



Type: Book Chapter

Part Four: Locating the Book of Mormon Geographically and Culturally

Author(s): Noel B. Reynolds

Source: *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*

Editor(s): Noel B. Reynolds

Published: Provo, UT; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies,
1997

Page(s): 375–377



The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed as a California non-profit corporation from 1979 until about 2006, when it was allowed to go into involuntary liquidation, at which time copyrights held by FARMS and its authors and/or editors reverted back to their original author and/or editors. This chapter is archived by permission of author and editor Noel B. Reynolds.

PART FOUR



LOCATING THE BOOK OF MORMON GEOGRAPHICALLY AND CULTURALLY

One obvious test of Book of Mormon authorship theories has always been its geography. From its opening scenes in Jerusalem to the final battle at Cumorah, the book records a long series of emigrations and travels complete with an array of geographically and culturally informative details. Do these accounts describe real places or do they flow from fertile nineteenth-century imaginings of fantasy geographies and civilizations such as Tolkien's Middle Earth does?

Only two locations named in the Book of Mormon can be positively identified in modern times: Jerusalem and the Red Sea. The rest of the account employs strange names unknown to modern readers and describes times and cultures long since vanished. But if the Book of Mormon was written by Nephi and his successors, those ancient names must apply to places that still exist, whatever their modern names might be.

The Book of Mormon also describes journeys through and settlements in some of the least-known areas of the world. When Joseph Smith translated the Book of Mormon

in 1829, no reliable descriptions were available to him for geographical details of the Arabian peninsula or the regions of the New World where civilizations and cities prospered between 600 B.C. and A.D. 421. Does the Book of Mormon provide plausible accounts of these areas? Or are its geographical and cultural descriptions fantastic, like those an early nineteenth-century New York farm boy might have imagined? Answering these questions is a simple and obvious test of the book's authorship claims.

In the first article in this section, Noel B. Reynolds compiles the findings of several people who have contributed to our understanding of the Arabian peninsula. Hugh Nibley first speculated that the Dhofar region of Oman might be Nephi's Bountiful. Lynn and Hope Hilton fired the imagination of Latter-day Saints with their richly illustrated account of their own travels in the regions most commonly associated with Lehi's trail. Eugene England used his experience from helping the Hiltons and his own further research to explain the truly improbable but accurate nature of Joseph Smith's description of Lehi's journey through the Arabian peninsula. Since the early 1980s, Warren P. and Michaela Knoth Aston have pushed the Arabian peninsula investigation to a higher level by systematically identifying possible sites for Nahom and Bountiful and, through on-site explorations and in-depth research, eliminating candidates that do not adequately meet the Book of Mormon descriptions. Because of their findings, FARMS has sponsored visits to the Dhofar by geologists and an archaeologist to further investigate the Aston's intriguing findings. As we continue this project, we can now document more adequately the congruence of the Book of Mormon account with specific sites in Yemen and Oman.

In the second article in this section, John L. Sorenson consolidates a wealth of research that demonstrates the

close similarities between the Book of Mormon record and the books of ancient Mesoamerica. He comprehensively and systematically analyzes a rich tradition of historical writing now known to have existed in ancient Mesoamerica. The extensive correspondence between the Book of Mormon and the writing tradition from the very area Sorenson previously demonstrated to be the most likely setting for the Book of Mormon stories provides a key contribution to the cultural analysis required to test theories that claim Joseph Smith was indeed the author of the Book of Mormon.

In the final chapter, William J. Hamblin pulls together the insights of numerous scholars' studies of warfare in the Book of Mormon. One third of the Book of Mormon text deals with aspects of warfare, a fact that often puzzles modern readers who read the book for spiritual and religious guidance and inspiration. Hamblin shows that warfare was a major preoccupation of all premodern elites. Ancient warfare was sacral, not secular, and in myriad other ways it differed from the details and characteristics of the modern warfare that developed in the sixteenth century. This newer form of warfare would be more familiar to Joseph Smith and his contemporaries than would ancient warfare, yet the Book of Mormon accounts repeatedly describe ancient warfare in general, and warfare in an ancient Mesoamerican context in particular.