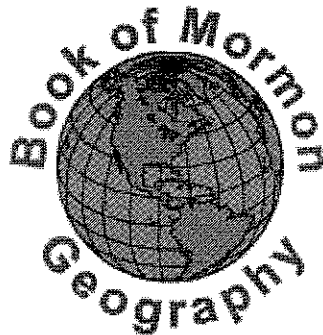
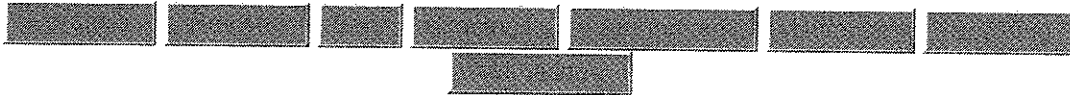


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Early Interpretations

The Mormon Church has never committed itself irrevocably to any one position regarding a specific geographical setting for the Book of Mormon, although a number of different views have been offered at various times in its history. The church's first newspaper was the *Evening and Morning Star*, edited by W. W. Phelps. In August 1832 the newspaper published an article entitled "The Book of Ether," which stated, "As to the Jaredites, no more is known than is contained in The Book of Ether. Perhaps 'Dighton writing Rock,' in Massachusetts, may hold an unknown tale in relation to these Pioneers of the land of liberty, which can yet be revealed. God is great, and when we look abroad in the earth, and take a glimpse through the long avenue of departed years, we can not only discover the traces in artificial curiosities, and common works, and small hills, mountain caves, and extensive prairies, where the Jaredites filled the measure of their time, but, as they were a very large race of men, whenever we hear that uncommon large bones have been dug up from the earth, we may conclude, That was the skeleton of a Jaredite." This theme was continued in another article entitled "The Far West" (October 1832): "the mind goes back to the day, when the Jaredites were in their glory upon this choice land above all others, and comes on till they, and even the Nephites, were destroyed for their wickedness this beautiful region of country is now mostly, excepting Arkansas and Missouri, the land of Joseph or the Indians, as they are called The world will never value the land of Desolation, as it is called in the book of Mormon, for any thing more than hunting ground, for want of timber and mill-seats: The Lord to the contrary notwithstanding, declares it to be the land of Zion which is the land of Joseph" In December 1832 the newspaper declared in an article entitled "The Book of Mormon" : "In the year one thousand

eight hundred and twenty seven, the plates came forth from the hill Cumorah, which is in the county of Ontario, and state of New-York, by the power of God." This appears to be the first public identification of the hill in New York as the hill Cumorah. In February 1833 the newspaper published "Discovery of Ancient Ruins in Central America," which began: "A late number of the London Literary Gazette, contains a letter from Lieut. Col. Galindo, at Peten, in Cetral America, giving some idea of those antiquities which rescue ancient America from the charge of barbarism." Juan Galindo was born in Dublin, but was later appointed governor of the Peten. In April 1831 he visited the Maya ruins at Palenque, and his report was published in *The Literary Gazette*. The *Evening and Morning Star* commented: "We are glad to see the proof begin to come, of the original or ancient inhabitants of this continent. It is good testimony in favor of the book of Mormon, and the book of Mormon is good testimony that such things as cities and civilization, 'prior to the fourteenth century,' existed in America. Helaman, in the book of Mormon, gives the following very interesting account of the people who lived upon this continent, before the birth of the Savior." After quoting Helaman 3:1-16, the paper stated, "In addition to the above, Nephi relates what took place at the crucifixion of the Lord, and should ruins of many cities be discovered, it would be no more than a confirmation of what was once on this land of the Lord." The paper then printed 3 Nephi 8:7 through 9:10. However, this linkage of the Book of Mormon to Central America seems to have had little effect on Joseph Smith for nearly a decade.

