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## Limited Geography and the Book of Mormon: Historical Antecedents and Early Interpretations

Author(s): Matthew Roper

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**Abstract:** This article discusses how geographical theories about the Book of Mormon have developed. Whereas many of the early members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints speculated that the Book of Mormon took place throughout all of the Americas, many present members and scholars believe it took place in the more specific region known as Mesoamerica.



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# LIMITED GEOGRAPHY AND THE BOOK OF MORMON: HISTORICAL ANTECEDENTS AND EARLY INTERPRETATIONS

Matthew Roper

*Matthew Roper (MS, Brigham Young University) is a resident scholar at the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at Brigham Young University.*

## Introduction

The Book of Mormon is a record prepared and written by ancient American prophets. It contains a lineage history of three small colonies who came from the Old World and settled in an American land of promise. It also describes some of the subsequent activities of these groups and their descendants, the teachings of the prophets and Jesus Christ to those people anciently, and divine warnings to modern readers today. Latter-day Saints believe the Book of Mormon to contain a true account, written anciently on plates having the appearance of gold. They believe that these plates were revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1823 by a heavenly messenger, who in mortality had been an ancient American prophet. One early and common theory proposed that the events in the Book of Mormon occurred throughout North, Central, and South America. This is known today as the “hemispheric” Book of Mormon geography. Many Latter-day Saint scholars who believe in the divinity and historicity of the Book of Mormon now interpret those events as having occurred in a restricted region of ancient Mesoamerica. During and after those events, according to this view, people once associated with the activities recorded in the Book of Mormon may have migrated to other parts of the Americas,

(continued on p. 228)

The rise of studies in Amerindian DNA is sometimes suggested as the catalyst for limited geographical models. As will be seen, however, limited geographical thinking on the Book of Mormon predates the discovery of the structure of the DNA molecule, which won the 1962 Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for Francis H. C. Crick, James D. Watson, and Maurice H. F. Wilkens—to say nothing of subsequent applications of DNA analysis to Amerindian genetics over the last two decades.

In recent issues of the *FARMS Review* and the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies*, Latter-day Saint scholars and scientists from a variety of disciplines, including molecular biology and genetics, have addressed a number of issues that relate to the application of scientific studies in human genetics to the Book of Mormon.<sup>1</sup> These scholars have noted:

1. While recent research in human genetics suggests a very substantial north Asian contribution, current scientific tools as yet do not allow us to define the full ancestral heritage of any contemporary native American population.<sup>2</sup> The difficulty in using the contemporary tools of genetics to prove or disprove the presence of Israelite or Lehite descendants in the Americas is compounded by the lack of any well-defined genetic marker for an ancient Israelite such as Lehi.

2. While they clearly include a biological component, terms such as Israelite, Jew, Nephite, or Lamanite are primarily cultural and ideological. In scripture and history, these terms always included many others who were not related biologically but shared culture, ideology, religion, or covenants.<sup>3</sup>

3. Prophetic promises in the Book of Mormon regarding the land were never confined to actual descendants of Lehi but were open-ended. Any nations, kindreds, tongues, or peoples who receive the covenant blessings of the gospel can become numbered with father Lehi among the house of Israel (1 Nephi 14:1–2; 2 Nephi 1:5; 10:19).<sup>4</sup>

4. Historically, many Latter-day Saints, including several leaders, have held that in addition to being descended from Book



of Mormon peoples, native American populations likely had many other ancestors as well.<sup>5</sup> If Lehi's small colony encountered and was eventually incorporated into a much larger native American population, it is unlikely that evidence for such a migration would be readily apparent.<sup>6</sup>

It must be emphasized that those who conceptualize a limited geography for Book of Mormon events in the region of Mesoamerica do not maintain that the descendants of Lehi remained confined to that region. These scholars have long suggested that people from the region of Book of Mormon activity or their descendants likely spread throughout the Americas during Book of Mormon times or after the destruction of Mormon's people. All pre-Columbian American unbelievers generally, regardless of biological origin, may quite properly be called Lamanites (Alma 45:13–14; 4 Nephi 1:38). However, those who receive the gospel and its covenants today would, according to Book of Mormon definitions, more accurately be considered the “children” or “seed” of father Lehi (1 Nephi 14:1–2).

#### Notes

1. Articles in the *FARMS Review* 15/2 (2003) include Daniel C. Peterson, “Prolegomena to the DNA Articles” (pp. 25–34); David A. McClellan, “Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature: Possible, Probable, or Not?” (pp. 35–90); Matthew Roper, “Nephi's Neighbors: Book of Mormon Peoples and Pre-Columbian Populations” (pp. 91–128); Matthew Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool: Israelite Kinship Relations, Genes, and Genealogy” (pp. 129–64); Brian D. Stubbs, “Elusive Israel and the Numerical Dynamics of Population Mixing” (pp. 165–82); and John A. Tvedtnes, “The Charge of ‘Racism’ in the Book of Mormon” (pp. 183–97). Articles in the *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003) include John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, “Before DNA” (pp. 6–23); Michael F. Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon: A Phylogenetic Perspective” (pp. 24–35); John M. Butler, “A Few Thoughts from a Believing DNA Scientist” (pp. 6–37); and D. Jeffrey Meldrum and Trent D. Stephens, “Who Are the Children of Lehi?” (pp. 38–51).

2. Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool,” 129–64.

3. Roper, “Swimming in the Gene Pool,” 129–64.

4. Roper, “Nephi's Neighbors,” 91–128.

5. Roper, “Nephi's Neighbors,” 91–128.

6. Whiting, “DNA and the Book of Mormon,” 24–35; Butler, “A Few Thoughts,” 36–37; Meldrum and Stephens, “Who Are the Children of Lehi?” 38–51; McClellan, “Detecting Lehi's Genetic Signature,” 35–90; Stubbs, “Elusive Israel,” 165–82.



but the events in the narrative itself were confined to a limited region. This interpretation is called the “limited” Mesoamerican geography.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, some critics of the Book of Mormon have claimed that the limited geography is only a late, desperate attempt to defend the Book of Mormon. It is, they assert, contrary “to the Book of Mormon text, early Mormon history, [and] Joseph Smith’s divine edicts.”<sup>2</sup> In order to place the assertions of these critics in perspective, it is necessary to address several questions: What was the hemispheric geography based on? Granted that this early view was popular, was it based on revelation? Is there any authoritative interpretation of Book of Mormon geography? Is the localized geography some kind of debater’s ploy or are there substantial reasons for this view?

It is not my intention to provide a comprehensive history of theories about Book of Mormon geography.<sup>3</sup> Instead, I will review the origins and development of a limited geographical understanding of the Book of Mormon. After discussing the early hemispheric view, I will demonstrate how Latter-day Saint speculation about the geography has changed and adjusted as readers of the Book of Mormon have found new information. I will show that antecedents of the limited geography were familiar to early readers of the Book of Mormon. Also, the absence of any official position and the diversity of opinion among Latter-day Saint writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries indicate that these interpretations of Book of Mormon geography were sometimes based on questionable assumptions about the authority of statements attributed to Joseph Smith. Third, I will show that the absence of an authoritative geography and the diversity of interpretations throughout the nineteenth century influenced church leaders

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1. See, for example, John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1985); Sorenson, *Mormon’s Map* (Provo, UT: FARMS, 2000); and John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, “Before DNA,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 12/1 (2003): 6–23.

2. Dan Vogel and Brent Lee Metcalfe, eds., *American Apocrypha: Essays on the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2002), vii–ix.

3. For an introduction to this subject, see John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, rev. ed. (Provo, UT: FARMS, 1992).

and significantly affected subsequent work on Book of Mormon geography. Finally, I will review the development of the limited geography theory and the scriptural basis on which it was established.

## Hemispheric Interpretations of Book of Mormon Geography

Historically, Latter-day Saints have proposed several possible correlations between the geography of the Americas and the Book of Mormon. The earliest interpretation was what may be called a hemispheric geography, which pictured the events of the Book of Mormon as occurring broadly throughout North, Central, and South America. Since the text describes a “land northward” connected by a “narrow neck of land” to a “land southward,” this is hardly surprising. The barest glance at a map of the Western Hemisphere would be enough to suggest such a view.

### Orson Pratt and Book of Mormon Geography

Orson Pratt, one of the earliest and best known proponents of a hemispheric geography, joined the church in 1830 and served several missions throughout the United States before being called as an apostle in 1835. During his mission to Great Britain, he published an influential tract describing the Prophet Joseph Smith’s first vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon, along with a brief description of its narrative. He placed its historical setting in various locations in North, Central, and South America.<sup>4</sup> Pratt published numerous other pamphlets and articles detailing his views on different subjects relating to the restoration of the gospel. Although he remained faithful to the church, Joseph Smith, and subsequent prophets, he occasionally encountered difficulties when his public statements and ideas conflicted with those of other church leaders, and he sometimes received reproof from Joseph Smith and Brigham Young for engaging in what

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4. Orson Pratt, *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions, and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records* (Edinburgh: Ballantyne and Hughes, 1840).



they felt was unjustified speculation. Notwithstanding these sporadic difficulties, Pratt remained a trusted church leader, an industrious missionary, and a devoted defender of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon.<sup>5</sup> It is not surprising that his views on the geography of the Book of Mormon would have some influence on Latter-day Saint interpretations of the book.

One of the earliest glimpses into Pratt's Book of Mormon geography can be found in an 1832 newspaper report that described a missionary presentation by Pratt and his fellow future apostle Lyman Johnson in Mercer County, Pennsylvania, while they were on their way to fulfill a mission to the East. The reporter indicated that the missionaries gave an account of the visit of the angel and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon as well as a brief description of its narrative. "Six hundred years before Christ a certain prophet called Lehi went out to declare and promulgate the prophecies to come; he came across the water into South America." After the Savior's appearance the people became wicked and commenced a war. "The last battle that was fought among these parties was on the *very ground* where the plates were found, but it had been a running battle, for they commenced at the Isthmus of Darien and ended at Manchester."<sup>6</sup>

When one reviews the numerous discourses and publications of Orson Pratt between 1840 and his death in 1881, one can detect a fairly consistent picture of his interpretation of Book of Mormon geography. Going from south to north, Pratt had Lehi landing on the western

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5. See Breck England, *The Life and Thought of Orson Pratt* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1985).

6. Orson Pratt, "The Orators of Mormonism," *Catholic Telegraph*, 14 April 1832, a reprint from the Mercer Free Press. In early 1832, the *Franklin Democrat*, another Pennsylvania paper, also reported that several unidentified missionaries gave a similar account of Lehi, who, "with another family who accompanied him, built themselves a ship and landed on the coast of South America." After the Savior's appearance and several generations of righteousness, the people were divided again and wars ensued. "The first battle was fought nigh to the straits of Darien [Panama], and the last at a hill called Comoro, when all the Christians were hewn down but one prophet" ("Mormonism," *Fredonia Censor*, 7 March 1832).



coast of South America,<sup>7</sup> specifically Chile.<sup>8</sup> The land of Nephi was in Ecuador at the headwaters of the Amazon.<sup>9</sup> The land of Zarahemla was in Colombia,<sup>10</sup> and the river Sidon was the Magdalena River in that country.<sup>11</sup> The land Bountiful was in the northern part of South America just below the Isthmus of Darien.<sup>12</sup> The Mulekites, on their arrival, had first landed north of Darien on the coast of North America and then settled Zarahemla in the northern part of South America.<sup>13</sup> It was on the west side just below this point that Hagoth (and others) built ships and launched them into the west sea.<sup>14</sup> The land southward, which Pratt viewed as South America, was divided between Nephite and Lamanite lands, with the Lamanites occupying the central and southern portions of the continent and the Nephites occupying the northern portion.<sup>15</sup> Pratt placed the narrow neck of land and the narrow pass or passage at the Isthmus of Darien in Panama.<sup>16</sup> The land northward extended in a northerly direction from the Isthmus of Darien up into northern Central America and North America.<sup>17</sup>

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7. O. Pratt, "Orators of Mormonism"; O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 16; *Journal of Discourses*, 14:10; 16:51, 341; 17:273.

