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Book of Mormon Geography

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Book of Mormon Geography

Harold B. Lee once advised the Saints not to become too concerned with Book of Mormon geography.

Some say the Hill Cumorah was in southern Mexico (and someone pushed it down still farther) and not in western New York. Well, if the Lord wanted us to know where it was or where Zarahemla was, he'd have given us latitude and longitude, don't you think?¹

Likewise, sometime before President Joseph F. Smith died in 1918, he said that the Lord had not revealed the location of Lehi's landing.² Without a revelation as to the locations of Book of Mormon events, we are left to our own speculations and the Church has not taken an official position on any geographic model.

In the quasi-official *Encyclopedia of Mormonism* (the production of which was overseen by Apostles Dallin Oaks and Neal Maxwell) we find the following comment: "The Church has not taken an official position with regard to location of geographical places [in the Book of Mormon].... [and] the authorities do not discourage private efforts to deal with the subject."³

In 1993, in response to a query from The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS), the office of the First Presidency faxed a statement that reads in part:

The Church emphasizes the doctrinal and historical value of the Book of Mormon, not its geography. While some Latter-day Saints have looked for possible locations... there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site.⁴

George Q. Cannon, First Presidency counselor to presidents Brigham Young, John Taylor, Wilford Woodruff, and Lorenzo Snow, said:

The First Presidency has often been asked to prepare some suggestive map illustrative of Nephite geography, but have never consented to do so. Nor are we acquainted with any of the Twelve Apostles who would undertake such a task. The reason is, that without further information they are not prepared even to suggest [a map]. The word of the Lord or the translation of other ancient records is required to clear up many points now so obscure....⁵

Without revelation on the topic we are left to our own intellects and theories. Why haven't we received revelation on this matter? We might just as easily ask why haven't we received revelation as to the age of the Earth, the exact location of Jesus' birth, the precise location that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea, or a definitive answer about evolution. Do the Pearly Gates "swing" or "slide"? Like Book of Mormon geography, such issues do not affect our salvation.

Although most members tacitly acknowledge that the Church has no official position on the location of Book of Mormon events, some members seem to believe that statements made by Joseph Smith implicitly represent revelation on the topic. Some have even gone as far to suggest that those who disagree with Joseph Smith's geographical comments are guilty of rejecting the prophet or are out-of-harmony with the Church. This is a strange accusation and logically implies that those Church leaders who have said that there is no official Book of Mormon geography are also on the road to apostasy.

Others claim that Joseph Smith identified—via revelation—certain Indian bones as belonging to Nephites. Upon closer examination, however, all such accounts are based on rumor and second-hand stories at best.⁶ During Joseph's lifetime, and under his editorship, other conflicting geographies were published in Church publications, suggesting that many people during Joseph's day—including the prophet himself—speculated on the location of Book of Mormon cities.

Joseph Smith's personal speculations evolved over time and can be used to support various geographic models including some comments which suggest that at least some of the Book of Mormon events and primary cities were located in Central America. A few other Latter-day Saints also made comments that suggest Central America—or Mesoamerica—was the home of much Book of Mormon activity. In 1891, for instance, Elder George Reynolds of the Church's First Council of the Seventy wrote that the Jaredites likely lived in Central America for most of their existence.⁷

Just because Joseph translated the Book of Mormon does not mean he received revelation as to the whereabouts of those events. He may have had some strong opinions on the matter but his opinions changed with time and reflected his best intellectual efforts to discover answers, just like any curious individual. Since he never claimed to know the geography from revelation we should not make this claim for him. No prophet has claimed revelation on Book of Mormon geography.

Critics like to quote Joseph's mother Lucy who said that while the Lord prepared Joseph to acquire the plates "God ...manifest[ed] to him" some of the "particulars" concerning the Book of Mormon. According to Lucy, Joseph described the "ancient

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inhabitants of this continent,” as well as their dress, mode of traveling, their cities, and more.⁸

To the critics (and some members) this suggests that Joseph knew everything about the Book of Mormon peoples, saw exactly what their lives were like, and would know where the events took place. Firstly, Lucy dictated her thoughts nearly two decades after Joseph’s vision. Her retelling may not have been as accurate as if she had recorded the event immediately after it transpired.

