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The Remnants of the Jaredites and the Limhite Expedition

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Chapter 15

The Remnants of the Jaredites and the Limhite Expedition

Around 128 BC a party of Limhites was sent to find Zarahemla, but the party became lost in the wilderness. Where did this expedition travel? Where did they encounter the remains of Jaredite civilization? And were there still Jaredite remnant populations there at the time?

Many who support the Book of Mormon geography model with the Grijalva River as the River Sidon have evaluated the text of the Book of Mormon (Poulsen 2016; Gardner 2015), concluding that the party mistakenly traveled down the Usumacinta River instead of the Grijalva River, where the land of Zarahemla was located (see figure 77). Many who support the Usumacinta River as the River Sidon have the counter interpretation that the party mistakenly traveled down the Grijalva River instead of the Usumacinta River, where the land of Zarahemla was located. The Caractors Document does not mention where the party initially traveled, but it does indicate that they returned via the Usumacinta River, which by default indicates the Usumacinta/Sidon theory cannot be correct, otherwise the party would have encountered Zarahemla on their return. The Caractors Document does mention that Mosiah₁ fled the land of Nephi from the east to Zarahemla, so the Grijalva River is the only possibility for Zarahemla, since the Zarahemla of the Usumacinta would not have Mosiah₁ fleeing from the east.

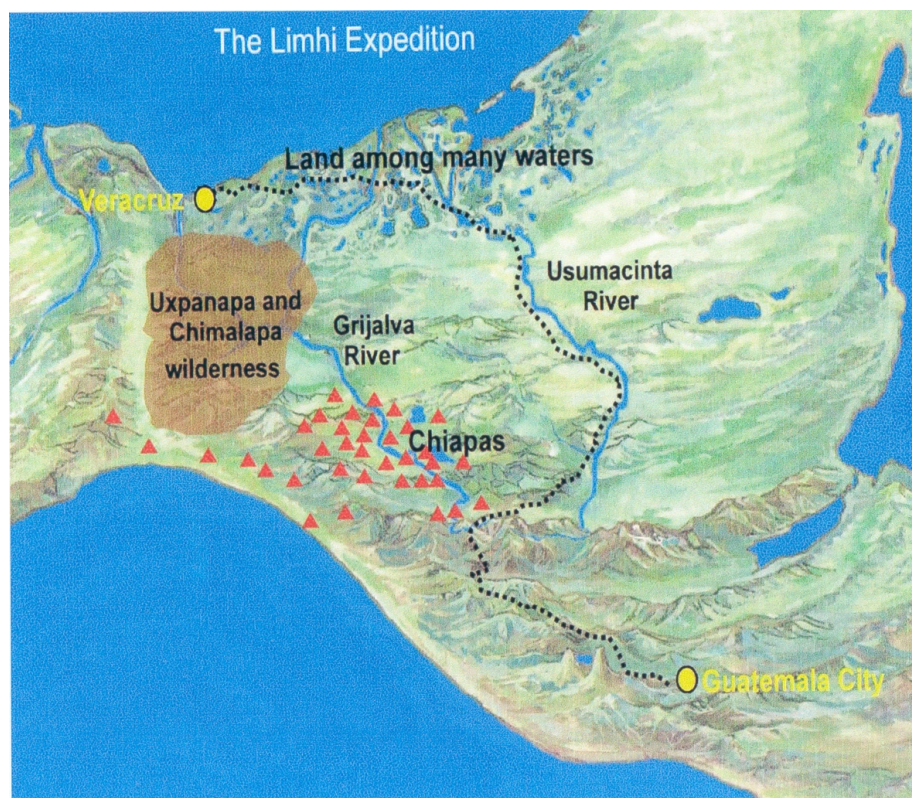


Figure 77. Limhite party's route according to the Usumacinta scenario (triangles are Preclassic sites present in 100 BC in the Grijalva basin). (Allen et al. 2009)

Instead of reaching Zarahemla, they “were lost in the wilderness for the space of many days” and traveled “in a land among many waters” and also discovered a “land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, etc., and was also covered with ruins of buildings of every kind, having discovered a land which had been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel” (Mosiah 8:8 [Original Manuscript version]). It is not textually specific as to the whether the “land among many waters” was encountered prior to discovering the land covered with ruins and bones. Later in the Book of Mormon this event is again recounted, where it is described that:

they could not find it (the land of Zarahemla) and they were lost in the wilderness. Nevertheless they did find a land which had been peopled, yea, a land which was covered with dry bones; yea a land which had been peopled and which had been destroyed. (Mosiah 21:26.)