8. Orson Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," *Millennial Star* 28 (1 December 1866): 761; (22 December 1866): 801; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:325; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 47.

9. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:325–26; 19:207; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 155.

10. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 13:129; 15:257; 16:56–57; 19:207; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 155.

11. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:325; 16:51; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 238.

12. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21; *Journal of Discourses*, 7:33; Orson Pratt, "Divinity of the Book of Mormon," *Millennial Star* 28 (16 June 1866): 370–71; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 13:128; 14:329; 15:259; 19:312.

13. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 16, 18; O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 761; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:326.

14. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:326.

15. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 16; *Journal of Discourses*, 14:325–26.

16. O. Pratt, "Orators of Mormonism"; O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21; O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 763; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:331; 16:51; 17:273.

17. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 18; O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 762; *Journal of Discourses*, 14:326.

In Pratt's geography, the Jaredites had landed on the western coast of the Gulf of California,<sup>18</sup> and the Jaredite capital in the land of Moron was somewhere in Central America between the Gulf of California and the Isthmus of Darien.<sup>19</sup> King Omer's settlement at Ablom was along the seacoast of New England east of New York.<sup>20</sup> The Jaredites, before they were destroyed, eventually inhabited all of North America.<sup>21</sup> The later Nephites also eventually migrated into North America, settling in a land of many waters, which Pratt identified as the region extending from the Mississippi Valley up into the Great Lakes region.<sup>22</sup> The Nephites, like the Jaredites before them, were eventually destroyed at the same hill called Cumorah in western New York.<sup>23</sup>

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Latter-day Saint writers followed Pratt's model. The popular opinions of George Reynolds<sup>24</sup> and James Little<sup>25</sup> were only slightly revised versions of Pratt's initial ideas, which were incorporated into the footnotes of the 1879 edition of the Book of Mormon. Although clearly a popular theory among Latter-day Saints, it is less clear how much of this hemispheric view reflected Joseph Smith's ideas or, more important for Latter-day Saints, which, if any, of these ideas were based on prophetic revelation.

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18. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 15; Orson Pratt, "The Mastodon of the Book of Ether," *Millennial Star* 28 (8 December 1866): 776; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:341; 13:129; 19:208; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 572, 582.

19. Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 582.

20. O. Pratt, "Mastodon of the Book of Ether," 776–77; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:341; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 589.

21. O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 15; O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 762; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:341–42; 19:207–8.

22. O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 763; *Journal of Discourses*, 13:130; 14:11, 326–27; 17:273.

23. O. Pratt, "Orators of Mormonism"; O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21; Orson Pratt, "Yucatan," *Millennial Star* 10/22 (15 November 1848): 347; Orson Pratt, "The Hill Cumorah," *Millennial Star* 28 (7 July 1866): 417–19; O. Pratt, "Sacred Metallic Plates," 763; *Journal of Discourses*, 14:11, 326, 331; 16:57; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 559, 606.

24. George Reynolds, *The Story of the Book of Mormon* (Chicago: Etten, 1888).

25. See Donald W. Parry, Jeanette W. Miller, and Sandra A. Thorne, eds., *A Comprehensive Annotated Book of Mormon Bibliography* (Provo, UT: Research, 1996), 266, for bibliographical references to Little's works.



### Joseph Smith and Book of Mormon Geography

The Prophet Joseph Smith knew that the plates from which the Book of Mormon was translated had been obtained from the hill near his home. Aside from this, however, it does not appear that the angel Moroni identified current locations for places mentioned in the book. It is noteworthy—but scarcely surprising—that the Book of Mormon itself does not identify the hill in which it was buried. Instead, the hill in which all the Nephite plates *other* than those of the Book of Mormon were buried is identified (Mormon 6:6).<sup>26</sup> It is also unclear how much, if any, geography Moroni revealed to the Prophet—whose calling was that of translator, not geographer. In the absence of revelation on Book of Mormon geography, we must expect the Saints to express their own ideas. Revelation is one thing, while speculation is quite another. Joseph Smith said very little about the geography of the Book of Mormon. What little he did say suggests that he may have shared the view held by his associates, that the Book of Mormon narrative describes events occurring in North, Central, and South America.

*Prophetic promises.* One reason early Latter-day Saints assumed a hemispheric geography is that it seems to have been inferred from the prophetic promises concerning the land. The Book of Mormon indicates that this land is a land of promise and that the blessings associated with it are open-ended and extend to all who are willing to receive and obey the covenants of God. Speaking of the Book of Mormon and these promises, the Prophet wrote in 1833: “By it, we learn, that our western tribes of Indians, are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it, all the tribes of Israel will come, with as many of the gentiles as shall comply with the requisitions of the new covenant.”<sup>27</sup> Since the promised blessings on the land extended to all, early Latter-day Saints may have assumed that Book of Mormon events extended throughout all the Americas as well.

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26. See below, page 266.

27. Joseph Smith to N. C. Saxton, 4 January 1833, *American Revivalist*, 2 February 1833.



In 1838 the Prophet wrote an account of Moroni's 1823 visitation: "He said there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of *this continent*, and the source from whence they sprang. He also said that the fulness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it, as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants" (JS—H 1:34). Although not recorded until 1838, this account of the message of the angel may have influenced subsequent Latter-day Saint understanding of Book of Mormon geography. In pre-1838 Latter-day Saint usage, some may have understood *continent* to refer to all of the Americas, including both North and South America, wherever a remnant of Jacob might be found. Since the Book of Mormon was written by pre-Columbian American prophets to the surviving remnant of a people now scattered throughout the Americas, one can understand why early readers of the Book of Mormon might interpret past events in the scriptural narrative in broad hemispheric terms. Still, in retrospect, a more attenuated interpretation would also have been consistent with this terminology. Book of Mormon events took place at some location in the Americas as opposed to some other place such as Europe or Asia or Africa. Early convert Eli Gilbert thus reasoned:

If Moses and the prophets, Christ and his apostles, were the real authors of the bible, chiefly revealed and written on the *continent* of Asia, was not the book of Mormon also written by men who were divinely inspired by the Holy Spirit, on the *continent* of America? And did not Jesus Christ as truly appear on the *continent* of America, after his resurrection, and choose twelve apostles to preach his gospel; and did he not deliver his holy doctrine, and teach the same to numerous multitudes on this American *continent*? I say, did he not as truly do these things here, after his resurrection, as he did the same in Jerusalem before his resurrection? My heart and soul replies yes: the proof is full and clear, and has recently been

confirmed by angels from heaven, and what need have we of any further witnesses?<sup>28</sup>

In other words, the comparison being drawn is one between the record of the Bible and the record of the Book of Mormon. Just as the Bible contains an account of the former inhabitants of the Asian continent, the Book of Mormon contains an account of the former inhabitants of the American continent. The Bible, however, is only concerned with a limited region of Asia and is largely confined to a small area. Similarly, the Book of Mormon, while an account written by ancient American prophets, may also have been limited to a small area, although the blessings promised in it may extend well beyond those boundaries. While the early Saints may have thought of Book of Mormon events in hemispheric terms, neither the prophecies in the Book of Mormon nor Joseph Smith's account of Moroni's visit requires such an interpretation of Book of Mormon geography.

*Lehi's landing place.* Several statements that have been attributed to the Prophet Joseph Smith have also led some of the Saints to assume that the Book of Mormon must be understood in a hemispheric setting. One of these concerns the place where Lehi and his family landed in the Americas. Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little published a booklet in 1882 entitled *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel*. They included the following statement:

LEHI'S TRAVELS.—*Revelation to Joseph the Seer.* The course that Lehi and his company traveled from Jerusalem to the place of their destination:

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28. Eli Gilbert to Oliver Cowdery, 24 September 1834, in *Messenger and Advocate* 1 (October 1834): 10, emphasis added. Even non-Mormon writers took note of the comparison, "The Holy Bible professes to be a history of the peopling of the *old continent*—the Golden Bible of the *new continent*." Wm. Owen, "A Comparison between the Book of Mormon and the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, or The Golden Bible vs. The Holy Bible," *Free Enquirer*, New York, 10 September 1831, emphasis added.



They traveled nearly a south, southeast direction until they came to the nineteenth degree of north latitude; then, nearly east to the Sea of Arabia, then sailed in a southeast direction, and landed on the continent of South America, in Chili [*sic*], thirty degrees south latitude.<sup>29</sup>

Some students of the Book of Mormon have assumed a hemispheric setting for Book of Mormon events largely on the basis of this statement since it seemed to anchor the Lehiite landing in western South America on the apparent authority of prophetic revelation to Joseph Smith. Research on the history of the statement shows that it can be traced to two documents. The first of these includes a statement written in the hand of Frederick G. Williams, who was one of Joseph Smith's scribes in Kirtland. On this document, however, the words "Lehi's Travels" and "Revelation to Joseph the Seer" do not appear as they do in the 1882 Richards and Little publication. "The original Williams copy . . . does not," as one scholar has noted, "attribute the statement to Joseph Smith and, although Richards follows closely the Williams account, he gives no source for the statement or the title. There is no known earlier historical evidence associating this specific statement with Joseph Smith."<sup>30</sup> The title and the words "Revelation to Joseph the Seer" seem to have been assumed and then added by Little and Richards in their 1882 publication.

A second statement, nearly identical to the one above, was apparently written down in the hand of John M. Bernhisel in the spring of 1845 on his visit to Emma Smith in Nauvoo while he was making a partial copy of the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible. Like the first, this second statement has no heading and is not attributed either to Joseph Smith or to revelation. Some have proposed that while the evidence for these documents does not support the view that it was a revelation, the statement may reflect the speculative ideas of Joseph

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29. Franklin D. Richards and James A. Little, *A Compendium of the Doctrines of the Gospel* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1882), 289.

30. Frederick G. Williams III, "Did Lehi Land in Chile?: An Assessment of the Frederick G. Williams Statement" (FARMS paper, 1988), 3–4.



Smith, Frederick G. Williams, or some of the other brethren in Kirtland, Ohio.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, “it should not be given any more authority than any other theory and must receive its test of validity, not by what others say about it, but by how it compares to information given in the Book of Mormon itself.”<sup>32</sup>

Significantly, Orson Pratt, who often mentioned the site of Lehi’s landing in his writings, never attributed the idea of a Chilean landing to Joseph Smith or to revelation. In fact, Pratt once explained that this view was actually based upon his own inference from the Book of Mormon text. “As near as we can judge *from the description of the country contained in this record* the first landing place was in Chili, not far from where the city of Valparaiso now stands.”<sup>33</sup> Following

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31. Williams, “Did Lehi Land in Chile?” 12–13.

32. Williams, “Did Lehi Land in Chile?” 16. “Despite apologetic denial,” writes one recent critic, “Joseph Smith said that ‘Lehi and his company . . . landed on the continent of South America, in Chile, thirty degrees south latitude.’” Dan Vogel, *Joseph Smith: The Making of a Prophet* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2004), 629 n. 18. And what is the evidence for this conclusion? In addition to citing the problematic 1882 Richards and Little *Compendium*, the writer notes that “this belief can be traced to the earliest teachings of the Mormon missionaries” (ibid.). On 18 November 1830, the *Ohio Observer and Telegraph* reported the arrival of Oliver Cowdery and several other missionaries in Ohio on their way to Missouri to preach to the Indians. According to the writer of the article, Cowdery believed that Lehi’s family “landed on the coast of Chili 600 years before the coming of Christ.” This apparently constitutes all the evidence for the assertion that Joseph Smith made the statement and that Latter-day Saints are bound to the view of the Book of Mormon that has Lehi landing in Chile in South America. While tracing a geographical idea to early missionaries may reveal what those early missionaries thought or said, it tells us little or nothing about where the idea originated or what Joseph Smith’s views were. Orson Pratt, who reported that he derived the idea of a Chilean landfall from consideration of the Book of Mormon text itself, had been baptized in September 1830 and had become “intimately acquainted” with the witnesses to the Book of Mormon (of whom, of course, Oliver Cowdery was one) in October 1830. Elden J. Watson, ed., *The Orson Pratt Journals* (Salt Lake City: published by the editor, 1975), 9. He does not tell us when he drew his conclusion, but it is not inconceivable that Cowdery’s November 1830 suggestion of a Chilean landing emerged from conversation with the precocious young convert Orson Pratt and not from Joseph Smith at all. More important, even if Joseph Smith, who was then in New York and not Ohio, shared the views of these brethren, why must we conclude that he derived that view from some revelation?

33. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:325, emphasis added. In 1848 Pratt explained that one can determine the location of Book of Mormon events rather precisely if one is “acquainted with the present geographical features of the country.” See below, page 251.

Pratt's death, the 1882 publication of Richards and Little's *Compendium* helped to disseminate the apparently mistaken view that the information about Lehi's Chilean landing was based on revelation.<sup>34</sup> In 1909, however, B. H. Roberts, who had himself once assumed that the statement represented revelation, eventually came to question its revelatory status. He noted that "this alleged 'revelation' has dominated all our thinking, and influenced all our conclusions upon the subject of Book of Mormon geography. Whereas, if this is not a revelation, the physical description relative to the contour of the lands occupied by the Jaredites and Nephites, that being principally that two large bodies of land were joined by a narrow neck of land—can be found between Mexico and Yucatan with the Isthmus of Tehuantepec between." In that case, "many of our difficulties as to the geography of the Book of Mormon—if not all of them[,] in fact, will have passed away." If not revelation, Roberts further reasoned, "much found in this treatise [Roberts's own writings] of the Book of Mormon relative to the Nephites being in South America—written under the impression that the passage . . . was, as is there set forth, a revelation—will have to be modified."<sup>35</sup> Other Latter-day Saints expressed similar cautions.<sup>36</sup> The key issue for Roberts and other Latter-day Saints was the accuracy of attributing this apocryphal or extracanonical statement of questionable origin to divine revelation—a legitimate concern. Subsequent research seems to confirm this assessment.<sup>37</sup>

*Zelph and Book of Mormon geography.* In mid-1834, while traveling with Zion's Camp through western Illinois on their way to Mis-

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Valparaíso lies at 33.02° south. "It may be," Williams asserts, "that 1 Nephi 18:24 is a key in establishing the landing site as being in Chile thirty degrees south latitude, for in that verse we learn that the seeds brought from Jerusalem 'did grow exceedingly.' Jerusalem is at approximately thirty degrees north latitude, a comparable climate, important for the growth of seeds." Williams's suggestion finds further support in Pratt's admission that the location was suggested "from the description of the country contained in this record." *Journal of Discourses*, 14:325.

34. Richards and Little, *Compendium of the Doctrines*, 289.

35. B. H. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret News, 1909), 3:502–3.

36. Frederick J. Pack, "Route Traveled by Lehi and His Company," *Instructor*, April 1938, 160.

37. Williams, "Did Lehi Land in Chile?"



souri, Joseph Smith and some of his associates explored the surface of a burial mound near the Illinois River. Some of the brethren uncovered a skeleton. Extant historical sources indicate that Joseph Smith made some statements regarding the identity of the individual whose remains they uncovered. These sources also hint that at least some of his remarks may have been based on a revelation or vision. Unfortunately, Joseph Smith himself did not describe the incident directly nor did he record the contents of any revelation. Several of the brethren wrote accounts in their journals describing the event and later scribes drew on these accounts when preparing the manuscript, which was later published in the *History of the Church*.<sup>38</sup> In several studies of this episode, Kenneth Godfrey has analyzed the different primary accounts, which agree on some details but disagree on others.<sup>39</sup> The challenge for historians is to determine which, if any, statements attributed to Joseph Smith on this matter were revelation and which may have been implied or surmised by him or by others. Although several of these sources make reference to ideas that could impinge on the question of Book of Mormon geography, they are problematic since, for several years prior to Zion's Camp, Latter-day Saints already seem to have held and shared assumptions about Book of Mormon geography. To what extent did Joseph Smith share these views, and to what extent did these earlier assumptions about Book of Mormon geography shape the information supplied in these early sources? Since these sources do not allow us to answer these questions, the usefulness of the Zelph story in trying to reconstruct an authoritative geography for the Book of Mormon is slight.

One early source, for example, refers to the land of Desolation, a location of some importance in the Book of Mormon. Levi Hancock, a member of Zion's Camp, reported that Joseph Smith told Sylvester Smith that the region where Zelph's bones were found "was called the land of desolation."<sup>40</sup> Was this part of the information that was revealed

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38. *History of the Church*, 2:79–80.

39. Kenneth W. Godfrey, "The Zelph Story," *BYU Studies* 29/2 (1989): 31–56; Godfrey, "What Is the Significance of Zelph in the Study of Book of Mormon Geography?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 8/2 (1999): 70–79.

40. Levi Hancock diary, cited in Godfrey, "Zelph Story," 37.

to the Prophet in a vision or was it a later supposition made by him or others following the mention of Zeph? The sources available simply do not allow us to answer this question. We can say, however, that Joseph's purported statement about Desolation is similar to a theory already advanced and published by W. W. Phelps a year and a half before. Phelps published an article in 1832 in which he described "the section of country from the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains" as the land of Desolation once inhabited by the Jaredites and Nephites.<sup>41</sup> Was the geographical reference in Joseph's comment, as reported by Hancock, part of a revelation about Zeph or did it simply reflect Phelps's view of the Book of Mormon? Based on the Hancock and Phelps references, one writer has asserted that Joseph Smith called North America the land of Desolation.<sup>42</sup> Joseph, it appears, seems to have shared the view in 1834 that the land between the Rocky Mountains and the Mississippi was Desolation, with Joseph apparently including western Illinois under that geographical umbrella. Since Phelps's idea preceded Zion's Camp by at least a year and a half, there is some justification for believing that this geographical point was merely an early interpretation rather than part of a revelation about Zeph.

What we appear to have in the 1830s are at least two differing hypotheses regarding the location of the land of Desolation, a key geographical point in the Book of Mormon. One view places it at the Isthmus of Darien in Panama and another places it in the Great Plains region of North America, thousands of miles to the north. Orson Pratt, who participated in Zion's Camp but never wrote about the Zeph episode, apparently placed Desolation in Panama. Among the early brethren, thus, there was fluidity of ideas about Book of Mormon geography. It also implies that such questions had not been settled by revelation.

On 4 June 1834, Joseph Smith wrote to his wife Emma and related some of the experiences of Zion's Camp. Toward the end of his letter, he reflected on the experience of traveling with a company of

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41. William W. Phelps, "The Far West," *Evening and Morning Star*, October 1832.

42. Dan Vogel, *Indian Origins and the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 1986), 85 n. 70. The Book of Mormon, however, never equates the land northward with the land of Desolation. Rather, the land Desolation is a region *within* the land northward.



good and honest men, “wandering over the plains of the Nephites, recounting occasionally the history of the Book of Mormon, roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as proof of its divine authenticity.”<sup>43</sup> The letter may be making reference to digging up the bones of Zelph, although Joseph does not name the warrior, nor does he say anything in the letter about a vision or revelation on the subject. Yet, even if we were to assume that the words “plains of the Nephites” represented revealed information rather than Joseph Smith’s own guess, the phrase is not a geographical designation for any place mentioned in the Book of Mormon text. In theory, any flat place where some Nephites had once been could be described as “the plains of the Nephites.” The Book of Mormon indicates that some groups of Nephites migrated from the land with which the Book of Mormon is concerned (Alma 63:4–9; Helaman 3:3–16). Did Zelph die in battle defending Mormon’s people in the late fourth century AD or did he perish defending a group of Nephite faithful who had migrated to parts of North America during or after Book of Mormon times? Aware of some of these difficulties, apostle John A. Widtsoe supposed that Zelph may have lived at a time “when Nephites and Lamanites had been somewhat dispersed and had wandered over the country.”<sup>44</sup> After surveying the available historical sources relating to Zelph, Fletcher Hammond argued that “it is possible and quite probable, that sometime during the Book of Mormon history, some adventurous Nephites and Lamanites settled in what is now the western plains of the United States, the Mississippi Valley, and as far north as the Great Lakes region. But, no account of what they did was important enough for Mormon to include it in the abridgment of the Large Plates of Nephi.”<sup>45</sup> In another treatment of this issue, Norman Pierce asks:

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43. Joseph Smith to Emma Smith, 4 June 1834, in Dean Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and Brigham Young University Press, 2002), 345–46.

44. John A. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” *Improvement Era*, July 1950, 547.

45. Fletcher B. Hammond, *Geography of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Utah Printing, 1959), 151–52.

Why were the prominent chieftain Zelph and the great Prophet Onandagus, who was known from the eastern sea to the Rocky Mountains, not mentioned at all in the Book of Mormon? Surely a prophet of such prominence would have received some notice had he been known to the historians of the Book of Mormon.

The answer is very obvious:—Because the Book of Mormon historians who were down in Central America, knew nothing at all of either the Prophet Onandagus or [of] the Chieftain Zelph. It was more than 400 years before Mormon’s time that Hagoth sailed north, and we only have a report of the first ship returning. . . . Naturally, both Mormon and Moroni were too far removed from Onandagus and Zelph to report them.<sup>46</sup>

### Early Views on Central America and the Narrow Neck of Land

In 1833 W. W. Phelps cited a letter from a traveler in Central America, published in the *London Literary Gazette*, describing ruins made of cement in the Petén in Guatemala. Phelps saw this as “good testimony that such things as cities and civilization, ‘prior to the fourteenth century,’ existed in America.”<sup>47</sup> In a lengthy tract on the Book of Mormon in 1841, missionary Charles Thompson quoted extracts from Josiah Priest’s book *American Antiquities*, which described the ruins of Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico, then known as Otulum. Early reports, reprinted by Priest, implied that the city was much more massive than it later turned out to be. These reports suggested to Thompson that the Mexican ruins could have been those of the Jaredite city built by Lib “by the narrow neck of land, by the place where the sea divides the land” (Ether 10:20).<sup>48</sup>

46. Norman C. Pierce, *Another Cumorah: Another Joseph* (n.p.: Pierce, 1954), 35–36.

47. William W. Phelps, “Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America,” *Evening and Morning Star* 1/9 (February 1833): [71].

48. Charles Thompson, *Evidences in Proof of the Book of Mormon . . .* (Batavia, NY: Waite, 1841), 93.



### Stephens's *Incidents of Travel*

While these discoveries were of interest to some Latter-day Saints, they seem to have had little effect on interpretations of Book of Mormon geography. The 1841 publication of John L. Stephens's *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*,<sup>49</sup> however, changed this. The book contained illustrations of many ruins in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico by artist Frederick Catherwood and was an instant success. In June, the Latter-day Saint newspaper in Nauvoo, the *Times and Seasons*, reprinted an article from the New York *Weekly Herald* describing lectures by Catherwood in New York.<sup>50</sup> In the fall of that year, John Bernhisel sent Joseph Smith a copy of Stephens and Catherwood's work. In a letter thanking his friend for the gift, Joseph wrote:

I received your kind present by the hand of Er. [Elder] Woodruff & feel myself under many obligations for this mark of your esteem & friendship which to me is the more interesting as it unfolds & developes many things that are of great importance to this generation & corresponds with & supports the testimony of the Book of Mormon; I have read the volumes with the greatest interest & pleasure & must say that of all the histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct luminous & comprehensive.<sup>51</sup>

Other Latter-day Saints were intrigued by these new discoveries as well and sought to incorporate the new information provided by Stephens and Catherwood into their own interpretations of the Book of Mormon. It may be significant that these interpreters seem to have expressed a variety of ideas not always consistent with each other or with earlier geographical constructions. The brethren apparently felt free to speculate, interpret, adapt, and revise their theories in light of new information and discoveries as they became known.

