

# Book of Mormon Evidences

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**Description:** The more we study the Book of Mormon, the more its ancient characteristics come to light. Hugh Nibley was perhaps the first scholar to take the book seriously from a research perspective. Since then dozens of other scholars have looked at the history, language, culture, theology, literature, and structure of the Book of Mormon, producing thousands of pages of results that support an ancient origin for the book, that it is not something a nineteenth-century farm boy could have concocted. In this class, we will explore only a portion of that research. Interested learners are encouraged to dive into the larger bibliography at the end of the notes.

## Introduction

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Last month we talked about the criticisms of the Book of Mormon, which we handily and fully dealt with in ninety minutes. This month we are tackling the evidences for the Book of Mormon, and in the same ninety minutes will only scratch the surface. I have heard some critics say that some particular piece of evidence (usually anachronisms or nineteenth-century language) are so damning that they don't need to bother to look at the other evidence support the book, even as new research debunks their very concerns. Such closed-mindedness is nothing but an echo chamber, reverberating their own uninformed conclusions.

Imagine a trial where the prosecutor says, "I have three pieces of evidence to present that will prove this person is guilty," and the defense saying, "I have seven hundred and forty-three evidences to present that this person is innocent." Would the judge hear the prosecutor's three pieces of evidence and tell the defense just to go home because the case is closed? Of course not—*all* the evidence would be brought out and weighed in the balance before a decision could be made.

I have taught this class at BYU Education Week four different years, each time taking four hours to present the evidences supporting the Book of Mormon. In each case, I was only able to present a small portion of those evidences, and what I presented was only in an introductory way. Scholars have spent *years* studying these topics and the list continues to grow with time. In this class, we will only touch on a few of what I consider to be the most significant evidences but only in an introductory way. The interested learner will want to consult the bibliography at the end for further reading—and even there, it is not remotely exhaustive. The only viable conclusion is that evidence is powerfully in favor of the veracity of the Book of Mormon.

## Hebraisms

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The Book of Mormon declares that the initial writers of the book spoke and wrote Hebrew. Indeed, that was the language of the people when Lehi and his family left Jerusalem, as is well documented with inscriptions and other documents from that period. Nephi declares that he wrote in "the language of my father," (1 Nephi 1:2) then explained that it is a combination of Jewish and Egyptian, which scholars believe means they spoke Hebrew but wrote it down with Egyptian characters. Hundreds of years later, Moroni says that they are still speaking Hebrew, or at least something they call Hebrew, but know that it "hath been altered by us also" (Moroni 9:32-33).

(Interestingly, they wrote in characters they called "the **reformed Egyptian**." Critics scoffed at this in the beginning, challenging members of the Church to identify a single writing of Hebrew written with Egyptian script. And no one could in the 1830s. But today there are many examples of exactly that, such as *Papyrus Amherst 63*, a fifth-century BC Hebrew text written in Egyptian. And the Egyptian used is often the more efficient version, called Demotic, which is very accurately called 'reformed Egyptian,' demonstrating the equivalency of such writing as Mormon used.)

The main point is that if the Book of Mormon is an ancient book written by people speaking Hebrew or some variation of Hebrew, then we should find manifestations of this Hebrew influence in the text. And we do.

It's important to note that Joseph Smith did study Hebrew, but not until six years after he completed the translation of the Book of Mormon. In some cases, a careful student of the Bible might have noticed some of these things and been able to bring them into a book. But witnesses (his wife and family) are clear that while Joseph read the Bible, he was by no means a scholar. And many of the Hebraisms we will highlight could not be known except by someone who read the Bible in Hebrew, because they are not apparent from the English translation! The abundance of Hebraisms and the unlikelihood that Joseph Smith could produce them on his own is a great testimony of the truthfulness of the Book of Mormon.

Hebraisms have been brought to our attention by several Hebrew scholars, but prominently **Don Parry** and **John Tvedtnes**, both of BYU. It should also be noted that Hugh Nibley highlighted many such influences, but more in the cultural than the linguistic arena, and the latter is where we will concentrate our efforts today.

One intriguing note is that the **original (1830) Book of Mormon has more evidence of Hebraisms** in it than our book today. What has happened is that over the years, edits were made (including by Joseph Smith) to make it easier to read in English, but these changes 'erased,' in a sense, the literalness of the original translation from Hebrew. For example, Alma 46:19:

And when Moroni had said these words, he went forth among the people, waving the rent [part] of his garment in the air...

The word in brackets was not in the original 1830 edition. That sounds awkward in English—how do you wave a rent (the tear or hole) in the air? But in Hebrew, many such words do not require something after them to make sense—such as broken, new, or rent. Would you say, 'I just bought a new' in English? The listener would respond, 'A new what?' But in Hebrew that makes perfect sense. So the 1830 Book of Mormon is great Hebrew, and adding "part" later makes it better English.

Here are some other Hebraisms to consider.

### Possessives (or Construct State)

To form a possessive, we say, "This is John's book" in English. But in Hebrew it's *book John*. If you follow that word order in English, it makes no sense, so you either change the order (as many modern translations do) or you insert an *of* in the middle: the book of John. The Bible is full of these phrases because the King James translators kept the Hebrew word order, in many cases: "tables of stone" (Exodus 24:12) or "the word of the Lord" (Genesis 15:4), just to name two.

The Book of Mormon is also full of such construct state phrases:

- "plates of brass" (1 Nephi 3:24)
- "rod of iron" (1 Nephi 8:19)
- "sword of Laban" (2 Nephi 5:14)
- "temple of Solomon" (2 Nephi 5:16)
- "commandments of the Lord" (2 Nephi 5:19)
- "land of promise" (1 Nephi 17:33)
- "works of darkness" (2 Nephi 25:2)
- and many more

There are two instances in the Book of Mormon where the possessive *Lord's* is used, both in 2 Nephi 28:3 (actually three, but one is a direct quote from Isaiah; see 2 Nephi 12:2). You might say, 'Oh, Joseph missed a couple. But there are, in fact, 134 occurrences of "Lord's" in the Bible, and 1744 using "...of the Lord.'" That means 8% of the time, the KJV uses the more modern English phrase. The Book of Mormon has 485 "...of the Lord" phrases, so with only two "Lord's," that's less than ½ of one percent. So as a percentage, the Book of Mormon is more Hebrew than the Bible.

### Cognates

Cognates, or more precisely, cognate accusatives, are when a noun and a verb sharing the same root are used together. This is fairly common in Hebrew, and we see it in our Bible in phrases such as, "**wrote** upon it a **writing**" (Exodus 39:30) or "she

**vowed a vow**” (1 Samuel 1:11) or “**dreamed a dream**” (Genesis 37:5). It is found often in the Hebrew Bible, though translated away because it is awkward sounding in English. An example of this would be Genesis 1:11, which says in Hebrew “Let the earth **grass grass**,” though the KJV translation is “Let the earth bring forth grass.” Someone who was trying to write well in English is very unlikely to use cognates.

