

Cities and Lands in the Book of Mormon

“They called the name of the city, or the land, Nephihah.” (Alma 50:14)

Throughout the Book of Mormon, the terms *city* and *land* seem to be interchangeable. There is a city of Nephi and a land of Nephi, a city of Zarahemla and a land of Zarahemla, and so forth. Evidently, each city controlled a certain territory or land that was designated from the name of the city. This is especially clear in Alma 50:14, where we read of the construction of a new site: “They called the name of the city, or the land, Nephihah.”

The pattern followed by the Nephites (and by the Lamanites when they became sedentary) was evidently brought from the Old World. In ancient Israel, the cities were places of refuge for farmers in surrounding villages. In time of war, the peasants could flee to the protection of the city walls, where arms were stored for defense. This is precisely what we find described in Mosiah 9:14–16.

In the law of Moses, cities assigned to the Levites were required to have pastures extending two thousand cubits (roughly three thousand feet) outside the walls (see Numbers 35:5). Because of this, the rabbis took the word *place* in Exodus 16:29 to mean a walled city, and restricted inhabitants to a maximum two thousand cubits’ walk on the Sabbath, giving us the “Sabbath day’s journey” of Acts 1:12.¹

Archaeological excavations in the fields surrounding the ancient site of Gezer disclosed six stones from the second century B.C. on which the words *border of Gezer* were inscribed in Hebrew and Greek. Clearly, biblical cities, like those of the Book of Mormon, controlled nearby land. Hence, we read of “the king of Ai, and his people, and his city, and his land” (Joshua 8:1) and of the city of Hebron, its suburbs (perhaps “pasturage”), fields, and villages (see 1 Chronicles 6:55–56).

It should therefore not be surprising to find that cities are sometimes called by the term *land* in the Bible. Tappuah is called a *land* in Joshua 17:8, but a *city* in Joshua 16:8 (see v. 9). Jeremiah prophesied that Jerusalem would become “a land not inhabited” (Jeremiah 6:8; compare 15:5–7).

The Mesha or Moabite stela of the ninth century B.C. provides contemporary archaeological evidence for the interchange of *city* and *land*. The text, reporting the rebellion of Mesha, king of Moab, against Israel, lists a number of “lands” which are known from the Bible to be cities. Internal evidence also implies that they are cities, since Mesha noted that he had “built” these lands.

The reason that lands were named after their principal cities was that some cities controlled other nearby sites. In the account of the assignment of lands to the tribes under Joshua, we frequently read of “cities with their villages.”² In some cases, a known city is named and is said to have other cities, towns, or villages under its dominion. Thus, we read of “Heshbon and all her cities” (Joshua 13:17), “Ekron, with her towns and her villages” (Joshua 15:45), “Megiddo and her towns” (Joshua 17:11), and “Ashdod with her towns and her villages” (Joshua 15:47).

Clay tablets written in the fourteenth century B.C. and found at El-Amarna in Egypt use the term *land* for Canaanite sites known to have been ancient cities. For example, one text speaks of the “town of Rubutu,”³ while another mentions the “land of Rubutu.”⁴ The first of these also speaks of the “land of Shechem” and “the land of the

town of Gath-carmel” (both ancient cities) and says of Jerusalem, “this land belongs to the king.” A third text mentions the lands of Gezer, Ashkelon, and Jerusalem.⁵

Lehi and Nephi seem to have known the designation of Jerusalem as both a city and the land it governed.⁶ The phrase *land of Jerusalem* is found in 1 Nephi 3:9–10; 7:2. We read that Lehi dwelt “at Jerusalem in all his days” (1 Nephi 1:4), but he evidently did not live in the city of that name. After coming to Jerusalem, where Laman visited Laban in his house (see 1 Nephi 3:11, 23), Lehi’s sons, thinking to purchase the brass plates from Laban, “went down to the land of [their] inheritance” (1 Nephi 3:22) to gather up their wealth. They then “went up again” to Jerusalem (1 Nephi 3:23) and offered their wealth in exchange for the plates. Laban chased them away and, after a time, they returned to “the walls of Jerusalem” (1 Nephi 4:4), and Nephi “crept into the city and went forth towards the house of Laban” (1 Nephi 4:5). From this, it appears that Lehi dwelt in the “land” of Jerusalem, but not in the city itself, as did Laban.

