



Type: Book Chapter

The Settlements of Book of Mormon Peoples

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Source: *Nephite Culture and Society: Collected Papers*

Published: Salt Lake City; New Sage Books, 1997

Pages: 131-154

Abstract: A neglected aspect of Book of Mormon studies is analyzing what the text says about the patterns of settlement of its peoples. To understand an ancient document, its authors, and its history requires asking where the groups it describes lived on the face of their lands, for the life of any people depends to an important degree on how many of them there are and on their space-determined interactions with each other and with outsiders. We cannot grasp what was going on among them unless we can characterize how houses, neighborhoods, communities and lands were arranged. Questions about Nephite, Lamanite and Jaredite settlement patterns have not previously been addressed. The aim of this article is to lay out some of the relevant questions and to search the text for preliminary answers.

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The study does not aim to settle questions of exactly where in the Western Hemisphere *Book of Mormon* groups dwelt. Rather, we shall be mainly reconstructing part of the “ethnogeography” of the Nephites, that is, how they themselves conceptualized the divisions of their living space.

The Nephite record provided for us by Mormon and Moroni is our main source of information. Most of the data on settlement forms that it contains we have received via the mind and language of Mormon, who lived in the fourth century A.D. He was the recipient of a long tradition of geographical thought and recording by his predecessors. This accumulated knowledge of his people reached him through the official national archive, which he controlled (see Mormon 1:2-4; 2:17; 6:6). Moreover, he personally travelled throughout most of Nephite territory (see Mormon 1:6-7; 2:3, 16, 27-9, etc.) He was, therefore, able to provide us with excerpts from the earlier records which were in his hands, as well as to give us interpretive statements of his own that reflected cumulative Nephite knowledge and ideas on settlement matters.

What we learn about Lamanite settlements is more limited. It comes from a few eyewitness accounts of visitors among them (for example, the sons of Mosiah who served as missionaries to the Lamanites). Mormon abstracted and sometimes quoted from those sources.

At hundreds of points in the scriptural text we find information spelling out or hinting at settlement patterns. Taking them all into account, we learn that Nephite (and probably Lamanite) thought crystallized at several analytical levels.

Level 1: The earth as a whole

Their ancestral traditions and recorded prophecies made their descendants aware of places as diverse as Jerusalem in the land of Israel (see, for example, 1 Nephi chapters 1, 3-4, 5:16), Egypt (see, for example, Alma 36:28), Arabia (see 1 Nephi chapters 16-17), the Indian, Pacific and Atlantic Oceans (see 1 Nephi 13:10-12 and chapters 17-18), and the lands of “the Gentiles,” that is, Europeans of the Christian tradition (see, for example, 1 Nephi chapter 13; 3 Nephi 28:27-32). Indeed, they had a mental model of the earth as a planetary globe that was part of the solar system (see Helaman 12:15).

Level 2: The promised land as a unit

The lands inhabited by the Nephites and Lamanites were considered one unit, in stated or implied contrast to more distant lands (see, for example, 1 Nephi 13:10-12; 2 Nephi 1:5-11; Alma 22:27-34). The “land of promise,” or “this land,” as announced and blessed by Lehi, was still a conceptual unity at the moment when the Savior appeared, for his announcement of the destruction of the wicked cities (see 3 Nephi 9, compare 8:11-12) refers to areas and cities whose names and geographical relationships belong within the territory already referred to as the promised land (see, for example, 3 Nephi 8:11-12).

Beyond the historical and prophetic statements about the Old World mentioned above, the only statement in the text that refers to lands beyond the conceptual bound of “our land” is by Lehi₁ in 2 Nephi 1:11. He prophesied that at some point in time the Lord would bring “other nations” upon them and that these would “take away from them the lands of their possessions.” This statement makes clear that geographically those nations would exist outside Lehi’s promised space, although not necessarily at a great distance. With that one exception all statements in the scriptural record are about the delimited territory entitled “the land of promise.”¹

Later, a good deal of emphasis was put on the distinction between the land northward and the land southward (see below), yet the integral nature of the promised land as a whole was not lost. Thus, following the advent of Jesus Christ at the city Bountiful, we are told that the church of God was established “in all the lands round about” (that is, round about centrally-located Bountiful) and then “upon all the face of the land” (4 Nephi 1:1-2). Again, in the final days of the Nephites, the overall territory involved remained essentially the same as it had four centuries previous. Lamanite armies once more came from the land of Nephi, which had always been their homeland, to attack the Nephites, first “in the borders of Zarahemla, by the waters of Sidon” (Mormon 1:10). Soon afterward the Lamanites pressed the attack to the narrow neck itself, again repeating what had happened in the first century B.C. (see Helaman 4:5-8 and Mormon 4:1 ff.) Clearly the land of promise (“the lands of our inheritance,” Mormon 2:27) was the primary settlement bloc in Nephite tradition from first to last.