The Book of Mormon includes many examples of cognates:

- “I will **curse** them even with a sore **curse**” (1 Nephi 2:23)
- “I have **dreamed a dream**” (1 Nephi 3:2; 8:2)
- “**yoketh** them with a **yoke**” (1 Nephi 13:5)
- “**work** a great and marvelous **work**” (1 Nephi 14:7)
- “the **desire** which I **desired** of him” (Enos 1:13)
- “**build buildings**” (2 Nephi 5:15; Mosiah 23:5)
- “**taxed** with a **tax**” (Mosiah 7:15)
- “**work** all manner of fine **work**” (Mosiah 11:10)

## Plural Amplification

In Hebrew, to amplify or emphasize an idea, writers will sometimes use a plural noun even though in English, we would use a singular. This example is particularly interesting because it is not evident in the KJV—the translators convert them all to singular. That means that Joseph Smith had no model to follow. Some examples include:

- thy brother’s blood [Heb. bloods] crieth unto me (Genesis 4:10)
- and strength and salvation [Heb. salvations] (Isaiah 33:6)
- brought forth to the day of wrath [Heb. wraths] (Job 21:30)

The Book of Mormon does indeed have plural nouns when in English they should clearly be singular:

- there shall be bloodsheds (2 Nephi 1:12)
- the understandings of the children of men (Mosiah 8:20)
- great condescensions unto the children of men (Jacob 4:7)
- labor with their mights (Jacob 5:72)
- their cunning and their lyings (Alma 20:13)
- destructions of my people (1 Nephi 15:5, 1830 and printer’s mss)

## Numbers

In the Old Testament, numbers are used following three patterns, which are also found in the Book of Mormon:

1. *Avoidance of complex numeric forms.* This refers to number forms starting with mono-, bi-, di-, uni-, tri-, multi-, etc. There are no such number forms in the Book of Mormon.
2. *A number without a noun.* The Old Testament has many examples of a number without a noun, such as Joseph giving “three hundred of silver” (Genesis 45:22—the italicized *pieces* correctly indicates that the word is not in the Hebrew); “ten weight of gold” (Genesis 24:22—the KJV adds *shekels*); and “he measured six of barley” (Ruth 3:15—the KJV adds *measures*). Book of Mormon examples include: “he can command fifty, yea, even he can slay fifty” (1 Nephi 3:31); and “there were two hundred, out of my two thousand and sixty” (Alma 57:25).
3. *Joining numbers with ‘and’.* It is very common to include an ‘and’ between numbers in Hebrew, such as “thirty and two kings” (1 Kings 20:1), unlike the expected phrase in English, ‘thirty-two kings.’ Likewise, in the Book of Mormon, we see: “forty and two thousand” (Mormon 2:9); “three hundred and twenty years” (Omni 1:5); and “sixty and three years old” (Mosiah 17:6).

## Calling Names

When we name a child, animal, or place, we say that we “called him” or “named him” [the name]. But in Hebrew, they “call the name of him” [the name]. In other words, the name is called, not the person or thing. An example everyone would recognize is: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall **call his name** Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14).

The Book of Mormon has several examples of this practice, including:

- “we did **call the name** of the place Shazer” (1 Nephi 16:13)

- “and they **called the name** of the city Moroni” (Alma 50:13-14)
- “he had three sons, and he **called their names** Mosiah, and Helorum, and Helaman” (Mosiah 1:2)
- “they **called their names** Anti-Nephi-Lehies” (Alma 23:17)

## Many “Ands”

Speaking of many ands, Hebrew often strings lists of many things together using the word “and”. In Hebrew, this is a single character that attaches easily to the beginning of a word. In English, this sounds repetitive.

Here are two Old Testament examples with the number of “and”s in each one:

- 1 Samuel 17:34-35 – **10**
- Joshua 7:24 – **13**

The Book of Mormon has many such examples, including:

- 1 Nephi 11:30-32 – **22**
- 1 Nephi 12:4 – **12**
- Mosiah 10:8 – **8**
- Alma 46:12-13 – **15**
- Helaman 3:14 – **18** (below)

But behold, a hundredth part of the proceedings of this people, yea, the account of the Lamanites **and** of the Nephites, **and** their wars, **and** contentions, **and** dissensions, **and** their preaching, **and** their prophecies, **and** their shipping **and** their building of ships, **and** their building of temples, **and** of synagogues **and** their sanctuaries, **and** their righteousness, **and** their wickedness, **and** their murders, **and** their robbings, **and** their plundering, **and** all manner of abominations **and** whoredoms, cannot be contained in this work.

## If...And

In some cases, the closeness to Hebrew has changed with subsequent editions and changes to the Book of Mormon text. In other words, looking at the original manuscripts shows an even greater Hebrew literary style than the edition we currently use, because the English has been ‘improved’ since then by Joseph Smith and others.

For example, in English we say “if...then” (or “if...” nothing else), but in Hebrew, it would say “if...and.” There are 14 examples of this construction in the original manuscripts and the 1830 edition Book of Mormon. One great example is a scripture that almost everyone in the Church can quote:

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and **if** ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, **and** he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost (Moroni 10:4, original manuscript and 1830 edition).

Other examples in the original manuscripts but which have been edited today include:

- yea, and **if** he say unto the earth move **and** it is moved (Helaman 12:13)
- yea **if** he say unto the earth thou shalt go back that it lengthen out the day for many hours **and** it is done (Helaman 12:14)
- and behold also **if** he saith unto the waters of the great deep be thou dried up **and** it is done (Helaman 12:16)

## Hebrew Words

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### Thieves and Robbers

In the ancient world, there was a fine distinction between a “thief” and a “robber.” The former stole from people in their own local area (town or village) while the latter came in from another place and attacked and plundered. Thieves were dealt with by local authorities, robbers by the military. This distinction does not exist in English or the US culture of Joseph Smith’s day, but is nevertheless accurately reflected in the Book of Mormon.

For example, see 3 Nephi 27:32 for thieves as a local issue and Helaman 2:10 for robbers from the outside being dealt with by the military. Note also 1 Nephi 3:13 where Laban declares Nephi to be a robber, since his family had left town, which therefore allowed Laban to exercise his own military authority in trying to kill him.

## Sheum

Mosiah 9:9 lists several crops the Nephites were cultivating, including *sheum*. The prophet supplied no translation of this word but transliterated it into the text, listing it with wheat and barley, indicating it was another type of grain. What is sheum? Only about forty years ago, we learned the answer—*she'um* is an Akkadian word used for various types of grains in ancient Babylon and Assyria. So it could be that the Nephites borrowed this word from the Jaredites who brought it over with them, or that it came with Lehi's family. Either way, it's an amazing find to discover an Old World term for a grain that is also used in the Book of Mormon for the same thing.

## Chiasmus

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One of the most striking Hebraisms in the Book of Mormon deserves its own section—chiasmus.

Chiasmus is an ancient structural form mainly used in poetry. Though not limited to the ancient Israelite culture (others in the same general time and region also used it), it is in Hebrew that chiasms are the most developed, and examples are found throughout the Bible. However, it should be noted that this form, while ancient, did not come to the attention of the Western Bible-reading world until into the mid-nineteenth century, well after the publication of the Book of Mormon. So finding such structures in the Book of Mormon is a powerful indication of its antiquity.

Chiasms are inverted parallelisms. A parallelism is when one thought matches or parallels another. There are several different kinds of parallelism but a simple and common one is demonstrated by this verse (Psalm 27:1):

The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?  
the Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?

Do you see how the second phrase matches the first and strengthens it? That is the power of parallelism—it reinforces the message. For modern readers, it also has the benefit of sometimes making a verse more clear, such as in this example from Isaiah 21:14:

The inhabitants of the land of Tema **brought** water to him that was thirsty,  
they **prevented** with their bread him that fled.

