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# THE BOOK OF MORMON: DISCOVERIES AND EVIDENCES

Friday: Geography and Archaeology

## INTRODUCTION

Book of Mormon geography has interested the Saints nearly since the book was first published. **Various theories** have been put forward as to the location of the lands of the Book of Mormon, and the debate continues today, though the focus has clearly **centered on Mesoamerica**. Interestingly, that focus first began in **1842** when a couple articles in the Church's periodical, *Times and Seasons*, noted the recent publication of a book chronicling the travels of a group through the ruins of Mesoamerica. Declaring that the ruins discussed in the book were certainly those of Book of Mormon cities, the author (perhaps Joseph Smith) said, **"It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens' ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon."**

To be clear, neither the First Presidency nor any other group speaking for the Church has ever expressed an **official viewpoint** on Book of Mormon geography. Differences of opinion have existed among various Church leaders over the years. In other words, the issue is **far from settled**. But mounting evidence is very persuasive as to the location, and it is surely only a matter of time until an archaeologist somewhere finds something that links to the Book of Mormon story.

Actually, they already have—but not yet in the New World.

## NAHOM

We spoke on Monday of the exciting discoveries at Nahom in Arabia, but it is worth mentioning again here in this context. Only one location in the Book of Mormon appears to have a name before Lehi's company arrives—Nahom. It is here that Ishmael died and the party rested for a time before continuing on what was likely the most challenging part of their journey to Bountiful. If Joseph Smith wrote the Book of Mormon himself, he would have to create a place name in his story that is located near the southern end of Arabia (because that is where the party turns east toward the coastline) that matches the name of a location unknown in his day but subsequently discovered to be an actual name in use during Lehi's day. To have that name discovered on ancient maps and—significantly—stone altars in a local temple, discovered by archeologists who know nothing of Joseph Smith or his work, is simply fantastic. Now more amazing archaeological evidence of the Book of Mormon has been discovered. Finding a sign labeled "Zarahemla" in the New World would be no more astonishing.

## A CONCEPTUAL GEOGRAPHY

A key to creating a Book of Mormon geography is to create a **conceptual map** or an **internal map**, based on a careful and thorough reading of the text. This has been done by several authors. I have done it myself, reading the book twice with just that aim in mind—discover, record, and make sense of every geographical reference. I created a wall-size map where I recorded everything I found—and made a lot of corrections along the way. In some cases, there simply isn't enough information to be precise, but you can get many details in a relative sense. John Sorenson has presented this the best, and I follow his presentation here.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION

There are at least **290 scriptural references** (in many cases, multiple verses) in the Book of Mormon that have some geographical information. Let's read a longer sample one that can give us a feel of the overall shape of the land. [**Alma 22:27-32**] [draw them on the board as you read them]

We could spend the entire hour analyzing all the geography verses in detail, but then you'd have to come back tomorrow for the rest of the class, so we won't. Suffice it to say that these 290 verses allow us to piece together a geography that has the land looking like this map overall. There is a Land Northward and Southward, divided by a narrow neck that takes about a day and a half to cross. In the Land Southward, there is the land of Nephi (where Nephi first settled but was mostly Lamanite territory later) and the land of Zarahemla (which was a Mulekite territory at first but then became Nephite when Mosiah<sup>1</sup> brought his people there. The Jaredite lands were in the Land Northward.

## SIZE

So with this general shape, what is the **size** of the land? Is it the entire continents of North and South America, or a smaller portion or that area? The clues we have in the text—typically how long it takes to go from place to place—argue for a small area. For example, in **Mosiah 18-25**, we read the journeys of **Alma** and his people from the waters of Mormon to Zarahemla. It took them **21 days**. How far they could travel in that time is unknown, but can be estimated from ancient and modern sources to be about **10-11 miles a day**, given they were traveling with men, women, children, and animals. That makes their journey from the waters of Mormon to Zarahemla about **230 miles**. Given the twists and turns of a route through a likely mountainous region, the actual distance on the map might be more like **180 miles**. By comparison, the distance from **Dan to Beersheba** (the length of the land of Israel) is about **150 miles**, in which **95% of the Old Testament** took place.

