

The Environment of the Nephites and How They Exploited It

My mental map of my own country not only includes features that are an inherent part of nature but also depends on how we have come to transform raw nature through our activities. For me, California means more than sheer physical elements like the Sierra Nevada mountains, the Mojave desert, and the giant forests of the north. It also means citrus and avocado groves in southern California, the vast canals and cultivated fields of the Central Valley, and the urban transformation of the Bay Area. A complete understanding of Book of Mormon geography must likewise involve the ways in which the activities of the Nephites, Lamanites, and Jaredites altered the natural landscape. Mormon's mental map of Nephite and Lamanite territories involved such cultural effects on nature as the clearing of forests to prepare land for planting, the making of roads and trails, and the development of a port where ships were built and launched. For us to understand his sense of geography, we must appreciate how the ancient inhabitants transformed their environment for economic and social ends and the geographical consequences those activities produced.

We cannot attempt a full reconstruction of Nephite economy; that would require a book by itself. All we try to do here is discover some of the important ways in which the economic exploitation of the environment in which the Nephites lived surely colored Mormon's picture of his world.

What was the climate where the Nephites and Lamanites dwelt?

Climatic conditions are crucial to how a people interpret and utilize their land. As a first step toward characterizing the climate in which Book of Mormon groups lived, let us note that the only part of the New World that can qualify as the promised land on the basis of configuration—that is, possessing the somewhat hourglass shape that we saw in chapter 3—is Middle America, that part of the hemisphere south of the United States and north of South America. Based on its shape the promised land settled by Lehi₁ and his descendants as recorded in the Book of Mormon has to be somewhere in that area. Nearly all that territory is tropical or semitropical (although parts of the highlands are essentially temperate). It is fair to say, then, that Nephi₁'s ship landed in tropical America; consequently, the “land of first inheritance” of the Nephites and Lamanites was rather hot and rainy and had lots of vegetation. (Such a climate could explain why the wilder Lamanites who dwelt along the coast were reported as “wandering about in the wilderness with [nothing but] a short skin girdle about their loins” [Enos 1:20].)

The climate and vegetation in the area where Lehi₁'s party first landed are not described in the Book of Mormon, but since the seeds the immigrants brought “did grow exceedingly” (1 Nephi 18:24), it is safe to assume both considerable heat and moisture. On the east sea coast, however, we learn that, at least during one season (on their new year's eve, in fact), the “heat of the day” was enough to cause “much fatigue” for marching warriors and an overpowering need to sleep (Alma 51:33). Of snow, ice, or cold in the land of promise, on the other hand, there is no hint anywhere in the text.

Two seasons are identified or implied. One is referred to as the “season of grain” (Helaman 11:6); this growing season would have been a time of rains. The other was a dry season. That was when wars were fought, men then being relatively free from farming tasks—while the weather was dry enough to permit travel and camping in the open.¹ This dual pattern is what one would expect in a tropical land.

Was the land fertile, naturally forested, desert, or what?

Tropical soils are typically not very fertile, because abundant rains wash away valuable nutrients. Certain areas in the Nephite and Lamanite lands would have been much richer in agricultural possibilities than others. Where rivers had deposited soils through flooding, in some flatter mountain valleys, and on the margins and deltas of rivers, substantial depth of good soil may occur. But in general the greenery of the vegetation in a tropical land is a more apparent than real sign of fertility, and cultivators using run-of-the-mill soil must change plots every few years to cope with declining fertility.

The unusual productivity that special areas could attain is seen in the local land of Zarahemla. Our knowledge of it comes from the account of the Nephites' battle with the Amlicites and Lamanites on the banks of the Sidon River. The combined enemy force, "so numerous that they could not be numbered" (Alma 2:35), were met and defeated by Alma₁ and his army on the west bank of the river. From there the Amlicites and Lamanites "fled before the Nephites towards the wilderness which was west and north" (Alma 2:36). In the melee, "many of their fields of grain were destroyed, for they were trodden down by the hosts of men" (Alma 3:2). Surprisingly, this loss caused actual famine for the inhabitants of the city and the local land of Zarahemla (see Alma 4:2-3). Evidently, the strip of cropland on rich alluvial soil next to the river Sidon, probably but a few miles in length, produced a substantial proportion of the community's food. Other Nephite settlements also seem to have been situated in depressions where streams likely left prime soil: a person went into or out of Gideon (see Alma 6:7), Melek (see Alma 8:3), Ammonihah (see Alma 15:1), Sidom (see Alma 15:1), and Manti (see Alma 43:22).

