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Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?

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Abstract: This article argues that, although there is little definite evidence or data with which to clearly identify Book of Mormon geographical sites, continued earnest, honest, and scholarly studies should not be discouraged. “All such studies are legitimate,” but dogmatic conclusions made without actual verifiable data “must at the best be held as intelligent conjectures.”

IS BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY KNOWN?

By John A. Widtsoe

OF THE COUNCIL OF THE TWELVE

THE actual geographical locations of Book of Mormon events and places have always intrigued students of the book. Several volumes and many articles on the subject have been published.¹ The various writers so far have failed to agree. Often the suggested locations vary, with different authors, thousands of miles. An earnest, honest search is being continued by enthusiastic Book of Mormon students.

The Book of Mormon was written centuries ago. Consequently, it makes no direct reference to modern, easily identifiable locations. Students must depend, chiefly, upon existing natural monuments, such as mountains, rivers, lakes, or ocean beaches, and try to identify them with similar places mentioned in the Book of Mormon. Ruins of early cities are also used as clues by the investigator. Usually, an ideal map is drawn based upon geographical facts mentioned in the book. Then a search is made for existing areas complying with the map. All such studies are legitimate, but the conclusions drawn from them, though they may be correct, must at the best be held as intelligent conjectures.

As far as can be learned, the Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred. Perhaps he did not know. However, certain facts and traditions of varying reliability are used as foundation guides by students of Book of Mormon geography.

First, it is known by revelation that Adam, the father of the human race, lived in or near the territory now known as the state of Missouri.² This has no bearing on Book of Mormon geography, since it deals with a period long before the coming of Book of Mormon people to America.

Second, on the journey into

¹Among them: J. A. & J. N. Washburn, *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography*, (Provo, Utah, 1939); T. S. Ferguson, *Cumorah Where? Independence, Mo.* (1947); Joel Ricks, *Geography of Book of Mormon Lands* (1940); Orin G. Wilde, *Landmarks of Ancient American People* (1947); Lynn C. Layton, "An 'Ideal' Book of Mormon Geography" (THE IMPROVEMENT ERA, 41:394, July 1938).

²THE IMPROVEMENT ERA 53:42 (January 1950)

northwestern Missouri, led by the Prophet, the skeleton of a large man was uncovered near the Illinois River. Joseph Smith said it was the remains of a white Lamanite named Zelph, a leader among this people.³ This is not of much value in Book of Mormon geographical studies, since Zelph probably dated from a later time when Nephites and Lamanites had been somewhat dispersed and had wandered over the country.

Third, the hill from which the Book of Mormon plates were obtained by Joseph Smith is definitely known. In the days of the Prophet this hill was known among the people as Cumorah.⁴ This is a fixed point in Book of Mormon later history. There is a controversy, however, about the Hill Cumorah—not about the location where the Book of Mormon plates were found, but whether it is the hill under that name near which Nephite events took place.⁵ A name, says one, may be applied to more than one hill; and plates containing the records of a people, sacred things, could be moved from place to place by divine help.

However, the hill known today as Cumorah in northern New York is a fixed, known point.

Fourth, a statement in the *Compendium* has been very generally accepted by the Church. This book, published in 1882, dealing with the doctrines of the gospel, was compiled by Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little. Elder Richards was a member of the Council of the Twelve, and James A. Little, a prominent and trusted elder in the

³History of the Church (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1902-1932) 2:79

⁴Ibid., 1:15

⁵Mormon 6:2, 6; 8:2; Ether 15:11

Church. In the book is a section devoted to "Gems from the History of the Prophet Joseph Smith." The last of these "gems" reads as follows:

"Lehi's Travels.—*Revelation to Joseph the Seer.* The course that Lehi and his company traveled from Jerusalem to the place of their destination: They traveled nearly a south, southeast direction until they came to the nineteenth degree of north latitude; then nearly east to the sea of Arabia, then sailed in a southeast direction, and landed on the continent of South America, in Chile, thirty degrees, south latitude."⁶

This, if correctly quoted would be another fixed, certain point in the study of Book of Mormon geography. Curiously enough, however, this statement is not found in the history of Joseph. Investigation points to a slip of paper in possession of the Church Historian said to have been the property of President Frederick G. Williams, one of Joseph's counselors. On the paper are notes pertaining to the doctrine and history of the Church. There also is found the above item relating to "Lehi's Travels." Much doubt has been cast upon the reliability of this statement, since diligent search has failed to trace it to the Prophet. It came into the possession of the Church Historian as a gift from Ezra G. Williams, son of Frederick G. Williams in 1864, twenty years after the Prophet's death, and was not published until thirty-eight years after the Prophet's death.

