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Review of Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon and An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon

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Book Reviews

F. RICHARD HAUCK. *Deciphering the Geography of the Book of Mormon: Settlements and Routes in Ancient America*. Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co., 1988. xv; 239 pp. 40 figures. \$12.95.

JOHN L. SORENSON. *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Salt Lake City and Provo: Deseret Book Co. and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985. xxi; 415 pp. 34 figures, 15 maps. \$16.95.

Reviewed by Bruce W. Warren, president of the Society for Early Historic Archaeology.

A common theme shared by the authors of the two books under review is the creation of a geographical model for the historical and cultural setting of the Book of Mormon. Both authors have advanced degrees in archaeology and anthropology and a knowledge of the contents of the Book of Mormon. They are thus well qualified to deal with this research topic. Both authors place the lands and events of the Book of Mormon in the cultural area of Mesoamerica (central and southern Mexico and northern Central America) but with some significant differences in the location of specific lands and cities.

Three important questions will be posed to evaluate the approach and results of the two authors' research. First, What type of society is described in the Book of Mormon? Second, Are the authors justified in limiting the historical events and geographical locations of the Book of Mormon to Mesoamerica? Third, To what extent have the authors used the dimensions of historical or cultural geography in analyzing the ancient setting of the Book of Mormon?

Both authors use the word *civilization* when they refer to Book of Mormon peoples.¹ Just what is a civilization? K. C. Chang writes, "I would refer to civilization, as archaeologically recognized, as the cultural manifestation of these contrastive pairs of societal opposites: class-class, urban-nonurban, and state-state. In other words, economic stratification, urbanization, and interstate relations are three of civilization's necessary societal determinants."²

Does the text of the Book of Mormon satisfy Chang's definition? I believe that it does as indicated by the following references:

1. *civilization*: Alma 51:22; Moroni 9:11
2. *classes/inequalities*: Mosiah 29:32; Alma 4:12, 15; 3 Nephi 7:10–14; 4 Nephi 1:26
3. *cities*: Jaredites-Ether 9:23; Nephites-Alma 8:7; 50:1; 62:32; Helaman 3:9; 4:9, 16; 8:6; 3 Nephi 6:7; 8:8–10, 14–15; 9:3; 4 Nephi 1:7–9; Mormon 8:7
4. *kingdom/nation/governor*: Jaredites-Ether 1:43; 7:20; Nephites-Mosiah 29:6–9; Alma 2:16; 9:20; 50:39; 61:1; 3 Nephi 1:1.

If the Jaredites and Nephites in the course of their history developed into a civilizational type of society, their lands and cities must have been located in an area of Ancient America that has ruins representing a civilizational level of development.

Only two areas of Ancient America developed societies that can be characterized as civilizations: Mesoamerica and the Andean area of South America. Travel distances based on the number of days it took the people to journey from one land to another or from one city to another indicate the overall lands mentioned in the Book of Mormon were confined to a relatively small area. For example, Alma the Younger and about “four hundred and fifty souls” traveled from the Waters of Mormon to the Land of Zarahemla in twenty-one days (Mosiah 18:35; 23:3; 24:20, 25). Book of Mormon textual information requires us to select either Mesoamerica or the Andean area as the geographical setting for the Jaredites, Nephites, Lamanites, and Mulekites. Either area is large enough to accommodate all the lands and cities mentioned in the record.

Mesoamerica is the easy choice since it has the surrounding seas, writing systems, topographical patterns, and surviving written traditions that parallel the textual requirements of the Book of Mormon. The Andean area lacks the surrounding seas, writing systems (dating to the Book of Mormon period), and appropriate topographical patterns and has no surviving written traditions. Further, Andean civilizational development did not begin with an agricultural economy but with a maritime economy. Irrigation agriculture as a subsistence base came later. Finally, the languages of the Mesoamerican and Andean areas are not related to each other. So the authors are justified in focusing on Mesoamerica as the key area for Book of Mormon historical events.

This conclusion does not suggest that descendants of the three Book of Mormon colonies did not eventually settle in South America or North America. The Jaredites started out with twenty-

four families (Ether 6:14–16) and the Nephites and Lamanites with seven tribes (Jacob 1:13). We have in the Book of Mormon the abridged record of one Jaredite family and only one of the seven tribes. We do not have the specific history of the other twenty-three Jaredite families or the other six tribes of the Lehi colony. Further, we know next to nothing about the Mulekite colony. We don't know if they came in one ship or many.

