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Review of Joseph L. Allen, *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*

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9:3). It is worth repeating that both Sorenson and Hauck locate the land of Cumorah in the Tuxtla mountains region.

NOTES

¹Hauck, 7; Sorenson, 107.

²Kwang-chih Chang, *Shang Civilization* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 365–66.

³J. E. Spencer and William L. Thomas, Jr., *Cultural Geography: An Evolutionary Introduction to Our Humanized Earth* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1969), 4.

⁴Spencer and Thomas, *Cultural Geography*, 111.

⁵Spencer and Thomas, *Cultural Geography*, 111–12.

⁶Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of the Year: Middle American Calendrical Systems* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 25–27.

⁷Edmonson, *Book of the Year*, 22, 117.

JOSEPH L. ALLEN. *Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon*. Orem, Utah: S. A. Publishers, 1989. \$39.95 hardback; \$24.95 paperback.

Reviewed by David A. Palmer, a senior researcher at Amoco Chemical Co. and past leader of two expeditions to Mexico.

Exploring the Lands of the Book of Mormon ought to be on the bookshelf of everyone interested in Book of Mormon geography. This significant volume, a large book of 437 pages with 147 maps, is a pleasure to read. Allen makes convincing arguments in a style that is generally easy to understand. On controversial issues he states the alternative views and then argues for his own. He is quick to admit that we are still stumbling somewhat and that many answers remain elusive (30).

Allen is not a professional archaeologist, but he has had considerable experience visiting the sites and has learned a great deal from archaeologists such as John L. Sorenson, Bruce W. Warren, and Garth L. Norman. In addition some of his own insights appear to have real merit. However, the volume has some shortcomings. The discussion of the ancient Nephite directional system is inadequate and leads to questionable conclusions, particularly those regarding the location of the city Bountiful. Of the book's many drawn figures, some are passable, but others are not up to the detail achieved in 1840 by Frederick Catherwood. For example, Figure 5-2 does not show a beard, which the actual monument has (57). Photographs would have been better than most of the drawings. Typographical errors also haunt the text.

Allen places all Book of Mormon events within Mesoamerica except for Moroni's trip to the Palmyra, New York, area. Mesoamerica encompasses the southern part of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. It is the only New World area, Allen states, where writing was present in early times. This area also had a great number of the cultural features mentioned in the Book of Mormon. In taking this position, Allen essentially agrees with the views of Ferguson, Hunter, Warren, Sorenson, Norman, and Palmer.¹

Most of Allen's dating scheme seems to be valid. He proposes 3114 B.C. as the date of Noah's flood, which could be correct. The estimate of 2700 B.C. for the landing of the Jaredites also appears to be very reasonable. Those dates are supported both by archaeological evidence and by the chronologies in the Greek Septuagint version of the Bible used by the Jews in Christ's day. Allen's date for King Mosiah I leading the Nephites down to the land of Zarahemla is 200 B.C. This date is not explicit in the Book of Mormon, so it is a matter of some guesswork. If the date is pushed back to 240-220 B.C., the archaeological data at Kaminaljuyu makes more sense. Those data could lead to some impressive correlations that Allen missed.

Allen's dating of the final Jaredite destruction is probably two hundred years too late. Radiocarbon dates corrected to the most recent half life and further corrected by tree-ring dating (MASCA dates) have led to the conclusion that La Venta really began about 1000 B.C. and was destroyed about 600 B.C.² To these dates we would have to add the normal uncertainty of plus or minus fifty years. Thus, the culture could have existed from 1050 B.C. down to 550 B.C.

The information on the ending date accords with Stela 13 at Monte Alban, period I, which gives a date for destruction of 4 August 563 B.C.³ That date could be the year when Shared overthrew King Coriantumr's people in the highlands (Ether 14:6) and leads to a postulated time for the Jaredite final destruction of 550 B.C. +/-3. This dating would correspond well with Coriantumr's encounter with the Mulekites (Omni 21-22), who arrived in America about that time.

Part of Allen's proposed geography agrees with Palmer, Warren, Clark, and Sorenson. Allen proposes that the land of Desolation is in the province of Veracruz, northwest of the River Coatzacoalcos. He locates the land of Zarahemla in the central depression of Chiapas and the land of Nephi in the highlands of Guatemala, centered at the present Guatemala City. These locations are based on the hypothesis that the "narrow strip of wilderness" (Alma 22:27) extended from the area of Izapa on the Pacific Coast

to the Caribbean. His land of Bountiful, then, needs to encompass the entire zone from the Caribbean to the River Coatzacoalcos. Assuming that Nephite north was true north, he places the cities of Mulek and Bountiful along the eastern shores of the Yucatan Peninsula, in contrast to the Sorenson-Warren-Palmer hypothesis. They place those cities on the Gulf of Mexico coast just east of the isthmus. The latter approach puts the cities in a much more strategic location, and there are ruins to support such a proposition. The main argument against Allen's view, however, is that it requires a shift in the Nephite coordinate system.