Level 3: Land southward and land northward

Details and terminology of the mental map held in Nephite culture (and also that of the Lamanites) of course developed over time. In early Nephite days, their area of concern was strictly the land of Nephi (up to Omni 1:12, possibly about 230 B.C.) Later, when Mosiah₁ had moved to the local land of Zarahemla (see Omni 1:13),

they still seem to have had no basis for realizing that there was a narrow neck of land or a land northward. (Perhaps the land southward/land northward dichotomy had not yet been conceptualized, at least among the provincial Zeniffites, at the time when king Limhi's exploring party traveled from Nephi to the final Jaredite battleground, on the order of 80 B.C., which would explain their failure to grasp the fact that they had passed through a narrow neck; see Mosiah 21:25-6). But among the literate elites by about 75 B.C., it is evident that both Amalickiah in Nephi and captain Moroni in Zarahemla were aware of the land northward as a distinct feature (see Alma 50:29; 51:30). At about the same time this conceptual distinction is laid out clearly in the geographical summary given in Alma 22:27-34 (although perhaps the clarity about the north-south division shown there owes partly to the fact that it was Mormon who wrote it in the fourth century A.D.)

By the fourth decade before the time of Christ, the division of the promised land at the isthmus had become conceptualized in terms of history—"the land of Lehi" (the land southward) was where the Lord had brought that founder/patriarch, while "the land of Mulek" or land northward had been where the Jewish prince's group had first landed (see Helaman 6:10).

Level 4: Extended lands, or realms

A more detailed level of geographical reference in the Nephite mind was the extended land, or realm. The basis was political in one sense—a realm was a sector ruled consistently by a Nephite or a Lamanite king.

For the first few centuries of the presence in the promised land of Lehi's descendants, as far as the text indicates, only two realms existed. The local land of Nephi was Nephite occupied, while the coastal lowlands between highland Nephi and the "west sea"—"the land of first inheritance" (Alma 22:28)—was the home and realm of the Lamanites.² A strong topographical and ecological contrast—hot,

humid lowland vs. cooler highland—backed up the distinction in rulership for the first three centuries or so.

After Mosiah₁'s flight from Nephi to Zarahemla, the Lamanites gained control over the former Nephite realm in the uplands and combined it with the west coast littoral. In time, the city of Nephi (renamed by the Lamanites Lehi-Nephi) became the capital of a greatly expanded Lamanite realm which combined both the old west coastal territory with upland Nephi; this was supplemented by lowland areas toward the east sea (see Alma 22:27).

The land of Zarahemla of Benjamin's day was strictly local (see below). But in only a few decades its power came to extend over virtually the whole northern portion of the land southward, to which the same name, the land of Zarahemla, was then extended (see Alma 22:29-32).³

For generations thereafter a fundamental contrast existed in the mental maps of both Nephites and Lamanites according to which "the land of Nephi" stood against "the land of Zarahemla"—the southerly portion of the land southward versus the northerly portion (see Alma 22:27-9, 34). During the period recorded in the most detailed portion of the *Book of Mormon* (the books of Mosiah through the first section of 3 Nephi) this opposition dominated strategic thinking in both realms. Late in B.C. times the Nephites expanded into the land northward, but the lands they possessed still formed a consistent major bloc which overlapped the narrow neck, in conceptual contrast to Lamanite territory to the southward (see, for example, 3 Nephi 3:21-4).

Level 5: Quarters of the land

Another Nephite geographical concept was expressed in terms of a "quarter of the land." A fourfold quartering of the land of Zarahemla in the days of the Amalickiahite wars was based on east-west and north-south axes (although those axes did not necessarily coincide with the axes we use today⁴). Mosiah 27:6 speaks

of “all quarters of the land.” Three of the quarters were subsequently identified. The quarter that was centered on Manti (see Alma 43:26; 58:30) was referred to as “on the south by the west sea” (Alma 53:22). Another quarter was based on the city of Bountiful (Alma 52:10; 61:15). “Quarter” was also applied to the area called “the borders by the east sea,” which was adjacent to Lamanite lands on the east and south. Apparently this segment was anchored by either the city of Moroni or the city of Nephihah, and it was conceived to be in direct contrast with the Manti quarter (see Alma 59:6).

The quarters were thought of as peripheral units surrounding a “heart” land consisting of the zone around the city of Zarahemla (Alma 60:19; Helaman 1:18). There in “the center” was where the political headquarters resided, as well as “the most capital parts” of the Nephite possessions in the land southward (Helaman 1:18, 24-27; compare Alma 60:19, 22). These statements account for three peripheral quarters in addition to the “heart.”⁵ That leaves only the north and west quadrant unnamed. Probably that area centered on Ammonihah.

The record is too succinct to discern specific quarters in Lamanite territory, although in principle it seems likely there were such, inasmuch as the concept was Hebraic and thus probably was part of the thinking of Laman and Lemuel. A hint comes from the discussion in Alma 23:8-15 about the cities and lands where Lamanites were converted by the Nephite missionaries. It mentions Amulonite anti-missionary influence being concentrated in “that part of the land wheresoever they dwelt” (verse 14), while their opponents were concentrated in another part.⁶ Also, indication of at least a twofold division of the Jaredite realm may suggest that the concept of quarters existed among that earlier people (see Ether 8:2-3; 10:32; 11:15).

