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Worthy of Another Look: Book of Mormon Students Meet: Interesting Convention Held in Provo Saturday and Sunday


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Abstract Excerpts from the Deseret Evening News of 25 May 1903 report on a convention at which Book of Mormon geography was discussed.
FROM THE EDITOR:
Book of Mormon geography has no doubt been a topic of discussion since before the book was published. Through the years, it seems, the discussion has heated up and then cooled down. A little more than a hundred years ago, a two-day “convention” was held at what would become Brigham Young University, and the topic was the Book of Mormon, including Book of Mormon geography. The President of the Church, various General Authorities, the president of Brigham Young Academy, and other interested individuals attended. Neither then nor now has there been any unanimity about the topic. For those interested in Book of Mormon geography and those who enjoy reading historical documents, we offer here a transcription of parts of the Deseret Evening News report on the conference. The closing remarks by the President of the Church, Joseph F. Smith, are as current today as they ever were.
Book of Mormon Geography

Prof. B. Cl[u]ff, Jr., was the first speaker. He referred to the indefinite manner in which the Book of Mormon writers described the land of Zarahemla, and the consequent uncertainty in the minds of Book of Mormon students on the matter of its location. He accounted for the lack of definiteness by the Book of Mormon writers on this point, by calling attention to the fact that, unless a person is writing a geography, he is not, as a rule, exact in the geographical description of the place where he lives. This was so with the Book of Mormon writers; but they wrote of other countries and places, locating them with reference to Zarahemla. Prof. Cluff read a great number of passages from the Book of Mormon, thus describing other cities and lands, which indicated that Zarahemla was located south of a narrow neck of land, that it was north of a plateau or higher country than Zarahemla, and that it was on one of the banks of a river having a north and south direction. This with other historical and descriptive Book of Mormon data, to which reference was made by the speaker, caused him to believe that Zarahemla was situated on the Magdalena river—the river Sidon of the Book of Mormon—in the United States of Columbia and Venezuela. The speaker referred to the fact that some students could not reconcile the statements as to time consumed in traveling from one place to another with Zarahemla being at the point claimed by him. This the speaker did not think was incompatible with his claim, and in support of this cited the rapidity with which the Indians, now in that country, the descendants of the Nephites and Lamanites, travel. From this initial point Prof. Cluff located a large number of cities and countries mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

Location of Zarahemla

Elder Robert Holmes, of Spanish Fork, had a different opinion as to the location of the land and city of Zarahemla and believed it was situated at some point in Honduras, and gave his reasons from Book of Mormon writings. Elder Holmes was quite earnest in his opinion and had evidently studied the question very closely.

President Smith’s Advice

At the close of Elder Holmes’ address, President Smith spoke briefly and expressed the idea that the question of the situation of the city was one of interest certainly, but if it could not be located the matter was not of vital importance, and if there were differences of opinion on the question it would not affect the salvation of the people; and he advised against students considering it of such vital importance as the principals of the Gospel.

Location of Nephite Lands

Elder B. H. Roberts expressed pleasure to be privileged to address the convention, and spoke of the apparent necessity for such a gathering. He desired to speak upon the question of locating the Nephite lands, and somewhat upon the bringing forth of the Book of Mormon. Where the peoples of Nephi, Mulok and the Jaredites were was a matter of secondary consideration. The Book of Mormon was not a physical geography but a history of the hand dealings of God with this people on this continent, to be brought forth in this day for the purpose of
bringing salvation to the descendants of Nephi and to testify of God to all the world. . . .

**Internal Evidences**

Dr. James E. Talmage spoke of the internal evidence of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon, which had been admitted, not only by our people, but by others who had examined it. These evidences were the diversity of style among the writers, which proved it to have been written, as is claimed, by different writers at different times; the consistency of its claims with the external evidences; its agreement with the Bible, etc.

Dr. Talmage related several instances showing that educators and scientists were interested in the book and becoming acquainted with it; and he believed the time would come when it would be accepted as having an important bearing on the history of this continent and its people.

President Smith endorsed the remarks of Dr. Talmage and Elder Roberts, and again cautioned the students against making the union question—the location of cities and lands—of equal importance with the doctrines contained in the book.

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