Secondly, just because Joseph saw such things in vision does not mean that Joseph knew the location of the events. The LDS Book of Mormon movie, *Testaments*, appears to have been filmed in Central America but it was actually filmed in Hawaii.⁹ Seeing people and buildings is not the same as seeing a map or satellite image.

Since the days of Joseph Smith most Saints believed that Book of Mormon events took place across the entire expanse of North and South America. This theory—referred to as the *Hemispheric Geography Theory* (HGT)—posits North America as the “land northward,” South America as the “land southward,” and present-day Panama as the “narrow neck” of land in between. This is a natural interpretation based on a cursory reading and superficial understanding of the Book of Mormon text. Most likely Joseph Smith, as well as the majority of Saints and leaders, unquestioningly accepted this model of Book of Mormon geography.

Joseph and other LDS leaders were not (and are not) immune to their own opinions, thoughts, and even misconceptions based on tradition. In Chapter 5 the concept of recontextualization is discussed. This phenomenon states that we tend to interpret new information according to our current understandings. Dr. R. John Williams offers an interesting parallel to the geography issue with the geographic interpretations of Christopher Columbus.

Columbus looked at the American hemisphere, and thought it corresponded to the text(s) he was reading (i.e., Marco Polo, Mandeville), just as Joseph Smith looked at the American hemisphere and thought it corresponded to the text he was reading/translating (i.e., the gold plates). And, [LDS] apologists could argue, the fact that Columbus was wrong about which lands were being referred to does not mean that those lands do not exist. The Indians were not from India, but India is, nonetheless a real place. Likewise, Joseph Smith might have been wrong in thinking that the North American Indians were “Lamanites,” but that does not necessarily mean that Lamanites did not, or do not, exist.¹⁰

When a man becomes a prophet, God does not instantly answer all questions and concerns about all aspects of the gospel (especially peripheral aspects such as geography). The Church does not support any official Book of Mormon geography. The fact that Joseph Smith may have believed in a hemispheric model for Book of Mormon geography is strong support that he did not write the Nephite text, but

rather translated it. Influenced, no doubt by the thinking of the day, the hemispheric model offered a superficial fit to a casual reading of the text.

It is important to understand that the Nephites would likely not have known about the overall geographical shape of the Americas. They did not have modern maps or satellite photos to show them the dimensions of landmasses or the location and distance to all the coasts of the hemispheric Americas. When Alma 22:32 tells us that Nephite lands were “nearly surrounded by water” with a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward, a quick look at a modern map suggests that the land southward (the Nephite portion “nearly surrounded by water”) might be South America. The Nephites, however, were likely unaware of the overall shape of South America to even know that it was “nearly surrounded by water.” The phrase could also mean that there were many bodies of water nearby.

Currently, most Latter-day Saints who have examined the issue at more than a superficial level reject the HGT in favor of some version of a *Limited Geography Theory* (LGT). The decisive factor in opting for a limited geography is travel distance between extreme ends of Book of Mormon cities. Travel distances, where noted, are always mentioned in terms of how long the trip took. All travel distances that we can decipher from Book of Mormon events indicate a very limited scale, probably no more than a few hundred miles—perhaps a total area about the size of Tennessee. While such a small area may seem unusual to modern readers, it should be noted that 95% of the Old Testament took place in an area only 150 miles long and fewer than 75 miles wide. Ancient Jerusalem encompassed a mere 13 acres.¹¹ This is a remarkably small area when we recall that 640 acres are needed to cover a square mile or that the Smith family farm where Joseph had his First Vision covered about 100 acres.¹²

LGT models include a Peruvian model, a Baja model, a Heartland model (Great Lakes area), and a Mesoamerican model (as well as some more obscure models). Virtually all the models are championed by intelligent proponents and all have some appeal as well as some problems. It must also be remembered that no paradigm—even a scientific paradigm—is completely free of all anomalies or problems. In science, “progressive modifications” allow for alterations within a paradigm so long as the paradigm is not destroyed by the modifications and so long as the preponderance of evidence supports the paradigm.