Level 6: Local land

A most fundamental spatial division was the local land. Its status and size are illustrated clearly in the case of early Zarahemla.

When king Benjamin chose to inaugurate his son Mosiah₂ as his successor, he instructed the latter to “make a proclamation throughout all this land among all this people...that thereby they may be gathered together; for on the morrow, I shall proclaim...that thou art a king and a ruler over this people” (Mosiah 1:10). It is evident that the distance to which a proclamation could be sent on one day announcing a gathering for the next had to have been limited. I have estimated that this “local land of Zarahemla” is unlikely to have exceeded twenty miles along the (Sidon) river from the center and probably was less.⁷ A confirmation of this order of dimension for a “land” comes from the account of the appearance of the resurrected Christ. He appeared among Nephites gathered at the temple “in the land Bountiful” (3 Nephi 11:1). Word of his intended visit again the following day “was noised abroad among the people immediately, before it was yet dark,” and “even all the night it was noised abroad concerning Jesus; and insomuch did they send forth unto the people that there were many...did labor exceedingly all that night, that they might be on the morrow in the place where Jesus should show himself” (3 Nephi 19:2-3). Despite the exceptional communication effort involved in this unique situation, it is obvious that the normal pattern was for people to assemble on overnight notice, the same as at Benjamin’s Zarahemla.

Another account that speaks to the question of dimensions comes from the story of Alma₁ and his people in the land of Helam. “It came to pass that while they were in the land of Helam, yea, in the city of Helam, while tilling the land round about, behold an army of Lamanites was in the borders of the land.... The brethren of Alma fled from their fields, and gathered themselves together in the city of Helam” to where Alma₁ was located (Mosiah 23:25-6).⁸ The fact the land and city were almost coterminous and that the fields were “in the city” clearly demonstrates the limited scale of the settlement. Since the land was located in mountainous wilderness, where even the Lamanites and Amulonites involved had lost their bearings, and since the number of Alma₁’s people was only in the hundreds, the

implication is that the “land of Helam” consisted of a small-scale mountain valley. Similar terminology has the Nephites “digging a ditch round about the land, or the city, Bountiful” (Alma 53:3). It is reasonable that physical configurations determined the extent of most of these lands (for example, Alma₂ went “into the valley of Gideon, there having been a city built, which was called the city of Gideon”; from there to Zarahemla was “down”; Alma 6:7; 62:7).

Many other textual statements imply that a local land consisted of that territory administered politically, economically and ecclesiastically by a single significant settlement, usually a “city.” Typically the radius of the territory would not have exceeded the distance that could be traveled on foot in a day, say 15 or 20 miles. Examples of local lands/cities in the *Book of Mormon* are Ammonihah, Gideon, Nephihah and Ishmael.

Sixteen lands are mentioned for which no central settlement is mentioned. Examples are Sidom, Melek, Antionum, Shemlon and Cumorah. Some of them may have had a dispersed or fully rural pattern of settlement, at least early on, yet lack of mention of a city does not necessarily mean no city existed; it may merely reflect the writer’s emphasis at that point in the record. For example, the land of Middoni had a king (Alma 20:4) and a prison, so while no city is mentioned, it is plausible that the king’s ruling seat was in fact at a significant settlement in that land that could have been called a city.

It should be noted that not all territory of concern was included in a land. Rarely, of course, would such indeterminate places be worthy of mention. One instance is at Alma 21:13, where some in the party of Nephites that included the sons of Mosiah₂ had to flee the land of Middoni “unto the regions round about.” Again mention is made of their preaching “in the land of Ishmael, and in all the land round about” (verse 21; compare 20:30, “from place to place”). While these examples are in Lamanite country, we also read concerning the Nephite land of Melek that Alma₁ preached to and baptized not only the inhabitants of that land but also dealt with people from “all the borders of the land which was by the wilderness side” (Alma 8:5). See

further on “un-land” territory in the discussion below about wilderness.

Level 7: Cities and their domains

At least three types of cities are indicated in the *Book of Mormon*. The first is a city that is the administrative center for a local land, as mentioned just above. The second is a city without any significant amount of dependent land. The third is a “great city.”

The city of Jerusalem in Israel was termed a “great city” by Nephi (1 Nephi 1:4; 10:3). Nazareth, the place where Jesus Christ grew up, was called merely a “city” (1 Nephi 11:13). The distinction strikes me as significant. The terminology applied by Nephi to Jewish Jerusalem and Nazareth gives us an idea about the size and function of the settlements called cities in *Book of Mormon* terminology.

Research on cities in the ancient Holy Land helps us grasp the meaning of Nephi’s use of the term “city,” and thus too of later usage of that word in the *Book of Mormon*.⁹ Six types of cities have been distinguished for the Iron Age II archaeological period, which extended down to Nephi’s day.