At first glance, this might not sound like a parallelism. After all, they brought water but prevented the bread. But knowing this is a parallelism, we might ask what that really means? The Hebrew word translated “prevented” in this verse really means to ‘come’, ‘be in front of’, or ‘meet.’ The KJV translators picked *prevented* because it had that meaning in that day. A better translation for our day, such as that provided by Don Parry, a BYU Hebrew scholar, says, “Bring bread to the fugitives.”

Let's look quickly at some other examples of chiasmus in the Bible. Here's a simple one, from Isaiah 55:8:

For **my** thoughts are not **your** thoughts,  
Neither are **your** ways **my** ways, saith the Lord.

Notice how the “my” and the “your” are reversed? That's an inverted parallelism, or chiasmus.

The pattern can get more complicated, with several layers building to a central climax, such as in this example from Numbers 15:35-36:

And the **LORD** said unto **Moses**,  
The man shall be surely put to **death**:  
all the congregation shall **stone** him with **stones**

**without the camp.**  
 And all the congregation brought him  
**without the camp,**  
 and **stoned** him with **stones,**  
 and he **died;**  
 as the **LORD** commanded **Moses.**

Sometimes authors put letters in front of the divisions to make it easier to track them, such as with this example from John 5:8-11:

A Jesus **saith** unto him, Rise, **take** up thy **bed**, and **walk.**  
 B And immediately the man was **made whole,**  
 C and **took** up his **bed**, and walked:  
 D and on the same day was the **sabbath.**  
 X The Jews therefore said unto him that was cured,  
 D It is the **sabbath** day:  
 C it is not lawful for thee to **carry** thy **bed.**  
 B He answered them, He that **made** me **whole,**  
 A the same **said** unto me, **Take** up thy **bed**, and **walk.**

Hundreds more could be given as illustration. The Old and New Testaments are literally filled with this structure, especially in Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah, as some of the more poetic books.

The discoverer of chiasmus in the Book of Mormon was John Welch. As a young missionary in Germany, he read a book that explained what it was. After that, he woke early to search for it in the Book of Mormon. The first chiasmus he found was in Mosiah 5:10-12:

A And now it shall come to pass, that whosoever shall not take upon him the **name** of Christ  
 B must be **called** by some other name;  
 C therefore, he findeth himself on the **left hand of God.**  
 D And **I would that ye should remember** also, that this is the name that I said I should give unto you  
 E that never should be **blotted out,**  
 F except it be through **transgression;**  
 G therefore,  
 F take heed that ye do not **transgress,**  
 E that the name be not **blotted out** of your hearts.  
 D I say unto you, **I would that ye should remember** to retain the name written always in your hearts,  
 C that ye are not found on the **left hand of God,**  
 B but that ye hear and know the voice by which ye shall be **called,**  
 A and also, the **name** by which he shall call you.

Another longer example is illustrated in this summary of Mosiah 2:9-27:

A Purpose of assembly	9
B What is man? "no more than mortal"	10—11
C Laws of Benjamin's kingdom	12—13
D Service "one another"	14—17
E Climax—thank your Heavenly King	18-20
D Service "one with another"	21
C Laws of God's Kingdom	22
B What is man? "no more than dust"	23—26
A Purpose of the assembly	27

Said Welch of this period of discovery during his mission:

In the next few weeks, I kept finding things, especially as I read on into the book of Alma. My scrawling notes show that I had detected chiastic patterns in Alma 5:39—41; 34:10—14; 40:22—24; and 41:13—15. One realization concerned the highly creative structure in Alma 41:13—15. I read this passage first in German and was a bit disappointed that it looked promising but was not quite perfect. Upon checking the passage in English, however, it became clear that the German translator had unwittingly muddled Alma's carefully constructed chiasm. This made me appreciate all the more the accuracy of Joseph Smith's translation.<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after his mission, he published his findings in *BYU Studies*. Following his lead, others have continued to look and find chiastic structures in the Book of Mormon, such as some of these identified by Hugh Pinnock:

And the **angel** said unto me  
    he is a **holy man**;  
        wherefore I know  
    he is a **holy man**  
Because it was said by an **angel** of God (Alma 10:9).

O the vainness, and the frailties, and the **foolishness** of men!  
    When they are **learned** they think they are wise,  
        and they **hearken not**  
            unto the counsel of God,  
        for they **set it aside**,  
    supposing they **know** of themselves,  
wherefore, their wisdom is **foolishness** and it profiteth them not (2 Nephi 9:28).

Many other chiasms have been found, some short, but in some cases entire chapters like Alma 36.

John Welch has stated:<sup>2</sup> "...chiasmus helps us see the artistry, complexity, creativity, and profundity of the Book of Mormon, and how it helps us interpret the meaning of the text and appreciate the individual personalities of its authors."

Chiasmus is a great example of a characteristic that readily demonstrates the ancient nature of the Book of Mormon text.

## Textual Consistency

First a word about the Book of Mormon text itself. One critic said, "That a young man with a lively imagination, a smattering of the Bible, a passable ability at reading, an acquaintance with the theological debates of the day...could bring forth a book such as the Book of Mormon is not out of the question." (cited in Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 20). But was it so easy? Joseph Smith was very unlearned and by his wife's testimony could hardly dictate a coherent letter, much less a book like the Book of Mormon. The book is complex, with multiple stories and timelines woven together but jumping back and forth chronologically, with foreshadowing, flashbacks, and quotes from one book in another, sometimes hundreds of pages apart. It covers 1000 years of history for the Nephites (not counting the Jaredites), with wars, politics, sermons, geography, culture, and more. And Joseph dictated it to scribes with no notes or papers to help him remember anything, at the rate of about 3000 words a day. The scribes didn't even read back what he last said after a break, according to testimony; he just picked up where he left off and kept going.

Any author who has attempted to write a history or historical fiction can tell you that to keep everything straight you have pages and pages of notes, maps, charts, lists, and more, and even then you make mistakes. Yet the Book of Mormon has no such errors, but is consistent in its chronology, history, geography, characters, etc. Hugh Nibley stated that Joseph Smith

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Welch, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 2007), pages 74-87.

<sup>2</sup> John W. Welch, "The Discovery of Chiasmus in the Book of Mormon: Forty Years Later," *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Volume 16, Issue 2, (Provo, Utah: Maxwell Institute, 2007), pages 74-87.



doesn't "get lost (as the student repeatedly does, picking his way out of one maze after another only with the greatest effort), and never once does he contradict himself. We should be glad to learn of any other like performance in the history of literature" (quoted in Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 21-22).

## Ancient Names

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### Name characteristics

There are some important characteristics of ancient names, especially Old Testament names, the context from which the Book of Mormon comes. For example, no one in the Old Testament has a **surname**—they are all known by one name only. This is not true in the New Testament. So if an author writing something like the Book of Mormon was influenced by the Bible in general, he might slip in a surname or two. After all, with several Nephis, Almas, Mosiahs, Helamans, and Lehis, wouldn't it be nice to be able to easily distinguish them? But the Book of Mormon is just like the Old Testament. Of the 337 proper names in the book, not one has a surname.