The Peruvian and Baja Models

Both of these models have some attractive features but also what I see as some fatal flaws. Both have problems matching a river to the requirements of the River Sidon as described in the Book of Mormon text. In the Peruvian model the primary archaeological evidence for large populations come from people who are far too late to be connected with Book of Mormon peoples and the Baja model lacks archaeological support for civilizations during Book of Mormon periods in lands that are suggested to encompass Book of Mormon cities.

The Peruvian model has one supposed ace-in-the-hole that, upon further investigation, fails to offer any real support. A document dated between 1836 and 1837 and written by Frederick G. Williams (one of Joseph's scribes) claims that Lehi landed in Chile. Some have supposed that Joseph was the source for this statement. In 1882 Franklin Richards and James Little published a booklet wherein they reproduced Williams' note about the Chilean landing under the heading, "Lehi's Travels—Revelation to Joseph the Seer." Williams, however, did not attribute the statement to Joseph Smith and there is no evidence that Joseph received such information by "revelation." B.H. Roberts and John A. Widtsoe, both careful critics, doubted that the statement came from Joseph. B.H. Roberts, for instance, called it an "alleged revelation." Roberts went on to note:

"Whereas, if this is not a revelation, the physical description relative to the contour of the lands occupied by the Jaredites and Nephites, that being principally that two large bodies of land were joined by a narrow neck of land—can be found between Mexico and Yucatan with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec between."¹³

It seems that Richards and Little made an unwarranted assumption. More likely the source for Williams' statement was actually Orson Pratt who believed that Lehi had landed in Chile and had been promoting his geography for many years. He never attributed his geographical model to revelation from Joseph Smith, however, and once explained that his model was based on his own analysis of the Book of Mormon text.¹⁴

In the end I personally find the Peruvian and Baja models to be interesting but unpersuasive when compared to other Book of Mormon geographic models.

The Great Lakes or Heartland Model

Beginning in about 1988 several Latter-day Saints began proposing that Book of Mormon events took place in the Great Lakes region of the United States. While there are variations of this model, most of the proponents claim not only that the area fits the Book of Mormon geographic requirements but they also claim that the Book of Mormon contains prophecies about the promised land that have been fulfilled (or are yet to be fulfilled) in—and only in—the United States of America (which would then rule out any non-U.S. geographic model).

Some Great-Lake promoters have also claimed that DNA science gives strong indication that some Great Lakes Native Americans are descendants of Middle Eastern nations (this claim is addressed in Chapter 16).

Elsewhere I have discussed in greater detail some of the issues I have with the Great Lakes model so I will not go into depth on the topic here.¹⁵ For the purposes of this chapter, however, I will note that I find the geography problematic when we try to align what we find in the Book of Mormon with real-world locations. The archae-

ology of ancient civilizations in the Great Lakes region also fails to match what we should expect from the textual clues provided in the Book of Mormon.

But what about Book of Mormon verses that appear to implicate the United States as the Nephite Promised Land? Proponents of a Great Lakes model often claim that Book of Mormon prophecies about the Promised Land apply uniquely to what is now the United States. It is important to understand a few things about scriptural references to the “promised land.” First, there is obviously more than one land of promise because both the Old and New World covenant people had such lands. The land could include a large area—or land of promise—as well as smaller sections of lands of promise in a larger area of promise. Thus the Book of Mormon can speak of lands of promise (see 2 Nephi 6:11, 9:2, 24:2).

Second, the “promise” was given to the righteous people. The Lord makes covenants with people not lands. Lands are promised in covenant to a righteous people and could move with the righteous people. While the Nephites’ original land of promise was their landing location, this changed when they went to the city of Nephi, to Zarahemla, and then to Bountiful. In each instance they had been kicked out by other nations yet they still referred to their new lands as lands of promise with the promise of protection.