- (1) The royal capital cities, Jerusalem and Samaria (compare Zarahemla, “the capital city,” in Helaman 1:17), had a unique status. The former is estimated to have ranged from about 32 acres and 5000 inhabitants in Solomon’s day to well over 25,000 on at least 125 acres in Lehi’s day. Samaria may have encompassed 170 acres, with a 6.4 acre rectangular acropolis at its center as the formal royal seat. For a comparison in scale, note that Temple Square in Salt Lake City is ten acres in extent.
 - (2) Also called “cities” in the Jewish record were major administrative centers, each over a district of the kingdom; these ranged from 12 to 17 acres in size with
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population a maximum of a couple of thousand; much of the space was occupied with administrative structures.

- (3) Secondary administrative centers constituted smaller “cities.”
- (4) Fortified provincial towns were smaller still but boasted a defensive wall, which qualified them as “cities.”
- (5) Fortress outposts were also called “cities,” although they were so condensed that they typically included only dwellings for the commander and his staff, administrative buildings, storage space and a small temple (or shrine?).

In addition to these several types of settlements for which the term “city” is used in the *Old Testament*, there were of course smaller units such as villages.

Overall the meaning of the Hebrew word which has been translated as “city” probably centers on two functions—a site’s having been established as a governmental center (including a temple or cult center as a symbol of royal patronage or presence), and its preparation to be defended militarily. Size had little to do with use of the label; many a “town” or even a “village” could have had more inhabitants than certain cities, but they lacked the crucial criteria to qualify for the name “city.”

Nephi’s referent for his category of “great city” would naturally be Jerusalem, for he personally had experienced it (compare 1 Nephi 4:5-7, 20). Meanwhile his use of the label “city” to apply to future Nazareth gives us a further clue to the settlement sizes in his nomenclature. Nazareth is estimated to have occupied less than 60 acres; however, much of that was empty space. When Jesus lived there, the maximum population would not have exceeded 500, according to archaeological data.¹⁰

With this information as background, we observe that six

“great” cities are specifically identified in *Book of Mormon* lands: Zarahemla (3 Nephi 9:3), Moroni (3 Nephi 9:4), Moronihah (3 Nephi 9:5), Jerusalem (Alma 21:2), Ammonihah (Alma 9:4), Jacobugath (3 Nephi 9:9), and the Jaredite city built by king Lib (Ether 10:20). In addition, when the Savior spoke to the people from above on the occasion of the great catastrophe, he referred to additional “great and notable cities” (3 Nephi 8:14) and “great cities” (3 Nephi 10:4) which had been destroyed (compare the “large cities” mentioned in Mosiah 27:6). Perhaps Bountiful was also “great” considering the statement about its special fortified status by which it “became an exceeding stronghold ever after” (Alma 53:5); of course it was not destroyed hence was not included in the list in 3 Nephi 9. The crowd gathered at Bountiful, presumably for a Jewish ritual occasion, numbered 2,500 (3 Nephi 17:25). They had probably assembled from the immediate sustaining area of the city, but the normal number would have been reduced due to casualties. The next day an “exceeding great number” (3 Nephi 19:3) assembled from an area of wider extent. For special ritual occasions, it appears that a “great city” could host up to 20,000 or more residents and visitors, I estimate.

It is not unreasonable that each of the five sectors of the land of Zarahemla (four quarters plus the heartland) was conceived of as dominated by a great city. At least Zarahemla, Moroni and Ammonihah (and Bountiful if we include it) are strong candidates to have been the capital settlements of their respective sectors. (Note that all these cities were, eventually, fortified). Incidentally, two of the mentioned great cities may have claimed the appellation prematurely. Braggart political leaders at Ammonihah asserted that it was “great” (see Alma 9:4), but its greatness came to an end when a Lamanite army overran and destroyed it (see Alma 16:1-3). (Might the city Moronihah have replaced it as head city over the northwestward quarter, although the text is silent on Moronihah’s location?) Similarly, Jerusalem was founded by Amalekites, Amulonites and Lamanites as their version of a great city (see Alma 21:1-2), yet the Savior’s list of destroyed places calls it simply a city (see 3 Nephi 9:7). Jacobugath, of

course, was located in the land northward at a great distance from the Nephites (see 3 Nephi 7:12; 9:9).

Also apparent in statements in the *Book of Mormon* is the fact that certain cities took on that status from the very moment of their founding. Such instant cities must have been given that title because of their intended function, and perhaps because of their initial, ambitious site plan, not because of the size of their populations. The case of the purposeful founding of the Jerusalem in the land of Nephi as a great city has just been mentioned.¹¹ More dramatic, however, was the simultaneous launching of a whole series of new cities in the area known as “the borders by the east sea.” Moroni had expelled Lamanite squatters from the zone as a military measure (Alma 50:9), then “began the foundation” of Moroni, Nephiah, Morianton and “many (other) cities” (Alma 50:13-15) as garrisons for the vulnerable area. (Recall the usage in Hebrew of the term for city to apply to remarkably small fortress sites.) They must have had only small sustaining areas around each of them, as suggested by the language concerning one, Nephiah, where city and land are equated (see Alma 50:14), the same as in the cases of Bountiful and Helam, mentioned above. The text makes the lack of surrounding lands especially clear in the case of two of these garrison cities; after only a single year’s agricultural cycle, the colonists in the land/city Morianton found that they had insufficient cultivable land, so they “did claim a part of the land” of neighboring Lehi (Alma 50:25-6). After the dispute was settled, by force, “a union took place between them and the people of Lehi” (Alma 50:36), meaning that rebellious Morianton lost its independent administrative status. In other words, cities established by military fiat did not always make demographic or economic sense.