Another characteristic of Old Testament names comes from their Hebrew or Semitic origin—none of them use the letters **q**, **x**, **or w**, and none begin with the letter **F**. Likewise, the Book of Mormon follows the same pattern—no names use the letters **q**, **x**, or **w**, and none start with **F**. If you were creating 337 names for a fictional story of several hundred pages and knew nothing about the Hebrew alphabet, what are the chances that you would be able to follow that pattern for every single name?

### Name statistics

Of the 337 names in the book, 188 are unique to the Book of Mormon. Critics love to try and find similarities to these unique names in Joseph Smith's environment, saying that was his source. But at best, they can find a small handful of such names, and then with only weak comparisons. There is nothing in his environment to help him create nearly two hundred names from scratch, and have them be internally consistent to the cultures and languages of the groups of people involved.

Names in the Book of Mormon	337
Unique names to the Book of Mormon	188 (56%)
Lehite/Mulekite names	142
Jaredite names	41
Both	5
Names in quotes from the Bible	96 (28%)
Names in both the Bible and Book of Mormon	53 (16%)

### Hebrew influence

One example is in Alma 18:13, where a servant of the king calls him "**Rabbanah**", which the text says means "powerful or great king." That word is related to the Hebrew word *rbb* which means 'to be big or many.'

Another one is the name **Jershon**, mentioned in Alma 27:22 and other places. In the Old Testament, names are often given to places that have symbolic meaning or represent an event. Jershon relates to the Hebrew word *yrö*, which means "inheritance." This sets up a great play on words: "Behold, we will give up the land of Jershon...and this land Jershon [meaning: **inheritance**] is the land which we will give unto our brethren for an **inheritance**." To reiterate, there is no evidence Joseph Smith knew any Hebrew when he translated the Book of Mormon, so this is a wonderful example of a hidden Hebrew influence.

Another example is the name "**Alma**." Originally a source of criticism by those who declared that Alma was not only not Hebrew (because it wasn't in the Bible or any other ancient text) but was a Latin female name! But when the **Bar Kochba letters** were discovered in 1960 by the famous Israeli archaeologist **Yigael Yadin**, there was a legal contract discovered from the time period A.D. 134-135. Twice in this document, the name *Alma* appears as the **son of Yehudah**, thus fixing it as a male Hebrew name. Not only does this remove the criticism, but it strengthens the Book of Mormon case as an authentic ancient document—because the name is verified by a non-Biblical source.



**Nephi** is found in an Apocryphal book of 2 Maccabees as a place name. It's possible Joseph Smith could have first learned the name from that source, since most Bibles in his day included the Apocrypha. However, Nephi is also attested as a potential Egyptian name, in the form of Nfr (meaning "good") or Nfw (meaning "captain"), the former being more likely because in Lehi's time, Egyptian "r"s were often dropped in favor of an "ee" sound, making it 'Nfee.'

Nephi's mother, **Sariah**, is also known from Egypt in Lehi's time, though as a Hebrew/Aramaic name. Written s'ryh and pronounced *sar-yah*, the discovery of this Aramaic papyrus from Egypt is the only known attestation of s'ryh as a female name, though it is commonly used as a male name in other sources. This name is not found in the Bible or other literature of Joseph Smith's day.

**Mulek** is another interesting name. The Book of Mormon (Mosiah 25:2; Helaman 8:21) says that he was a son of Zedekiah who escaped the fate of his other brothers. In 2 Kings 25:7, it says that all of Zedekiah's sons were slain. So at first glance, it appears that the Book of Mormon contradicts the Bible. But a seal was found from Lehi's time with the inscription "MalkiYahu, son of the king" (Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 42). With the common practice of shortening names to remove the theophoric (name of God), this could easily be Malki or Mulek (since vowels are not included in ancient Hebrew). However, it is also interesting to note that Mulek could simply be a diminutive for the Hebrew word "king" or *melek*, which could make Mulek mean "little king." Either way, the inclusion of this name in the Book of Mormon is a strong support for its truth as an ancient record.

### Nibley's Notes on Names

Hugh Nibley wrote extensively about how many names in the Book of Mormon showed characteristics of antiquity. From his writings, I note just the following:

1. The Book of Mormon judge **Paanchi** and his father **Pahoran** both have good Egyptian names, though not mentioned in the Bible or in anything discovered before Joseph Smith's time. The Egyptian Paanchi was the son of Kherihor (compare to the Book of Mormon Korihor) and lived about 400 years before Lehi. Paanchi's brothers in the Book of Mormon also bear documented Egyptian names: Pahoran ('a man of Horan,' the Egyptian name for Syria/Palestine) and Pacumeni (Egyptian Pakamen). Ironically, both the Egyptian Paanchi and Kherihor and the Book of Mormon Paanchi and Korihor are involved in plots to gain power and priestcraft.
2. After the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem, many Jews who were not carried away fled to a location in the Upper (southern) Nile at **Elephantine**. The names found while excavating this large Jewish colony have many similarities to the Book of Mormon names and less overlap with Biblical names. This makes sense, since these people came from the same time period as Lehi.
3. Related to that, a name list comes from Babylonian records of prisoners taken from Judah under Nebuchadnezzar. These are names right out of Lehi's time. One item of note from the lists is the tendency of people of that age to name children after Egyptian heroes. A similar trend is found in the Book of Mormon, with Egyptian hero names such as Aha, Himni, Korihor, Paanchi, Pakumeni, Sam, Zeezrom, Ham, Manti, Nephi, and Zenoch. Other names, such as Zeniff and Zoram, have also been identified in that time period. None of these names are found in the Bible.
4. The Book of Mormon has many names ending in *-iah* or *-ihah*. This correlates with the majority of names found at Lachish, which was destroyed by the Babylonians during Lehi's day. Other studies have demonstrated that a similar suffix (*-iahu*), a theophoric element tied to the name Jehovah (or Yahweh), was very common in Lehi's Jerusalem. Many characters in the Book of Mormon have this as part of their names.
5. In the Bible, Lehi is only a place name. But a piece of pottery from Elath included the name of a person called Lehi.
6. The names Laman and Lemuel are interesting. Laman is not found in the Bible. Lemuel is, but only twice in Proverbs. Both are attested in discoveries since Joseph Smith's time as coming from the south Arabia. In addition, they are consistently grouped together in the Book of Mormon text, and we find many other such names of two men, often brothers, in assonant (sound alike) pairs in Arabic writings. Given that Lehi took his family, including Laman and Lemuel, into Arabia when they left Jerusalem, is a fascinating correlation.
7. One of the most common name elements in the Old Testament is *ba'al*, tying to the local god of that name. But the Book of Mormon has not one such name. A flaw? No, because studies have shown that in Lehi's day, there were few

with that element. For example, Elephantine names (mentioned above) include no *ba'al* names, just like the Book of Mormon.

## Ancient Texts

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Many ancient texts have come to light since the publication of the Book of Mormon. Many of the elements of these non-Biblical writings surface also in the Book of Mormon, helping us appreciate the antiquity of the Book of Mormon text.

### Metal plates and texts hidden away

The first thing to note relates to how the Book of Mormon was stored—on **metal plates and hidden away**. Thought to be incredible in Joseph Smith's day, today both kinds of records are common. Records hidden away include the **Nag Hammadi** scrolls, the **Dead Sea Scrolls**, records at **Masada**, and the **Bar Kokhba** letters. Fascinatingly, the apocryphal books of Enoch and others often speak of hidden books being revealed to their characters.

