

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MORMONISM



Edited by
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of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*

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major reworking of the 1920 edition: The text appears again in double columns, but new introductory material, chapter summaries, and footnotes are provided. About twenty significant textual errors that had entered the printer's manuscript are corrected by reference to the original manuscript. Other corrections were made from comparison with the printer's manuscript and the 1840 Nauvoo edition.

THE REORGANIZED CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAY SAINTS (RLDS) also has its own textual tradition. Prior to 1874, the RLDS used an edition of the Book of Mormon published by James O. Wright (1858, New York), basically a reprinting of the 1840 Nauvoo edition. The first and second RLDS editions (1874, Plano, Illinois; and 1892, Lamoni, Iowa) followed the 1840 text and had their own system of versification. Unlike the later LDS editions, all RLDS editions have retained the original longer chapters.

In 1903 the RLDS obtained the printer's manuscript and used it to produce their third edition (1908, Lamoni, Iowa). The text of the 1908 edition restored many of the readings found in that manuscript, but generally did not alter the grammatical changes made in the 1837 Kirtland edition. This edition also included a new versification, which has remained unchanged in all subsequent RLDS editions. In 1966 the RLDS published a thoroughly modernized Book of Mormon text. Both the 1908 (with minor editing) and the 1966 texts are available, but only the 1908 edition is authorized for use in the RLDS Church.

A critical text of the Book of Mormon was published in 1984–1987 by the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies. This is the first published text of the Book of Mormon to show the precise history of many textual variants. Although this textual study of the editions and manuscripts of the Book of Mormon is incomplete and preliminary, it is helpful for a general overview of the textual history of the Book of Mormon.

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ROYAL SKOUSEN

BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY

Although the Book of Mormon is primarily a religious record of the NEPHITES, LAMANITES, and JAREDITES, enough geographic details are embedded in the narrative to allow reconstruction of at least a rudimentary geography of Book of Mormon lands. In the technical usage of the term "geography" (e.g., physical, economic, cultural, or political), no Book of Mormon geography has yet been written. Most Latter-day Saints who write geographies have in mind one or both of two activities: first, internal reconstruction of the relative size and configuration of Book of Mormon lands based upon textual statements and allusions; second, speculative attempts to match an internal geography to a location within North or South America. Three questions relating to Book of Mormon geography are discussed here: (1) How can one reconstruct a Book of Mormon geography? (2) What does a Book of Mormon geography look like? (3) What hypothetical locations have been suggested for Book of Mormon lands?

RECONSTRUCTING INTERNAL BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY. Although Church leadership officially and consistently distances itself from issues regarding Book of Mormon geography in order to focus attention on the spiritual message of the book, private speculation and scholarship in this area have been abundant. Using textual clues, laymen and scholars have formulated over sixty possible geographies. Dissimilarities among them stem from differences in (1) the interpretation of scriptural passages and statements of General Authorities; (2) procedures for reconciling scriptural information; (3) initial assumptions concerning the text and traditional LDS identification of certain fea-

tures mentioned (especially the hill CUMORAH and the “narrow neck of land,” which figure prominently in the text); and (4) personal penchants and disciplinary training.

Those who believe that reconstructing a Book of Mormon geography is possible must first deal with the usual problems of interpreting historical texts. Different weights must be given to various passages, depending upon the amount and precision of the information conveyed. Many Book of Mormon cities cannot be situated because of insufficient textual information; this is especially true for Lamanite and Jaredite cities. The Book of Mormon is essentially a Nephite record, and most geographic elements mentioned are in Nephite territory.

From textual evidence, one can approximate some spatial relationships of various natural features and cities. Distances in the Book of Mormon are recorded in terms of the time required to travel from place to place. The best information for reconstructing internal geography comes from the accounts of wars between Nephites and Lamanites during the first century B.C., with more limited information from Nephite missionary journeys. Travel distance can be standardized to a degree by controlling, where possible, for the nature of the terrain (e.g., mountains versus plains) and the relative velocity (e.g., an army’s march versus travel with children or animals). The elementary internal geography presented below is based on an interpretation of distances thus standardized and directions based on the text.

AN INTERNAL BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHY. Numerous attempts have been made to diagram physical and political geographies depicting features mentioned in the text, but this requires many additional assumptions and is difficult to accomplish without making approximate relationships appear precise (Sorenson, 1991). The description presented below of the size and configuration of Book of Mormon lands and the locations of settlements within it summarizes the least ambiguous evidence.