No mention is made here of the “land among many waters.”

Although this is primarily an issue of land southward geography, because it does involve the land northward, it is appropriate to evaluate the various theories. In looking at both theories, the only way that either theory is possible is to assume that the carefully selected group of Limhites were all incapable of knowing that the sun came up in the east and set in the west.

The party had at least some idea of the direction that they were to take to find Zarahemla and probably at least had information that it was on a river, probably knowing the general direction that the river essentially flowed, at least on the portion where Zarahemla was located. They likely had some idea of the time that it took to arrive at Zarahemla. If one subscribes to the Grijalva/Sidon model, the Limhite party would have known to head west but then encountered the Usumacinta, and then they mysteriously headed entirely northward instead of going west. In the Usumacinta/Sidon model, they would have known to go north but then mysteriously headed entirely west instead.

The only scenario that makes sense without assuming total incompetence of the Limhite party is that the party generally headed in the right direction, but they slightly missed the River Sidon and the associated valley. At some point they recognized that they had gone awry (probably by having traveled a known period of time), and because of wilderness terrain, they probably did not know how exactly how far they had gone. At some point they still came to a location that was sufficiently similar to the description of Zarahemla they knew (settlements along an east-flowing river for the Grijalva model) that they thought they had found Zarahemla.

Under the Usumacinta/Sidon model, the party would have either missed Zarahemla by heading north, veering either slightly west or east from the route, but in either case they would have ended up at the ocean (or clear up into the Yucatán Peninsula) and would not have ended up anywhere close to the abandoned Olmec areas.

Jaredite Remnant Possibilities

The Limhite party also obtained the 24 plates and other items. With regard to the plates, King Limhi told Ammon that he was “desirous that these records should be translated; for perhaps they will give us a knowledge of a remnant of the people who have been destroyed, from whence these records came; or perhaps they will give us a knowledge of this very people who have been destroyed” (Mosiah 8:12). Mormon indicates (with the benefit of hindsight after the record was translated) that the records obtained “a record of the people whose bones they had found” (Mosiah 21:27).

The people encountered by the group of Limhites and identified as “a remnant” of the Jaredites are identified in the archaeological record as either the light populations documented at La Venta and San Lorenzo, or the Epi-Olmec, with Tres Zapotes being the primary Epi-Olmec population center.

La Venta Population and San Lorenzo Remnant Populations

Since the Limhite party encountered “a land covered with ruins of buildings of every kind” (Mosiah 8:8), it is likely that they visited one or more of the main abandoned Olmec cities. There were light populations in La Venta after 400 BC. Diehl (2004, 60–61) describes them as “squatters camped in the ruins.” San Lorenzo was also lightly occupied during what is classified as the Late Formative Remplás phase (ca. 300–50 BC). Laguna de los Cerros has not been sufficiently investigated to determine if there were populations there.

The Epi-Olmec

According to the chronology identified in the Caractors Document, the group of Limhites recovered the Jaredite plates in approximately 128 BC. The known locations of the Epi-Olmec culture are shown in figure 67. The Epi-Olmec culture lasted from roughly 300 BCE to roughly 250 CE (Diehl 2004, 181). It is not known precisely how the Jaredite records were obtained, only that Ether “hid them in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:34). Also recovered were “breastplates, which are large, and they are of brass and of copper, and are perfectly sound” (Mosiah 8:10). It has already been established that Ether’s operation area was the Tuxtla Mountains, so the Limhi party would definitely have been in the right area in which to find the Jaredite plates. It is possible that the knowledge of where they were hidden was passed down through Ether’s posterity, with instructions from Ether to provide them to the Limhites who would come. (That of course would be just one reasonable possibility.)

