a major elevation to get from the eastern lowlands to either Zarahemla or Manti (see Alma 43:25). That barrier had to be the mountainous zone forming the easterly side of the Sidon basin. Judging by travel time, the one way through or around that eastern stretch of wilderness was wide as well as rugged. A statement from Helaman<sub>2</sub> to Moroni<sub>1</sub> understandably emphasizes that the Lamanites saw no viable targets between Manti and the east sea borders (see Alma 56:25; see also 43:25–26; 59:5–6).

This geographical situation explains why the Lamanite aggressors never made any attempt to penetrate that intimidating wilderness southeast of Zarahemla in order to mount an attack on the capital. For an army, it must have been too tough an ecological nut to crack. The Nephite heartland could count on a natural barrier to shield them from any serious threat from that direction. Combined with the natural mountain barriers that protected

their land on their south and west, this wilderness zone in the southeasterly direction helped confer on the Nephites in the center a feeling of complacency about their safety (see Helaman 1:18; Alma 60:19).

### **What was the course of the Sidon River?**

There is convincing reason to suppose that the Sidon reached the sea on the east side of the land southward. It was at least two hundred miles long and located in a tropical environment; thus surely it had a substantial flow. We would expect such a sizable stream to have developed something of a delta where it reached the sea. A delta would explain how such a wide stretch of lowland came into being on the borders by the east sea. When Moroni<sup>1</sup> drove Lamanite inhabitants out of the area along the east sea and established garrison cities (see Alma 50:7, 9–11), he focused on fortifying along a defense “line” (Alma 50:11) against anticipated Lamanite attacks. That line logically had a physical basis; it could well have been one of the branch distribution channels by which the waters of the Sidon reached the sea. No comparable piece of coastal land is indicated on the west coast. Quite surely the Sidon did not flow to the west sea, because to the west, we have seen, a mountain range ran—the one that protected the land of Melek. This means that the continental divide was also on the west side. The divide separated streams—likely quite steep and small—that drained into the sea west, the Pacific Ocean, from tributaries of the Sidon River that flowed eastward into the Atlantic.

### **What can be said about the surface structure of the land northward?**

The Nephite record offers limited information about the land northward. The Jaredite record might potentially tell us more, but because we are not clear on all the ways to connect the Nephite and Jaredite maps, we can make only limited use of the geographical information in the book of Ether.

Important geographical facts that Mormon knew about the land northward fail to come through clearly in his record for what seems to me three reasons: (1) While Mormon produced the Book of Mormon in the land northward (see Mormon 6:6), his last few years were highly stressful, so he paid minimal attention to geography. That information would not make any difference to his final message. (2) He may have had a limited supply of unused metal plates and may thus have been reluctant to discuss such details. (3) He was a native of the area where he then lived (see Mormon 1:1–6), and natives of an area are inclined to feel it unnecessary to explain what is obvious to them about that area.

The land northward as characterized in the book of Ether was consistently divided into two politically rivalrous parts. If we had a more detailed text, we might be able to make sure that the division was geographically based, but still that notion makes sense. One part under certain rulers was considered “up”—in elevated terrain—while a rival occupied another portion in lowlands.

The land of Moron (no city is ever mentioned) was the Jaredite capital area, “the land of their first inheritance” (Ether 7:16), “where the king dwelt” (Ether 7:5–6). From some Jaredite lands one went “up” to Moron (Ether 7:5; 14:11); at other times coming to or from Moron required travel “over” some elevated feature (see Ether 7:4–5; 9:3, 9).

At times the realm described in Ether’s record was divided in two. For example, Ether 7:16–20 reports, “The country was divided; and there were two kingdoms.” Jared rebelled against his father, King Omer, and “came and dwelt in the land of Heth” (Ether 8:2), where he gained control of half the kingdom and made his father captive (see Ether 8:3). Restored to rule by loyal sons, Omer was later forced to flee from Moron to the east seashore (see

Ether 9:3, discussed below). Ether 10:20; 14:3, 6–7, 11–12, 26; 15:8–11 relate in a complicated way to further show the contrast between upland and lowland. The elevation difference coupled with the division of the land into political halves suggests a continuing environmental and geographical basis for rivalry, probably highlands versus lowlands. The references given show that the lowlands were on the east sea side, while the higher elevation was toward the west sea.