Great Lakes proponents often quote 1 Nephi 13:12–15, which talks about a gentile who would be led by the Spirit to cross many waters to come to the remnant of Lamanites in the “promised land.” Latter-day Saints have traditionally inferred this to be Columbus and his discovery of America. Great Lakes theorists seem to ignore, however, the fact that Columbus never set foot into what is currently the United States. His voyages focused on the Bahamas, the northern part of South America and the Central American areas. Verses 13–15 tell us that more gentiles would come to the Promised Land and would scatter the Lamanites. Many Latter-day Saints have inferred that this accounts for the founding of United States and the wars with the American Indians. While this certainly could be part of the prophecy’s fulfillment, as President Spencer W. Kimball explained, this could also refer to the Spaniards who came to different parts of North and South America.¹⁶

In 2 Nephi 10:11 we are told that the Promised Land—“this land”—would be a “land of liberty” to the gentiles, and they would have “no kings.” Certainly, this sounds like what we have in the United States. There is no question that the Lord’s hand was involved in the establishment of the United States and the freedoms—especially the religious freedoms—that many nations now enjoy. Such a land was necessary for the restoration of the gospel.

Having noted this, however, there are a couple of important things to consider. First, Orson Hyde—an early LDS leader and contemporary of Joseph Smith—quoted the above verse and claimed that “‘This land,’ means both North and South America, and also the families of islands that geographically and naturally belong and adhere to the same....”¹⁷ The phrase “this land” does not necessarily restrict the Promised Land to the present-day borders of the United States. According to the church-sponsored *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, “Zion” is synonymous with the Promised Land.¹⁸

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It is interesting therefore to note that Joseph Smith claimed that Zion constituted North and South American as well as anywhere the righteous Saints gather.

Second, it is odd to read Jacob (2 Nephi 10) say that there would be no “kings” in the Promised Land because his brother Nephi was the king, and there continued to be kings in the Nephite Promised Land for another 400 years. Jacob began this topic by paraphrasing Isaiah (49), and the point of his comments was that if they remained righteous they would continue to have religious liberty and that they would be protected against those who fought against Zion. Gardner points out that if the comma in verse 11 were removed, the verse would make more sense (and it should be noted that the original Book of Mormon manuscript had no punctuation): “... and there shall be no kings upon the land(,) who shall rise up unto the Gentiles” (in this early context, the gentiles would still have been the non-Israelite “others” in their vicinity).

His point is that no other kings shall stand against the Nephites if they are righteous, for their true king is Yahweh who has promised to preserve them.¹⁹

While we certainly can accept that the Lord had a special plan that involved the freedoms of America, this does not necessarily mandate that the Book of Mormon events took place in Joseph Smith’s immediate vicinity.

The Mesoamerican Model

Most LDS scholars (and some LDS leaders) favor a Mesoamerican model. In lieu of revelation on the matter (and statements made by past or current leaders do not equal revelation) the best way to determine the accuracy of any model is to subject it to the same tests that we would use in any other scientific or historical inquiry. From my research, I find that the Mesoamerican model fits all of the evidence better than any other competing model. Following are some of the geographic criteria from the Book of Mormon text and how those criteria are met by Mesoamerica:

- **Mapping.** The internal geography of the Book of Mormon requires that the land be positioned between an east and a west sea or, at the very least, situated between two bodies of water large enough to be called “seas” (as in, the Dead Sea).²⁰
- **Writings.** Mesoamerica is the only place that seems to have had a sophisticated writing system during Book of Mormon times.
- **Advanced cities and fortifications.** Archaeology confirms such cities in Mesoamerica during Book of Mormon times.
- **Rivers.** Rivers must be the right size and in the right portions of the land. We find such correlation in Mesoamerica.

- **Climate.** The Book of Mormon suggests a temperate climate (for growing such things as “wheat” and “barley”) and never mentions snow or cold in a New World setting.
- **Culture.** Both Book of Mormon cultures and Mesoamerican cultures had developed agriculture and commerce.
- **Volcanism.** 3 Nephi describes destruction that is best explained by volcanic activity and earthquakes. Mesoamerica lies in a zone that experiences frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity.