The picture we get of the land of Nephi, including the region around the city of Nephi and the lands of Shilom, Shemlon, Helam, Amulon, Ishmael, and so on, is of an extensive area of forested mountains or plateau country within which only certain valleys were settled. We can see this especially in the delight of Alma₁ and his group when they found the valley they called the land of Helam: "And they fled eight days' journey into the wilderness. And they came to a land, yea, even a very beautiful and pleasant land, a land of pure water" (Mosiah 23:3-4). This picture is confirmed in the accompanying narrative about the lost Lamanite army. From the city of Nephi, they chased after Limhi and his people, who had a head start trying to escape to Zarahemla. The pursuers lost the track after two days and then found they were "lost in the wilderness" (Mosiah 22:16; 23:30). After wandering about, they stumbled onto the people of Amulon, who had "begun to till the ground" in what they called the land of Amulon, a place the Lamanites had been unaware of (Mosiah 23:31). The Amulonites must not have liked pioneering much, because they abandoned their land to join with the Lamanites in trying to find a way back to Nephi. They still had no clue what route to take when they bumbled into Alma₁'s Helam (see Mosiah 23:31-37). In this instance and elsewhere in his comments or implications about the geography of Nephi, Mormon emphasizes how much wilderness there was. The picture conveyed is that relatively few areas of settlement existed amidst a virtual sea of forested, mountainous wilderness. (As noted earlier, we lack information from the Book of Mormon to assess how much long-range change in this picture might have been produced as a result of the great catastrophe described in 3 Nephi 8.)

The small plates of Nephi relate in Nephi₁'s words incidents in the Near East that give a different meaning of "wilderness." For example, in 1 Nephi 16 the word refers to desert. The basic meaning of the term translated from Hebrew as "wilderness" is apparently "uninhabited area," but when used in relation to the American promised land it may mean something different, because we read of wilderness that was "full of the Lamanites" (Alma 31:3; compare Alma 50:7, 9; 3 Nephi 3:17). In the New World, Lehi₁'s group immediately upon landing "journeyed in the wilderness," where they found "beasts in the forests of every kind" (1 Nephi 18:25). Bountiful, a lowland zone, was mostly "wilderness which is filled with all manner of wild animals of every kind" (Alma 22:31; compare Alma 2:37 on the wilderness of Hermounts). From the early land of Nephi, Enos "went to hunt beasts in the forests" (Enos

1:3), and at least patches of wilderness were found immediately adjacent to the city of Nephi in Zeniffite times (see Mosiah 10:9). Obviously, wilderness in these cases was in no sense desert, but probably forest. Limhi's explorers lost their way while headed to Zarahemla, probably because of the confusing, broken, forest-covered terrain they had to traverse (see Mosiah 8:8). Military movements through wilderness near Manti and elsewhere also make it clear that the wilderness consisted of forest, not open, barren space (see Alma 43:27–35; 58:18–19).

It is clear, then, that substantial areas of the land southward—probably most of it—were forested. When people went from that area to settle in the land northward, they encountered a marked contrast in the flora. Instead of the abundant timber resources that were at hand in their homelands southward, they now had to use alternative housing or import timber (see Helaman 3:7–10). Note too that the deforested portion of the land northward was not termed “wilderness,” but merely “desolate” (Helaman 3:6).

What was the basis of economic life in the promised land?

The fundamental economic activity was farming: “They did raise grain in abundance, both in the north and in the south; and they did flourish exceedingly” (Helaman 6:12). Specific crops mentioned, at one point in time and in the land of Nephi, were “corn,” “barley,” “wheat,” “neas,” and “sheum,” and “all manner of seeds” as well as fruits (Mosiah 9:9). “Corn” is intimated to have been the preferred grain (see Mosiah 7:22 and 9:9, where it is first in the list of grains, and Mosiah 9:14, according to which Lamanites stole it specifically). When grain was insufficient, famine prevailed (see Alma 3:2; 4:2; Helaman 11:5–6; 3 Nephi 4:3, 6). Nothing in the text suggests that the people prepared or cultivated the land using anything other than their own hands; while animals (“flocks and herds”) were kept, they seem to have been used mainly for food (see, for example, 3 Nephi 3:22; 4:4).