Other distances can be derived from travel and war stories, such as Limhi's peoples' journey, looking for Zarahemla but finding instead the last battle site of the Jaredites and the 24 plates left by Ether, or Captain Moroni's story of losing and retaking the eastern coastline cities. When you put them all together, you get an area and relative positions of the major areas like this.

There are few clues about the overall shape of the land except for being narrow at the neck and wider at both ends. There is **nothing** in the text about the **eastern part of the land of Nephi**, for example, nor about the **land northward**. We can imagine it gets wider, but we have no data to draw that with any accuracy.

## TOPOGRAPHY, CLIMATE, AND CULTURE

The scriptures gives us a large number of clues about the lay of the land—but usually in the words **up, down, over**, etc. From the context, it appears that these consistently refer to **elevation** and not in the sense that we would use them (I go *down* to Utah from Washington because it's south, even though it's much higher in elevation). For example, we learn that **Zarahemla** is "up" from the coast but "down" from Nephi (**Alma 52:22; Words of Mormon 1:13; Helaman 1:17**), putting it somewhere in the middle in terms of elevation. The land of Bountiful, on the other hand, is clearly at a low elevation, near the sea, for near there Hagoth built and sailed his ships (**Alma 63:5**).

A major feature is the **river Sidon**, which originated in the hill country south of Manti (**Alma 16:6**), flowed north past Zarahemla (which sat on the west side of the river: **Alma 2:15f**), then continued on until it emptied into the East Sea. This is suggested by the extensive flat area on the east (a river delta, at least in part) and the mountainous area mentioned on the west—rivers don't flow up hill.

In the **Land Northward**, we get the sense of highlands on the west and lowlands on the east, with at least one major hill (Cumorah/Ramah) down towards the eastern coast. It was a “land of many waters” (**Mormon 6:4**) so probably a drainage area for the higher lands to the west.

**Snow** is never mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and the crops were either **highland wheat and barley or corn**, which thrives in a warmer climate. **Fevers** are mentioned, common in the **tropics**, and **droughts** are unusual.

## MESOAMERICAN SETTING

The next step is to take our conceptual map and see if it fits with any real-world locations. Placing the “narrow neck” of land seems to be a key factor. It cannot be the Isthmus of Panama, for example, for a number of reasons—too narrow, the northern part of South America is not surrounded by the sea, etc. Other proposals, such as it being near the New York area, don’t work either for similar reasons, and typically require someone to presume that the land has dramatically changed since Book of Mormon times (large portions used to be under water), which isn’t supported by archaeology or geology. Another recent suggestion of Baja California is intriguing, and the proponents make a good case for the geography, but cannot supply any correlating information relating to the archaeology, culture (such as writing), and other requirements.

The only real candidate that matches all the criterion is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. This places the Book of Mormon clearly in Mesoamerica—southern Mexico and northern Central America.

## MESOAMERICA OVERVIEW

The **Isthmus of Tehuantepec** is wet and heavily forested on the Atlantic side, sloping up to a pass and divide, then dropping sharply on the Pacific side. Width is about **120 miles**. The **plains** on the Atlantic side support a large population because of **excellent growing conditions**, even though the heat and humidity are high. North of the Isthmus is a **poorly drained lowland** that floods each year. Travel is difficult through the sand dunes and swamps, and only happens during the dry season. The eastern coast is called ‘**the border of the sea**’ by both the ancient Toltecs and the modern Guatemalans, similar to the Nephite name, “**borders by the seashore**” (Alma 56:31).

The west coastal plain is narrow—only 5-10 miles for most of it—and dry because the winds from the north.

Below the Isthmus is the **central depression of Chiapas**. A large river, **the Rio Grande de Chiapas or Grijalva**, runs down the middle. On the east is a plateau, extending northwest from the Guatemala highlands. Shielded by mountains, the basin is relatively dry and warm.

Further south, the **Guatemalan highlands** are high enough to keep the temperatures pleasant. Between the Chiapas depression and the highlands is a **forested area** that experiences heavy rain and is sparsely settled. The highest mountains in Central America are found here, up to nearly 14,000 feet. But south of that wilderness is habitable land, highly populated even today.