The Mesoamerican model is not without its problems. How, for instance, can Cumorah be in New York if Book of Mormon events took place in Mesoamerica? How could the Isthmus of Tehuantepec be called a “narrow” neck of land? Central America runs northwest by southeast, which seems to violate Book of Mormon directions. Let us look at some of these supposed problems.

Where is Cumorah?

The hill known as *Cumorah* by the Nephites was known by the Jaredites as the hill Ramah (Ether 15:11). Around the time that the Lehites were leaving Jerusalem, the Jaredites were fighting their final battle in the vicinity of the hill Ramah. Approximately a thousand years later, the Lamanites and Nephites were engaged in their own final battle at the same hill—now called Cumorah.

The Lord instructed the prophet Mormon to keep his record safe, so when the final battle began he buried all the plates, except the plates that were translated into the Book of Mormon, in the Hill Cumorah (Mormon 6:6). The plates that eventually ended up in Joseph’s hands were given to Mormon’s son, Moroni, who later added his own comments and a translation of the Book of Ether. To reiterate, we are specifically told by Mormon that the Book of Mormon plates *were not* included with those plates buried at Cumorah.

Why, then, do we call the hill in New York “Cumorah?” As far as we currently know, Joseph never specifically referred to the drumlin hill in New York as Cumorah (at least not in any first-hand written record). The closest we come to such a designation is an 1842 *Times and Seasons* letter (that later became Doctrine and Covenants 128) which reads in part, “Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfillment of the prophets—the book to be revealed.”

Mormon says he wrote and compiled the Book of Mormon record at the Hill Cumorah before the great battle (Mormon 6:6). Since the Book of Mormon contains the “glad tidings” of the Restoration of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, it can accurately be called the “glad tidings from Cumorah,” regardless of where it was found.

Even as late as 1838 when Joseph published his official history (*Joseph Smith History*), he did not refer to the hill as Cumorah but simply as “a hill of considerable

size” (1:51). The earliest references we find to the hill being called Cumorah appear to come from Orson and Parley Pratt as well as Oliver Cowdery.

It is obvious that most of the early Saints believed in a hemispheric geography; that is, they believed that the Nephites and Lamanites lived from South America to North America. It is certainly possible that Joseph accepted the early LDS designation of the New York hill as Cumorah, but the fact that he never called it Cumorah suggests that he never received a revelation on the issue.

In accordance with their geographical theories, the early Saints typically believed that Moroni buried the final record in the same hill in which his father Mormon had buried the rest of the plates. In 1866, Orson Pratt suggested that Moroni was “inspired to select a department of the hill separate from the great sacred depository of the numerous volumes hid up by his father.”²¹

It is possible that Pratt’s assumptions were based on rumors that Joseph and Oliver were allowed to enter a cave in the Hill Cumorah where they saw stacks of plates and the Sword of Laban. All tales of this cave are secondhand and late; the earliest known account dates to 1855—five years after Oliver’s death and 11 years after Joseph’s martyrdom.²² We have no first-hand record of this cave encounter, so we do not know if the stories had any basis in fact or were garbled from an actual event.

As noted on the FAIR Wiki, the New York “Hill Cumorah” is a drumlin “a pile of gravel scraped together by an ancient glacier.”²³ It is not reasonable to assume that it would contain a cave. Dr. Michael Dorais of the geology department at BYU explains that “Cumorah” was formed tens of thousands of years ago and “is one of 10,000 similar hills of west-central New York that compose one of the largest drumlin fields in the world.” Dorais notes, however, that such a hill would “have allowed efficient water drainage that could have been important in the preservation of the (Book of Mormon) plates...”²⁴

If Cumorah was in Central America, How Did the Plates Get to New York?