There was, however, a hilly area within the east lowlands near the east sea. Omer's journey took "many days" (Ether 9:3), which suggests a route that was indirect, since Moron was also "near" the land Desolation (Ether 7:6). We are further told that in the course of his trip he "passed by the hill of Shim" and then "came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed," that is, Cumorah (Ether 9:3). Mormon explained that the retreating Nephites arrived at the hill Shim before they got to Cumorah, indicating that Shim is on the south of Cumorah (see Mormon 4:20–23; compare 6:2–4). Map 6 displays how this information in the text fits together into a consistent picture in relation to the topography.

An obvious physical principle supports the concept that higher lands lay to the west. Notable bodies of water were found in parts of the lowland area not far from the east sea. The waters of Ripliancum, a name meaning "large" or "to exceed all," barred the way northward for the army of Coriantumr<sup>1</sup> in the closing days of the Jaredites' final wars (see Ether 15:7–10). From there the hill Ramah, the same place the Nephites called Cumorah (see Ether 9:3; 15:11), was only one day away southward (see Ether 15:10–11). Mormon's description of the Cumorah/Ramah area told of "many waters, rivers, and fountains" (Mormon 6:4). Where did all this water come from? Clearly, much of it had to be runoff from highlands that were, logically, to the west. That westward area included the land of Moron. We have already seen that the high mountains forming the continental divide in the land southward lay near that land's west coast, and it makes geological sense that in the land north from the isthmus the higher areas would also be toward the west.

Two bits of information from the Nephite record confirm the picture of the western part of the land northward being elevated. First, consider the geographical situation within the narrow neck of land. According to the text, only one route allowed large groups to travel from south to north through the neck—via the narrow passage, which was near sea level and not far from the east sea (see Alma 50:25, 29, 31–34; 51:25–26, 30, 32; 52:9). Yet the neck was wide enough for Limhi's explorers to pass through without detecting the presence of either sea. Why could groups not pass into the land northward at a point farther west than the narrow passage? It could well have been because the western side of the isthmus was bounded on the north by a mountain barrier, the southern rampart of the highlands that contained the land of Moron.

The presence of western highlands in the land northward is also confirmed by Hagoth's shipping activity. The settlers who migrated from the land of Zarahemla to the eastern part of the land northward simply "went forth unto the land northward" (Helaman 3:3) "and even . . . did spread forth" (Helaman 3:5; see 3:8). This progressive overland migration, or continuous "spread," no doubt traversed the narrow pass; movements mentioned in Alma 63:4 and 9 also appear to have been overland. Nothing is said nor hinted of the use of shipping along the east sea coast, but we are pointedly informed that along the west sea side, Hagoth and others built ships to move colonists northward (see Alma 63:5–8, 10; Helaman 3:10). Why the difference? It is reasonable to suppose that the west highlands of the land northward extended to the sea and that thus no suitable land route northward existed along the west coast. Furthermore, a highland zone in the western land northward likely meant that few desirable sites for settlement existed along that coast, for the elevated zone would have kept the moist northeast trade winds of the tropics from reaching the west coast. The lack of timber indicated in the Hagoth account (see Helaman 3:10) further indicates that the west coast colonies in the land northward were only marginally viable. If the western

highland zone stretched to near the west sea so that no feasible coastal land route existed, this could explain the use of ships.

In any case, those colonies had little long-term impact on Nephite consciousness: the people in the south did not even know what happened to the ships; Alma's son Corianton traveled there only to drop out of sight historically; and none of the west coast colonies are indicated to have been involved in the final wars of the Nephites, all of which took place in the eastern lowlands (see Alma 63:8, 10, 11; Mormon 2:16–6:6).

A unique feature of the land northward is the hilly area (no "mountain" is identified there) near the east sea. It included the hills Cumorah and Shim of the Nephites, and what the Jaredites called hill Comnor and adjacent valleys of Corihor and Shurr (see Mormon 6:4, 11; Ether 9:3; 14:28).