Other cities seemingly established for military ends were Zeezrom, Cumeni, Antiparah and perhaps Judea. The Nephite and Lamanite garrisons in those places were vulnerable due to lack of local food production and limited population—the non-military population seems to have been trivial (see Alma chapters 56 and 57). This is precisely the situation which has been found to characterize

many of the fortress cities of Judah that are listed in Joshua 15:20-62.¹² Whether it is true of *Book of Mormon* cities that are named without being put in the context of attached lands, we cannot tell (for example, Lamanite cities Shimnilom and Lemuel, see Alma 24:12; and Nephite Teancum, see Mormon 4:3).

Within many ancient cities certain areas (often “quarters”) were occupied by different social groups. These might be lineages or clans, ethnic/linguistic groups, or craft specialists.¹³ It would be quite expectable that Nephite and Lamanite cities would also be internally segmented. One definite indication of that situation is in the account of Zarahemla at the time when king Mosiah₂ spoke to his people about a change in the form of their government. “Now all the people of Nephi were assembled together, and also all the people of Zarahemla, and they were gathered together in two bodies” (Mosiah 25:4). Of course the languages of those two social segments were different.

There were other social enclaves present as well. After the king’s speech, he had Alma₁ speak, during which “they were assembled together in large bodies, and he went from one body to another” (Mosiah 25:15). Groups present included the Zarahemla Nephites, the Zarahemla “Mulekites,” “the people of Limhi,” and “his (Alma₁’s) brethren” (verse 16). It is almost certain that in the capital city these four groups (and perhaps more; recall that there were “seven churches in the [local] land of Zarahemla,” Mosiah 25:23) inhabited distinct areas.

Furthermore, when the people of Ammon (former Lamanites) were transplanted from dangerous Jershon near the east sea to out-of-the-way Melek on the west of Zarahemla, they would have been settled in some area distinct from the inhabitants already present, although not necessarily within a city (see Alma 35:13; 8:4-5). Another documented case was at the city of Jerusalem which had been built by the Lamanites, Amalekites and people of Amulon (Alma 21:2). When missionary “Aaron came to the city of Jerusalem,” he “first began to preach to the Amalekites. And he began to preach to them in their synagogues” (verse 4). This probably means that the Amalekites

occupied a particular area of that city, as the Amulonites and the Lamanites, respectively, must also have done.

Of interest too is the statement that lands, cities and villages were called “after the name of him who first possessed them” (Alma 8:7). The important link between political control and economy involved in the term “possessed” will be discussed in Chapter 8.

Level 8: Town

“Towns” are mentioned twice. Both mentions date to about A.D. 375 (Mormon 4:22; 5:5). In the second instance towns are specifically distinguished from cities. These towns are reported only in the land northward, but there is no reason to suppose that the same category of settlement existed in the land southward also. We can only suppose that the distinctive sense of this settlement label is a community with a population too large to be comfortably called a village yet without being the seat of any regional administrative functions.

Level 9: Village

Villages in a generic sense are mentioned consistently (for example, Mosiah 27:6; Alma 8:7; 23:14; Mormon 4:22). In only a single case is the name of a village given in the text, and that is in Lamanite country; missionary Aaron “came over to a village which was called Ani-Anti,” which lay between the city of Jerusalem and the land of Middoni (Alma 21:11). It is plausible that most inhabitants of every land lived in villages or smaller places, where they were near their cultivated lands. Despite their ubiquity their general sameness would have made them uninteresting to the elite Nephite record-keepers who had more striking scenes and events to record.

Level 10: Small village

Alma 8:7 also mentions “small villages” in addition to normal

villages. We would call the former hamlets. Again the total numbers resident in those truly rural places probably were substantial, based on what we know of agrarian societies throughout the world.

Another dimension: Wilderness vs. civilized

A culturally meaningful contrast is evident in the Nephite record between inhabited lands and “wilderness.” The distinction was not unambiguous, of course. For instance, Helaman 3:23 speaks of “the more settled parts of the land,” implying a gradation in the degree of “de-wildernessing.” The same distinction is apparent in Alma 31:3 where we learn that a part of the wilderness was “filled with Lamanites.” It seems that in Nephite thinking there was a transitional state of “less-than-wilderness” or “wilderness in the process of becoming settled.” Nevertheless the normal contrast between settled area and wilderness had considerable power in the Nephite geographical paradigm.