The question of directional systems in the Book of Mormon is vital to a correct understanding of Nephite geography, for the difference in directional systems is the distinguishing difference between truly different geographies. Was Nephite north aligned with the North Pole or not? If not, where was it? Was it a specific direction? Allen proposes that Nephite north is true north. This position requires that the cities designed to defend the entrance to the land northward be placed in Belize. But is that site reasonable?

My own study of the directional systems employed during the Nephite time period suggests that use of true north for orientation was rare. Because of the twenty-five millennia precession of the axis of the earth (it wobbles like a top), Polaris was not a pole star in Lehi's time. Instead, it described a circle of about twenty-four degrees in the night sky. In the absence of a visible pole star, directions would have been difficult to determine from just the sun's rising and setting, which vary by fifty degrees over the course of a year. Serious investigation of Mesoamerican ruins built before the time of Christ suggests that the inhabitants based their directions on the solstice readings, the extremes of the sun's travel on 21/22 June and 21/22 December. That solstitial direction is sixty-five degrees west of true north and was probably used as "Nephite north."

The archaeoastronomer Vincent Malmström has discovered that many of the important preclassic sites in Mesoamerica were deliberately placed so that the solstice could be measured when the sun passed over nearby peaks. Basically he found that many, but not all, sites in Guatemala and Mexico are aligned sixty-five degrees west of north. An example is in the impressive ruin at Cholula, where the largest pyramid is aligned with the highest peak of the volcano Ixtaccihuatl sixty-five degrees west of north. That alignment corresponds to the summer sunset solstice. The temple face is at right angles to that direction. Other sites similarly placed relative to volcanic peaks with the sixty-five degrees west of north orientation include El Meson, Nopiloa, Remojadas, Tlatilco, and Tlapacoya. Tres Zapotes, Cerro de la Piedra, and Cerro de las Mesas

are all lined up solstitially with the hill Vigia (probably the Hill Cumorah).⁴ The probable city of Nephi, Kaminaljuyu, also had this solstitial orientation to its buildings. The important late preclassic site of Dainzu, near Oazaca, has a sixty-three degree west of north orientation to its main facade. At the ruins of Lambityeco, the alignment is sixty-five degrees. Izapa, considered by its chief excavator, Gareth Lowe, “to have been a ‘Greenwich’ and ‘Mount Palomar’ for its time . . . also something of a New World Athens or Alexandria in the crucial intermediate era of pre-Classic Mesoamerican learning and artistic development,”⁵ was also solstitially oriented.

A careful protractor-aided study of detailed maps, correcting for use of compass north rather than true north, suggests that a great number of sites in Allen’s land of Zarahemla have an orientation of sixty-five degrees west of north. These include La Libertad (probable Manti), Laguna Francesa, Sitio Colónia Niños Heroes, Chapatengo, San Francisco, Santa Isabel, El Salvador, San Felipe, Laguna Dolores, and the possible site of Zarahemla, Santa Rosa.

Malmström noted that “there are probably few other regions of the world where the principles of architecture, astronomy, and calendrics found so intimate and dramatic a blending as they did in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.”⁶ This blending is manifested in the many calendar stones, which virtually always show directional symbols. Further, the solstice readings tie directly to the importance of the intercardinal points. The famous Aztec calendar can be easily observed to have the directional signs at the intercardinal points.

Thus, we cannot assume that Nephite north was true north as we know it today, and so we must question the overall orientation of Allen’s sites and his positioning of the narrow neck of land. A more likely site for the land of Bountiful places the River Tonalá on its east side, the River Coatzacoalcos on its west (with which Allen agrees), the Gulf of Mexico on its north, and the Pacific on its south (all in modern coordinates). The city of Mulek appears to have been La Venta. This location makes sense from many points of view. It was first an Olmec (probable Jaredite) city of great importance with many monuments (223). Especially noteworthy is its Stela 3, where the man holding the baton of authority may be King Coriantumr. The bearded man on the right may be King Mulek. (See fig. 1.)

The location of La Venta is important in determining the location of the land and city of Bountiful. The location of La Venta just east of the River Tonalá places it outside of the land of Bountiful but still close to it (Alma 51). The most likely location for the city of Bountiful appears to be at the modern village of Tonalá. It is at the exit of the river to the Gulf and has a large lagoon protecting a

third side. Ancient ruins are abundant, but the site is not reported on archaeological maps. It is exceptionally close to La Venta, though the river and some lagoons prevent a straight-line march.