When Mormon died he passed his record on to his son Moroni. For the next several decades Moroni kept adding to the plates until, before his own demise, he buried them as his father had done. Some Mesoamerican proponents have suggested that Moroni may have taken the plates to the New York hill as a resurrected being. The angel Moroni took the plates away from Joseph once the translation was finished, so it certainly seems reasonable that he—as an angel—could have deposited them near Joseph’s home as well.

It is also possible that during the decades in which Moroni was wandering and fleeing from the Lamanites (Moroni 1:1–3) that he simply carried the fifty-pound plates until he made his final home in upstate New York. It is interesting to speculate who and what Moroni might have encountered during such a trek.

Some may be tempted to think that walking several thousand miles would be an impossible, if not unlikely, journey. History, however, has given us other examples of

similar treks. In the mid-sixteenth century, for example, English sailor David Ingram and several shipmates were marooned on a coast of Mexico. Ingram and a couple of dozen other sailors began a journey northward. Eleven months later Ingram and two of his comrades had reached Nova Scotia Canada (just a bit further Northeast of Joseph Smith's home land).²⁵

While Ingram embellished his travel stories with some tall tales (and possibly conflated some details with the details from his travels in Africa and South America) most scholars accept the veracity of his claim that he actually traveled from Mexico to Canada in less than a year. To test the possibility of the journey forty-six year old Richard Nathan walked the same route in reverse in nine months from August 1999 until May 2000.²⁶

Moroni may have taken a similar or different path to New York. Thousands of years ago, the Native Americans developed footpath trails and trade routes that connected Mexico to what is now New Mexico (and possibly beyond).²⁷ The main route was eventually developed by the Spaniards as the 1,600-mile *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* or "Royal Road of the Interior"²⁸ which linked the Spanish colonial capital in Mexico City with its north frontier.²⁹

The El Camino was eventually instrumental in many phases of American history including the path used by the U.S. army to invade Mexico which incited the Mexican-American war of 1846–1848. Today the pathway is paralleled by Interstate 25. The ancient trade route would have been no more than a foot-trail in Moroni's day, but could easily have led him to the Santa Fe area.

A number of years ago LDS scholar H. Donl Peterson discovered two copies of a hand-drawn map in the Church archives (author unknown). The maps claim to depict the travels of Moroni. The previous owner of the maps claims to have acquired them from early Latter-day Saint Robert Dickson, who got it from William McBride and Andrew Hamilton, who got it from Joseph Smith.

The map lists the "land Bountiful" in Central America and claims to describe Moroni's travels from Central America to Sand Hills Arizona, then on to Salt Lake, Adam-Ondi-Ahman, Nauvoo, Independence, Kirtland, and then New York.³⁰

If the map is genuine and accurately reflects the thinking of early Latter-day Saints and/or Joseph Smith, it supports the theory that Moroni traveled Northward along what became the El Camino, continued traveling North-Northwest to Arizona, and then worked his way North through Utah (where we learn that he dedicated the spot for the Manti temple³¹ as well as other temple sites) and eventually found his way to upstate New York.

While such a trip would have been much longer than the trip taken by the shipwrecked sailor David Ingram, the travel distance is not unreasonable—especially given the time Moroni had from the day he acquired his father's plates until the day he buried them himself. While we may never know if Moroni buried the plates during his mortal ministry or as an angel, the fact that he could have brought the plates from Mesoamerica to New York dispels the argument that the Mesoamerican model is incompatible with Joseph's retrieval of the record from a hill on the family farm.

How Can the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Be Called a “Narrow” Neck of Land?

According to most versions of the Mesoamerican model for Book of Mormon geography, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (the narrow strip of land separating the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean) constitutes the “narrow neck” of land described in the Book of Mormon (Alma 22:32). While this strip of *terra firma* certainly reflects a narrow neck of land between two larger bodies of land, some may question how this section could be traversed in a day and a half by a Nephite (Alma 22:32) when the narrowest point is still 137 miles across.

The Book of Mormon’s narrow neck was obviously not extremely narrow because in Mosiah 8 we read that the Limhi explorers unknowingly passed through it and thought they were still around the land of Zarahemla.