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49. John L. Stephens, *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan* (New York: Harper & Row, 1841).

50. "American Antiquities—More Proofs of the Book of Mormon," *Times and Seasons* 2 (15 June 1841): 440–42.

51. Joseph Smith to John Bernhisel, 16 November 1841, in Jessee, *Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, 533.

### Parley P. Pratt's View

One of the earliest Latter-day Saints to discuss Stephens's work was apostle Parley Pratt, Orson Pratt's brother. Having learned of the book in England, Pratt commented on the discoveries in March 1842:

It is a striking and extraordinary coincidence, that, in the Book of Mormon, commencing page 563 [553 of the 1837 edition], there is an account of many cities as existing among the Nephites on the "narrow neck of land which connected the north country with the south country;" and Mormon names a number of them, which were strongly fortified, and were the theatres of tremendous battles, and that finally the Nephites were destroyed or driven to the northward, from year to year, and their towns and country made most desolate, until the remnant became extinct on the memorable heights of Cumorah (now western New York),— I say it is remarkable that Mr. Smith, in translating the Book of Mormon from 1827 to 1830, should mention the names and circumstances of those towns and fortifications in this very section of country, where a Mr. Stephens, ten years afterwards, penetrated a dense forest, till then unexplored by modern travellers, and actually finds the ruins of those very cities mentioned by Mormon.

The nameless nation of which he speaks were the Nephites.

The lost record for which he mourns is the *Book of Mormon*.

The architects, orators, statesmen, and generals, whose works and monuments he admires, are, *Alma, Moroni, Helaman, Nephi, Mormon*, and their contemporaries.

The very cities whose ruins are in his estimation without a name, are called in the Book of Mormon, "Teancum, Boaz, Jordan, Desolation," &c.<sup>52</sup>

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52. Parley P. Pratt, "Ruins in Central America," *Millennial Star* 2/11 (March 1842): 165.



How did Stephens's work affect Parley Pratt's understanding of the geography of the Book of Mormon? First, we should note that he refers to the final battles of the Nephites (Mormon 3–4). He clearly conceptualizes the Book of Mormon in hemispheric terms. However, by identifying the ruins of Catherwood and Stephens's travels with the cities of Mormon's final narrative (Mormon 4–5), he seemingly moves the dividing line between the land northward and the land southward nearly a thousand miles to the north of the Isthmus of Darien, a significant modification of earlier geographical views that placed that border in Panama. In fact, as far as the text of the Book of Mormon is concerned, the only geographical location mentioned by Mormon after the city of Jordan is the "land of Cumorah" with its hill (Mormon 6:2), yet Pratt's correlation places the cities of Desolation (Mormon 3:5–7; 4:3, 8, 13, 19), Teancum (4:3, 7, 14), Boaz (4:20), and Jordan (5:3) among the ruins of northwestern Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, with most of the action in Mormon's final narrative occurring there, and with the final flight of the Nephites to their New York destruction appended almost as an afterthought.

### John Taylor's View

Another Latter-day Saint who was influenced by the work of Stephens and Catherwood was apostle John Taylor, who by the fall of 1842 was the acting editor for the *Times and Seasons*. In the 15 September 1842 issue, he provided extracts from Stephens and Catherwood's book to which he appended interpretive commentary. The extract gave a description of the ruins of Palenque in Chiapas, Mexico. Taylor claimed that "these wonderful ruins of *Palenque* are among the mighty works of the Nephites."<sup>53</sup> He then cited a passage from 2 Nephi 5:13–16, which described the first settlement of the land of Nephi and the construction of Nephi's temple.<sup>54</sup> He further noted that Alma 22 seems to give

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53. "Extract from Stephens' 'Incidents of Travel in Central America,'" *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842): 914.

54. "Extract from Stephens' 'Incidents,'" 914–15.

“a full description of the Isthmus,”<sup>55</sup> without specifying whether he meant all of Central America or just the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. If he intended to identify Palenque with Nephi’s settlement in the land southward, only the latter would fit, but it seems more likely that Taylor was unsure at the time he wrote of the precise location of Palenque. Consequently, he may have had all of Central America in view. That the article reflects some confusion over the location of these ruins is clear from Taylor’s 15 September 1842 interpretation:

Mr Stephens’ great developments of antiquities are made bare to the eyes of all the people by reading the history of the Nephites in the Book of Mormon. They lived about the narrow neck of land, which now embraces Central America, with all the cities that can be found. Read the destruction of cities at the crucifixion of Christ. . . . Who could have dreamed that twelve years would have developed such incontrovertible testimony to the Book of Mormon?<sup>56</sup>

In another article found in the same issue, he described the Jaredites as coming to North America and remarked that the people eventually “covered the whole continent from sea to sea, with towns and cities,” before their destruction and that “Lehi went down by the Red Sea to the great Southern Ocean, and crossed over to this land, and landed a little south of the Isthmus of Darien, and improved the country according to the word of the Lord.”<sup>57</sup>

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55. “Extract from Stephens’ ‘Incidents,’” 915.

56. “Extract from Stephens’ ‘Incidents,’” 915.

57. “‘Facts Are Stubborn Things,’” *Times and Seasons* 3 (15 September 1842): 921–22. One recent critic attempts to downplay this reference to an alternate landing, suggesting the statement should not be taken too literally. “The statement that Lehi landed ‘a little south’ of Panama is as literal as the parallel phrase that Lehi ‘improved the country.’ Lehi died long before any improvements were made ‘a little south’ of the narrow neck of land.” Dan Vogel, “Dan Vogel’s [2002] Reply to Kevin Christensen,” at [www.xmission.com/~research/central/reply.htm](http://www.xmission.com/~research/central/reply.htm) (accessed 1 December 2004). In fact, this ad hoc explanation contradicts the Book of Mormon text, which explicitly states that Lehi and his family *did* improve the land: “And it came to pass that we did begin to till the earth, and we began to plant seeds; yea, we did put all our seeds into the earth, which we had brought from the land of Jerusalem. And it came to pass that they did grow exceedingly; wherefore, we were blessed in abundance” (1 Nephi 18:24).



Whatever his initial conceptions, Taylor had apparently gained a clearer idea of the location of the ruins discussed by Catherwood and Stephens by the next issue of the church paper. For the 1 October edition, he explained:

Since our “Extract” was published from Mr. Stephens’ “Incidents of Travel,” &c., we have found another important fact relating to the truth of the Book of Mormon. Central America, or Guatemala, is situated *north* of the Isthmus of Darien and once embraced several hundred miles of territory from north to south.—The city of Zarahemla, burnt at the crucifixion of the Savior, and rebuilt afterwards, stood upon *this* land. . . .

It is certainly a good thing for the excellency and veracity, of the divine authenticity of the Book of Mormon, that the ruins of Zarahemla have been found where the Nephites left them: and that a large stone with engravings upon it, as Mosiah said; and a “*large round* stone, with the sides sculptured in hieroglyphics,” as Mr. Stephens has published, is also among the left remembrances of the, (to him,) *lost and unknown*. We are not agoing to declare positively that the ruins of Quirigua are those of Zarahemla, but when the land and the stones, and the books tell the story so plain, we are of [the] opinion, that it would require more proof than the Jews could bring to prove the disciples stole the body of Jesus from the tomb, to prove that the ruins of the city in question, are not one of those referred to in the Book of Mormon. . . . It will not be a bad plan to compare Mr. Stephens’ ruined cities with those in the Book of Mormon: light cleaves to light, and facts are supported by facts.<sup>58</sup>

In another editorial, nearly a year later, he indicated that “it has fallen to [Stephens’s] lot to explore the ruins of this once mighty people, but the ‘Book of Mormon’ unfolds their history; and published as

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58. “Zarahemla,” *Times and Seasons* 3 (1 October 1842): 927, emphasis added.

it was, years before these discoveries were made, and giving as it does, accounts of a people, and of cities that bear a striking resemblance to those mentioned by Mr. Stephens, both in regard to magnificence and *location*, it affords the most indubitable testimony of the historical truth of that book.”<sup>59</sup> In yet another article, Taylor expressed his belief that Joseph Smith was “one of the greatest men that ever lived on the earth; emphatically proved so, by being inspired by God to bring forth the Book of Mormon, which gives the true history of the natives of this continent; their ancient glory and cities:—*which cities have been discovered by Mr Ste[ph]ens in Central America, exactly where the Book of Mormon left them.*”<sup>60</sup>

What can be determined about Taylor’s geographical views as found in the *Times and Seasons* in Nauvoo? He had the Jaredites inheriting North America, which is equated with the land northward. Whatever his understanding on 15 September, by 1 October he was of the opinion that Zarahemla was at the ruins of Quirigua in northwestern Honduras. Since the Book of Mormon places Zarahemla in the land southward, Taylor’s view would require that the narrow neck of land be somewhere north of that point, at either the Bay of Honduras or the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. It is unclear what role, if any, South America had in Taylor’s 1842 conception, although the 15 September reference to Lehi landing a little south of the Isthmus of Darien—significantly, Taylor seemed to know nothing of a landing in Chile—could be understood to mean that only the northernmost region of South America was involved. In any case, we clearly have a geography that limits most Nephite activities in the Book of Mormon to Central America, with the exception of their final destruction at Cumorah.

### John E. Page’s View

Another Latter-day Saint apostle who was influenced by the discoveries of Catherwood and Stephens was John E. Page, who in mid-

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59. “Stephens’ Works on Central America,” *Times and Seasons* 4 (1 October 1843): 346, emphasis added.

60. “The Mormon Prophet,” *Times and Seasons* 6 (1 April 1845): 855, emphasis added.



1842 was laboring in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. In several articles, Page argued that some of those cities described by Catherwood and Stephens in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico may have been the very same cities destroyed in 3 Nephi 8–9:

And how was you destroyed? was the inquiry of those efficient antiquarians Messrs. Catherwood and Stephens, the charge d'affairs of these United States, as they sit on the wondrous walls of "Copan," situated near the western extremity of the Bay of Honduras, in the narrowest neck of land between the waters of the Atlantic ocean and the Pacific ocean, the very place where the Book of Mormon located a great city, on the narrow neck of land between the two seas. . . . How was this city, with seven or eight others, which Stephens gives us an account of, destroyed? Read the Book of Mormon, and that will tell the story of their sad disasters.<sup>61</sup>

In addition to placing the destruction of wicked cities at the time of Christ's death (3 Nephi 8–9) in Mesoamerica, Page also situated the narrow neck of land at the Bay of Honduras rather than Panama, as some earlier missionaries had done. He also conjectured that the unnamed city of Lib (Ether 10:20) was Copan and was also among those later Nephite cities that were destroyed. In another article several weeks later, Page discussed Alma's prophecies to the people of Gideon who lived near Zarahemla (Alma 7). "Let it be distinctly understood," Page wrote, "that the Prophet Alma uttered this prophecy, not far from Guatemala or Central America, some 82 years before the birth of Christ."<sup>62</sup> By placing Gideon and, by implication, Zarahemla in Guatemala and by placing the narrow neck of land in northern Honduras, Page clearly differed from Orson Pratt, who placed Zarahemla in northern South America and the narrow neck of land at Panama.

In an article published in 1848, Page made his correlation between Central America and the main lands of the Book of Mormon more

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61. John E. Page, reply to "A Disciple," *Morning Chronicle*, Pittsburgh, 1 July 1842.