Nearly a **hundred ancient documents inscribed on metal plates** have been found in the last 80 years. Such metal records, including scriptures, have been discovered on several continents, some right in Jerusalem. In other cases, the records have been buried in stone boxes, such as those from Sargon II at Khorsabad (at the Louvre today). The **Ketef Hinnom** texts, discovered in a tomb in Jerusalem and dating to the time of Lehi, are two small metal rolls which contain parts of Numbers 6. They are the oldest scriptural writings ever found. Even more texts have been discovered which speak of records kept on metal plates.

### Reformed Egyptian

Moroni says that the hidden texts of the Book of Mormon were written in **Hebrew** (or an altered form of it) using “**reformed Egyptian**” characters (Mormon 9:32-33). Until fairly recently, no records had been discovered where Hebrew was written with anything but Hebrew letters. But now we have Hebrew texts written in Egyptian—written in **hieratic**, a ‘reformed’ version of Egyptian hieroglyphic characters. Examples abound, including the London Magical Papyrus, Papyrus Anastasi I, Ostrakon 25759, and Amherst Papyrus 63. The latter is the oldest example—from the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C.—and perhaps the most interesting because it uses **demotic** (an Egyptian script in use during Lehi's day) and includes excerpts from Psalms 20. So we have not only Semitic texts written in Egyptian characters, but scripture!

### Joseph of Egypt

The Book of Mormon includes a fascinating account of **Commander Moroni** tearing a piece of his garment, writing on it, and rallying the people to his cry of **liberty**. In response, people **tore their own garments** saying it was symbolic of the covenant they were making (called a simile curse). Then they threw their garments at Moroni's feet, saying that if they didn't keep their covenant, that they would be cast down like their garments. Moroni reminded them of the story of Joseph, whose garment was rent by his brothers, and most of which was destroyed. But a **part of that torn garment remained** to the end of Israel's life, and Moroni declared that to be symbolic of the remnant of Joseph's seed that God would preserve (**Alma 46:19-24**).

Many of the details of that story are not in our Old Testament. But well after the Book of Mormon was published, a number of ancient **Jewish and Arab texts** came to light, including the somewhat well-known **Book of Jasher**, that give similar details. They speak of Joseph's garment being torn, and a piece of it being preserved by Jacob/Israel on which he weeps nightly for his lost son. Another story tells of Joseph's garment being the thing that let Jacob know his son was still alive, because he perceived Joseph's smell before he saw him.

The Book of Mormon quotes prophecies of Joseph about the Lord raising up **Moses and Aaron** to deliver his people out of Egyptian bondage. There is no such prophecy recorded in the Bible. But ancient Jewish scriptural commentaries (**targumim**) teach that Joseph did know his people would end up as slaves in Egypt and that they would be later delivered by God, through two deliverers.

## Prophecies of Christ

The Book of Mormon includes a number of prophecies about Jesus Christ prior to his birth, including details such as his **name**, his **miracles**, the manner of his **death**, his **resurrection**, and the name of his **mother**. Some critics called this out, saying that it's an easy thing for Joseph Smith to write such things into the text in the 1800s, with the New Testament as a reference. There are no clear indications of the details of Jesus' life are in our current Old Testament, they say, so that's a strike against the Book of Mormon.

But an examination of early and mediaeval Christian and Jewish texts show that many believed that **Old Testament prophets** had done exactly what the Book of Mormon declares—**taught the details of Jesus' life**. **Ignatius**, a bishop in Antioch (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> century) taught that Old Testament prophets "lived according to Christ Jesus. On this account also they were persecuted, being inspired by His grace to fully convince the unbelieving that there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son." An early Christian document called *The Epistle of Barnabas* teaches that Moses knew much about the Savior and taught the people about his name, his mission, and his suffering. According to an Eastern medieval text called the *Book of the Bee*, many Old Testament prophets taught specifics about Jesus. According to this text:

- Hosea taught when he would be born and that he would have twelve disciples.
- Nahum wrote that he would be slain and the veil of the temple rent at that time.
- Habakkuk prophesied that he would come and do away with the law of the Jews.

Early Church fathers (such as **Justin Martyr and Irenaeus**) taught that Jeremiah spoke of Jesus preaching salvation to the dead, and that Jeremiah taught of Jesus' birth to a virgin, laying in a crib, and people coming to worship him.

Another text, *4 Baruch*, speaks of Jeremiah's teachings about Jesus' life, his selection of twelve apostles, his death and resurrection in three days, and his return in glory on the Mount of Olives. None of these texts were available to Joseph Smith.

## Death of Laban

The Book of Mormon has in its early pages a story of an execution. Nephi is instructed by the Spirit to kill Laban in order to get the brass plates and safely escape. He resists doing so but, in the end, follows the direction from God.

A second century Jewish text (*'Abot de Rabbi Nathan 20*) discusses **Moses'** killing of an Egyptian **taskmaster**, as recorded in Exodus 2. In this text, Moses is hesitant to perform the deed until he is divinely instructed to do so. In fact, in this text, Moses was able to interact with a court of angels who rendered the verdict on the Egyptian and told Moses to kill him, so he did.

Another text says that as **David prepared to slay Goliath**, he "lifted up his eyes to heaven and saw angels deliberating on Goliath the Philistine."

These examples demonstrate that even in small details, the Book of Mormon account conforms to ancient traditions about similar experiences, which were not available to Joseph Smith.

## Wordprints

One of the most interesting studies of the Book of Mormon text is that of stylometry, or wordprinting. This is a **statistical analysis of a text to determine likely authorship**. It works by taking known writings of a person and comparing them to texts in question, to determine if that person is the author. Something like fingerprints, each author has a personal 'wordprint,' which is determined by how he or she uses a number of **non-contextual words**, such as *the*, *and*, *a*, or *of*. Studies have shown that the use of these words is consistent for a single author, even over a long period of time. Additional research has demonstrated that the wordprint pattern of an author can still be detected in a translation of that author's writing, as long as the translation is more literal and not a freeform translation that is more of a paraphrase.

Wordprint analysis has been done on a number of writings, the most famous of which is perhaps the **Federalist Papers**. You probably remember that these documents were written in the early days of our country and published anonymously. Through historical documents, authorship was discovered for seventy-three of the papers, but twelve could not be determined. By comparing those papers to the writings of potential authors, such as Alexander Hamilton or James Madison, wordprint

research determined that Madison was unquestionably the author of all twelve. Another example has to do with an unfinished work of Jane Austen. Many years later, someone completed the novel and published it anonymously. The author tried hard to copy Jane Austen's writing style, and to many reading it, the author was very successful. But wordprint analysis was able to easily determine which parts were original and which were added and edited by the new author, because though she copied the style of Austen, she could not suppress her own pattern of using non-contextual words.

The Book of Mormon is an excellent potential wordprint study. Critics claim it was written by Joseph Smith or another author: "The sameness of the language in all parts of the book of Mormon proves that it is from the same hand" (Ash, *Of Faith and Reason*, 31), said one critic. The Book of Mormon claims to contain sufficient writings by several original authors to perform the analysis (it takes several thousand words to achieve statistical relevance). In addition, we have known writings of Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and others who could have potentially authored the book, if it was not of ancient origin. These can be used to compare to the Book of Mormon text to discover if one of these people are likely to be the author.

