

Historical Geography

The sequence of cultures in a land, with their changing centers of development and influence, gives us another dimension of geography. For example, a full characterization of the geography of the United States requires understanding that comes only through a set of successive maps each related to a date or period: discovery, early colonists, the colonies at the time of the American Revolution, the westward expansion, the Civil War, urbanization, and so on. Maps of key changes in population and activity over time dynamically explain not only the what and when, but even the why, of any area's course of development.

We have enough information on the Nephites' expansion to sketch out its main lines, but for certain geographical areas within their promised land, as well as for certain historical periods, our information remains slim. In the case of the Lamanites we know their history even less well. Mormon, of course, was aware of much more detail about both peoples than we can know, but whether he systematically thought through the historical geography of the promised land is a question we cannot answer. But he must have had rudiments of a time-sequenced picture in his mind, whether or not he or anybody else among his people ever framed it definitively.

What was the geographical setting for the earliest era of Nephite and Lamanite history?

This historical period begins with the landing of Lehi₁'s party and continues to the migration of Mosiah₁ to Zarahemla (see 1 Nephi 18:23–Omni 1:13). Of course, we have this information only from the small plates of Nephi, not through Mormon. The historical and geographical data accessible is cryptic, and we are left to infer much.

The events covered include the separation of Nephi₁ and his group from those led by Laman₁ and Lemuel, who remained in the land of first inheritance; the settlement in the land of Nephi; local geographical expansion by the Nephites; Lamanite pressure on the Nephites; and finally, the departure of Mosiah₁ and his party to Zarahemla.

Chapter 5 discussed the movement of Nephi₁'s original party from the coastal land of first inheritance up to the land of Nephi. Once there they “waxed strong in the land,” “multiplied exceedingly, and spread upon the face of the land” (Jarom 1:5, 8). These descriptions of growth must be read cautiously: only about five adult males were in the original Nephite party, so even after several centuries the population would still have been tiny, unless they had incorporated “native” people into their social and political system (this is, in fact, probable).¹ Since they were occasionally attacked by the Lamanites, they would have hesitated to extend to more distant places except in substantial numbers, which they did not have. (When the Zeniffites came to the land of Nephi several centuries later, they repaired the walls of two former Nephite cities, Lehi-Nephi and Shilom. The original Nephites probably had never spread beyond the local land around those two settlements [see Mosiah 9:8], and the Lamanites had only lightly, and thus recently, inhabited the two lands [see Mosiah 9:6–7].)

The earliest Lamanites, meanwhile, inhabited wilderness along the west sea coast. If they subsisted by any means other than hunting and foraging at this stage, there is no hint of it in the text, yet their population growth at least kept pace with that of the Nephites. The Lamanites probably also incorporated other groups. For their earliest positions, see map 12.

By a generation after 300 B.C., “the more wicked part of the Nephites were destroyed” (Omni 1:5). The implication is that this destruction was a result of wars with the Lamanites. The extreme brevity of the small plates regarding this period makes our view of the history especially sketchy, but around 200 B.C. Mosiah₁ was “warned of the Lord that he should flee out of the land of Nephi, and as many as would hearken . . . should also depart out of the land with him” (Omni 1:12). Whether Mosiah₁ was a ruler in Nephi before his departure is left unsaid, but he carried with him the records on metal plates and the sacred artifacts that would have been kept by the Nephite king. Nothing more is said about those Nephites who remained behind; presumably they were exterminated, although some might have survived to mix with the Lamanites. Mosiah₁ and his fellow refugees “were led by many preachings and prophesyings” through the wilderness “until they came down into the land which is called the land of Zarahemla” (Omni 1:13).

Where were the people of Zarahemla, or Mulekites, located before Mosiah₁'s arrival among them?

Mulek's party are said to have landed first in the land northward (see Alma 22:30; Helaman 6:10), then at least some of their descendants later “came from there up into the [then] south wilderness” (Alma 22:31) to the land of Zarahemla, where Mosiah₁ found them. The text of the Book of Mormon refers to a place called “the city of Mulek” (Alma 51:26) near the east coast, but it does not indicate how the city originated. It is reasonable to assume that the city was named after “him [Mulek] who first possessed” that place, in accordance with later Nephite custom (Alma 8:7). Probably the first settlement of those who arrived from the Mediterranean with Mulek's party was at this place near the east sea. Inasmuch as subsequent history mentions that the party's descendants “had many wars and serious contentions, and [their having] fallen by the sword from time to time” (Omni 1:17), we could suppose that internal conflicts gradually pushed one portion of the Mulekites, the people of Zarahemla, up the Sidon River to the area where Mosiah₁ found them. (See map 13.) Others of the original population in the east coastal lowlands may have remained there or spread upriver through the intermediate area; that makes more sense than the Zarahemla group constituting the sole survivors who for no apparent reason vaulted up the river in one movement.² (I suspect that “the people who were in the land Bountiful” mentioned in Alma 50:32 as a loyalty concern to Moroni₁ were of the same origin, remotely, as the people of Zarahemla. The text gives no hint of a Nephite colonization before the time of the statement.)