62. John E. Page, "Mormonism Concluded: To 'A Disciple,'" *Morning Chronicle*, Pittsburgh, 20 July 1842.

explicit. “All who are familiar with the Book of Mormon are probably aware of the fact that the whole account of the history of the fore fathers of the American Indians, called the Nephites, Lamanites and Zoramites, is confined to Central America entirely until the 394th page [Alma 63].”<sup>63</sup> As evidence for the Book of Mormon, Page related a Guatemalan account, cited by Stephens, of a war that started because of the abduction of a king’s daughter.<sup>64</sup> Page drew a parallel between this tradition and the abduction of the Lamanite daughters by Noah’s priests in the land of Nephi (see Mosiah 20). “According to the Book of Mormon the above circumstance transpired in Central America, the country where Mr. Stephens obtained the traditional corroborating account.”<sup>65</sup> Significantly, that connection would place the land of Nephi in Guatemala rather than in South America, as others had placed it. In Page’s view, Samuel the Lamanite “delivered his prophecy at the city of Zarahemla, which, at some future period, I intend to show clearly that it is the veritable city of Palenque, the ruins of which is situated some miles south-west of the Gulf of Mexico.” Although in 1842 he had proposed a Honduran location for the narrow neck of land, it appears that he had modified his view by 1848—since, with Zarahemla at Palenque, only Tehuantepec would qualify. Like other Latter-day Saints of the time, Page still held that the Jaredites occupied North America and no doubt assumed that the Nephites were destroyed in New York, yet the importance of Central America for most of the events in the narrative of the Nephites is clear. Also noteworthy is the fact that, while allowing for later migrations from the core of Nephite lands to other regions in the Americas, the Book of Mormon geography advanced by Page not only limits Nephite activities in the Book of Mormon to Central America but, by placing the land of Nephi in Guatemala, seems to exclude South America completely.<sup>66</sup>

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63. John E. Page, “Collateral Testimony of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon.—No. 3,” *Gospel Herald*, 14 September 1848, 123.

64. John E. Page, “Collateral Testimony of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon.—No. 4,” *Gospel Herald*, 21 September 1848, 125–26.

65. Page, “Collateral Testimony.—No. 4,” 126.

66. On Page’s subsequent life and activities, see John Quist, “John E. Page: An Apostle of Uncertainty,” *Journal of Mormon History* 12 (1985): 53–68.



### Orson Pratt's View

By 1848 Orson Pratt was also referencing the works of Catherwood and Stephens in support of the Book of Mormon, yet the role of the Central American ruins in his geographical interpretation seems to follow that of his apostle-brother Parley rather than that of Taylor or Page. He noted:

In the Book of Mormon are given the names and locations of numerous cities of great magnitude, which once flourished among the ancient nations of America. The northern portions of South America, and also Central America, were the most densely populated. . . . A careful reader of that interesting book, can trace the relative bearings and distances of many of these cities from each other; and, if acquainted with the present geographical features of the country, he can, by the descriptions given in that book, determine, very nearly, the precise spot of ground they once occupied. Now, since that invaluable book made its appearance in print, it is a remarkable fact, that the mouldering ruins of many splendid edifices, and towers, and magnificent cities of great extent, have been discovered by Catherwood and Stephens in the interior wilds of Central America, in the very region where the ancient cities described in the Book of Mormon were said to exist.<sup>67</sup>

Pratt specifically located the city of Desolation (Mormon 3:5) “in Central America, near to or in Yucatan.”<sup>68</sup> Eventually, “the occupants of Yucatan and Central America, having been driven from their great and magnificent cities, were pursued by the Lamanites to the hill Cumorah in the interior of the state of New York.”<sup>69</sup>

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67. Orson Pratt, “Was Joseph Smith Sent of God?” *Millennial Star* 10 (1 October 1848): 289.

68. O. Pratt, “Yucatan,” 347.

69. O. Pratt, “Yucatan,” 347.

In terms of Orson Pratt's 1848 ideas, several points are worthy of note. First is the fact that his views, while following his brother Parley's, differed significantly from those of apostles Taylor and Page.<sup>70</sup>

Second, Pratt continued to posit a hemispheric model with one modification. Stephens's discoveries caused him to shift the city of Desolation—the place where the final Nephite battles commence—from Panama to Yucatán in Mexico. Then, in 1872 and without explanation, he returned to his earlier position. “About three hundred and seventy-five years after the birth of Christ, the Nephites occupying North America, the Lamanites South America, and wars having existed between them for nearly fifty years, the Lamanites began to overpower the Nephites, and they drove them northward from the narrow neck of land which we call the Isthmus of Darien.”<sup>71</sup> This suggests some uncertainty as to the dividing line between the lands northward and southward.

The different reactions and interpretations of church leaders in the Nauvoo period indicate a fluidity of interpretation of Book of Mormon geography and undermine the claim that one particular opinion was authoritative, much less established by “divine edict.” Clearly, Latter-day Saints who learned of these competing opinions came to view Central America, and particularly northern Central America (i.e., Mesoamerica), as increasingly important.

### George Q. Cannon's View

In 1856, apostle George Q. Cannon refuted the argument that Indians were too primitive to build cities and temples since Stephens and Catherwood's discoveries were made “in the country declared

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70. It is doubtful that Orson Pratt was familiar with Page's views since Page labored in Pittsburgh, while Pratt was in Nauvoo. Why, though, does Pratt seem to be unaware of or uninfluenced by the articles published in Nauvoo in late 1842? From the summer of 1842 until early 1843, Pratt was not actively involved in the leadership of the church and was even excommunicated for a period of several months. By 1843, Pratt had returned to full fellowship and his apostolic calling, but he may have been unaware of the discussion of Book of Mormon geography in the church paper at the time.

71. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:331.



by the Book of Mormon to be the *principal residence* of one of the colonies that were led to this land.”<sup>72</sup> Cannon’s reference to the “principal residence” of Book of Mormon peoples in the region of southern Mexico and Guatemala illustrates how this region had attained increased importance in the Book of Mormon geography of some Latter-day Saints. By 1876 Latter-day Saints were learning more about Mesoamerican traditions that some thought might be related to the Nephites and Jaredites. These traditions prompted George Ottinger to shift from his earlier support for Orson Pratt’s views to the Tehuantepec view, with Zarahemla in Mexico. “Is it not possible that the great Rio Usumacinta, ‘flowing north into the sea,’ may be the ancient river Sidon? Those remarkable and world-famous ruins known under the name Palenque may yet be proven to be the remains of that ‘great city and religious center’ of the aboriginals, called Zarahemla.”<sup>73</sup> But placing Zarahemla at Palenque in southern Mexico would obviously shift the land of Bountiful to a more northerly location. Pratt’s speculations put both Zarahemla and Bountiful in the northern portion of South America between Colombia and Panama. Given such differences, it may not be entirely accurate to speak of *the* traditional geography even in the nineteenth century. Clearly, we have at least two radically different approaches to Book of Mormon geography, obviously indicating again that such things had not been settled.

### Lack of Consensus in Early Views of Book of Mormon Geography

One other nineteenth-century geography that is worthy of note can be found in an anonymous five-page pamphlet containing a map of northern South America, the Caribbean, and Central America. The anonymous tract proposed a Book of Mormon geography set between northernmost South America and southern Mexico. The author suggested that Lehi had landed on the coast of northwestern Colombia

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72. George Q. Cannon, “Buried Cities of the West,” *Millennial Star* 19 (10 January 1857): 18, emphasis added.

73. G. M. O., “Votan, the Culture Hero of the Mayas,” *Juvenile Instructor*, 1 March 1879, 58.

(there is no hint of a landing in Chile) and that the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla were to be found in northern Colombia and Venezuela, with the narrow neck of land centered around the Isthmus of Darien. Rather than place the Jaredites in North America, as other nineteenth-century writers had done, the author proposed that they had met their destruction in Central America. Based on the description of King Limhi's search party in the book of Mosiah, the author concluded that the Jaredites had been destroyed several centuries later than 600 BC and that Coriantumr's people had met their destruction, "not by the hill of Cumorah as generally reported, but over 1500 miles southward" in the vicinity of Honduras.<sup>74</sup>

All nineteenth-century writers on Book of Mormon geography apparently assumed that the place where Joseph Smith found the plates and the hill where the Nephites met their destruction were identical. Aside from this one point, however, the diversity of nineteenth-century opinion is striking. Yet this fact has not been fully appreciated by students of the Book of Mormon or their critics. Did Lehi land in Chile?<sup>75</sup> Cobiga, Bolivia?<sup>76</sup> Lima, Peru?<sup>77</sup> A little south of the Isthmus of Darien?<sup>78</sup> Or "on the Pacific side of the southern part of Central America"?<sup>79</sup> Where was the land of Nephi? Was it in South America? In Ecuador?<sup>80</sup> Bolivia?<sup>81</sup> Venezuela?<sup>82</sup> Or was it in Central

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74. *Plain Facts for Students of the Book of Mormon, with a Map of the Promised Land* (n.p., [ca. 1887]), 3. Although this pamphlet bears no date, the writer speaks of President John Taylor as being alive and cites a letter from President Taylor to an unnamed member of the church in Logan City, Utah, dated 20 November 1886 (*ibid.*, 4). John Taylor died on 25 July 1887.

75. Richards and Little, *Compendium of the Doctrines*, 289.

76. J. R. F., "American Antiquities," *Juvenile Instructor*, 15 August 1884, 250–51.

77. G. M. O., "Old America," *Millennial Star* 38 (14 August 1876): 518.

78. "Facts Are Stubborn Things," 922.

79. John E. Page, "Collateral Testimony of the Truth and Divinity of the Book of Mormon.—No. 1," *Gospel Herald*, 31 August 1848, 108.

80. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:325–26; 19:207; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 155.

81. "Ancient American History," *Millennial Star* 33 (11 January 1868): 22; G. M. O., "Old America," 518.

82. *Plain Facts* [1887], [5].



America? Guatemala?<sup>83</sup> Was the land of Zarahemla in Colombia in South America?<sup>84</sup> Further north in Honduras?<sup>85</sup> Or in Mexico?<sup>86</sup> Was the river Sidon the Magdalena in Colombia?<sup>87</sup> Or was it the Usumacinta in Mexico?<sup>88</sup> Was the narrow neck of land in Panama, at the Isthmus of Darien?<sup>89</sup> By the Bay of Honduras?<sup>90</sup> Or was it at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in Mexico?<sup>91</sup> Was the land of Desolation near the Isthmus of Darien?<sup>92</sup> Honduras?<sup>93</sup> Yucatán?<sup>94</sup> Or in the United States between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains?<sup>95</sup> Were the Jaredites destroyed at the hill in New York or in Honduras in Central America?<sup>96</sup> It is worth emphasizing that these points of disagreement are not over peripheral or insignificant matters but over key elements that are central to any discussion of Book of Mormon geography. The fact that there was such wide disagreement during the first fifty years after the publication of the Book of Mormon strongly suggests that no one view prevailed. It also indicates the absence of an authoritative stance on the subject.

### Church Views on Book of Mormon Geography

In the face of this lack of agreement on Book of Mormon geography, church leaders over the next several decades did several things

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83. Page, “Collateral Testimony.—No. 4,” 125–26. Page spoke of these events “as transpiring in Central America” (ibid., 126).

84. *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 13:129; 15:257; 16:56–57; 19:207.

85. “Zarahemla,” 927.

86. Page, “Collateral Testimony.—No. 3,” 123; G. M. O., “Votan,” 58.

87. *Journal of Discourses*, 14:325; 16:51; Book of Mormon (1879 ed.), 238.

88. G. M. O., “Votan,” 58.

89. O. Pratt, “Orators of Mormonism”; O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:331; 16:51; 17:273.

90. Page, reply to “‘A Disciple.’”

91. “Zarahemla,” 927; Page, “Collateral Testimony.—No. 3,” 123; G. M. O., “Votan,” 58.

92. O. Pratt, “Orators of Mormonism”; O. Pratt, *Interesting Account*, 21; *Journal of Discourses*, 12:342; 14:331; 16:51; 17:273.

93. *Plain Facts* [1887], 3, [5].

