

So How Much Do We Know?

After sifting through the text of the Book of Mormon in search of geographical information, as we have just done, we end up with what I call “Mormon’s Map.” The meaning of that label is that our graphic representation is, in large part, a simplified two-dimensional rendering of the body of information about geography that Mormon possessed in his mind.

We must, of course, say “simplified” and add “partial” for two reasons: (1) even Mormon could not have recalled at the time he was writing all the knowledge he had acquired about the lands he personally traversed (we ourselves “know” things geographical from our personal experiences that we never could express in words); and (2) Mormon drew on what he knew of geography and shed light on those matters only when it seemed required in order to formulate his account based for the most part on records kept by others. He wanted to teach moral lessons to future readers, not instruct them about sheer facts of history and geography. Geography was significant for his task at some points, but not central to it.

It would be absurd to assume that the incomplete map we have been able to deduce from the text represents all that our author-editor could tell us if he were sitting by our side as a consultant on geography. We have been able to derive from his record only an approximation, yet it is a reasonable approximation. It utilizes all the information I have been able to elicit from Mormon’s words and those of other Book of Mormon writers. It is remarkably consistent and provides an enlightening setting for events reported in the record. No doubt this version can be improved, and will be if we discover new points in the text of the Book of Mormon that require change in the map.

Because of lack of explicit information, at points I have had to make assumptions, whereas Mormon probably had recorded or observed facts to fill my informational gaps. By what route and how far did Alma’s people travel from Mormon to Helam? I try to answer that question by seeking examples from the travel accounts that seem to tell of journeys under somewhat similar circumstances. My assumptions are subject to correction, but they are the best I can do at present.

The map we have at this point is perhaps like those maps of parts of the Americas that European cartographers made in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. They drew in coastlines on the basis of reports that were not very clear or full from voyagers who had traversed portions of the coast. Where they did not possess direct information, those mapmakers made inferences—guesses may be more accurate. As for the interior spaces beyond the coasts, their information was even sketchier. Still, the maps they drafted were avidly sought by later voyagers and served them well enough. The comprehensive “Mormon’s Map” on the inside front cover of this book can prove useful too.

To what uses can a map in this tentative condition be put?

I see three services this map can furnish:

1. It gives us a model that we can apply to stories from the record to check their consistency and perhaps shed new light on factors they involved that had not occurred to us before (and maybe not even to Mormon).
2. From the map we may discern new questions about geography—that is, see gaps in our knowledge for which we might seek answers by consulting Mormon’s text anew.

3. The map summarizes a set of criteria, discussed in chapters 2–8, against which to evaluate proposals for where in the external world Nephite lands were located.

As examples of the first type of exercise, consider these questions: Why did the Lamanites, after slaying many of their fellow Lamanites who were converted by the sons of Mosiah², swear vengeance on the Nephites, whom they then attacked at a distant and unlikely spot, the land of Ammonihah (see Alma 25:1–2)? Or can we see from geography why Captain Moroni feared that the people in Bountiful might ally themselves with Morianton in the land of waters to the north to form a political entity that would have dire consequences for the Nephites (see Alma 50:29–32)? And why did the Lamanites consent to give Mormon and the Nephites four years to prepare for the battle at Cumorah? Why didn't they attack them immediately, while they were weakened (see Mormon 6:1–3)?

Regarding the second function, we might want to know what conditions of geography in the intermediate area gave Amalickiah the freedom and confidence to move his armies unperturbed over three hundred miles, from the land of Nephi to near the Nephite city of Moroni, in preparation for launching his blitzkrieg attack (see Alma 51:11–14, 22). What was, or was not, in the area between Nephi and the east sea?

The third use may help us sort through a vast amount of LDS effort that has been expended over more than a century. In my 1992 work, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, I tabulated and summarized scores of theories of Book of Mormon geography that have been put forward by students of the topic. The flood of new and duplicative theories has not been stemmed by the failure of any previous ones to convince others of their accuracy.

In one section of that 1992 book, I arranged a “report card” for evaluating proposed relations between the real world and Book of Mormon lands. More than 110 criteria were listed. One could rate any theory with an A, B, C, D, or F grade according to how well it met the criteria set out for us by Mormon's record. For instance, if a particular theory proposed that the distance from Nephi to Zarahemla was either fifty miles or one thousand miles, it should receive an F grade on that point. Nobody seems to have taken my report card seriously, but it still offers a path through the jungle of mistaken information and bad logic that has for so long plagued geographical study of the Book of Mormon.

The features found on “Mormon's Map” as presented in this book are more carefully defined, more logically cross-checked, and more numerous than the criteria in the 1992 work. It should now be possible to evaluate confidently the theories that have been presented according to how well they agree with or fail to match the map that Mormon had in his mind. To perform those evaluations is a task for another time and place, but now, at least, the task is feasible because we have a view into Mormon's mind.