The “Land among Many Waters”

There are two likely possibilities for this area described by the Limhite party. The first is the series of lagoons, swamps, and rivers along the north coast as depicted in figure 77. The land of Cumorah is also similarly described in the Book of Mormon as “a land of many waters, rivers, and fountains” (Mormon 6:4).

Length of Time

No timeframe is found in the Book of Mormon for the total time the Limhite party was gone. The text only states that the period of time they were initially lost in the wilderness was “the space of many days” (Mosiah 8:8). However, the Caractors Document does provide dates of departure, so the calculated period of time, knowing that the party returned shortly before the arrival of Ammon, puts the length of the journey in the neighborhood of five to six years.

Religious “Sacred Bundle” Items Obtained

In addition to the breastplates obtained by the Limhite party, the text indicates that “and again, they have brought swords, the hilts thereof have perished, and the blades thereof were cankered with rust” (Mosiah 8:11). This statement is a bit curious because of the clause “and again.” The phrase may just mean “also,” but it could imply that there may have been a previous discussion by Mormon involving these swords that was included in the lost 116 manuscript pages of the Book of Mormon.

In the context of Mesoamerica and similar to the sword of Laban, these swords were most likely the Swords of Shule. The ancient Near East culture that existed at the time of the Jaredite departure recognized the symbolism and pattern of swords as an element of the symbols of royal and divine sanction. Gilgamesh, the hero-king, according to Akkadian myths, had a sword with which he killed the Bull of Heaven and the Wilderness Monster (Pritchard 1969). Divine beings bearing swords are found in Akkadian iconography (Hendel 1985). Eannatum, the

king of Lagash, is shown on a Sumerian stele from 2500 BC equipped with a sickle sword, and royal tombs in Ur and Anatolia from the same period contained ornamental short swords (Yadin 1963).

For the Nephites, the sword of Laban was recognized as a symbol of divine authority and kingship and was passed down along with the Book of Mormon plates, the Urim and Thummim (which included a breastplate), and the Liahona as a collection of sacred relics (Holbrook 1993).

With space on the gold plates at a premium, the discussion by Moroni² of the swords and the manner of their making by Shule would be an anomaly if it did not pertain to something else in the Book of Mormon. It must be remembered that the party of Limhites, who recovered the Jaredite plates, breastplates, and swords, at the time thought that they had in fact discovered Zarahemla destroyed (they “supposed it to be the land of Zarahemla” [Mosiah 21:26]). They brought back the Jaredite plates as a “testimony that the things they had said were true.” It is not specifically clear from the text whether the bringing back of the swords and breastplates was also part of the “testimony” or if they were received from the “remnant” people, but it does seem to be implied based on the text.

Similar to the ancient Near East, Mesoamerica also has a long-standing tradition of passing down sacred and royal relics. This is done in the form of “sacred bundles.” This practice of passing on royal relics and the presence of the sacred bundles (which are typically wrapped with sacred cords and cloth) has been indicated back to at least the Olmec Middle Formative period (1200–400 BC). In Mesoamerica, sacred bundles are considered to contain a “secret and invisible energy” and are closely associated with migration narratives. Claims of rulership and authority are related to the possession, preservation, or taking care of sacred bundles (Guernsey et al. 2006, vi). There is not much evidence in Olmec times of all the items contained in a sacred bundle, but known Aztec bundles did contain a wide variety of objects, including weapons, such as arrows and fire sticks and brightly polished mirrors (which by themselves constitute an important symbol of power in Mesoamerica).