The third question posed for the authors relates to their use of the dimensions of historical or cultural geography in developing their models of Book of Mormon geography. J. E. Spencer and William L. Thomas, Jr., state that “cultural geography is concerned with the systems of human technologies and cultural practices as these are developed in particular regions of the earth through time by human populations conceived as culture groups.”³ Spencer and Thomas believe that studies in cultural geography can be pursued using four concepts and six interrelationships between the concepts. The four concepts are

1. *population*: a human population group occupying a territory that is spatially defined
2. *physical-biotic environment*: the processes and phenomena of a physical and biotic character which, although neutral to population survival, offer resources potentially useful for the maintenance of life
3. *social organization*: the way in which the population is integrated and functions; the interdependence of units (families, kin groups, associations) in a more or less elaborated division of labor. This is an aspect of culture, since individuals are unequipped to survive in isolation.
4. *technology*: the set of techniques (abilities, ideas, tools) employed by the population to gain sustenance from its environment. This also is an aspect of culture, yet a dependent variable.⁴

The six interrelationships are

1. population↔environment
2. population↔social organization
3. population↔technology
4. organization↔technology
5. environment↔organization
6. environment↔technology.⁵

Figure 1 will help the reader visualize the Spencer and Thomas approach to cultural geography. Their four concepts would represent the population and ecological (environmental) dimensions on

the left side of the figure and the social control (organization) and technological dimensions on the right side of the figure.

Hauck's model of Book of Mormon geography can be studied in map 1 and Sorenson's model can be viewed in map 2. The two models correspond to each other in the general location of the land and hill Cumorah and the identification of the west sea. Otherwise the authors disagree on the specifics of all other geographical units mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

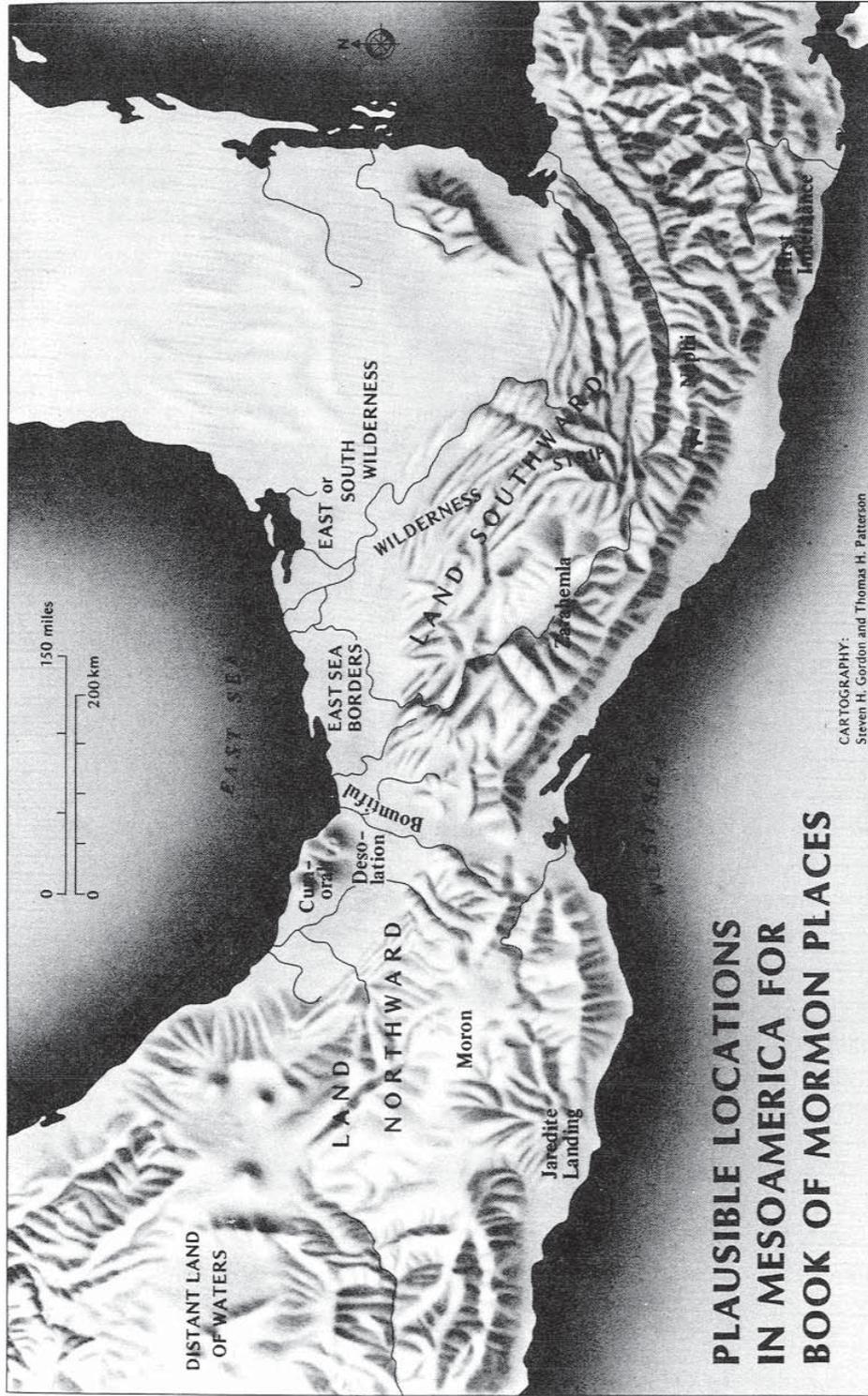
Hauck's model does not incorporate any of the four concepts of cultural geography. He does not discuss population, environment, technology, or social organization in terms of either the Book of Mormon or Mesoamerica. And it goes without saying that he does not analyze any of the six interrelationships between these four cultural geographical concepts.