Two major wordprint studies have been done on the Book of Mormon. The first was published in 1980, and done by Wayne Larsen and Alvin Rencher, both statisticians. (I am not a statistician so am reporting what they said without claiming to fully interpret it.) They use multivariate analysis of variance, which basically means looking at the patterns of usage of the non-contextual words in text of known authorship and comparing them to texts of unknown or disputed authorship. To check their work, they also performed cluster analysis and discriminant or classification analysis. Their conclusions are as follows:

1. The differences in the usage of the words studied is large enough that "the statistical odds that a single author wrote the book [of Mormon] are less than 1 in 100 billion." The words they studied were *and, the, of, that, to, unto, in, it, for, and be*. They also did a follow-up study using a larger group of 38 words with the same results. No author can keep track of such patterns (even if he was aware of their existence, which Joseph Smith clearly wasn't) and vary them consistently from author to author in a text like the Book of Mormon.
2. "None of the Book of Mormon selections resembled the writing of any of the suggested nineteenth-century authors. The Book of Mormon itself offers the strongest evidence for a clear scientific refutation of the theories that it was written in the nineteenth century."
3. The Book of Mormon was "indeed written by several distinct authors, who were individually consistent" in their wordprints.
4. Wordprints were similar for those of overlapping time periods. In other words, Nephi's writings most resembled Lehi's; Alma, Amulek, and Abinadi resembled each other; The writings of Samuel the Lamanite and Nephi (who were contemporaries) resemble each other. And modern authors, such as Joseph Smith and Oliver Cowdery, were far more similar to each other than they were to any of the Book of Mormon authors.<sup>3</sup>
5. They concluded that the translation process "was both direct and literal and that each individual author's style was preserved." This agrees with recent research on the translation process that comes from Royal Skousen's study of the Book of Mormon manuscripts and the testimony of witnesses, that Joseph Smith was given the text word for word, including the spelling of names. In other words, the translation was not done as a human would normally do it—read the text in one language and attempt to convert it into another. Joseph Smith was told exactly how to write it in English, which proved to be a very literal translation of Nephi's, Alma's, Mormon's, and others' words.

(As a side note, in a related study, they found a strong internal consistency in the book of Isaiah—better, in fact, than any other Old Testament book of that general time period. This is contrary to the dominant scholarly opinion that Isaiah has two or more separate authors.)

The second wordprint study was done by a group of people known as the "Berkley Group." The science of stylometry had evolved much since Larsen and Rencher's initial work, and this group of scientists, led by John L. Hilton and including several who were not members of the Church, determined to update the research and address some weaknesses in the

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<sup>3</sup> See Figures 1 and 2 on pp. 173 and 175, Wayne A. Larsen and Alvin C. Rencher, "Who Wrote the Book of Mormon? An Analysis of Wordprints," Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship*.

methodologies. They started with a skeptical approach—not sure if wordprinting was even valid. They spent seven years developing and performing their tests on the Book of Mormon and other texts, and published their findings in 1987. They limited their research to larger blocks of text and thus fewer authors (Nephi and Alma in the Book of Mormon, who have the largest amount of text directly attributable to them), and Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and Solomon Spaulding from the nineteenth century). They turned their focus beyond just the frequency of non-contextual words, but also the patterns of their usage (the context of their use). They used the original Book of Mormon manuscripts, rather than the more recent version which includes modern editing changes, and only compared two texts at a time, thus focusing their research on “rejections,” meaning that word patterns are different between two texts. They employed a number of “control” studies which employed the same measurements on noncontroversial texts, and demonstrated the validity of their methodology. They also looked at translated texts of various kinds to see how wordprints survived a translation.

The results of their control tests are in this chart.<sup>4</sup> “Within-Author” means written by the same author, while “Between-Author” means written by two different people. Texts written by the same author peak at 2 rejections (which is “theoretically expected”), while texts written by different authors peak at 7 rejections. The larger the number of rejections, the less likely that the texts are written by the same author.

This is what they learned when they applied their methodology to the Book of Mormon.

- The Nephi and Alma texts compared to themselves show the same results as the control texts. That is, a block of Nephi’s writings compared to other of his writings shows that they are written by the same author; the same results are manifest for Alma’s writings compared to other Alma writings.
- Comparing the two authors’ texts to each other also matches the control texts. That is, the number of rejections is consistently high when Nephi and Alma are compared, demonstrating that these texts were not written by the same person.
- Comparing Nephi and Alma’s writings to Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and Solomon Spaulding’s writings shows a consistently high number of rejections, in most cases showing statistically that they are not the same authors. Particularly, Nephi and Joseph Smith are very different, while Alma and Joseph Smith are more alike (though statistically “uncertain”, still means likely not the same author).
- Their conclusion (and remember, this is from non-LDS scientists): “it is statistically indefensible to propose Joseph Smith or Oliver Cowdery or Solomon Spaulding as the author of the 30,000 words from the Book of Mormon manuscript texts attributed to Nephi and Alma. Additionally, these two Book of Mormon writers have wordprints unique to themselves and measure statistically independent from each other in the same fashion that other uncontested authors do. Therefore, the Book of Mormon measures multiauthored, with authorship consistent to its own internal claims.”

Wordprinting is a remarkable statistical analysis that supports the proposition that the Book of Mormon is written by ancient and multiple authors. Likewise, the names in the Book of Mormon and the ties to ancient texts only discovered since Joseph Smith published the work, also support the idea of the antiquity of the text.

## Geography

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### Nahom

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 had written the Book of Mormon himself, he would have had 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 on the Frankincense trail) 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—on stone altars in a local temple,

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<sup>4</sup> John L. Hilton, “On Verifying Wordprint Studies,” in Reynolds, *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited*.

by archeologists who know nothing of Joseph Smith or his work, is simply amazing. Finding a sign labeled “Zarahemla” in the New World would be no more astonishing.

Now let’s turn to the lands where most of the Book of Mormon takes place—the lands of Nephi, Zarahemla, Bountiful, etc.

## A conceptual geography

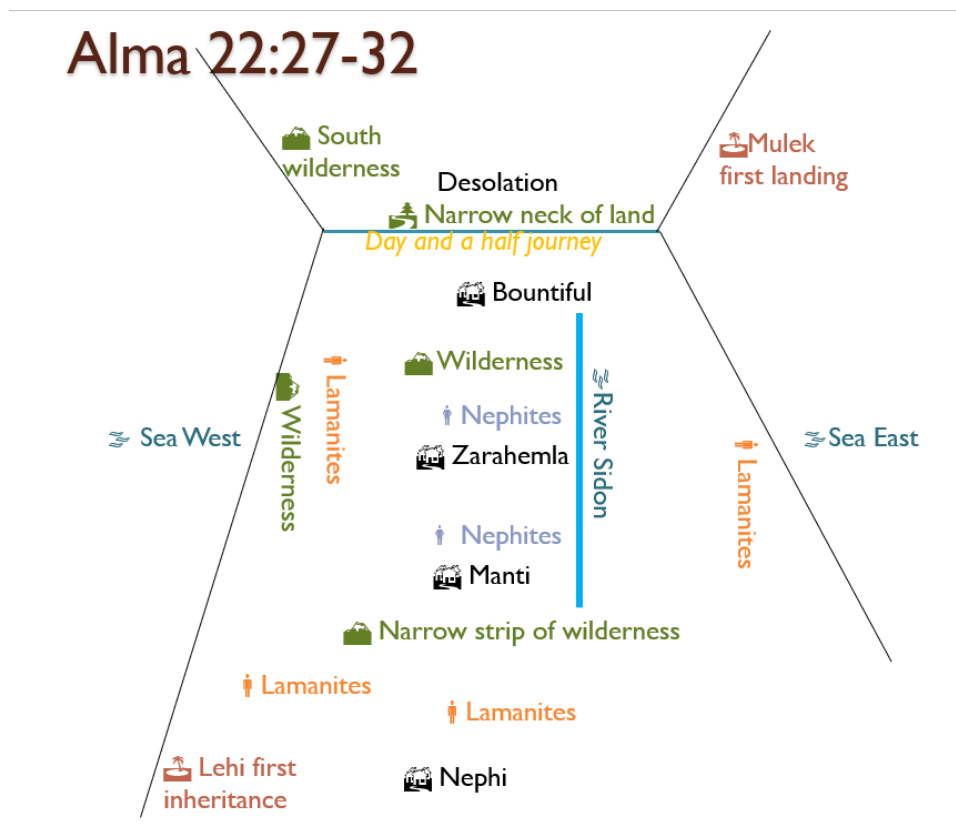
I believe that the key to discovering the actual Book of Mormon geography is to first create a “conceptual” or “internal” map, based on a careful and thorough reading of the text. Many others agree, and this has been done by a number of people with some similarities of interpretation and many differences (walk through multiple).