Fifth, a statement from the days of Joseph Smith, seldom quoted, bears on this subject. In the *Times and Seasons*, 1842, Zarahemla, a great Book of Mormon city, is partly identified with the ruins of Quirigua, spoken of in Stephens' great book *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*.⁷ The article in the *Times and Seasons* positively stated that Zarahemla, while not necessarily

(Continued on page 596)

⁶Compendium (Salt Lake City, Utah, 1886) 289

⁷John L. Stephens *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*, (New York 1841) vol. 2, p. 118, ch. VII

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(Continued from page 547)

where the Quirigua ruins now stands, was in "this land." This seems to place many Book of Mormon activities in that region. The interesting fact in this connection is that the Prophet Joseph Smith at this time was editor of the *Times and Seasons*, and had announced his full editorial responsibility for the paper." This seems to give the subjoined article an authority it

⁸*Times and Seasons* (Nauvoo, Ill., 1839-1846): 3:710. See also *History of the Church* (March 2, 1842) 4:524

might not otherwise possess. The following is an excerpt from the editorial.

"Since our 'Extract' was published from Mr. Stephens' 'Incidents of Travel,' &c., we have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon. 'Central America, or Guatemala, is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south—The city of Zara-

DESTINATION . . .

BY RICHARD L. EVANS

ONE of our most common characteristics is that we seldom seem to have arrived at precisely where we think we want to go. It is a restless world. And the chances are that even those who have what we think they would want, don't have quite what they think they want. We are pressed into pursuing many purposes, but it almost always seems that we are occupied with the pursuit rather than with the settled enjoyment of what we have already arrived at. Anticipation almost always exceeds realization. We are often eager to go, but glad to be back, and then soon bored with being back, and eager to go again. We are often impatient with the present, and impatient for the future to unfold. Of course, part of the future unfolds each day, but we are impatient for yet some further future. And what we thought would satisfy yesterday, we find on acquisition, does not so fully satisfy today. Like an errant knight, we cannot be content with the conquests of the past, but are ever after added experience and ever reaching for what is just a bit beyond. There may be much more restlessness in life than should be so; but part of it, no doubt, is as was intended, because our existence here is not in itself an end. Life is a journey and not a destination—an eternal journey, in which here or hereafter there will always be something to beckon us on. There may be periods of brief content. There may be periods of precious rest and of pausing between pursuits. But it doesn't seem to be in the nature of things for us to be too completely content, and even when we acquire what we think would make us so, there is ever within us the spirit of moving on—for immortal man must always have unconquered conquests, and a large part of the pleasure is in the pursuing. We may be grateful that there are always unaccomplished purposes, here and hereafter. And we may be comforted that we can look forward to being again with those who have gone before—for life is a journey and not a destination. Man is on an eternal march, and this very restlessness is added evidence that we are ever on our way.

"The Spoken Word"

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hemla, burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon this land, as will be seen from the following words in the book of Alma:—"And now it was only the distance of a day and a half's journey for a Nephite, on the line Bountiful, and the land Desolation, from the east to the west sea; and thus the land of Nephi, and the land of Zarahemla was nearly surrounded by water: there being a small neck of land between the land northward and the land southward." [See Book of Mormon 3rd edition 280-81.]

"It is certainly a good thing for the excellency and veracity, of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, that the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them: and that a large stone with engravings upon it, as Mosiah said: and a 'large round stone, with the sides sculptured in hieroglyphics,' as Mr. Stephens has published, is also among the left remembrances of the, (to him,) *lost and unknown*. We are not going to declare positively that the ruins of Quirigua are those of Zarahemla, but when the land and the stones and the books tell the story so plain, we are of the opinion, that it would require more proof than the Jews could bring, to prove the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb, to prove that the ruins of the city in question, are not one of those referred to in the Book of Mormon."

They who work on the geography of the Book of Mormon have little else than the preceding approaches with which to work, viz: that Nephites found their way into what is now the state of Illinois; that the plates of the Book of Mormon were found in a hill in northwestern New York State; that a statement exists of doubtful authenticity that Lehi and his party landed on the shore of the land now known as Chile; and that under the Prophet's editorship Central America was denominated the region of Book of Mormon activities.

Out of diligent, prayerful study, we may be led to a better understanding of times and places in the history of the people who move across the pages of the divinely given Book of Mormon.

*Times, and Seasons 3:927 (No. 23, October 1, 1842); Cumorah Where? p. 6.

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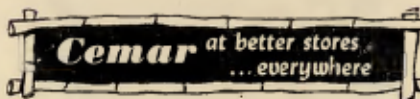
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