Book of Mormon lands were longer from north to south than from east to west. They consisted of two land masses connected by an isthmus (“a narrow neck of land”) flanked by an “east sea” and a “west sea” (Alma 22:27, 32). The land north of the narrow neck was known as the “land northward” and that to the south as the “land south-

ward” (Alma 22:32). The Jaredite narrative took place entirely in the land northward (Omni 1:22; Ether 10:21), but details are insufficient to place their cities relative to one another. Most of the Nephite narrative, on the other hand, took place in the land southward. Travel accounts for the land southward indicate that the Nephites and Lamanites occupied an area that could be traversed north to south by normal travel in perhaps thirty days.

The land southward was divided by a “narrow strip of wilderness” that ran from the “sea east” to the “sea west” (Alma 22:27). Nephites occupied the land to the north of this wilderness, and the Lamanites, that to the south. Sidon, the only river mentioned by name, ran northward between eastern and western wildernesses from headwaters in the narrow strip of wilderness (Alma 22:29). The Sidon probably emptied into the east sea—based on the description of the east wilderness as a rather wide, coastal zone—but its mouth is nowhere specified.

The relative locations of some important Nephite cities can be inferred from the text. Zarahemla was the Nephite capital in the first century B.C. That portion of the land southward occupied by the Nephites was known as the “land of Zarahemla” (Hel. 1:18). The city of Nephi, the original Nephite colony, by this time had been occupied by Lamanites and served at times as one of their capitals for the land south of the narrow wilderness divide (Alma 47:20). Based upon the migration account of Alma¹, the distance between the cities of Zarahemla and Nephi can be estimated to be about twenty-two days’ travel by a company that includes children and flocks, mostly through mountainous terrain (cf. Mosiah 23:3; 24:20, 25).

The distance from Zarahemla to the narrow neck was probably less than that between Zarahemla and Nephi. The principal settlement near the narrow neck was the city of Bountiful, located near the east sea (Alma 52:17–23). This lowland city was of key military importance in controlling access to the land northward from the east-sea side.

The relative location of the hill Cumorah is most tenuous, since travel time from Bountiful, or the narrow neck, to Cumorah is nowhere specified. Cumorah was near the east sea in the land northward, and the limited evidence suggests that it was probably not many days’ travel from the narrow neck of land (Mosiah 8:8; Ether 9:3). It is also

probable that the portion of the land northward occupied by the Jaredites was smaller than the Nephite-Lamanite land southward.

Book of Mormon lands encompassed mountainous wildernesses, coastal plains, valleys, a large river, a highland lake, and lowland wetlands. The land also apparently experienced occasional volcanic eruptions and earthquakes (3 Ne. 8:5–18). Culturally, the Book of Mormon describes an urbanized, agrarian people having metallurgy (Hel. 6:11), writing (1 Ne. 1:1–3), lunar and solar calendars (2 Ne. 5:28; Omni 1:21), domestic animals (2 Ne. 5:11), various grains (1 Ne. 8:1), gold, silver, pearls, and “costly apparel” (Alma 1:29; 4 Ne. 1:24). Based upon these criteria, many scholars currently see northern Central America and southern Mexico (Mesoamerica) as the most likely location of Book of Mormon lands. However, such views are private and do not represent an official position of the Church.

HYPOTHESIZED LOCATIONS OF BOOK OF MORMON LANDS. Two issues merit consideration in relation to possible external correlations of Book of Mormon geography. What is the official position of the Church, and what are the pervading opinions of its members?

In early Church history, the most common opinion among members and Church leaders was that Book of Mormon lands encompassed all of North and South America, although at least one more limited alternative view was also held for a time by some. The official position of the Church is that the events narrated in the Book of Mormon occurred somewhere in the Americas, but that the specific location has not been revealed. This position applies both to internal geographies and to external correlations. No internal geography has yet been proposed or approved by the Church, and none of the internal or external geographies proposed by individual members (including that proposed above) has received approval. Efforts in that direction by members are neither encouraged nor discouraged. In the words of John A. Widtsoe, an apostle, “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” (Vol. 3, p. 93).

Three statements sometimes attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith are often cited as evidence of an official Church position. An 1836 statement asserts that “Lehi and his company . . . landed on the continent of South America, in Chili [*sic*],

thirty degrees, south latitude” (Richards, Little, p. 272). This view was accepted by Orson Pratt and printed in the footnotes to the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon, but insufficient evidence exists to clearly attribute it to Joseph Smith (“Did Lehi Land in Chili [*sic*]?”; cf. Roberts, Vol. 3, pp. 501–503, and Widtsoe, Vol. 3, pp. 93–98).