Among the Aztecs, the sacred bundle, which was called a *tlaquimilolli*, established a direct communication with god. The sacred bundle of Tezcatlipoca, which consisted of a wrapped mirror, guided the forefathers of the Tetzcocans by “talking to them in a human voice.” The *tlaquimilolli* had a military function; the Tlaxcalans used the arrows in the sacred bundle to foretell the result of battle. Conquered peoples were made to hand over their sacred bundles to conquerors. The *tlaquimilolli* served a role in the acquisition of power, which was also evidenced in the Maya with their sacred bundles (mentioned in the chronicles of the Quiche Maya from Guatemala as the *Pisom C’ac’al* [Bundle of Flames or Shrouded Glory]) (Olivier 2006). Aztec and other pre-Columbian Mexican groups had sacred bundles that contained flint knives, religious documents, and pyrite mirrors (Olivier 1995). These pyrite mirrors have been found as offerings among the Olmec at La Merced (Diehl 2004, 44). Olmec figurines show these mirrors worn upon their chests, consistent with the breastplates found by the Limhites (Diehl 2004, 70, 94).

Although the objects brought back by the Limhite party were not specifically mentioned as being part of something specifically akin to a sacred bundle, all of the items are consistent with sacred and royal relics and certainly would have been an impressive “testimony,” including the unusual ancient steel swords of Shule that would have come through Ether’s royal line along with Ether’s record. It would seem unlikely that a few ordinary rusted swords and abandoned breastplates would really add much to a testimony of the relative extinction of an entire culture and people unless they were somehow unusual. The word *testimony* makes sense in that the Limhite party was trying to establish that what they had found did represent the end of a people, since it would not have been given up if the tribe that maintained it still existed.

The “Testimony” of the Sacred Relics

The Limhite party believed that they had found a “testimony” that the destroyed people were the Nephites and people of Zarahemla in the form of a set of bright metal engraved plates, breastplates, and metallic iron (or steel)

swords. Bradley (2012) has compared the items in the Ark of the Covenant with the Nephite sacred relics. These items would be an effective testimony of the extermination of the Nephites, since the Limhite party believed they were the unique sacred relics of the Nephites—namely the swords correlated with the sword of Laban and the metal records correlated with the plates of brass. While at this point in time in the Book of Mormon there is no mention of a sacred relic that is a breastplate, perhaps there is mention of one in the 116 lost pages. The Liahona is also a sacred object, but there was no corresponding object recovered by the Limhite party.

The Limhite party may not have been intimately familiar with the details of the Nephite sacred relics, since what they found were gold plates instead of brass, and multiple swords, although with blades made of the same steel material as the sword of Laban, did not have gold hilts. However, it is apparent that Limhi was not fully convinced that the people who were destroyed were actually the Nephites and people of Zarahemla because Limhi stated that, upon Ammon's announcement that he was from Zarahemla, "now I know of a surety that my brethren who were in the land of Zarahemla are yet alive" (Mosiah 7:14). This prior doubt would certainly be logical based on the receipt of a sacred bundle containing peculiar objects that included a set of plates written in a totally foreign script not fully matching what the Nephites possessed as sacred items. Multiple relic swords also did not match a single sword of Laban. It is important to remember that Limhi was literate and maintained his own set of historical plates (see Mosiah 8:5). We don't know exactly what he did or did not know about the Nephite relics, but the Limhite party obviously knew enough to mistake the sacred relics of the Jaredites for the sacred relics of the Nephites.

The fact that the 24 plates, likely in an Olmec-style script, were thought to be the plates of brass is further evidence that the Egyptian and biblical Hebrew script found in the brass plates were not able to be understood at this point in time, nearly 400 or so years after Lehi's departure from Jerusalem. The Zeniffites clearly had religious scriptures derived from the plates of brass, since they followed (at least initially) the law of Moses and quoted from Isaiah during Abinadi's trial. Had the record that the Zeniffites were utilizing contained Egyptian or biblical Hebrew script, they would have known that the 24 plates could not have been the brass plates. I discussed evidence of this fact derived from other premises in a previous work (Grover 2017, 295–300).

Further Details Regarding the Limhite Party Route

Before the arrival of Ammon in the land of Nephi, the actual exploratory Limhite party indicated that they encountered a "land that had been peopled" and had been "destroyed" and supposed it to be the land of Zarahemla, and so they then returned to the land of Nephi (Mosiah 21:26). Given that explanation, it is unlikely that the "remnant" that they encountered was the main Epi-Olmec settlements around Tres Zapotes, or they would not have described the land as not being "peopled." That also diminishes the likelihood that the "land among many waters" included the land of Cumorah, although a visit to the lightly populated southern portion might still be a possibility.