What Hauck has attempted to do with the Book of Mormon text is to take the place names and topographical features mentioned in the book and arrange them into a network based on directional and distance information. This is an important procedural operation, but the resulting network patterns are slightly misleading because very little specific directional and distance information is available in the Book of Mormon text. Instead of one line or one path connecting each place or topographical feature, there should probably be two connecting lines or paths, one for direction and the other for distance. When the direction is given in the Book of Mormon text, the line would be solid, and when the directional information is lacking, the line would not be solid. The same conditions would hold for the distance lines. If there is information, the lines would be solid; otherwise the lines would be broken. In reality probably more than ninety percent of Hauck's models of Book of Mormon locational networks should have been composed of broken lines or paths since directional and distance information is so scarce.

One would expect that Hauck will use in future publications on the Book of Mormon relevant Mesoamerican information from the fields of archaeology, ethnography, linguistics, and ethnohistory. In the book under review, he does not make use of these resources to test his network models.

Sorenson's geographical model for the Book of Mormon does deal with the four cultural geographical concepts and to some degree with the interrelationships between these concepts. Additionally, Sorenson uses archaeological, ethnographic, linguistic, and ethnohistoric documents from Mesoamerica to support his geographical model.

The main differences between Hauck's and Sorenson's models of Book of Mormon geography center on the relationship of four



Map 2. Sorenson's model of Book of Mormon geography.

geographical regions in Mesoamerica with Book of Mormon events and the identification of three topographical features described in the Book of Mormon. The four geographical regions are the Valley of Guatemala, the central depression of Chiapas, the Oaxaca Valley, and the Yucatan Peninsula. The three topographical features are the narrow strip of wilderness, the river Sidon, and the narrow neck of land.

The archaeological evidence of Mesoamerican trade in obsidian, ceramics, etc., in the Book of Mormon time period supports Sorenson's use of the Valley of Guatemala, the central depression of Chiapas, and the Oaxaca Valley in Book of Mormon geography. I fail to see how Hauck can ignore these regions in his attempt to create a model of Book of Mormon geography. The Yucatan Peninsula remains a "sore thumb" for both Sorenson and Hauck and all other students of Book of Mormon research. The base of the peninsula has two of the biggest archaeological sites in Mesoamerica dating to the latter part of Book of Mormon history, El Mirador, Guatemala, and Calakmul, Mexico. Sorenson considers this region to be part of "the east wilderness full of Lamanites," and Hauck ignores the region.

The narrow strip of wilderness for Sorenson is basically the linguistic boundary between the Zoque and Maya tribes. For Hauck the narrow strip of wilderness is a mountain range in Guatemala that runs from the Pacific Ocean to the Caribbean Sea. Sorenson's river Sidon is the Grijalva river of Chiapas, and Hauck's river Sidon is the Usumacinta river that borders the state of Chiapas, Mexico, and Guatemala. Sorenson's narrow neck of land is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec whereas Hauck's is the Pacific coast of Chiapas.

At the present time, most of the evidence for or against these two differing models of Book of Mormon geography would be classified as circumstantial. What is imperative for eventually producing a provable model of Book of Mormon geography is to find place names in languages, codices, written documents, emblem glyphs, or art symbolism from Mesoamerica that parallels in meaning and pattern the place names in the Book of Mormon. No one would object to a revelation on the matter.