There are several possible explanations for the travel-distance dilemma. Dr. John Sorenson explains that travel distance for “a Nephite” might refer to someone accustomed to traveling long distances in short periods (as opposed to someone who was not “a Nephite”). Sorenson cites the example of some Mexican Indian foot runners who have been known to run up to five hundred miles in six days, pausing one day for rest before running back again. Sorenson also cites the example of a man who, in 1973, walked five hundred miles in six days as well as a man who traveled 161 miles in a single twenty-four hour period.³²

There may be a simpler answer, however. Our initial inclination when reading Alma 22:32 is to envision the Narrow Neck’s distance as a day and a half’s journey from ocean to ocean, but the verse actually says that a Nephite could make the roughly 36-hour journey from “the east” to the west sea (not the *east sea* to the west sea). It is possible that “the east” referred to some other delineator other than the east sea—perhaps something much further inland (which could have greatly reduced the travel distance to the west sea).

Dr. Lawrence Poulsen, for example—who I personally think has the most up-to-date theories for the Mesoamerican model—argues that “the east” in Alma 22 refers to travel along the natural east border in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and then true east along the northern border of the *barrancas* (bluffs) to the Cuatzacoalcos River. This river forms the eastern boundary of the Isthmus while a thick wilderness and the barrancas creates a natural border of cliffs that are about 4,000 to 5,000 feet high.³³

Many years ago, based on the description and geographical qualifiers given in the Book of Mormon, Poulsen theorized that this area could very likely be the Book of Mormon “Hermounts.” According to Alma 2:37–38, Hermounts “was that part of the wilderness which was infested by wild and ravenous beasts” and “many died in the wilderness of their wounds, and were devoured by those beasts....”

Poulsen’s Hermounts argument was part of a much larger argument and context—a portion of which (like Sorenson) identifies the Grijalva River as the Book of Mormon’s River Sidon. The Nephite culture likely lived in the Grijalva River basin. As Poulsen notes:

The [Isthmus] of Tehuantepec is [found] to the northwest of this basin and is [separated] from the Grijalva basin by a range of mountains on the eastern border of the [I]sthmus. This [mountainous] area called “barrancas” is almost totally [uninhabited] even today.³⁴

Several years after Poulsen suggested that the barrancas of the Isthmus matched the Book of Mormon Hermounts, he discovered some additional information that helped support his theory. The word “Tehuantepec” is a Nahuatl (early Mesoamerican) word composed of *tecuani* and *tepec*. While *tepec* translates as “hill” or “mountain,” *tecuani* means “man eating beast.” Thus Tehuantepec means, “the mountains of man-eating beasts.”³⁵

The Tehuantepec Coat of Arms, for example, has both a glyph for a mountain as well as a jaguar or *tecuani*. While *tecuani* is typically translated as “jaguar” an alternative translation is “man-eating beast.” According to Poulsen, Matt Roper—another LDS scholar—claims that natives will avoid that particular area in the Isthmus for fear of man-eating beasts.³⁶

While Poulsen acknowledges that the Nahuatl language may have come late in this area of Mesoamerica, he correctly points out that when later cultures translate names into their own languages, they frequently adapt their translations to the names and features given by the former cultures’ language.

What does this interesting and Book-of-Mormon-favorable information have to do with the travel distance for a day-and-a-half’s journey for “a Nephite”? The Isthmus’ eastern border—the barrancas that could be identified with Hermounts—is less than half-way across the Isthmus. A Nephite traveling from the west sea (the Pacific Ocean side of the Isthmus) to “the east” border (the natural east border in the Isthmus) could cross that distance in a day and a half with little difficulty.

Book of Mormon Directions

At first glance there seems to be a problem with Book of Mormon directions and the layout of Mesoamerica. While the Nephites generally used terms such as “northward” and “southward,” with seas in all four directions, this is not what we intuitively see in a map of Mesoamerica, which runs somewhat diagonally from northwest and southeast. How could an intelligent people like the Nephites get cardinal directions wrong? The directions are not wrong if we factor in the context of a genuine ancient culture.