According to the Characters Document chronology, the party of Limhites left 473 years after the departure of Lehi, which would have been 128 BC. Based on the fact that their return was "not many days before the coming of Ammon" (Mosiah 21:26), which was around 479 years after the departure of Lehi, they were gone for a considerable length of time, along the order of five or six years. It is indicated that they were lost in the wilderness "for the space of many days," but that length of time was apparently the time they were actually lost in the wilderness, before they found their way out of the wilderness and were no longer lost, presumably then encountering the "remnant" population, in an area that at least had an east-flowing river with signs of population.

King Limhi characterized them as being "diligent," which is an appropriate description based on the length of time that they were gone. They traveled "in a land among many waters" and apparently somewhere along the way

found the “land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, etc.” and with “ruins of buildings” (Mosiah 8:8). It is noteworthy here that the early editions of the Book of Mormon up until 1920 had this verse reading “the bones of men, and of beasts, etc.” so this could be interpreted as bones of other vertebrates, which would certainly be indicative of remains within a volcanic eruption.

The description provided in Mosiah 21:26 can be read as a list of descriptions (each separated by a “yea,” which can sometimes represent the word *and* as in a list) of the land that was found:

Mosiah 21:26

Nevertheless, they did find a land which had been peopled; yea, a land which was covered with dry bones; yea, a land which had been peopled and which had been destroyed; and they, having supposed it to be the land of Zarahemla, returned to the land of Nephi, having arrived in the borders of the land not many days before the coming of Ammon.

This verse notes that the land itself “had been destroyed.” Alma 22:30 states the same thing. A reasonable interpretation that the Limhite party, in addition to observing evidence of people (buildings, etc. that had been abandoned and bones present), also observed at least a portion of the land as “destroyed,” which would be consistent with the remains of a volcanic eruption. Volcanic eruptions were recorded in the central Tuxtlas that overlap with the timeframe of the Limhite party.

The Limhite party must have traveled to more than one abandoned Olmec population center, as they recounted to Limhi that the land had “been peopled with a people who were as numerous as the hosts of Israel” (Mosiah 8:8).

The Limhite party obviously did not remain lost, as they eventually made their way back. It seems likely that they had some knowledge of the Usumacinta River and at least knew that if they roughly followed the coast, they would find it. At this point in history, Maya (Lamanite) centers were located along the Usumacinta (i.e. Piedras Negras), and the river was a known Mayan trade route.

West-Flowing River

In order to satisfy the requirements of the Limhite party route, there must be a west-flowing river that flows through a portion of the abandoned Olmec area. If one looks at current maps, there is no obvious choice. However, as previously discussed, the lower Grijalva River once followed different routes (see figure 44). The Bari river channel was no longer existent at the time of the Limhite party, but the Blasillo channel, which formed sometime after 700 BC, was still present. It ran westward along the same directional alignment as the upper Grijalva, where Zarahemla actually was, and ran through the abandoned Olmec area near La Venta. This is the best candidate to be mistaken for the River Sidon.

Probable Path

While not every twist and turn of the Limhite party route can be identified, the basic path of the Limhite party started in the valley of Guatemala and headed westward. The path then veered slightly north and encountered the virtually uninhabited mountains of the Chiapas Plateau that constituted the “wilderness,” missing the Central Depression of the Chiapas where the land of Zarahemla was located, exiting the highland near where the Blasillo channel of the Grijalva River runs westward. The Limhite party then proceeded into the abandoned La Venta Olmec area, which still had squatters. Although there are a variety of routes after that, the Limhite party visited the southern Tuxtlas, encountering desolate areas caused by volcanism. They likely also visited San Lorenzo and perhaps Laguna de los Cerros. On their return, they passed the lagoon, swamp, and river complexes along the coast and returned up the Usumacinta River. The path described above satisfies all the conditions and descriptions enumerated in the Book of Mormon.



Figure 78. Path of the Limhite party.