In 1842 an editorial in the Church newspaper claimed that “Lehi . . . landed a little south of the Isthmus of Darien [Panama]” (*T&S* 3 [Sept. 15, 1842]:921–22). This would move the location of Lehi’s landing some 3,000 miles north of the proposed site in Chile. Although Joseph Smith had assumed editorial responsibility for the paper by this time, it is not known whether this statement originated with him or even represented his views. Two weeks later, another editorial appeared in the *Times and Seasons* that, in effect, constituted a book review of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan*, by John Lloyd Stephens. This was the first accessible book in English containing detailed descriptions and drawings of ancient Mayan ruins. Excerpts from it were included in the *Times and Seasons*, along with the comment that “it will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens’ ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon: light cleaves to light, and facts are supported by facts. The truth injures no one” (*T&S* 3 [Oct. 1, 1842]:927).

In statements since then, Church leaders have generally declined to give any opinion on issues of Book of Mormon geography. When asked to review a map showing the supposed landing place of Lehi’s company, President Joseph F. Smith declared that the “Lord had not yet revealed it” (Cannon, p. 160 n.). In 1929, Anthony W. Ivins, counselor in the First Presidency, added, “There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles that question [of Book of Mormon geography]. . . . We are just waiting until we discover the truth” (*CR*, Apr. 1929, p. 16). While the Church has not taken an official position with regard to location of geographical places, the authorities do not discourage private efforts to deal with the subject (Cannon).

The unidentified *Times and Seasons* editorialist seems to have favored modern Central America as the setting for Book of Mormon events. As noted, recent geographies by some Church members promote this identification, but others consider upstate New York or South America the correct setting. Considerable diversity of opinion remains among Church members regarding Book

of Mormon geography; however, most students of the problem agree that the hundreds of geographical references in the Book of Mormon are remarkably consistent—even if the students cannot always agree upon precise locations.

Of the numerous proposed external Book of Mormon geographies, none has been positively and unambiguously confirmed by archaeology. More fundamentally, there is no agreement on whether such positive identification could be made or, if so, what form a “proof” would take; nor is it clear what would constitute “falsification” or “dis-proof” of various proposed geographies. Until these methodological issues have been resolved, all internal and external geographies—including supposed archaeological tests of them—should, at best, be considered only intelligent conjectures.

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JOHN E. CLARK

BOOK OF MORMON LANGUAGE

The language of the Book of Mormon exhibits features typical of a translation from an ancient Near Eastern text as well as the stamp of nineteenth-century English and the style of the King James

Version (KJV) of the Bible. That the language of the Book of Mormon should resemble that of the KJV seems only natural, since in the time of the Prophet Joseph SMITH, the KJV was the most widely read book in America and formed the standard of religious language for most English-speaking people (see *CWHN* 8:212–18). Furthermore, the Book of Mormon shares certain affinities with the KJV: both include works of ancient PROPHETS of ISRAEL as well as accounts of part of the ministry of Jesus Christ, both are translations into English, and both are to become “one” in God’s hand as collections of his word to his children (Ezek. 37:16–17; 1 Ne. 13:41; D&C 42:12).

LANGUAGES USED BY THE NEPHITES. Statements in the Book of Mormon have spawned differing views about the language in which the book was originally written. In approximately 600 B.C., NEPHI₁—the first Book of Mormon author and one who had spent his youth in JERUSALEM—wrote, “I make a record [the small plates of Nephi] in the language of my father, which consists of the learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians” (1 Ne. 1:2). One thousand years later, MORONI₂, the last Nephite prophet, noted concerning the PLATES of Mormon that “we have written this record . . . in the characters which are called among us the reformed Egyptian, being handed down and altered by us, according to our manner of speech. And if our plates [metal leaves] had been sufficiently large we should have written in Hebrew; but the Hebrew hath been altered by us also. . . . But the Lord knoweth . . . that none other people knoweth our language” (Morm. 9:32–34). In light of these two passages, it is evident that Nephite record keepers knew Hebrew and something of Egyptian. It is unknown whether Nephi, Mormon, or Moroni wrote Hebrew in modified Egyptian characters or inscribed their plates in both the Egyptian language and Egyptian characters or whether Nephi wrote in one language and Mormon and Moroni, who lived some nine hundred years later, in another. The mention of “characters” called “reformed Egyptian” tends to support the hypothesis of Hebrew in Egyptian script. Although Nephi’s observation (1 Ne. 1:2) is troublesome for that view, the statement is ambiguous and inconclusive for both views.

Nephite authors seem to have patterned their writing after the plates of brass, a record containing biblical texts composed before 600 B.C. that was in the possession of descendants of JOSEPH OF