Vast areas of wilderness were involved. Alma 22:27-32 tells of wilderness along both east and west sea “borders” as well as a “narrow strip” that connected the two coastal wildernesses. Yet that so-called narrow strip was not very narrow, for it took the Zeniffite party “many days’ wandering in the wilderness” to cross the “strip” and reach the land of Nephi (Mosiah 9:4), while Ammon and his party years later who were traveling in search of the Zeniffites left Zarahemla and “wandered many days in the wilderness, even forty days” (Mosiah 7:4). The “east wilderness” too had to be extensive, for a Lamanite army which was frustrated in the land of Antionum near the east sea (see Alma 43:22) evidently traveled for weeks, if not months, “round about” in the east wilderness to reach the land of Manti. We know that because during the interval captain Moroni had time for a complex set of activities—to learn through spies where the enemy was headed, then to send from his base in Jershon to Zarahemla to obtain an oracle from Alma², to get that word back to Jershon by messenger, and then to travel with part of his army all the

way to the Manti area and set up an ambush—all this while the Lamanites were *en route* “round about.”¹⁴ Another large-scale wilderness consisted of the greater land of Bountiful, “it being the wilderness which is filled with all manner of wild animals” (Alma 22:31). The journey of king Limhi’s exploring party from Nephi to the Jaredites’ final extermination area (a trip on the order of 500 miles direct) apparently failed to encounter a single Nephite community (see Mosiah 8:7-11). This supports the picture from elsewhere in the text of vast areas of wilderness interspersed by limited civilized areas or “lands.”

Specific areas within the generally settled lands were also considered wilderness and even were given names of their own. A notable example was “the wilderness, which was called Hermounts” (Alma 2:36-7). As I have explained elsewhere, the language of the text concerning movements touching that piece of wilderness demands that it lie no more than 20 miles from the capital city, Zarahemla.¹⁵ So even the general land of Zarahemla included at least one enclave that remained wilderness (also compare 3 Nephi 4:1-3 and Ether 14:3).

Hierarchy of settlements

An important tool in interpreting the political and social significance of ancient ruins is to establish how settlements fit in a hierarchical order of size which relates to their relative power and prestige.¹⁶ Scholars refer to two-tier, three-tier or four-tier hierarchies; each superior tier consists of a settlement or settlements whose population is of a different order of magnitude from that of settlements in the next lower tier. Thus in a three-tiered region excavators normally find a dominant city whose size was markedly greater than that of the subordinated villages around it, which in turn were larger than the even more numerous rural hamlets. A four-tier system would boast a single large metropolis with subject cities at some distance from it. In the ancient world a governmental system deserving the label “state” would have at least four tiers.

Archaeologists find consistently that major centers (presumed cities) included large public buildings that represented substantial investments of wealth, and they might have a fortification wall about them, too. Villages would show a few large structures—presumably houses of families of higher rank and political power than average—but no obvious public structures, that is, “temples” or “palaces.” Also consistent would be the absence of all evidence of luxury goods in ruins and graves of the most rural settlements, a selected few such items in village remains, and numerous of these indicators of wealth within a city. Obviously, political, economic and religious functions were concentrated in the larger places.

This nesting of community size and power in a hierarchical whole is evident in the *Book of Mormon* text. In the beginning, Nephite sociopolitical structure in the land of Nephi had only a two-tier settlement system—the city of Nephi where the king dwelt and the temple stood (see the clear implications in 2 Nephi 5:8-17), and its rural environs. It is equally clear that in Benjamin’s day a two-tier structure still prevailed (see Mosiah 1:10, and note the correlative fact that there was not even a tax system, as at Mosiah 2:14).

This pristine simplicity was complicated no later than the end of king Mosiah₂’s reign. By then “the people began to be very numerous, and began to scatter abroad upon the face of the earth, yea, on the north and on the south, on the east and on the west, building large cities and villages in all quarters of the land” (Mosiah 27:6). Shortly thereafter, Alma₂’s preaching circuit demonstrated that more complex structure in detail. He visited component lands which, in some cases at least, had their own cities—Gideon, Ammonihah and probably Sidom (see the heading to Alma 5; also 6:7; 8:3, 6; 14:23-4; 15:1). The Nephite polity would now qualify, according to criteria used by today’s social scientists, as a chiefdom-becoming-a-state.

The administrative hierarchy is shown in the case of Korihor. When he made trouble among the inhabitants of the land of Gideon, “he was taken and bound and carried [*from some village*] before the high priest, and also the chief judge over the land [*who obviously were*]

located in the city of Gideon].” But “when the high priest and the chief judge saw the hardness of his heart...they caused that he should be bound; and they delivered him up into the hands of the officers, and sent him to the land of Zarahemla, that he might be brought before Alma, and the chief judge who was governor over all the land” (Alma 30:21, 29). A state-level polity seems represented in this arrangement of power and settlement.