## THE COMPARISON

What about **Yucatan**? This protrusion breaks the hourglass shape of our conceptual map—or does it? The Book of Mormon is **silent** about the **lands to the east** of the land of Nephi or south of the Nephite cities on the seashore. So we have no data about what lies there—it simply didn’t figure into the story as we received it. So the presence of that peninsula causes no problems.

The **river Sidon** matches well with the **Grijalva** River. It comes out of the Guatemalan highlands, run through a major basin on intermediate elevation, then goes to the sea across a coastal plain/delta. It is about 300 miles long.

The narrow neck aligns with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, at 120 miles, is **on the long side** of our description but fits well enough. The topography matches what we know from the Book of Mormon, with a **narrow strip of wilderness**, a **narrow pass**, and a **hilly region just to the north** where the final battles took place.

## DIRECTIONS

One obvious difference between our conceptual map and Mesoamerica is the way it generally faces. Several factors are worth considering here.

First, it's important to understand that ancient cultures **did not possess our exacting nature** when it came to directions. They didn't have compasses or other tools to measure the magnetic field. Other things were more important to them in terms of alignment. Ancient languages reflect this more relaxed approach. The ancient Hebrew word **Yam** means "sea," and came to mean "**west**" because the Mediterranean Sea is on the west of Israel. An Israelite would orient himself by facing east (**qedem**, or "**ahead**") with his back to the sea—in fact, the word "orient" means to face east. Thus "**south**" was **yamin** ("**right hand**") and **north** was **shemol** ("**left hand**"). This matches our system nicely, but only because their coastline of Israel runs almost perfectly north and south.

So what happens when Lehi and family arrive in the New World? **With the sea at their backs, they call that west**, and south is to their right, north to the left, and east right in front of them, just like back home. The problem is, the sea they call "west" is actually off by quite a bit, being much **more southwest**. This approach to directions matches what the Europeans found among the native population when they arrived, causing one historian to note that **Mayan directions are off of ours by about 45 degrees**. Another scholar noted that the **Mayans called the Gulf of Mexico the "East Sea" and the Pacific Ocean the "West Sea,"** just as we see in the Book of Mormon. Even the early Europeans showed the same lack of distinction, calling the direction from Mexico City to Guatemala "**south**" even though it is really more east.

## SUMMARY

Here is how it aligns:

- Narrow neck of land = Isthmus of Tehuantepec
- East sea = Gulf of Mexico, Gulf of Campeche
- West sea = Pacific Ocean
- Land southward = the Mexican states of Chiapas and Tabasco, plus highland and coastal Guatemala and perhaps part of El Salvador
- Land northward = the Mexican states of Veracruz, Oaxaca, Puebla, and Guerrero (or more)
- River Sidon = Grijalva River
- Zarahemla =? Santa Rosa (today under water because of the Angostura Dam)
- Final battleground = Tuxtla mountains of south-central Veracruz
- City of Nephi =? Kaminaljuyu, part of Guatemala City today
- Land of Nephi = highlands of southern Guatemala

Not only does Mesoamerica match the physical requirements of the conceptual map, but it aligns with the **cultural requirements** in the Book of Mormon. For example, it is the **only area** where there is a history of **writing systems** dating back to that time period, certainly a requirement for the literate people described in the text.

Getting the big picture right does not mean all the details are correct. Matching up ancient sites with Book of Mormon locations is a great exercise, and can help make the story more real. But the **exact pairings are educated guesses** at this point and could change as more information comes out. Still, the overall map is sound and we appear to be in the **right general place—Mesoamerica**. The Book of Mormon, if you believe in it, took place *somewhere*. This geographical picture makes that somewhere more real.

## MESOAMERICAN HISTORY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON

There is a period of history in Mesoamerica that scholars label “**The Second Tradition**.” This is the period that gives rise to the cultures we tend to know best, such as the **Maya**. The most dominant characteristic of this culture is the **centrality of religion** and power of priesthood in society. Religion and religious symbolism was linked to every aspect of their culture—earning a living, marrying, governing, warring, art, etc. This began in the Late Pre-Classic period and extended into the Classic.