What is the current state of affairs in Book of Mormon geography? I believe Hauck's book falls short of approaching a geography of the Book of Mormon. He neglects too many dimensions of cultural geography in his study. His book would have been better labeled *Locational Networking and the Book of Mormon*. Sorenson's book has a good historical and cultural geographical approach to the problem. He does not use any of the current mathematical or statistical approaches of contemporary geography.

However, Hauck's statistics are premature because they are designed for use in cases where extensive information is available for processing. At the present time such information is inadequate for statistical procedures of a sophisticated nature.

Currently, three regions in Mesoamerica have interesting prospects for locating some Book of Mormon lands. These regions are the Valley of Guatemala, the Oaxaca Valley, and the Tuxtla mountains of southern Veracruz. Sorenson's model incorporates all three of these regions, but Hauck's model only involves one (the Tuxtla mountains).

Two stelae are significant to Book of Mormon geography studies. A recent book by Munro S. Edmonson dates the first one, Stela 10, at Kaminaljuyu, Guatemala, in three separate calendars at 10 November 147 B.C. Kaminaljuyu is an archaeological site located on the western edge of Guatemala City in the Valley of Guatemala. Stela 10 at this site is really a royal throne with hieroglyphic writing that cannot be read at the present time, but the throne does depict a person who is dead by fire and a second figure of a king. This monument has parallels to an episode in Mosiah chapter 17 which describes the death of the prophet Abinadi by fire at the hands of King Noah about 148 B.C. according to the dates at the bottom of the page of chapter 17. The implications of this monument for the Book of Mormon is that Kaminaljuyu could be the city of Nephi.⁶

Edmonson dates Stela 13 at Monte Alban in the Oaxaca Valley at 563 B.C. following Alfonso Caso or 251 B.C. based on Edmonson's own research. The stela shows the capture of a king at Monte Alban by a foreign Olmec ruler from the lowlands of Veracruz. This event could parallel the capture of king Coriantumr in the land of Moron (Ether 14:6). However, until the choice between the two different dates can be resolved, Stela 13 cannot contribute to the question of whether the Jaredites destroyed themselves at the coming of the Mulekites in the sixth century B.C. or at the time of king Zarahemla in the third century B.C. As far as this monument goes, students of the Book of Mormon could have it either way for the time being.⁷

Finally, in the Tuxtla mountains of southern Veracruz, the name of a river emptying into the lagoon system near Alvarado is *Hueyapan* which means "large waters" and parallels the Jaredite name "waters of Ripliancum, which by interpretation, is large, or to exceed all" (Ether 15:8). One of the volcanic mountains in the Tuxtla region bears the Aztec name *Cintepec* which means "corn hill." The Aztecs were latecomers in Mesoamerica, and the earlier name in Maya could have been '*shim*. This word is very close to the Book of Mormon hill Shim in the land Antum (Morm. 1:3, Ether

9:3). It is worth repeating that both Sorenson and Hauck locate the land of Cumorah in the Tuxtla mountains region.

NOTES

¹Hauck, 7; Sorenson, 107.

²Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 365–66.

³J. E. Spencer and William L. Thomas, Jr., *Cultural Geography: An Evolutionary Introduction to Our Humanized Earth* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969), 4.

⁴Spencer and Thomas, *Cultural Geography*, 111.

⁵Spencer and Thomas, *Cultural Geography*, 111–12.

⁶Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of the Year: Middle American Calendrical Systems* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 25–27.

⁷Edmonson, *Book of the Year*, 22, 117.

JOSEPH L. ALLEN. *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*. Orem, Utah: S. A. Publishers, 1989. \$39.95 hardback; \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewed by David A. Palmer, a senior researcher at Amoco Chemical Co. and past leader of two expeditions to Mexico.

Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon ought to be on the bookshelf of everyone interested in Book of Mormon geography. This significant volume, a large book of 437 pages with 147 maps, is a pleasure to read. Allen makes convincing arguments in a style that is generally easy to understand. On controversial issues he states the alternative views and then argues for his own. He is quick to admit that we are still stumbling somewhat and that many answers remain elusive (30).

Allen is not a professional archaeologist, but he has had considerable experience visiting the sites and has learned a great deal from archaeologists such as John L. Sorenson, Bruce W. Warren, and Garth L. Norman. In addition some of his own insights appear to have real merit. However, the volume has some shortcomings. The discussion of the ancient Nephite directional system is inadequate and leads to questionable conclusions, particularly those regarding the location of the city Bountiful. Of the book's many drawn figures, some are passable, but others are not up to the detail achieved in 1840 by Frederick Catherwood. For example, Figure 5-2 does not show a beard, which the actual monument has (57). Photographs would have been better than most of the drawings. Typographical errors also haunt the text.