An even more complex hierarchy is suggested for the period of the great war against the Lamanites and dissenters led by Ammaron. At least captain Moroni’s language in his epistle to chief judge Pahoran indicates a large bureaucratic structure at the capital which would only occur in a sizable state: “...Sit upon your thrones” (Alma 60:7, 11); “...sit in idleness while ye are surrounded with thousands...yea, and tens of thousands, who do also sit in idleness” (verse 22); all part of “the great head of our government” (verse 24). This picture of political complexity is underlined in 3 Nephi 6, a few generations later, where we learn that under a Nephite central government that now reached into the land northward, “there were many cities built anew, and there were many old cities repaired. And there were many highways cast up...which led from city to city, and from land to land, and from place to place” (verses 7-8). Moreover, “there were many merchants in the land, and also many lawyers, and many officers,” as well as sharp differences in social rank (verses 11-12). No wonder Zarahemla, the capital, was termed a “great city.”

The Lamanites and Jaredites

Information on Lamanite settlements is much more limited. At one point in time (early first century B.C.) a political hierarchy is disclosed in which subordinate kings, some of them located in cities, were subject to a king over all the land (see Alma 20:23-26; 22:1, 27; 23:8-14). He dwelt in the city of Lehi-Nephi. Its antiquity (it was the original Nephi’s city) and the fact that it possessed a wall (see Mosiah 22:6) might have combined with the great king’s residence there to

qualify it as a tier above other cities. The Lamanite capital might have been considered a great city, although the term is not used in our brief record. Interestingly, the record refers to king Lamoni, who ruled in the land of Ishmael where no city was reported to exist, as occupying a “house” (Alma 19:18), but his father, the great king, is said to have had a “palace” in his city, Lehi-Nephi, (Alma 22:2; though also called “the house of the king” in verse 1).

For the Jaredites, two facts about settlement stand out. The land where the Jared lineage ruler or king lived was called Moron, but no mention is ever made of a city there. This failure suggests that the polity of the Jaredites was modest in scale. Other Jaredite settlements were, however, called cities (Ether 7:9; 10:4, 9, 12; 14:17). One, built by king Lib at the narrow neck of land (in the second millennium B.C.), was pointedly called “a great city” when first built (Ether 10:20).

Mesoamerican settlement patterns

Various studies in recent decades have provided decisive evidence that “the land of promise,” which was the scene of the events recorded in the bulk of the *Book of Mormon* account, was located in Mesoamerica (central and southern Mexico and northern Central America). Large numbers of geographical and cultural features have been identified that demonstrate that relationship.¹⁷

It should be of interest to know something of how Mesoamerican settlement patterns compare with those identified above from the *Book of Mormon*. A number of characteristics of settlements that are cited in the archaeological literature have direct parallels with statements and intimations about settlements in the *Book of Mormon*. This mere sampling of parallels points to the need for a more comprehensive comparison yet to be done.

1. Population size is not a vital consideration in whether a settlement is to be classified as a city. Political or military function or the status of being a planned city was instead determinative.¹⁸
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2. City and land or surrounding area shared the same name and were not conceptually distinguished from each other.¹⁹
3. Ruler and place shared the same name.²⁰
4. Fortified sites could also qualify as cities despite lack of other criteria.²¹
5. A city could accommodate various ethnic or linguistic groups, normally in different residential sectors.²²
6. Unquestionable cities, and perhaps even great cities, existed throughout most of Mesoamerican history, even prior to 600 B.C.²³

The *Book of Mormon* text manifests a hierarchy of Nephite settlements which makes functional sense in terms of what we know about the operation of ancient societies, as well as agreeing with the information the sacred book contains about demographic growth. Finer-grained examination of cases in the text should permit us to put the political, legal and economic arrangements in *Book of Mormon* lands in still clearer terms. In turn, we can then expect that nuances of language employed by persons in the record will also become clearer.



Notes To Chapter 6

- ¹ I realize that Latter-day Saint interpretation has traditionally construed statements in 1 Nephi 13 to apply to the territory of the United States of America. A full analysis of the geography and history of this prophecy will be presented elsewhere, but it is sufficient for the present to note that the “man among the Gentiles” (taken as Columbus by the Saints) of verse 12 “went forth upon the many waters, even unto the seed of my brethren, who were in the promised land.” Where he went was, of course, tropical America, never North America. Thus when “the seed of my brethren” were “scattered before the Gentiles and were smitten,” (verse 14), the fulfillment can be accounted for in terms of Spanish or Middle America. Similarly, when verse 17 speaks of “their mother Gentiles” being gathered to battle against the Gentile settlers of the “promised land,” as well as the settlers’ carrying forth the book from the Jews to the Lamanites, this could refer to Middle America which rebelled to gain independence from Spain in the early 1800s. Still this may not entirely exclude North America, which saw parallel depredations by English and French settlers of North America on the Lamanites-by-extension in that territory, for verse 13 speaks of “other Gentiles” who also “went forth out of captivity upon the many waters,” in addition to the Spanish for whom Columbus was the specific forerunner. This limited “Middle American correlation” of 1 Nephi 13 concurs with the statement in 4 Nephi 1:1 that “the disciples of Jesus...formed a church of Christ in all the lands round about” the city Bountiful where the Savior appeared; the next verse adds that in the next (third) year, “the people were all converted unto the Lord, upon all the face of the land.” Of course it is completely implausible that they would have done so throughout vast North America in the three years allotted for the task by the historical record.
- ² See the discussion in my *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book*, revised edition, FARMS: Provo, Utah, 1992, pages 250 and following, and compare pages 242-3.
- ³ See *An Ancient American Setting*, pages 190-197, the section entitled “The Expansion of Zarahemla.” The strip of coast “on the west of the land of Zarahemla” (Alma 22:28) and perhaps Bountiful—the matter is unclear (compare Helaman 4:5-8)—were alone excluded from the designation.
- ⁴ See “Appendix C: The Problem of Directions,” in my *The Geography of Book of*
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Mormon Events: A Source Book, Provo: FARMS, 1992, revised edition.