94. P. Pratt, “Ruins in Central America,” 165; O. Pratt, “Yucatan,” 347.

95. Phelps, “The Far West.”

96. *Plain Facts* [1887], 3, [5].

that would influence subsequent discussion and study of the Book of Mormon. First, they refused to endorse any particular Book of Mormon geography or map and emphasized that matters of geography were of less importance than the prophetic messages found in the text. Second, they encouraged more careful and diligent study of the scriptures in order to better understand Book of Mormon geography. In 1890 apostle George Q. Cannon, by then a counselor in the First Presidency, surveyed this diversity of opinion about Book of Mormon geography. He noted that, at the time, numerous lectures had been given and many different maps had been circulated. Although pleased with the increased interest in the Book of Mormon, he observed that Latter-day Saints were not united in their conclusions and that it would be unwise for the church to endorse any particular map or model. “Of course, there can be no harm result from the study of the geography of this continent at the time it was settled by the Nephites, *drawing all the information possibl[e] from the record* which has been translated for our benefit.”<sup>97</sup>

In May 1903, a group of students, teachers, and church leaders gathered at the Brigham Young Academy in Provo, Utah, to discuss Book of Mormon geography. Different opinions were expressed. President Joseph F. Smith, who attended the conference, advised that the location of Book of Mormon sites “was not of vital importance, and if there were differences of opinion on the question it would not affect the salvation of the people.” He also “cautioned the students against making the . . . question—the location of cities and lands—of equal importance with the doctrines contained in the Book [of Mormon].” President Anthon H. Lund “advised those present to study the Book of Mormon and be guided by the advice of President Smith in their studies.”<sup>98</sup>

On a later occasion, President Smith was asked to approve a map that someone had prepared, which purported to show exactly where Lehi and his company landed. He declined, saying that “the Lord had not yet revealed it.”<sup>99</sup> (Plainly, he knew nothing of any revelation to

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97. George Q. Cannon, “The Book of Mormon Geography,” *Juvenile Instructor*, 1 January 1890, 18–19, emphasis added.

98. “Book of Mormon Students Meet,” *Deseret Evening News*, 25 May 1903, 7.

99. Pack, “Route Traveled by Lehi,” 160.



Joseph Smith specifying a landfall in Chile.) Elder B. H. Roberts, who had attended the 1903 gathering, noted in 1909 that “the question of Book of Mormon geography is more than ever recognized as an open one by students of the book.” After expressing doubts regarding the authenticity of the apocryphal Joseph Smith “revelation” about Lehi landing in Chile, Roberts offered the following counsel to Latter-day Saints interested in the study of the Book of Mormon:

We desire only to ascertain the truth; nothing but the truth will endure; and the ascertainment of the truth and the proclamation of the truth in any given case, or upon any subject, will do no harm to the work of the Lord which is itself truth. Nor need we be surprised if now and then we find our predecessors, many of whom bear honored names and deserve our respect and gratitude for what they achieved in making clear the truth, as they conceived it to be—*we need not be surprised if we sometimes find them mistaken in their conceptions and deductions*; just as the generations who succeed us in unfolding in a larger way some of the yet unlearned truths of the Gospel, will find that *we have had some misconceptions and made some wrong deductions in our day and time. . . .* The generation which preceded us did not exhaust by their knowledge all the truth, so that nothing was left for us in its unfolding; no, not even in respect of the Book of Mormon; any more than we shall exhaust all discovery in relation to that book and leave nothing for the generation following us to develop. *All which is submitted, especially to the membership of the Church, that they may be prepared to find and receive new truths both in the Book of Mormon itself and about it*; and that they may also rejoice in the fact that knowledge of truth is inexhaustible, and will forever go on developing.<sup>100</sup>

A third move taken by church leaders was the removal of Orson Pratt’s 1879 footnotes from the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon. This action, along with growing concern about the authenticity of the

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100. Roberts, *New Witnesses for God*, 3:503–4, emphasis added.

Frederick G. Williams statement, signaled to some students of the Book of Mormon that there was no authoritative opinion on geographical questions and that the text itself should be the primary source for the study of the subject. The new state of things was recognized by Latter-day Saint engineer Jean Driggs when he noted in 1928: “At the present time the church does not commit itself on the location of Book of Mormon lands and we are left to work out the home lands of the Nephites and Jaredites from the Book of Mormon itself.”<sup>101</sup> Driggs’s observation was supported by Anthony W. Ivins of the First Presidency in 1929:

There is a great deal of talk about the geography of the Book of Mormon. Where was the land of Zarahemla? Where was the City of Zarahemla? and other geographic matters. *It does not make any difference to us. There has never been anything yet set forth that definitely settles that question. So the Church says we are just waiting until we discover the truth. . . .* As you study the Book of Mormon keep these things in mind and do not make definite statements concerning things that have not been proven in advance to be true.<sup>102</sup>

James E. Talmage (echoing President Joseph F. Smith’s 1903 counsel) stated in 1929 that matters of Book of Mormon geography were not grave doctrinal issues but technicalities of secondary importance. “It matters not to me just where this city or that camp was located. . . . I encourage and recommend all possible investigation, comparison and research in this matter. The more thinkers, investigators, workers we have in the field the better; but our brethren who devote themselves to that kind of research should remember that they must speak with caution and not declare as demonstrated truths points that are not really proved.”<sup>103</sup>

In 1950 Elder John A. Widtsoe wrote: “As far as can be learned, the Prophet Joseph Smith, translator of the book, did not say where, on the American continent, Book of Mormon activities occurred. Perhaps

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101. Jean R. Driggs, *The Palestine of America* (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1928), [7].

102. Anthony W. Ivins, *Conference Report*, April 1929, 16–17, emphasis added.

103. James E. Talmage, *Conference Report*, April 1929, 44.



he did not know.” While we know the hill at which the Prophet Joseph Smith recovered the Nephite record, Elder Widtsoe noted, “There is a controversy . . . about the Hill Cumorah—not about the location where the Book of Mormon plates were found, but whether it is the hill under that name near which Nephite events took place. A name, says one, may be applied to more than one hill; and plates containing the records of a people, sacred things, could be moved from place to place by divine help.” He then cited the 1 October 1842 *Times and Seasons* article mentioned above, in which “under the Prophet’s editorship Central America was denominated the region of Book of Mormon activities.” In light of such information, he hoped that “diligent, prayerful study” might yield further insight.<sup>104</sup>

“Don’t be concerned about Book of Mormon geography,” advised Elder Harold B. Lee in 1966, while indicating his own lack of concern about both the topic itself and divergent views regarding it.

Some say the Hill Cumorah was in southern Mexico (and someone pushed it down still farther) and not in western New York. Well, if the Lord wanted us to know where it was or where Zarahemla was, he’d have given us latitude and longitude, don’t you think? And why bother our heads trying to discover with archaeological certainty the geographical locations of the cities of the Book of Mormon like Zarahemla?<sup>105</sup>

Seven years later, on the occasion of a visit to the Hill Cumorah in New York, then President Lee affirmed his view on Book of Mormon geography: “The witness of the Book of Mormon is not found in the ruins of Central and South America. They may be outward evidences of a people long since disappeared. The real witness is that which is found in the Book of Mormon itself.”<sup>106</sup>

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104. Widtsoe, “Is Book of Mormon Geography Known?” 547, 597.

105. Harold B. Lee, “Loyalty,” Address to Seminary and Institute Personnel, 8 July 1966, cited in *Teachings of Harold B. Lee: Eleventh President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. Clyde J. Williams (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1996), 155. Elder Lee seems to grant that the question of the location of the hill Cumorah was an open one.

106. “Pres. Lee Visits Hill Cumorah,” *Church News*, 4 August 1973, 3, cited in *Teachings of Harold B. Lee*, 156.

“The Church emphasizes the doctrinal and historical value of the Book of Mormon, not its geography,” agreed Michael Watson, secretary to the First Presidency of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, in a 1993 statement:

While some Latter-day Saints have looked for possible locations and explanations [for Book of Mormon geography] because the New York Hill Cumorah does not readily fit the Book of Mormon description of Cumorah, there are no conclusive connections between the Book of Mormon text and any specific site.<sup>107</sup>

### Limited Book of Mormon Geography and Mesoamerica

In the early twentieth century, with the removal of Orson Pratt’s geographical footnotes from the 1920 edition of the Book of Mormon, the refusal of church leaders to endorse a specific Book of Mormon geography, and the cautious counsel from the Brethren that Latter-day Saints focus more intently on geographical clues found in that ancient American record, some students of the Book of Mormon began to develop more sophisticated approaches to its geography. These scholars, basing their analysis on information in the text itself, interpreted events described in the Book of Mormon, including the final destruction of the Nephites and Jaredites, as restricted in geographical scale to a portion of the Americas somewhere within the region of Central America, even if they often differed on more tentative external correlations.

The first writer to advance a fully limited Book of Mormon geography that confined Book of Mormon events, including the destruction of the Nephites and Jaredites, to ancient Mesoamerica was Louis Edward Hills. From 1917 to 1924, Hills, a member of the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, published several studies

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107. Correspondence from Michael Watson, 23 April 1993, as cited in William J. Hamblin, “Basic Methodological Problems with the Anti-Mormon Approach to the Geography and Archaeology of the Book of Mormon,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 2/1 (1993): 181.



emphatically arguing for this view.<sup>108</sup> He was attracted to Mesoamerica by traditions in the writings of Ixtlilxochitl, which he felt paralleled events in the Book of Mormon. He also contended that information in the text about distances made the hemispheric interpretation implausible. Hills argued that the Hill Ramah and Cumorah were not identical, yet he placed both locations within southern Mexico, with Ramah near Tehuantepec and Cumorah near Teotihuacan.<sup>109</sup> J. F. Gunsolley, another RLDS writer, provided an additional interesting interpretation in 1922. Based on the description of Limhi's search party, he argued that the Jaredite destruction at Ramah must have taken place somewhere within or near the narrow neck of land. Since Ramah and Cumorah seemed identical (Ether 15:11), he reasoned, Cumorah would have to have been there also. While Gunsolley came to this conclusion, *he still believed that Lehi landed in South America*. He felt, though, that information in the Book of Mormon text required a location for Cumorah in southern Mexico rather than in New York.<sup>110</sup>

It is not known how much these studies influenced the interpretations of Latter-day Saints; their first versions of a fully limited Book of Mormon geography began to appear in the years from 1920 to 1926. In an article for the *Improvement Era*, Janne Sjordahl outlined the key features of these interpretations without criticism or condemnation. In addition to his own modified hemispheric view, which placed the narrow neck of land at the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Sjordahl reviewed the approaches of George Reynolds and Joel Ricks,<sup>111</sup> which generally followed those of Orson Pratt.

A theory, of more recent date, holds that the geographical scene of the history of the Book of Mormon is confined to

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108. L. E. Hills, *Geography of Mexico and Central America from 2234 B.C. to 421 A.D.* (Independence, MO: 1917); Hills, *A Short Work on the Popol Vuh and the Traditional History of the Ancient Americans by Ixt-lil-xochitl* (Independence, MO: 1918); and Hills, *New Light on American Archaeology* (Independence, MO: Lambert Moon, 1924).