In both Mayan and Hebrew, for example, *north* means on “the left hand” and *south* means “on the right.” Studies indicate that some people in Mesoamerica called the Pacific Ocean the “west sea” and the Gulf Coast the “east sea” although these seas are actually southwest and northeast of Mesoamerican lands. Even some European conquerors used directions similar to those used in the Book of Mormon when they wrote about their travels in Mesoamerica.

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Systems for labeling directions in ancient times varied by thousands of different schemes and were generally arbitrary systems designed by individual groups to deal with their unique geographical and linguistic situations. The Maya, for instance, conceived of north as up—as in up toward the sky—which makes translation difficult to a world that sees north at the top of a map. Some ancient Mayan maps even orient east—rather than north—at the top of the map.

As Poulsen points out, in most ancient languages the word(s) translated in English as “east” nearly always refer to the rising of the sun, while “west” refers to the setting of the sun.

The concept of direction in ancient cultures was centered on the movement of the sun, in particular its movement relative to the individual’s location. This is an anthropocentric [person centered] rather than a geocentric [earth centered] view of direction. In other words, it is based on personal orientation rather than on contemporary global map orientation.³⁷

Ancient maps usually depicted this personal view of geography and directions. They were typically graphical drawings with lines to connect distinct locations. Little thought was given to scale. Also, ancient societies did not understand many of the directional concepts the same way we do today. When we hear “up” or “down” in regards to directions, for example, we think of “up” and “down” on a map—or “north” and “south.” To someone of an ancient culture, however, this would be “up” or “down” a hill or mountain.

While “east” would refer to the direction of sunrise and “west” to sunset, in Mesoamerica “north” would refer to the direction to the right of sunrise, while “south” would denote the direction left of sunrise. East and west were delineated by relatively narrow angles—they ranged from the point where the sun rose and set from the Winter Equinox to the Spring Equinox. North and south, however, were all of the vectors to the right and left of sunrise so they consisted of a much wider coverage of directional vectors.

Mesoamerican specialist Brant Gardner and Dr. Poulsen agree that ancient perspectives on directions differ from our modern perspectives.³⁸ Modern cultures understand cardinal directions as four quadrants, like a “+” that divides a square into four equal sections of direction. The Mesoamerican conceptual universe, however, was more like a squashed “x”—or an “x” connecting the corners of a rectangle. In the “x” the right “east” and left “west” sections take up a smaller slice of the pie than the wider wedges given to the north and south sections of the “x” division. While a square divided by a “+” yields an equal 25% for all four directions, the squashed “x” in a rectangle yields an east and west with 13% of the total number of directional vectors for each direction and a north and south with 37% each.

Lands that we might locate in the east or west, for instance, would be in the north or south based on ancient Mesoamerican directions. Some ancient inscriptions, for example, refer to the Teotihuacán rulers as “western lords.” Directly west

of the inscriptions, however, lay the Pacific Ocean. Teotihuacán was actually to the north-northwest. To put it simply, the directional systems of some ancient cultures were not based on the same cultural principles as ours.³⁹

When we examine Book of Mormon directions, we find a pattern that fits amazingly well with the Mesoamerican understanding of directions. Poulsen points out that there are 378 Book of Mormon references to direction. 19% of those references denote east or eastward directions, 16% west or westward, while 39% reference north or northward directions and 27% south or southward.⁴⁰

Other than the slight under sampling of south notations (which is likely based on the fact that the south was mostly Lamanite territory and would likely demand fewer references in a book written by Nephites), the percentages match what we should expect to find in a Mesoamerican directional concept.

When we overlay the Mesoamerican direction system on Central American we find that the upper part of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec really is in the north, while the lower part is really in the south. Plus we find that there are seas north, east, south, and west, and that the Nephites are surrounded by water like “an isle of the sea” (2 Nephi 10:20).

Understanding the way that the ancient Mesoamericans understood directions not only strengthens the theory that Book of Mormon events took place in Central America, but it also supports the claim that the Nephite scripture is based on an authentic ancient text.

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