- ⁵ Note that when the Nephites extended their possessions into the land northward in the last half of the first century B.C., the location of “the ‘center’ of their lands” changed in their minds. 3 Nephi 3:21 and 23, which dates some 17 years after the birth of the Savior, has “the center of our lands” shifted to somewhere northward from the old “heart” around the city of Zarahemla.
- ⁶ Compare Alma 24:5. The believers were in “lands round about” the king’s capital in Nephi, while verse 20 mentions that the united antagonists “came up” against the Anti-Nephi-Lehies. See the discussion in *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, pages 250-1 and compare pages 242-3.
- ⁷ *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, page 221.
- ⁸ *Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, page 227.
- ⁹ “Cities: Cities in the Levant,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 1:1031-1043, and Philip J. King, “Jerusalem,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 3:747-66, which relies on M. Broshi, “Estimating the Population of Ancient Jerusalem,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 4 (1978), pages 10-15.
- ¹⁰ James F. Strange, “Nazareth,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4:1050-1.
- ¹¹ Regarding the symbolism of this second Jerusalem, I continue to believe there is merit in a suggestion I made in note 32 on page 380 of *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*, that its location was chosen to reflect certain cosmological connotations of the Palestinian Jerusalem.
- ¹² Zvi Greenhut, “City of Salt,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 19 (July-August 1993), page 4 and following.
- ¹³ See, for example, Joyce Marcus and Kent V. Flannery, *Zapotec Civilization: How Urban Society Evolved in Mexico’s Oaxaca Valley*, Thames and Hudson: London, 1996, pages 233-4.
- ¹⁴ *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, pages 267-8.
- ¹⁵ *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, pages 232
- ¹⁶ A classic treatment in these terms is Henry T. Wright and Gregory A. Johnson, “Population, Exchange, and Early State Formation in Southwestern Iran,” *American Anthropologist* 77 (1975), pages 267-89.
- ¹⁷ See, for example, my article, “The Book of Mormon as a Mesoamerican Record,” in *Book of Mormon Authorship Revisited: The Evidence for Ancient Origins*, edited by Noel B. Reynolds, Provo, Utah: FARMS, 1997, pages 391-522.
- ¹⁸ Joyce Marcus, “On the Nature of the Mesoamerican City,” in Evon Z. Vogt and Richard M. Levanthal, editors, *Prehistoric Settlement Patterns: Essays in Honor of Gordon R. Willey*, Albuquerque and Cambridge: University of New Mexico Press and Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, 1984, pages 206, 239-42. On city planning, consider Teotihuacan, where the essential plan was laid out virtually from the first and then followed for many centuries; see George L. Cowgill, “Teotihuacan, Internal Militaristic Competition, and the Fall of the Classic Maya,” in *Maya Archaeology and*
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Ethnohistory, Norman Hammond and Gordon R. Willey, editors, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1979, page 53.

- ¹⁹ Marcus' "Mesoamerican City," pages 207-8.
- ²⁰ At least among Nahuatl speakers; see Marcus' "Mesoamerican City," page 207.
- ²¹ Marcus' "Mesoamerican City," page 210.
- ²² Edward E. Calnek, "The Internal Structure of Cities in America, Pre-Columbian Cities: The Case of Tenochtitlan," *Proceedings, 41st International Congress of Americanists (Mexico 1974)*, Mexico, 1975, pages 348-9. Rene Millon, *The Teotihuacan Map*, volume 1, Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1973, pages 40-1.
- ²³ On La Venta as an urban site of at least 200 hectares, see Rebecca B. Gonzalez Lauck, "Recientes investigaciones en La Venta, Tabasco," in *El Preclásico o Formativo: Avances y Perspectivas*, México: "Seminario de Arqueología Dr. Román Piña Chan," edited by Martha Carmona Macias, Museo Nacional de Antropología, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1989, page 84. Compare the nearby site of Las Limas, again with such a high degree of nucleation that it can only be considered a city, of over 100 hectares: Hernando Gomez Rueda, "Nuevas exploraciones en la región Olmeca; una aproximación a los patrones de asentamiento," in *El Preclásico o Formativo*, pages 91-100. Also, Ann Cyphers Guillen, in a lecture at Brigham Young University in 1996, reported that current work at the Olmec site of San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan, Veracruz, indicates that before 900 B.C. it was a huge place of at least 690 hectares, with many criteria for being considered a city, probably the first great city in Mesoamerica.