What was the geography of the Zeniffite enclave among the Lamanites in Nephi?

Zeniff's deal with the Lamanite king was that the Zeniffites could occupy the two local lands originally called Nephi and Shilom (under the Lamanites, Nephi was renamed Lehi-Nephi). While their population initially grew modestly, over time casualties from battling the Lamanites reduced their numbers drastically (see Mosiah 21:17). Map 11 highlights the small zone the Zeniffites occupied.

How did the Lamanites expand their territory?

Once the Zeniffites under King Limhi escaped their overlords, the Lamanites spread from their west lowland home base up through the lands of Shemlon and Shilom to Nephi proper. By the time the sons of Mosiah₂ and their companions arrived in the land of Nephi some thirty years later, the Lamanite king was established in the city of Lehi-Nephi and his people occupied the surrounding lands (see Alma 20:1; 22:1). The Book of Mormon indicates that the lands of Helam and Amulon were later incorporated in the Lamanite domain (see Mosiah 23:1–5, 25–35). The Lamanites also controlled a new city, Jerusalem, and had settled the lands of Ishmael and Middoni (see Alma 17:19; 20:4; 21:1–2). Further, the Lamanite king exercised some degree of rule over other lands as distant as both

the east and west sea coasts (see Alma 22:27). Whether ethnic Lamanites physically spread to those lands or whether locals in the most distant of those places only symbolically affiliated themselves with the rulership of the king in Lehi-Nephi we cannot tell. In any case, in the second century b.c. the total population subservient to the Lamanite king grew rapidly in a short period of time. Map 13 shows the expansion of Nephite and Lamanite settlement between about 200 and 50 B.C.

Where were the scenes of the lengthy war started by Amalickiah?

Amalickiah's strategy for conquering the Nephites was apparently set by his Zoramite advisors (see Alma 48:5), who had some traditional role among Nephite military forces that is not entirely clear but that made them privy to vital information.³ Four attack routes were possible: (1) along the short east coast to capture the narrow neck and thus surround the Nephites, (2) hitting the southwest sector west of Manti to get at the city of Zarahemla, (3) moving northward along the west coast and over into Ammonihah, and (4) hitting the center of the land, Zarahemla, in a frontal assault via Manti. Amalickiah tried the first three, but the fourth was not tried until a quarter century later (see Helaman 1:19).

The strategically preferred plan called for an overwhelming offensive to be launched toward the narrow neck from the Zoramite homeland, Antionum, on the east sea coast area (see Alma 51:22–29). That place was the Lamanites' base nearest the vital isthmus (see Alma 50:32; 52:9). The attacks on Nephite outposts on the south and west part of the land of Zarahemla—from Manti to Antiparah—were apparently not considered to have much chance of success but were largely diversionary (see Alma 56:13–15, 20, 24–26). The attack that proceeded down the west coast of Nephite territory to strike at Ammonihah was a long shot (see Alma 16:2–3, 9; 49:1–25). The distance involved put the Lamanite strike force well beyond any hope of support from the homeland. If they failed, they failed, but they just might strike it lucky.

The important thing to know about this historical situation is that the movements were based on a well-thought-out strategy. They did not result from some imaginative scheme thought up by amateurs. Mormon, an experienced strategist, could see this as he studied the historical records, and he surely appreciated the full significance of what was going on in the battle of strategies between the Lamanite-Zoramite general staff and Captain Moroni, as shown by comments like that in Alma 50:32.

In what parts of the land northward did colonists from the land southward settle?

This topic has already been discussed but is recapitulated and extended here to draw attention to an important historical episode. The parts of the land northward where the Nephites lived (the "north countries" of Ether 1:1) were those they tried to defend the most desperately in Mormon's last campaigns. They were the same zones from which people were gathered around a.d. 25, according to 3 Nephi 3–4, to a refuge area in the land southward to wait out the robbers. The northern limits of focused Nephite colonization did not extend much beyond the land of Cumorah; all the surviving Nephites could collect there in the fourth century A.D. despite the social chaos resulting from a string of defeats at the hands of the Lamanites (see Mormon 5–6). Map 14 shows the probable routes of Nephite expansion into the land northward.

The question of where migrants of Lamanite extraction settled in the land northward is, however, unclear (see Helaman 3:12). They might have gone to areas other than "the north country" in the eastern lowlands.

Nearly all the information about colonization of the land northward comes from the first century b.c. Information later in the Book of Mormon is minimal. After the virtual geographic silence of 4 Nephi, we read of Mormon living around a.d. 300 in the land northward, where he apparently lived all his young life (see Mormon 1:1–5). The Nephites are there without historical comment; most likely Mormon’s ancestors had arrived there over three centuries earlier in one of the movements described in the book of Helaman.

