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## Excerpt, "Book of Mormon Geographies 1842-present", pg. 190-191

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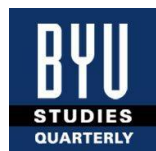
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**Abstract:** The Book of Mormon was intended to be a spiritual work—to give readers a testimony of Jesus Christ—not a people’s history and geography. However, for many scholars who believe in the book’s literal truth, there is a natural curiosity to discover where the events in the book took place. Many believe that the historical and geographic context of the Book of Mormon can help readers better understand the spiritual message, as it does with the New Testament.

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# Book of Mormon Geographies

1842–present

**T**HE BOOK OF MORMON was intended to be a spiritual work—to give readers a testimony of Jesus Christ—not a people’s history and geography. However, for many scholars who believe in the book’s literal truth, there is a natural curiosity to discover where the events in the book took place. Many believe that the historical and geographic context of the Book of Mormon can help readers better understand the spiritual message, as it does with the New Testament. Some hope for archaeological proof of the Book of Mormon.

A variety of professional scholars and passionate amateurs, both LDS and RLDS, have published at least 90 theories of the location of the places and events in the Book of Mormon. These theories include both external models, which attempt to correlate places in the text to actual places in the Americas; and internal models, which are based on geographical cues in the Book of Mormon itself with no attempt to tie them to real locations.

These models tend to follow a basic “hourglass” pattern, consisting of a “land northward” that contains the Hill Cumorah and is the setting for the book of Ether, and a “land southward” where most of the Book of Mormon narrative takes place (containing cities such as Nephi, Zarahemla, and Bountiful); these are connected by a “narrow neck of land.” However, some researchers have proposed other interpretations of the same scriptures, resulting in radically different geographies.

The introduction of new geographies has ebbed and flowed through the years, based on several factors: occasional statements by General Authorities supporting (unofficially) one theory or another, acceptance or rejection of ideas by the community of Book of Mormon scholars, and varying interest in the subject by the general membership. Since no theory can claim irrefutable proof of its truth, novel ideas will continue to appear.

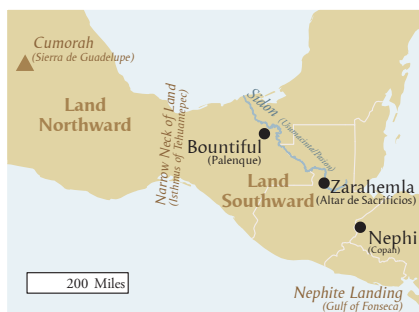
Brandon S. Plewe



Early Saints, including Joseph Smith, frequently speculated about Book of Mormon lands and peoples based on the arrowheads, burial mounds, and other ancient artifacts they found around them. In 1842, Joseph received a copy of John Lloyd Stephens’ *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, a best-selling sensation due in part to its beautiful illustrations of Mayan ruins. The Prophet and his editors published several articles in the *Times and Seasons* about the relationships they saw between Book of Mormon civilizations and Mesoamerica. They focused on three sites in particular that had been featured in Stephens’ book, even suggesting that Quiriguá could be the Nephite capital Zarahemla.

During the nineteenth century, and much of the twentieth, most readers of the Book of Mormon assumed that its events covered the entire Western Hemisphere. Scholars such as George Reynolds (1880) and Joel Ricks developed specific theories of locations that restricted most of the narrative to a smaller area but kept the Hill Cumorah as the final place of destruction.

This hemispheric approach, and the implication that all of today’s Native Americans are Lamanites, was unofficially endorsed by some General Authorities during the early 1900s and still has a widespread acceptance, despite archaeological, ethnic, and genetic evidence to the contrary.



The 1917 model of Louis Hills (who was RLDS) was the first to respond to the issues of the hemispheric model by asserting that the Hill Cumorah, where the Nephites and Jaredites were destroyed, was not the hill where the plates were buried.

While the plausibility and orthodoxy of this hypothesis were debated, dozens of similar limited Mesoamerican theories were published, especially during a period of openness in the 1970s and 1980s. The 1985 model of John Sorenson has gained the widest acceptance by LDS scholars, despite the fact that archaeological support for a Mesoamerican (or any other) setting is circumstantial.

Note: The maps shown here were selected to be representative of the variety of ideas and milestones in the history of this field of study, and are not necessarily the most likely nor the most widely accepted theories. The editors make no assertions of their scholarship, validity, or likelihood relative to models not shown here. The maps have been redrawn from original documents to facilitate comparisons.





The first purely internal geography was published by Lynn Layton in 1938, avoiding archaeological challenges by not attempting to tie events to real locations. Authors have generally posited that such a correlation may eventually be possible as scientific evidence increases. Layton determined sites on his map based on statements of relative location (distances and directions) given in the Book of Mormon.

Internal geographies serve a variety of purposes. Some were a step in developing an external geography. John Clark's 1989 minimalist model was presented as a tool for validating other published models (internal and external). Others are marketed to a general audience of Book of Mormon readers hoping to better understand the narrative without taking an archaeological stance.



The widespread support for Sorenson's model largely subdued geographic research in the early 1990s, but many alternative geographies have been published recently. These include novel Mesoamerican theories (such as that of James Warr) and many attempts to locate the events in the book in New York (including the 1998 model of Duane Aston) and elsewhere in the United States. The latter have generally used innovative interpretations to avoid the classic "hourglass" model but have not gained wide acceptance.



Although the variety of theories have increased, Mesoamerica remains the location that is most widely accepted among scholars. New theories, such as that of Garth Norman (2006), continue to place the Nephites and Lamanites in the Mayan region, and guided group tours to "the lands of the Book of Mormon" are very popular.



Many authors have interpreted that when "the whole face of the land changed" (3 Nephi 8:12) at the death of Christ, the shoreline changed to today's configuration from something drastically different (often based on evidence of flooding in past geologic eras). This hypothesis has been used to identify lost "hourglasses" in South America (as suggested by Venice Priddis in 1975), Mesoamerica, and New York. Other scholars have cited scriptural and geologic evidence against such sweeping changes.

Over 90 theories of Book of Mormon geography have been published over the past 170 years. General locations have gone in and out of favor, and most authors have resorted to minor publishing houses or self-publishing to get their ideas in print.

#### Location

- Western Hemisphere
- Mesoamerica
- South America or Panama
- United States / New York
- Other location
- Internal Model

#### Publisher

- Major  
*Church magazine, Deseret Book, etc.*
- Minor publisher or journal
- Self-published

