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Directions in Hebrew, Egyptian, and Nephite Language

Author(s): William Hamblin

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Chapter 52
Directions in Hebrew, Egyptian, and Nephite Language

Alma 22:27 "on the east and on the west"

A great deal of effort has gone into trying to correlate the cities and regions mentioned in the Book of Mormon with the geography of the Americas. The most widely accepted attempt currently is the "limited geography" theory most extensively developed by John Sorenson.¹ Some critics have claimed that Sorenson's theory is incorrect because the lands he ascribes to the Book of Mormon are actually situated along a northwest/southeast axis rather than north/south as described in the Book of Mormon. Sorenson offers an excellent discussion of this issue,² to which the following can be added.

How would the Nephites, using the "learning of the Jews and the language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2), have written *north*, *south*, *east*, and *west*? The Hebrews, like most Semitic peoples, oriented themselves by facing east, toward the rising sun. Thus *east* in Hebrew was simply *front* (*qedem*), with *south* as *right* (*yamîn*), *north* as left (*šémôl*), and *west* as *rear* (*achôr*) or "sea" (*yam*).³

But the Nephites also knew the "language of the Egyptians" (1 Nephi 1:2; Mosiah 1:4; Mormon 9:32). The Egyptians oriented themselves by facing south, toward the source of the Nile. "One of the terms for 'south' [in Egyptian] is also a term for 'face'; the usual word for 'north' is probably related to a word which means the 'back of the head.'" The word for *east* is the same as for *left*, and *west* is the same word as *right*.⁴

Thus the Hebrew orientation is shifted 90 degrees from the Egyptian. The Hebrew word for *west* (*rear*) has the same basic meaning as Egyptian *north* (*back of the head*); Hebrew *east* (*front*) equals Egyptian *south* (*face*); Hebrew *north* (*left*) matches Egyptian *east* (*left*); with Hebrew *south* (*right*) being Egyptian *west* (*right*).

Thus when Nephi or his descendants wrote in "the language of the Egyptians," they would conceptualize the *land westward* in terms of the Hebrew word *back*. But in writing the Hebrew *land backward* in Egyptian characters, they would actually be writing the Egyptian

word for *land northward*. So when the Nephites wrote the Egyptian word for *north*, did they have the Hebrew meaning *west* in mind, or the Egyptian meaning *north*?

If Nephi used the Egyptian terms with Hebrew meanings in mind, and if Joseph Smith then translated those terms literally, a remarkable coincidence occurs. In the Hebrew (and modern) concept of directions, *land westward* (Hebrew rear) would have been written in Egypto-Nephite characters as *land northward* (Egyptian behind), and *land eastward* (Hebrew front) would have been written in Egypto-Nephite as *land southward* (Egyptian front). In other words, the conceptual geography of the Hebrew universe must be "distorted" in relation to the Egyptian vocabulary in precisely the way that Nephite geography seems "distorted" in relation to Mesoamerica.

Such Nephite behavior would parallel the way the Egyptians dealt with the problem of fitting their conceptual scheme to strange landscapes encountered when they traveled outside Egypt. They did not change their world view to fit the new geographical facts but simply kept the same terminology. This is shown in their handling of the direction of flow of the Euphrates River. As we have seen, "The Egyptian word 'to go north' is also the Egyptian word 'to go downstream,' and the word 'to go south' is also the word 'to go upstream,' against the current [of the Nile]. When the Egyptians met another river, the Euphrates, for example, that flowed south instead of north, they had to express the contrast by calling it 'that circling water which goes downstream in going upstream,' " which could also be translated as "the river which flows 'north' [Egyptian downstream] by flowing 'south' [Mesopotamian downstream]." ⁵ In other words, they kept their own cosmographic mind-set unchanged while they adjusted the "real-world" geography to fit it—which seems to be what the Nephites did.

If this way of translating directions did not bother the Egyptians, it may not have bothered their contemporaries, the Nephites. Thus we can see that cardinal directions were not expressed by ancient civilizations in the same way they are by modern civilizations. We need to consider how the Nephites in fact labeled their geography, rather than simply to presume that north must mean the direction north as we now understand it.

Based on research by William J. Hamblin, May 1990. See also the appendix on directions in John L. Sorenson's "The Geography of Book of Mormon Events: A Source Book" (Provo: F.A.R.M.S., 1990).

Footnotes

1. John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book and F.A.R.M.S., 1985).
2. *Ibid.*, 38-42.
3. See Brevard S. Childs, "Orientation," in George Buttrick, ed. *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:608.
4. John A. Wilson, in Henri Frankfort, et al., *Before Philosophy: The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 51.
5. *Ibid.*, 45-46.