The center of gravity of the Nephite population moved quietly northward between 50 B.C. and A.D. 30. In earlier centuries, first Nephi and then Zarahemla were the key Nephite centers. By around 40 B.C. the Nephites temporarily found it necessary to retreat well northward, to the land of Bountiful and even farther north (see Helaman 4), but they soon regained control of their traditional homeland in the land of Zarahemla. Each northbound shift probably left behind a residue of Nephites who chose to build new lives there. The northward shift of the population is particularly evident in the Savior’s visit to the people in the city Bountiful (see 3 Nephi 11:1). All the disciples he chose at that time to lead his church were already living at Bountiful, and it was there that he established the headquarters, as it were, of the church. Nephi and Zarahemla were no longer central and perhaps not even significant. From that point on, events centered on the isthmus—the geographic feature that united the lands northward and southward. When young Mormon left his home area, which lay somewhere near or in the hill section that included Cumorah, and was taken to Zarahemla, he was touring the central Nephite zone.

Still, only a part of the land northward was of concern. Not a single hint in the topographic references involving the Nephite possessions in the land northward points to any highland territory; there are no “ups” or “downs” in Mormon’s personal account that relate to the northern lands themselves. Nothing suggests that the Nephites settled or dwelt in the Jaredites’ Moron, which was “up.” The hills Shim and Cumorah (and clearly there would have been some others around) are referred to, but no mountains.

Which parts of the land do we know were damaged by the great natural disaster at the time of the Savior’s death?

The account of the Savior’s visit to Bountiful tells us that while there was indeed noteworthy damage inflicted by storms, winds, earthquakes, and perhaps volcanism (see 3 Nephi 11:1), life quickly returned to a semblance of normality. The worst of the destruction missed at least Bountiful (twenty-five hundred people gathered around the temple for some occasion, and they were not without food and homes).

The Lord’s account of destroyed cities tells a story of great damage. The listing of their fates (see 3 Nephi 8–9) informs us of sixteen named cities that bore the brunt of the natural catastrophe. The list appears to be in two parts: 3 Nephi 9:3–7 gives the names of three destroyed places that we know were located in the land southward, so it is logical that the four cities mentioned with them were also located in the south. Verses 8–10 form a distinct segment of text and probably name cities farther northward. Jacobugath was farther north than all the other cities mentioned in the Book of Mormon for which we know locations. Very likely the others mentioned with it in these three verses were likewise to the north.

Map 15 indicates the location of cities for which we know or can infer a position. Other cities, whose positions we are uncertain about, I have placed at random in either the land southward or land northward, as implied in the previous paragraph (except for Moronihah; the Nephite military leader Moronihah operated in the borders by the east sea around Jershon, and the city named for him quite certainly was there also).

Where did the Nephites finally retreat from and to?

First the Nephites were driven to Joshua from the Zarahemla area through a land called at that time David, as well as from a city known as Angola (see Mormon 2). The probable course of their retreat is shown on map 16.

North of the narrow pass two historical episodes of retreat occurred. An early rout sent the Nephites reeling all the way to Jashon, which was near the hill Shim (see Mormon 2:16–17). They recovered from this loss to the extent of even retaking the land of Zarahemla (see Mormon 2:27), but they had already demonstrated that they could not defend that large territory. They took advantage of their temporary good fortune in winning back their land southward territory and traded the indefensible land for hoped-for stability. They made a treaty with their enemies that established a new boundary between the parties at the narrow neck (see Mormon 2:28–29). The agreement lasted for some years, until the old ethnic hatred aroused a new war (see Mormon 3:1–4).

Eventually the Nephites were driven northward anew (see Mormon 4:19–5:7). This time there would be no further chance for political redemption. In a last gamble, they chanced everything on one climactic battle at the hill Cumorah (see Mormon 6:1–6). That slaughter marked the end of the Nephites as a people. The final wars are documented geographically on map 17.

Underlying the Nephite-Lamanite historical picture were always the mysterious Jaredites. King Mosiah₁'s subjects were "desirous beyond measure to know concerning those people who had been destroyed" (Mosiah 28:12; see 8:12). They felt powerfully that the desolated place where millions had preceded them in death was under a "great curse" (3 Nephi 3:24).

This sketch of the historical movements of the Nephites and other Book of Mormon groups teaches two things: (1) The lands described in physical terms in previous chapters went through a series of changes in the peoples, and presumably the cultures, that occupied them between the sixth century B.C. and the fourth century A.D. Those developments and events ought to be manifested in the archaeological remains, art, and linguistic history of whatever area was the actual place where the events took place. (2) Mormon, Moroni₂, and other writers of the Book of Mormon held in their minds as part of their geographical picture notions derived from that historical sequence.

Notes

1. See Sorenson, "When Lehi's Party Arrived."

2. These points are discussed in greater detail in John L. Sorenson, "The 'Mulekites,'" *BYU Studies* 30/3 (1990): 6–22.

3. See John A. Tvedtnes, "Book of Mormon Tribal Affiliation and Military Castes," in *Warfare in the Book of Mormon*, 296–326.