### **Pre-Classic Period** (2000 BC-AD 200)

- Early (2000 – 1000 BC)
- Middle (1000 – 400 BC)
- Late (400 BC – AD 200)

### **Classic Period** (AD 200-950)

- Early (AD 200-600)
- Late (AD 600-900)
- Terminal (AD 900-950)

### **Post Classic Period** (AD 950-1521)

- Early (AD 900 – 1200)
- Late (AD 1200 – 1521)

The chart (from Sorenson) summarizes a number of historical correlations between Mesoamerica and the Book of Mormon record.

The book of Omni tells the story of **Mosiah** leaving the land of Nephi about **200 BC**. They went down from the highlands to a place on the River Sidon, linked up with the **people of Zarahemla**, and settled there on the west side of the river. We have suggested that the city of Nephi is perhaps Kaminaljuyu and Zarahemla is perhaps Santa Rosa. **Archaeology** shows that at the time of Mosiah’s migration, **these two sites were culturally related**.

After the days of Mosiah’s grandson by the same name, who was the last king, **classes** began to arise among the people. Nephite **dissenters** collaborated with Lamanites, and both cultures became **more complex and wealthy**. This is the same picture we get from the history of these two areas—**commerce expanding**, the **rise of classes**, **servants sacrificed** (think of the Lamanite king killing those who didn’t correctly tend his flocks), and **large tombs** for royalty.

**Warfare** was characteristic of the next period. Moroni, Teancum, Helaman, and Amalickiah all come from this period. Large groups of **people were moved** for military reasons. Some **towns were destroyed**. This is the same picture we get from archaeology in about **75 BC in the Chiapas (Zarahemla) region**.

The book of Helaman talks about people **spreading into the Land Northward**. In the Mesoamerica record at this time, **Chiapas grows in influence** and begins to **spread its culture northward** beyond the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

Sometime around **AD 30-50**, there is **noticeable destruction** at major sites in Chiapas, Santa Rosa (Zarahemla), with buildings burned and destroyed. Immediately following, there is a **dramatic change in the culture**. The **Chiapas** area **interacts** strongly with the area around and **just north of the Isthmus** of Tehuantepec. This matches perfectly with what we see in 3 and 4 Nephi.

Interestingly, archaeology tells us almost **nothing about the next 150 years**—just as 4 Nephi flies through them. This is the **beginning of the worship** of the god later known as **Quetzalcoatl**. One noticeable exception is **Teotihuacan**, just north of the areas of our focus. It experienced **dramatic growth**, and the great **Pyramid of the Sun** was built during this time. The city grew to perhaps **100,000 residents**. At first, **religion dominates** this culture, as well as that further south. But soon, wealth, influence, and authority take over, and **sweeping changes occur in the years AD 200-300**. This precisely matches 4 Nephi's description of the changes that took place in this same time. [4 Nephi 1:24-27, 40-41, 45-46]

Sadly, the surge in the society of AD 200-300 **ended rather abruptly** in the archaeological record. Religion turned from a simple faith the people could follow to **elaborate rituals** they couldn't understand. Worship involved **hallucinogenic drugs**, and very **few new buildings** are erected. Soon **warfare** is depicted in the art, and the society grows more **barbaric**, even **cannibalistic**. This happens not only in the north at **Teotihuacan**, but also in the **Guatemalan and Yucatan lowlands**. Where there were only signs of peaceful people before, now they developed a warlike tradition, based on their carvings.

It is in this setting that the Book of Mormon portrays the **end of the Nephite civilization**, attacked on one side by **Lamanites** and on the other by **robbers**. The Lamanites drive them north out of the land of Zarahemla. This matches the archaeological record where there is a **decline in population in central Chiapas about AD 350**, with the void being filled by highland Guatemalan people—the Lamanites.

## JAREDITES AND OLMECS

There is also a strong cultural and historical alignment between the Jaredite record and that of the Olmec people. The chart shows a summary of that.

## VOLCANIC AND EARTHQUAKE ACTIVITY

Written by an eyewitness, not Joseph Smith who had never seen or experienced such things.

## SOURCES

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