Unfortunately, the information Moroni<sub>2</sub> gives us in his abridgement of Ether's account (see Ether 1:1–5), where we might hope to learn about land northward topography, is too brief to allow us to establish more than a partial connection with Nephite geography. Moroni<sub>2</sub> specifically identified the hill Ramah with his hill Cumorah (see Ether 9:3; 15:11). Also, the narrow neck of land and by implication the narrow pass were features of the Jaredite lowland sector that Moroni<sub>2</sub> tied to Nephite geography (see Ether 9:32–33; 10:20).

Moroni<sub>2</sub> also said that the land of Moron was "near" (Ether 7:6) the land of Desolation that he and his father knew well. However, the term "near" is somewhat puzzling, since, as noted earlier, Jaredite king Omer's journey from Moron past Cumorah and to the east seashore was said to take "many days" (Ether 9:3). (The route he followed must have been circuitous.) In any case, nothing Mormon or Moroni<sub>2</sub> said in their own records suggests that Nephites they knew of or cared about settled in or had anything to do with the Moron of the Jaredites in the highlands.

Jaredite territory in the land northward was not very extensive. The story of the end of Ether's ministry underlines that fact. In the days of King Coriantumr, who reigned "over all the land" (Ether 12:1), Ether's prophesying was rejected, and the prophet had to flee from Moron to a "cavity of a rock" (Ether 13:13–14, 18). That rude shelter served as his base while he made the remainder of his record. He got his information on the final wars of his people by "viewing the destructions which came upon the people, by night" (Ether 13:14); somehow he "did behold all the doings of the people" (Ether 15:13). Perhaps this wording means that he had informants, for he himself could not have visited all the battlefields on an overnight basis. He might have been shown visions. (How else could he have learned the details of the final struggle between Shiz and Coriantumr<sub>1</sub>, as told in Ether 15:29–32? The only other option would be that Coriantumr<sub>1</sub> himself related that story to the Mulekites [see Omni 1:21], whose record of what Coriantumr<sub>1</sub> told them came to Moroni<sub>2</sub>'s attention by the time Moroni<sub>2</sub> was working on the book of Ether.) Finally the Lord told Ether to "go forth," and Ether saw that the destruction he had prophesied had indeed come to pass (see Ether 15:33).

Thus we are left with a broad outline and some particular intimations about the topography and waterways of the land northward, but we cannot solve more than a portion of that puzzle.

## Summary

The land surfaces and bodies of water in the Nephites' land of promise as pictured in Mormon's text come through with high consistency. The overall treatment makes complete sense in terms of the principles of geography and the



natural sciences. The proposition that Mormon had a clear-cut map in his mind as he produced the Book of Mormon is strongly supported, even though it is frustrating that certain clarifying details are omitted.

The southerly portion of the land southward, the overall land of Nephi, was predominantly highland country, although the term “land of Nephi” in a political sense came to be extended to include limited territories along both the east sea and west sea coasts. Northward from Nephi was a marked mountain barrier that had to be crossed to reach the land of Zarahemla. The basic landform of the land of Zarahemla was a sizable basin drained by the Sidon River, the only river specifically named or characterized in the Book of Mormon. The Nephite lands and cities, including the heartland around the city of Zarahemla, was at an intermediate elevation. The area was closed in by a high range of mountains near the west sea coast and another sizable elevated territory on the east sea side of the basin. A deep zone of “wilderness” sloped down from that eastern upland to extensive coastal lowlands by the east sea, but the west coastal zone was narrow, and the Nephites inhabited it only lightly if at all.

The isthmus, or “narrow neck of land,” that connected the lands southward and northward contained a particular feature termed a “narrow pass.” Through it all large-scale movements of people through the neck had to travel, making it of absolute strategic importance in warfare. In the land northward, a western upland sector was contrasted with easterly wet lowlands. A knot of hill country near the east sea lay a short distance north of the neck. The crucial position of this pass can be seen very clearly in the case of Morianton’s flight (see map 4).

The main topographic features of the Book of Mormon lands in America where the historical events it records took place can be seen on the map entitled Major Physical Features, located on the inside back cover of the book.

### **Notes**

1. See Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 238–39.

2. Comparison of Alma 51:26 and 59:5 exposes what appears to be a scribal error. The former says that the Lamanites captured Nephiah in their first strike, but 59:5 has the place still in Nephite hands some five years later. I suppose that the historian listed Nephiah too hastily in the former passage, a natural enough response to the dismay felt at the smashing success of Amalickiah’s initial campaign.