Though the term *land of Jerusalem* is not found in the Bible, it is known from one of the Dead Sea Scrolls attributed to the prophet Jeremiah and denominated 4Q385b.⁷ The importance of Jerusalem as a political capital of the kingdom of Judah is demonstrated by a Babylonian text recounting Nebuchadrezzar II’s siege of Jerusalem, in which it is called “the city of Judah.”⁸ Alma 7:10 contains a prophecy that Christ would be born in “Jerusalem which is the land of our forefathers.” Critics of the Book of Mormon typically use this as evidence of error in the text and conclude that it invalidates the book as an authentic ancient document. They attribute the error to Joseph Smith, whom they believe to be the author of the Book of Mormon. This presupposes, however, that Joseph Smith was ignorant of the fact that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem, which is hardly likely. It is much easier to believe that the denomination of Jerusalem as a “land” was deliberate. In view of the evidence we have seen thus far, this was perfectly in keeping with ancient Near Eastern tradition. Even were it not so, there would be nothing wrong with Alma, author of the passage, using Nephite geographical terminology to denote the place of Jesus’ birth. To the Nephites, whose society revolved around cities controlling larger lands, it would have been perfectly logical to place Bethlehem in the land of Jerusalem.

But there is evidence that, even in the Old World, Bethlehem was considered to be part of the “land of Jerusalem.” One of the Amarna texts speaks of “a town in the land of Jerusalem” named *Bit-NINIB*. Some scholars give the name as *Bit-Lahmi*, which is the Canaanite equivalent of the Hebrew name rendered *Beth-lehem* in English Bibles.⁹

We conclude that Lehi’s descendants in the New World followed authentic Old World custom in denominating each land by the principal city in the land.¹⁰ This kind of detail lends evidence to the authenticity and antiquity of the Book of Mormon text.

Research by John A. Tvedtnes, originally published in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 147–50.

Notes

1. Exodus 16:29 reads, “Abide ye every man in his place, let no man go out of his place on the seventh day.” The “Sabbath limit” of two thousand cubits is defined in Mishnah, ‘*Eruvin* 4:3; 5:7, and *Sotah* 5:3 (which refers to Numbers 35:4–5). Other references to the “Sabbath limit” are found in Mishnah, *Shabbat* 23:3–4; ‘*Eruvin* 3:4; 4:2–3, 11; 5:4–5; 7:11; 8:1; 10:2; *Bezah* 4:2; *Rosh ha-Shanah* 4:8; *Ketubbot* 2:10; *Nedarim* 7:5; *Makkot* 2:7.

2. Joshua 15:36; see 13:23, 28; 15:32, 41, 44, 46–47, 51, 54, 57, 59–60, 62; 16:9; 18:24, 28; 19:6–8, 15–16, 22, 30–31, 38–39, 48; 21:12. Sometimes the word *daughters* was used in the Hebrew text to mean villages, in the

sense of satellites (Exodus 21:25, 32; 2 Chronicles 28:18; Nehemiah 11:25, 27, 30–31).

3. El-Amarna 289, in James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 489; see Taanach tablet 1, in *ibid.*, 490.

4. El-Amarna 290, in *ibid.*, 489.

5. See El-Amarna 287, in *ibid.*, 488.

6. Hugh W. Nibley discussed this subject in *Lehi in the Desert; The World of the Jaredites; There Were Jaredites* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 6–7, and in *An Approach to the Book of Mormon*, 3rd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1988), 101–2.

7. See Geza Vermes, *The Complete Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (New York: Penguin, 1997), 566.

8. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 564.

9. See El-Amarna 290, in Pritchard, *ibid.* 489, where the name is rendered *Bit-Lahmi*.

10. For examples and discussion of the word pair city/land, see Kevin L. Barney, “Poetic Diction and Parallel Word Pairs in the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/2 (1995): 37–38.