Crop production under the best of conditions was abundant, sufficient to support a variety of craft workers (for example, see Helaman 6:11, 13) and to sustain a large number of administrative and other specialist personnel and an elite social class (see Mosiah 7:22; Alma 60:21–22; 3 Nephi 6:10–12). The economic surplus stimulated trade in both the lands southward and northward (see Mosiah 24:7; Helaman 3:10; 6:7–8). Some areas were productive enough to export a food surplus, while others ran short at times: central Zarahemla had to supply the Nephite army in the southwestern quarter of the land, for instance (see Alma 57:6; 58:4, 7), and the land of Melek was an exporter (see Alma 62:29).

Hunting was uncommon once the land had filled up with people and deprived the game of their natural habitat (see 3 Nephi 4:1–3). While hunting may have been an idealized traditional activity among the Lamanites, at least according to their biased Nephite neighbors (as in Enos 1:20), the high population level the Lamanites actually reached, as indicated by the size of their armies, cannot be accounted for except on the basis of settled agrarian living.²

What were some of the visible consequences of this economic system?

Mormon's economic view of his people was that prosperous conditions resulted when an ideal social and religious order was followed (for example, see Helaman 3:24, 25, 36; 4 Nephi 1:3, 23). Mormon felt that ideally the population should predominantly be cultivators and exhibit minimal distinctions in wealth (see Alma 32:4–5; 34:24–25; 35:9; 3 Nephi 6:1–5). Conversely, he believed that economic distress followed when the people became unrighteous and unequal. When such conditions arose, Mormon editorialized pointedly about the suffering and evils that resulted from differences in wealth and class distinctions (see Alma 4:6–9; 5:55; Helaman 3:36; 4:12; 6:39; 4 Nephi 1:26).

Mormon also had a sense of history on which he based his understanding of changes in population and exploitation of the land. He knew that in early times the land was relatively empty (see in Mosiah 8:8 the story of Limhi's exploring party who missed finding the people at Zarahemla; see also Omni 1:13–14; Mosiah 23:30, 35). He exhibited satisfaction with stories of occupying new land and resulting prosperity (see Mosiah 23:19–20; Helaman 3:8; 11:20). In his own day, however, Mormon might not have cared much for the ecological and demographic realities that faced him. When he went south to Zarahemla as a youth, he observed, obviously impressed and perhaps a bit dismayed, that “the whole face of the land had become covered with buildings, and the people were as numerous almost, as it were the sand of the sea” (Mormon 1:7). Soon he was forced to lead his people as they scrambled to find refuge and subsistence in the land of Joshua and, after further flights, in Jashon, Shem, Desolation, Boaz, and who knows where else (see Mormon 2:6–7). His leadership experience in regard to economics and ecology must have been capped in the last few years before the climactic battle at the hill Cumorah. At that time he was responsible for a population of hundreds of thousands crowded together in the land of Cumorah (see Mormon 6:2–5, 10–15). Incidentally, the area must have had incredibly productive soil to have provisioned such a mass of people for the four years of their doomed stay.

The most visible consequence of Nephite economic practices would have been the widespread cultural modification of the landscape. Mormon and his predecessors knew that overpopulation could destroy an ecological system. He was struck with how the Jaredites who had preceded them had denuded the land of Desolation of all its trees (at least that is how the Nephites interpreted what they observed upon their arrival, although they may have overreacted; the land may have been naturally more treeless than they, who had come from forested country, considered natural). This treelessness was most visible in the land of Desolation, in or near where Mormon himself grew up. His own ancestors may have been among the Nephite colonists in the north who “did dwell in tents, and in houses of cement, and they did suffer whatsoever tree should spring up upon the face of the land that it should grow up, that in time they might have timber” (Helaman 3:9).

Such profound and widespread ecological, economic, and demographic consequences undoubtedly colored Mormon's mental map of the world in which he lived.

Notes

1. See John L. Sorenson, “Seasonality of Warfare in the Book of Mormon and in Mesoamerica,” in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks and William J. Hamblin (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and FARMS, 1990), 445–77.

2. See my article, “When Lehi's Party Arrived in the Land, Did They Find Others There?” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 1/1 (1992): 1–4, 26–28.