I have done it myself, reading the book multiple times 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.

## General description

There are at least 290 scriptural references (in many cases, multiple verses, making well over 400 verses) in the Book of Mormon that have some geographical information. There are at least 89 geographical place names. There are at least ten essential Book of Mormon geography features that have to be accounted for in any model. There are at least six journeys recorded that indicate distances, helping give a sense of scale. Many scriptures describe various geographical relationships and features that have to be considered. The amazing thing is that with all this discussion of geography in different parts of the book, with different characters, and in different times, the Book of Mormon is internally consistent—in other words, it does not contradict itself on geographical details, but paints a consistent picture of the shape, size, and location of Nephite and Lamanite lands.

While we cannot read 290 references in a single class, we can read a longer sample one that can give us a feel of the overall shape of the land, **Alma 22:27-32**. When we lay out the relationships, it might look something like this.



If we looked at the other 289 references, we would add more details to our internal map. Many people have built such maps, interpreting the references evidence in the Book of Mormon. Because it was not Mormon’s goal to give us a precise



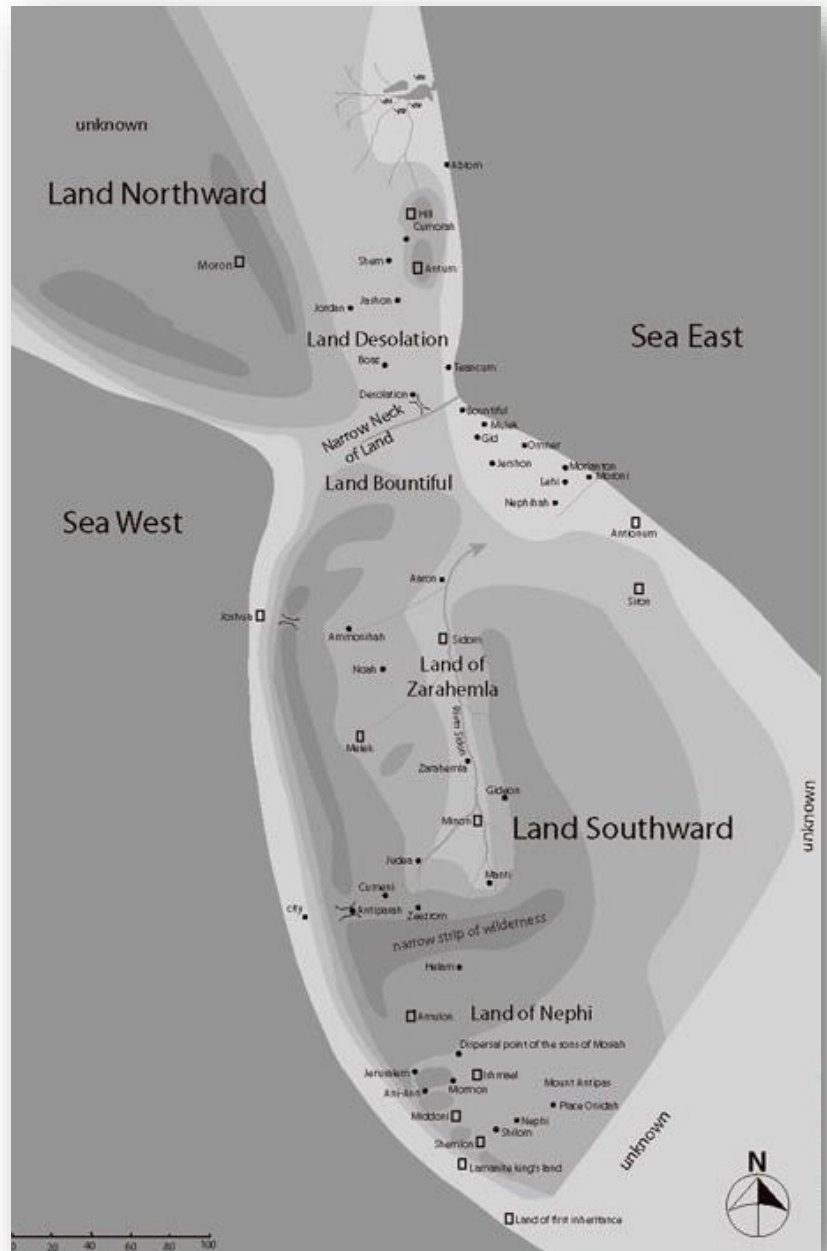
geographical representation, there can be differences of opinion. I read the Book of Mormon twice, just to look at the geography, and did my best to map everything on a large poster board on the wall in my office.

When I was done, mine looked very much like the map below by John Sorenson, so I simply determined to use his going forward.<sup>5</sup> 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<sub>1</sub> brought his people there to settle). The Jaredite lands were in the Land Northward.

Recently, some folks at BYU have been developing an online, virtual and interactive map of Book of Mormon lands. While not complete at the time of this writing, the app shows promise and provides a good conceptual model of potential Book of Mormon geographical relationships (the colored map below).<sup>6</sup>

## 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 Helam to Zarahemla. It took them **21 days** (**Mosiah 23:3** [8 days from the Waters of Mormon to Helam]; **Mosiah 24:20** [1 day from Helam to valley of Alma]; **Mosiah 24:25** [12 days from the valley of Alma to Zarahemla]). How far they traveled in that time is not precisely known but can be estimated from ancient and modern sources to be about 10-15 miles a day, given they were traveling with men, women, children, and animals. That makes their total journey from the Waters of Mormon to Zarahemla about 210-315 miles. Given the twists and turns of a route through a likely mountainous region, the actual straight distance on the map might be much less, perhaps something like 150-180 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.



<sup>5</sup> From his book called *Mormon's Map*.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://virtualscriptures.org/book-of-mormon-map/>.



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 twenty-four plates left by Ether, or Captain Moroni's story of losing and retaking the eastern coastline cities.



## Shape

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 much 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 give us a large number of clues about the lay of the land—usually in the words *up*, *down*, *over*, etc. As they do in the Old Testament, 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**, the only river mentioned in the Book of Mormon, and 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 sea, probably 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.