109. This view seems to contradict Ether 15:11.

110. J. F. Gunsolley, "More Comment on Book of Mormon Geography," *Saints Herald* 69/46 (1922): 1074–76.

111. Reynolds, *Story of the Book of Mormon*; and Joel Ricks, *Helps to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Logan, UT: n.p., 1916).

a comparatively small area of Central America, viz., Guatemala, British Honduras, part of Yucatan, and Salvador. In this area, it is thought, the Jaredites, the Mulekites and the followers of Lehi, all established their first colonies, and from there, in due course of time, they spread out north and south, and peopled the American continents. But in the Book of Mormon, it is further thought, only the history of the original area has been preserved.<sup>112</sup>

Willard Young, a son of President Brigham Young who graduated from West Point and had worked as an engineer in Central America for a time, argued that Lehi crossed the Pacific Ocean and “landed on the shore of Salvador in Central America” and located all subsequent Book of Mormon events within Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. He believed that the Jaredites had primarily occupied Guatemala and parts of Honduras. The narrow neck of land was a “small peninsula running northwest at the extreme eastern end of Guatemala.” The hill Ramah or Cumorah was “between the cities of Jucatan and Chiquimula in Guatemala.” Stuart Bagley placed the city of Nephi at the site of Uxmal, with Zarahemla “about 300 miles south of this place. The Usumacinta River was the river Sidon and Bountiful was in Chiapas Mexico. The narrow neck was the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Desolation was north and west of that place.”<sup>113</sup> In 1928 Driggs wrote a brief, thoughtful study. He outlined a geography centered around Honduras and proposed that the hill Cumorah (where both the Jaredites and Nephites fought their final battles) was located within that region. He defended his arguments for a limited geography primarily on statements from the text itself. For example, he noted that the Book of Mormon describes the distance between the lands of Nephi and Zarahemla for a group of several hundred traveling through the wilderness with families and flocks on foot as requiring about twenty-one days to traverse. “Thus we have the account of a journey totaling 21 days, with flocks, grains, and all their possessions, through a

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112. Janne M. Sjodahl, “Suggested Key to Book of Mormon Geography,” *Improvement Era*, September 1927, 977.

113. Sjodahl, “Suggested Key,” 977.



wilderness. This distance has been variously estimated as being from 100 to 300 miles<sup>114</sup>—delineating a more limited region than had been previously thought. Driggs felt that this region fit best within Central America in the region of Honduras.

The church's Department of Education published a study guide in 1938 for the instruction of Latter-day Saint students and teachers.

A general tendency is noticeable . . . to greatly reduce the area actually occupied and mentioned in Book of Mormon history. Central America, therefore, becomes increasingly important in the total picture.

Pivotal points of discussion for these groups have been the landing places of the three colonies, the location of the narrow neck of land, and the site of the Hill Ramah or Cumorah which are mentioned in the Book of Mormon.

In the face of these conflicting opinions, the reader will recognize that careful personal investigation should precede his conclusions and that *no one is justified in representing any one theory as the official explanation of the Church*. In fact a decision on the subject is not necessary in order to obtain and enjoy the true spiritual values of the Book.<sup>115</sup>

Jesse A. and Jesse N. Washburn published *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography* in 1939.<sup>116</sup> The authors developed a detailed internal Book of Mormon geography based entirely on information found in the text, without attempting to provide external correlations—something that had not previously been done. Although it has now been superseded by better and more thorough studies,<sup>117</sup>

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114. Driggs, *Palestine of America*, [4]. Compare this with a more recent discussion of the issue by John L. Sorenson, "The Problem of Establishing Distances," in *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 393–97.

115. William E. Berrett, Milton R. Hunter, Roy A. Welker, and H. Alvah Fitzgerald, *A Guide to the Study of the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: LDS Department of Education, 1938), 44–45, emphasis added.

116. Jesse A. Washburn and Jesse N. Washburn, *An Approach to the Study of Book of Mormon Geography* (Provo, UT: New Era, 1939).

117. See Sorenson's *Ancient American Setting; Geography of Book of Mormon Events; and Mormon's Map*.

the Washburns' cautious approach is still worth reading today. Based on their study of the text, they concluded that "the lands and peoples of the ancient Americans were limited in extent. Should we not think in terms of hundreds of miles instead of thousands, and of millions of people instead of hundreds of millions?"<sup>118</sup> Verla Birrell noted in 1948: "The majority of the current writers prefer to place the Isthmus of Tehuantepec as the site of 'the narrow neck of land' with Central America as the location for the setting of the *Book of Mormon*."<sup>119</sup>

Another proponent of a limited Book of Mormon geography was Latter-day Saint archaeologist M. Wells Jakeman, who considered the Usumacinta to be the river Sidon and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to be the narrow neck of land. In 1954 he remarked: "It should also be noted that this restriction of the Book of Mormon area to the central part of the New World does not rule out the possibility that the Book of Mormon peoples, before the end of the account, established settlements also in parts of North and South America outside this area."<sup>120</sup> Although much of his own work on Book of Mormon geography remains unpublished, several subsequent supporters of the limited Tehuantepec model, such as John Sorenson, Garth Norman, and Gareth Lowe, studied under Jakeman and may have benefited indirectly from his perspective.<sup>121</sup> The New World Archaeological Foundation, for which Jakeman was an advisor, began its work in the early 1950s and concentrated on the general area he favored.<sup>122</sup>

BYU professor Sidney B. Sperry was another influential promoter of the limited geography. Although he seems initially to have held to a hemispheric interpretation of the Book of Mormon, by the 1960s he openly questioned this view, particularly the idea that the final battle

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118. Washburn and Washburn, *Study of Book of Mormon Geography*, 208.

119. Verla Birrell, *The Book of Mormon Guidebook* (Salt Lake City: Birrell, 1948), 563.

120. M. Wells Jakeman, "The Book of Mormon Civilizations: Their Origin and Their Development in Space and Time," *University Archaeology Society Newsletter* 6/2 (1954), reprinted in *Progress in Archaeology: An Anthology*, ed. Ross T. Christensen (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 1963), 83.

121. On Jakeman, see Sorenson, *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, 26–29.

122. See Daniel C. Peterson, "On the New World Archaeological Foundation," *FARMS Review* 16/1 (2004): 221–33.



of the Nephites occurred in New York rather than Central America. During the 1960s, Sperry circulated a brief overview of the Cumorah issue in his Book of Mormon classes<sup>123</sup> in which he outlined his reasons for locating the ancient hill Cumorah in Middle America.

### The Hill Cumorah

The location of the hill where both the Jaredites and the Nephites met their final destruction is a key geographical reference point in Book of Mormon geography since it fixes the termination of the Book of Mormon narrative to a spot in the land northward, just as the landing place of Lehi fixes Lehite beginnings in the land of promise to a location in the land southward. As noted above, a hemispheric Book of Mormon geography places events, in large part, in these two locations, which are thought to be North and South America respectively.

Today, the glacial drumlin from which the Prophet Joseph Smith retrieved the plates is known by Latter-day Saints as the Hill Cumorah. The Saints agree that the hill in New York was the place where Moroni eventually buried the plates, which he later entrusted to Joseph Smith and from which Joseph translated the Book of Mormon through the gift and power of God. A long tradition attributes the name Cumorah to that hill, and it appears that most nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints assumed that the final battleground described by Mormon and the hill in New York where the Prophet obtained the plates were the same location. One of the notable characteristics of Mesoamerican Book of Mormon geographies, however, is the placement of the final Jaredite and Nephite battles within the region of Central America, rather than New York, as Latter-day Saints once thought.<sup>124</sup> Given the long tradition of associating the New York hill with the name

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123. See Sidney B. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1968), 447–51; the class handout for Sperry's Book of Mormon classes was reprinted in Sidney B. Sperry, "Were There Two Cumorahs?" *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* 4/1 (1995): 260–68.

124. A useful overview of the argument is David A. Palmer, *In Search of Cumorah: New Evidences for the Book of Mormon from Ancient Mexico* (Bountiful, UT: Horizon, 1981).

Cumorah, on what basis do twentieth-century readers who accept the Book of Mormon and the prophetic calling of Joseph Smith come to the conclusion that the hill described in the Book of Mormon and the hill in New York are not the same? How did the hill in New York come to be known as Cumorah? Did this contemporary attribution come by way of revelation? Discussion of the question has had a dual focus—on scriptural evidence in the Book of Mormon itself and on Latter-day Saint tradition.

### **Scriptural Evidence on Cumorah from the Book of Mormon**

Near the end of his narrative, Mormon wrote that he “made this record out of the plates of Nephi, and hid up in the hill Cumorah all the records which had been entrusted to me by the hand of the Lord, *save it were these few plates which I gave unto my son Moroni*” (Mormon 6:6). Moroni indicates his intention to complete his father’s record and hide it, but he never designates in the text itself where that hiding place would be.

The description of the final Jaredite battles in the book of Ether offers some clues to the location of the ancient Cumorah. The land of Moron, where Jaredite kings dwelt (Ether 7:5), was the capital of that kingdom. Other Jaredite lands seem to be described in relatively close association with that land. The description in the Book of Mormon of the Jaredites also implies that they lived relatively close to the narrow neck of land. The land of Moron is specifically said to be near the place called the land of Desolation by the Nephites (Ether 7:5–6). Since the land of Desolation is in the land northward bordering on the land of Bountiful in the land southward (Alma 22:30–31), the Jaredite capital was obviously near the narrow neck of land. Additionally, in terms of migration and the movement of armies, Jaredite movements are described as east and sometimes south, but never north as would be required if the Jaredite battles took them to New York.

Additional clues appear in the discussion of King Omer’s flight. In the book of Ether, the righteous King Omer is warned to flee from his wicked son Jared. “And the Lord warned Omer in a dream that he should depart out of the land; wherefore Omer departed out



of the land with his family, and traveled many days, and came over and passed by the hill of Shim, and came over by the place where the Nephites were destroyed, and from thence eastward, and came to a place which was called Ablom, by the seashore, and there he pitched his tent” (Ether 9:3). Later, one of the sons of Jared “gathered together a small number of men, and fled out of the land, and came over and dwelt with Omer” (Ether 9:9). Under Pratt’s hemispheric geography, this would have Omer departing from a place somewhere below the Gulf of California, heading down to the hill Shim somewhere near the Isthmus of Darien, backtracking northward from Panama into western New York, and then turning eastward to settle on the coast of New England. Proponents of a limited geography offer a differing scenario. Rather than describing a journey of thousands of miles, the passages from the book of Ether seem to “support the idea that the home lands of the Jaredites were near the narrow pass that led into the land southward, and that this was the seat of the Jaredite empire, even to the final battle at the hill Ramah.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, “the land of Moron, the land of Desolation, the seashore to the east, the hill Shim and the hill Cumorah are all comparatively close to each other, in a section corresponding to Central America, certainly not so remote as the state of New York, approximately three thousand miles to the north.”<sup>126</sup> The Washburns observed in 1939 that “when King Omer, the fourth king of the Jaredites, fled from the menace of Jared, he went eastward and in his flight passed both the hill Shim, where Ammaron later hid the Nephite records, and the hill Cumorah, where Mormon later hid part of those records and where the Nephites were destroyed. The only directions mentioned are east and south. If there was a flight of thousands of miles to the north, there is no mention of it here.”<sup>127</sup> “The evidence . . . almost forces one to acknowledge that the ‘place where the Nephites were destroyed’ was close to the Hill Shim in the land of Desolation.”<sup>128</sup>

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125. Driggs, *Palestine of America*, [6].

126. Driggs, *Palestine of America*, [7].

127. Washburn and Washburn, *Study of Book of Mormon Geography*, 186.

128. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 450; see Sperry, “Were There Two Cumorahs,” 260–68.

Adherents of a limited geography have also pointed to passages relating to the last Jaredite king, Coriantumr. The book of Ether indicates that Coriantumr had received many deep wounds during the final wars of his people (Ether 13:31; 14:12; 14:30; 15:9; 15:27–28, 32). Eventually he was “discovered by the people of Zarahemla,” with whom he lived for a short time before he died (Omni 1:21). Given Coriantumr’s weakened condition, it is unlikely that he would make a journey of thousands of miles from New York to Central America to be buried by the people of Zarahemla. The statement that he was *discovered* by the people of Zarahemla suggests that he did not find them but that they found him. Although seemingly inconsistent with the hemispheric interpretation, these verses make excellent sense under a restricted geography that places the final destruction of Coriantumr’s people relatively near the narrow neck of land.