The battle described in Alma 52 fits this area, as it is fourteen kilometers from the coast and another six kilometers from the Tonala river. The strategy developed by Captain Moroni to tire out the Lamanite army, effortlessly capture the city of Mulek, and then defeat the Lamanites with fresh armies fits this geographic scenario. Location of the Nephite cities along the Gulf Coast between Coatzacoalcos and Villahermosa makes all of the action more plausible. In the context of archaeologically known settlements on the Gulf Coast, the trails are reasonable and certainly present practical distances. Most of the action could have taken place in less than a week.

By contrast, the trails of Morianton and Teancum that Allen shows in figure 24-4 (283) appear to be unreasonable. Teancum would have crossed rough terrain and gone over a high mountain pass to arrive in the Land of Zarahemla. He would have traveled right past the city of Zarahemla and all other major Nephite settlements. Then his army would have crossed over to the Pacific Coast and finally gone through the narrow neck of land before finally meeting Teancum near the Atlantic Coast. None of these events, such as passing through Zarahemla, is mentioned in the text. This trip would have taken three to four weeks, when a fresh army from Zarahemla could have arrived in half the time! The important point to be made is that cities located along the Gulf of Mexico just east of the isthmus would have had strategic importance. Those in Belize would not.

Thus, the location of the city Bountiful is a crucial factor in pinning down the details of Book of Mormon archaeology, and its location relates directly to the directional system accepted. Allen needs to make a stronger case for his directional system before it will be very plausible.

On the positive side, Allen has made some good points with Book of Mormon words. He notes that two Jaredite names, Shule (Xul) and Com, have survived the millennia and may be represented in the Maya cultures of Guatemala and Yucatan (8). There are also correspondences in place names. A common ending for words in both Maya and the Book of Mormon is *ha*. For example, Xel(*ha*), Balam(*ha*), Altun(*ha*), Pulsi(*ha*), etc., are mirrored by Book of Mormon names such as Nephi(*hah*), Moroni(*hah*), and Ammoni(*hah*). There is reported to be a community in the frontiers of Mexico and Guatemala named Cumen. It may have been established by one of the Lord's twelve disciples who was called



FIGURE 1. Detail from the La Venta Stella 3 showing a person of high status with a beaked nose and a beard.

Kumen. There is also an archaeological site in Belize called Lamanai. It dates to 100 B.C. when there was a Lamanite king by the name of Lamoni. Names beginning with *Co* or *Ko* are rather common in the Mayan language. For example, there is a town in the Yucatan peninsula called Co-Com. Book of Mormon names beginning with *Co* include (Co)hor, (Ko)rihor, (Co)rianton, and (Co)riantumr.

Whether these are valid correspondences can be judged only by others more knowledgeable in language studies. However, the distribution of the Mayan language over the years makes Allen's description of the land of Bountiful less likely than that developed by Sorenson; the Mayan language frontier came to approximately the area where the land of La Venta was located.

As Allen states, we cannot absolutely prove the truth of the Book of Mormon with archaeological, geographical, or cultural evidence. That must come by spiritual witness. However, Allen's book exposes new evidences and thought-provoking hypotheses that can contribute to our understanding of the setting in which the events chronicled in the Book of Mormon took place.

NOTES

¹See Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *Cumora Where?* (Independence, Mo.: Zion's Printing, 1947); Milton R. Hunter, *Archaeology and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1956); V. Garth Norman, "Izapa Sculpture: Part 1 Album and Part 2 Text," Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, no. 30 (Provo, Utah: New World Archaeological Foundation, Brigham Young University, 1976); David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumora: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, Utah: Horizon, 1981); John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah: Deseret Book Co. and the Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985); and Bruce W. Warren and Thomas Stuart Ferguson, *The Messiah in Ancient America* (Provo, Utah: Book of Mormon Research Foundation, 1987).

²R. Berger, J. A. Graham, and R. F. Heizer, "A Reconsideration of the Age of the La Venta Site," *Contributions of the University of California Archaeological Research Facility* 3 (1967): 1-24.

³Munro S. Edmonson, *The Book of the Year: Middle American Calendar Systems* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1988), 22.

⁴Vincent H. Malmström, "A Reconstruction of the Chronology of Mesoamerican Calendrical Systems," *Journal of the History of Astronomy* 9 (June 1978): 105-16.

⁵Gareth W. Lowe, Thomas A. Lee, Jr., and Eduardo Martinez Espinosa, "Izapa: An Introduction to the Ruins and Monuments," Papers of the New World Archaeological Foundation, no. 31 (Provo, Utah: New World Archaeological Foundation, Brigham Young University, 1982), 269.

⁶Vincent H. Malmström, "Architecture, Astronomy, and Calendrics in Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica," in *Archaeoastronomy in the Americas*, ed. Ray Williamson (Los Altos, Calif.: Ballelna Press, 1981), 258.