The Book of Mormon portrays a sophisticated civilization, with temples, writing, road systems, structured governments, trade and commerce, and more. All of these issues have to be considered along with the geography of any location to determine how strong a candidate site might be.

## Putting it on a Real Map

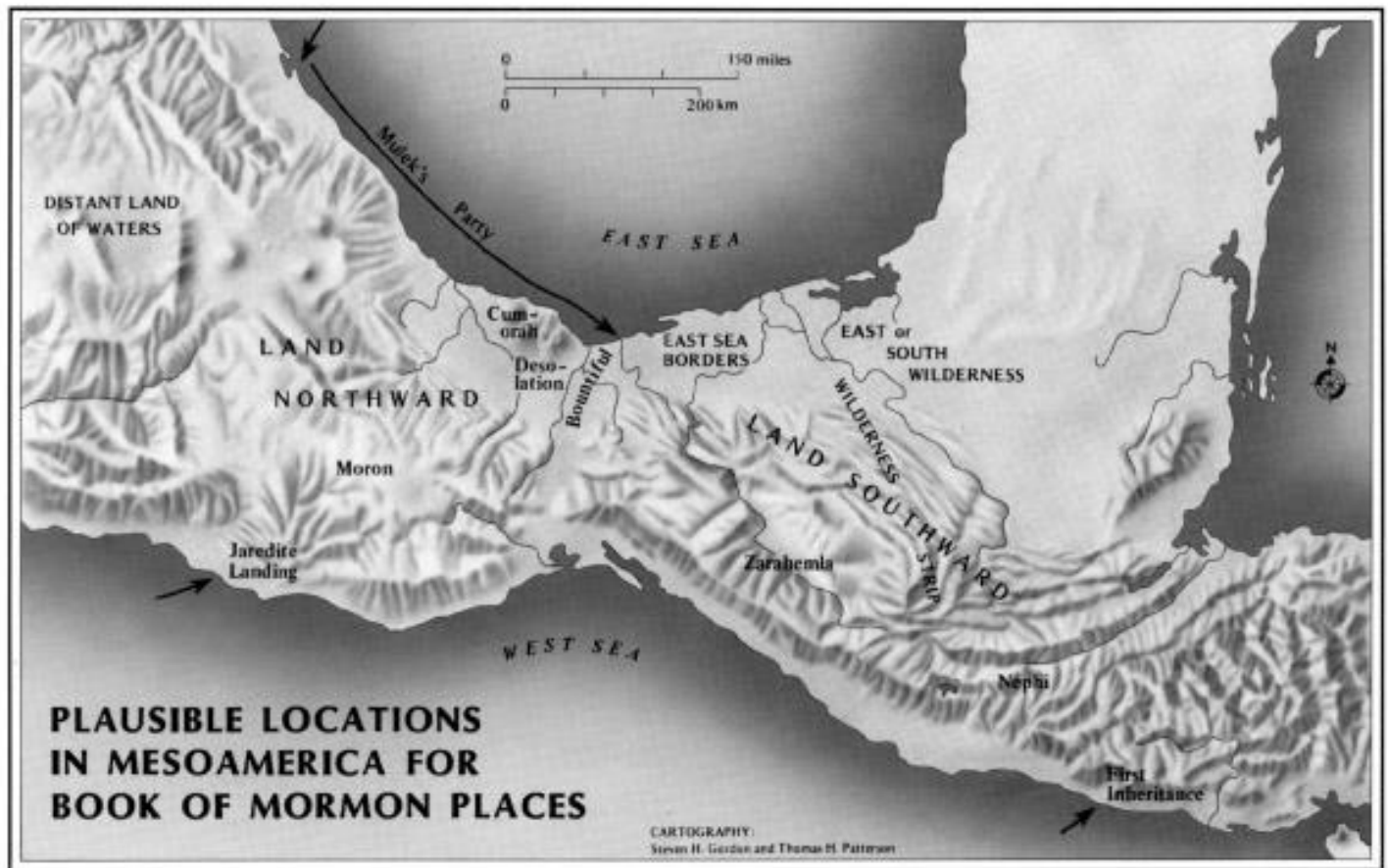
The next step is to take our conceptual map and see if it fits with any real-world locations. As with the conceptual maps, many have attempted to place the Book of Mormon in a real-world setting (including even Malaysia!). Here are a few of them.



From my own study, the candidate that matches the criterion best today is the area of 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 many 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. For example, 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.

## Plausible Locations

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

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 Mesoamerican 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 with Bountiful becoming a more prominent Nephite city.

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 dominated** 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.

## Book of Mormon Textual Research

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In the last few years, great research has been happening in terms of the text of the Book of Mormon itself. This has taken several forms, such as Royal Skousen’s critical text project and the work of several young scholars carefully examining the text of the book that Joseph Smith delivered to us. I will mention just a few of these with references for further reading below.

### Onomastic wordplay

We talked above about the Hebrew meanings of names but some new research on how the meanings of names are worked into the stories of the Book of Mormon is breaking new ground. Matthew Bowen of BYU-Hawaii has published *Name as Key-Word*, a study of sixteen names or name-groups in the Book of Mormon that have symbolic meanings, reflected in the text and story of the Book of Mormon, but which would have been unknown to Joseph Smith, who knew no Hebrew in 1829.

For example, the name of the woman Abish (one of only three named women in the Book of Mormon story) is introduced as associated with her father and a vision, and whose name means “father is a man.” Tied to the whole story is the notion that Jesus, the Father in a covenantal sense, is born of a woman and thus a man. That word association is woven throughout the conversion of Lamoni, his wife, and their people, and hinges on Abish’s role in the entire scenario, who walks into the picture, plays her part, and disappears without a word.

### Critical Text Project

The most significant study of the Book of Mormon text is more than twenty years in the making and not yet complete. Still, Royal Skousen of BYU has produced fourteen dense volumes so far with more to come, plus numerous articles and chapters summarizes his efforts. The result is a detailed look at what the original text of the Book of Mormon likely was, as well as a thoroughly documented list of all variants in every publication of the Book of Mormon in history.

One of the most fascinating finds in terms of Book of Mormon evidences is that the language of the Book of Mormon is not from Joseph Smith’s time or place. Since its publication, many have mocked the seemingly poor grammar of the first (and even current) edition. Though Joseph Smith and subsequent editions addressed many of these issues so they’re not as visible to us today, Skousen discovered that these things are not poor grammar at all, but rather English from 200-300 years before Joseph Smith’s time. Though it’s unclear why the Lord would have Joseph write the book in English that was already archaic before its publication, this does stand as a testimony that Joseph Smith himself did not write it. If he had truly been the author of it, he would have used the English of his time and place, instead of older phrases that pre-date him by hundreds of years.

### Many More

There are many, many more examples that we could use, but this is sufficient to make the point. A work of fiction would have all the signs of contemporary authorship, and would be lacking in the markings of a truly ancient text, including Hebrew words, phrases, and structure; ancient and unique names that reflect the appropriate cultural and linguistic situation of the story; archaeological support; geographical consistency, and a carefully composed textual structure—all of which was produced by a relatively uneducated farm boy in about two months’ time, with no notes or references of any kind to help him remember hundreds of details, which he never confused in his dictation.

The Book of Mormon is a miracle and a verifiable ancient record with an important message for our day.

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