Further information about the location of the final Jaredite battles is found in the book of Mosiah, which tells of a colony of Nephites that migrated to the land of Nephi from the land of Zarahemla and fell into bondage to the Lamanites. A generation or two later, King Limhi, the Nephite ruler of the colony, sent a party of forty-three to search for the land of Zarahemla and to appeal for help.

And they were lost in the wilderness for the space of many days, yet they were diligent, and found not the land of Zarahemla but returned to this land, having traveled in a land among many waters, having discovered a land which was covered with bones of men, and of beasts, 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)

Later passages clarify that the land discovered was the same as the land of Desolation, “it being so far northward that it came into the land which had been peopled and been destroyed, of whose bones we have spoken” (Alma 22:30). Limhi’s men inadvertently discovered the land of Desolation, thinking they had found the land of Zarahemla. This raises several questions. How long would this search party have



traveled before they turned back? Is it possible that they would travel thousands of miles or even hundreds of miles before they turned back? “In three generations,” Driggs concluded in 1928,

it is not likely that their conception of the distance between Nephi and Zarahemla would be so uncertain that they would travel from Central America up into the state of New York and think they had found a land, which, as above noted, was a 21 days’ journey for people driving their flocks. It is more reasonable to consider the land of many waters, rivers and fountains as being just north of the land of Desolation, or a part of the land of Desolation, which in this treatment would be considered to be within the limits of Central America and probably in Guatemala.<sup>129</sup>

After Shiz was slain by Coriantumr near the hill Ramah, Ether hid the plates “in a manner that the people of Limhi did find them” (Ether 15:33). Does this language justify the possibility of a journey of several thousand miles into Central America by Ether in order to put the plates in a location where the men of Limhi would find them, or does it suggest that he hid them near the place of the final Jaredite battles? Finally, the report of Limhi’s men provides a clue to the scale of the land they discovered. The land covered with bones and ruins, in which they found the twenty-four gold plates, “had been peopled with a people who were *as numerous as the hosts of Israel*” (Mosiah 8:8). Even if they did not have firsthand experience with the dimensions of the land of Israel, the Nephites would have an idea of its geography from the information contained on the plates of brass. Significantly, ancient Israel occupied a territory roughly forty miles from east to west and three hundred miles from north to south. This implies that the inhabitants whose ruins and remains were discovered by Limhi’s search party in the land of Desolation could have occupied a region of comparable scale.<sup>130</sup>

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129. Driggs, *Palestine of America*, [5].

130. If “Israel” referred to the northern kingdom during the divided monarchy, the region of comparison would, of course, be much smaller.

Lastly, other scriptural evidence pertaining to the location of the hill Cumorah appears in the prophet Mormon's account of the final destruction of the Nephites during the late fourth century AD. He described the final struggles of his people as they were eventually driven into the land northward and destroyed. Mormon told how the Nephites were driven from the cities of Desolation and Teancum at the narrow neck of land to the cities of Boaz and Jordan, finally gathering all their remaining forces at Cumorah for the final battle. According to Sperry's observation,

All of these places, including "the city of Jordan," the last town mentioned by Mormon to which the Nephites fled, are clearly in the land of Desolation in Middle America. How likely is it that the whole Nephite nation, including women and children, would make a long, last journey of at least 2,500 miles from the region of the city of Jordan to have a final battle with the Lamanites in what is now the state of New York? (Mormon 6:1–15) Militarily, such a move would waste the strength and resources of a people already exhausted. Cumorah must have been a place somewhere near the region of Jordan in the land of Desolation.<sup>131</sup>

### **Traditions about the New York Hill Cumorah**

The Book of Mormon seems to imply that the hill Cumorah was near the narrow neck of land, but a long Latter-day Saint tradition links the hill Cumorah with the hill in New York. How did the hill in New York come to be known as the hill Cumorah? How have subsequent Latter-day Saints reconciled the apparent discrepancy between the description in the Book of Mormon and the tradition that both the Jaredites and Nephites met their end in New York?

First, some Latter-day Saint scholars have argued that early Saints may have named the hill in New York Cumorah, perhaps assuming that the New York drumlin and the hill mentioned by Mormon were

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131. Sperry, *Book of Mormon Compendium*, 449.



the same because they were both the repository of plates. They note that Joseph Smith's own account of the appearance of Moroni fails to name the hill where the plates were found (JS—H 1:51) and that the earliest reference to the New York hill as Cumorah comes not from Joseph Smith but from Oliver Cowdery and W. W. Phelps. Was this association simply an inference drawn by the early brethren, or was it based on revelation?

At least one piece of evidence gives the impression that the association did not originate from mere speculation. On several occasions late in his life, David Whitmer reportedly referred to an incident in which he was traveling in a wagon with Joseph and Oliver on the way to Whitmer's home in Fayette, New York.

The Prophet, & I were riding in a wagon, & an aged man about 5 feet 10 heavey Set & on his back an old fashioned Armeey knapsack Straped over his Shoulders & Something Square in it, & he walked alongside of the Wagon & Wiped the Sweat off his face, Smileing very Pleasant David asked him to ride and he replied I am going across to the hill Comorah.

According to Whitmer, Joseph later told David that they had seen one of the Nephite prophets.<sup>132</sup> The earliest accounts of this incident were recorded over forty-eight years after the event. If this account is accurate, then the association between the name Cumorah and the hill near Joseph's home may not have been based merely on personal assumption.<sup>133</sup>

A second suggestion is that the hill in New York was named after the site near the narrow neck of land by Lehitese who migrated to North America during or after Book of Mormon times. The practice of the same name being applied to multiple sites has precedent in both

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132. Edward Stevenson, interview with David Whitmer, 22–23 December 1877, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, ed. Lyndon W. Cook (Orem, UT: Grandin Book, 1991), 13; Orson Pratt and Joseph F. Smith, interview with David Whitmer, 7–8 September 1878, in *David Whitmer Interviews*, 27.

133. Given that the earliest account of this experience was recorded forty-eight years after the event, it is possible that Whitmer's reference to "Comorah" was influenced by Book of Mormon geographical thinking of the time.

the Bible and the Book of Mormon. In the Book of Mormon, Nephite dissidents and Lamanites built a city that they named Jerusalem, “calling it after the land of their fathers’ nativity” (Alma 21:1). Other Book of Mormon places that were given biblical names include Ephraim, Gilgal, Helam, Jordan, Midian, Ramah,<sup>134</sup> and Sidon. In the Book of Mormon, there is a hill Manti at Zarahemla (Alma 1:15) as well as a land and city of Manti (Alma 16:6; 56:14) near the headwaters of the Sidon. There is the land and the city of Desolation (Mormon 3:5, 7) and also the “Desolation of Nehors” (Alma 16:11). There was a hill called Onidah in the Zoramite lands in Antionum (Alma 32:4) and another Onidah in the land of Nephi (Alma 47:5). Since biblical and Book of Mormon precedents exist for applying the same name to different sites, it would not be surprising if Nephite migrants into the land northward followed this practice and named the New York hill after the earlier Cumorah.

A third possibility, related to and not necessarily excluded by the second possibility, is that Moroni himself named the hill in New York Cumorah “after the land of his fathers’ nativity” since it too was a repository for the sacred plates. The name Cumorah applied to the New York hill would also remind later generations of the events surrounding that earlier hill and of the sacred record kept of that earlier people.

Moroni said that he wandered wherever he could for his own safety (Moroni 1:3) and mentioned several times that he would have liked to have written more in his account, but that he lacked ore to create additional plates (Mormon 8:5, 23). Readers have assumed from these passages that, by the time Moroni was ready to hide up the plates, he had moved out of familiar territory. In 1928, after reviewing the key passages in the Book of Mormon for both a limited geography and a hill Cumorah within Mesoamerica, Driggs offered a possible scenario in which he reconciled the apparent conflict between the scriptural description of Cumorah and the tradition that applies that name to the location in New York.

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134. In Syro-Palestine there were as many as five different sites with the name Ramah. Patrick M. Arnold, “Ramah,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:613–14.



[Moroni] is wandering wherever he can, for the safety of his own life.—Moroni 1:3. What is more natural than that he would take his course northward, to avoid his enemies; and, under the directing power of God, would be led to deposit his precious record where it was revealed to the Prophet Joseph Smith. Moroni may have named the hill in New York, where he hid the plates, the hill Cumorah. . . . The hill in New York retains its importance as the place where the plates were revealed from which the Book of Mormon was translated, but the writer sees no reason for the continued assertions to the effect that the great battles were fought in that portion of the American continent. The Book of Mormon is one of the four standard works of the church. The 8th Article of Faith establishes our stand to the effect that, “we believe the Book of Mormon to be the word of God.” Therefore, *if there be seeming contradictions between what men have said and the correct interpretation of the Book of Mormon, the latter record must be considered as correct.*<sup>135</sup>

## Conclusion

In the history of Latter-day Saint interpretations of Book of Mormon geography, three key tenets have been thought to tie the Book of Mormon to a hemispheric setting: Lehi’s landing place, the narrow neck of land, and the location of the final Nephite battlefield at the hill in New York. In spite of popular tradition, the idea that Lehi and his colony landed in Chile cannot be traced to Joseph Smith, much less to revelation, yet the mistaken assumption that the statement was revelatory led well-intentioned interpreters to include South America in their reconstructions of Book of Mormon events. However, even during the nineteenth century, other Latter-day Saint writers seem not to have regarded the statement as authoritative and felt free to

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135. Driggs, *Palestine of America*, [8], emphasis added. Sorenson, *Ancient American Setting*, 45, cites the story of David Ingram, a shipwrecked English sailor, who is said to have walked essentially the same route as Moroni in the mid-sixteenth century. His journey required eleven months.

offer different interpretations. An examination of nineteenth-century geographics also demonstrates uncertainty about the location of the narrow neck of land. While most writers conceptualized the dividing line between the land northward and the land southward as being somewhere within Central America, opinions differed as to whether it was in Panama, Honduras, or Mexico. Efforts to posit a more northerly location were due largely to the discoveries of ruins in Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico by Stephens and Catherwood, whose works received wide circulation in the 1840s. Such interpretations show that Latter-day Saint writers were quite willing to change and adjust their geographical conceptions and offer speculation in light of additional knowledge and discoveries. This and the diversity of opinion among nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints on matters of geography seriously undermine the claim that any traditional view was authoritatively established by revelation. In light of this diversity of opinion, church leaders refused to endorse any one interpretation but encouraged the Saints to give more diligent attention to what the Book of Mormon itself says about its own geographical setting. Limited geographical interpretations of the Book of Mormon are not a recent phenomenon. Antecedents of a limited geography go back to the 1840s, and fully limited geographies arose in an early twentieth-century context in which some church leaders were encouraging the Saints to pay more attention to the Book of Mormon text. Although writers differed on possible external correlations with the Book of Mormon, they tended to agree, based on internal geographical information in the text, that the events described in that scripture were limited in scale, on the order of hundreds, rather than thousands, of miles.

In a revelation to the Prophet Joseph Smith in 1833, the Lord encouraged the Saints to seek diligently for greater knowledge and understanding in many fields of learning. They were to seek learning “by study and also by faith” (D&C 88:118). “Teach ye diligently,” the Lord said, “and my grace shall attend you, that you may be instructed more perfectly in theory, in principle, in doctrine, in the law of the gospel, in all things that pertain unto the kingdom of God, that are expedient for you to understand” (D&C 88:78). It is remarkable that,



in addition to the revealed and saving doctrine and laws of the gospel, the Lord would also encourage his Saints to seek greater understanding in “theory.” This apparently refers to things that we know only in part and which may not be fully revealed, but which he encourages us to study patiently as we seek for greater understanding. Interpretations of Book of Mormon geography clearly fall into the area of theory rather than doctrine and are obviously of lesser importance than those things that pertain to our salvation. Still, as in all other fields of knowledge, these theories have their place; each must be evaluated on its own scholarly merits, and for those who continue to seek in all humility and diligence, the promise is given that “my grace shall attend you” (D&C 88:188).