Before the 1840s, Joseph Smith made a few references to sites which he identified as scenes of ancient activity. He had, of course, claimed that a hill near Manchester, New York, where he uncovered the gold plates, was the hill where Moroni had buried the plates after the final battle between the Nephites and Lamanites. While Zion's Camp was traveling through Ohio in May 1834, Joseph, along with a number of other men, came to some thick woods, and he stated that he felt that a great battle had taken place there. A short distance further, they came upon "a mound sixty feet high, containing human bones" (Joseph Smith 1976, 2:66). Joseph also described what occurred about a month later, after they had crossed the Illinois River:

During our travels we visited several of the mounds which had been thrown up by the ancient inhabitants of this country--Nephites, Lamanites, etc., and this morning I went up on a high mound, near the river

On the top of the mound were stones which presented the appearance of three altars having been erected one above the other, according to the ancient order; and the remains of bones were strewn over the surface of the ground. The brethren procured a shovel and a hoe, and removing the earth to the depth of about one foot, discovered the skeleton of a man, almost entire, and between his ribs the stone point of a Lamanitish arrow, which evidently produced his death. Elder Burr Riggs retained the arrow. The contemplation of the scenery around us produced

peculiar sensations in our bosoms; and subsequently the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty, I discovered that the person whose skeleton was before us was a white Lamanite, a large, thick-set man, and a man of God. His name was Zelph. He was a warrior and chieftain under the great prophet Onandagus, who was known from the Hill Cumorah, or eastern sea to the Rocky mountains. The curse was taken from Zelph, or, at least, in part--one of his thigh bones was broken by a stone flung from a sling, while in battle, years before his death. He was killed in battle by the arrow found among his ribs, during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites. (Joseph Smith 1976, 2:79-80)

It should be noted that Joseph's tale bears strong resemblances to Plutarch's account of the wounding of Alexander the Great. Zelph was a warrior and chieftain, associated with the great prophet Onandagus; Alexander was also a great military leader and was accompanied by a seer named Aristander. One of Zelph's thigh bones had been broken by a stone years before, and Zelph died from an arrow, which was found among his ribs. Alexander's leg bone had also been broken by an arrow, and he nearly died from an arrow which was embedded between his ribs.

The story about Zelph presents a problem, because it has been published both with and without the words "Hill Cumorah." The handwritten copy, in fact, contains these words, but a line was drawn through them, leaving the text to read, "who was known from the eastern sea to the Rocky mountains." To complicate matters further, Joseph's history says both that his group had crossed to the west side of the Illinois River, and that Zelph was killed "during the last great struggle of the Lamanites and Nephites," which, according to the Book of Mormon, occurred at the hill Cumorah. Was Joseph identifying the high mound near the Illinois River as the hill Cumorah? If not, how could Zelph's remains have been discovered there, if the hill Cumorah was located in the state of New York, hundreds of miles to the east? In any case, it appears that we can at least state positively that Joseph placed the Nephites and the hill Cumorah somewhere in North America.

On 4 June 1834 Joseph and his company arrived on the banks of the Mississippi River, where he wrote a letter to his wife Emma, in which he once again identified the country as Nephite territory. He said that he passed away the time "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" (Joseph Smith 1984, 324).

The following year, Oliver Cowdery eliminated any uncertainty about the location of Cumorah. Oliver acted as Joseph's scribe during the translation of the Book of Mormon and was given the titles of "second elder" and "assistant president" of the church. The *Messenger and Advocate*, a Mormon newspaper published at Kirtland,

Ohio, printed a series of letters from Oliver, giving a history of the discovery of the gold plates. In Letter VII Oliver supplied the following information:

You are acquainted with the mail road from Palmyra, Wayne Co. to Canandaigua, Ontario Co. N. Y. and also, as you pass from the former to the latter place, before arriving at the little village of Manchester, say from three to four, or about four miles from Palmyra, you pass a large hill on the east side of the road. . . .

At about one mile west rises another ridge of less height, running parallel with the former, leaving a beautiful vale between. . . . here, between these hills, the entire power and national strength of both the Jaredites and Nephites were destroyed.

By turning to the 529th and 530th pages of the book of Mormon you will read Mormon's account of the last great struggle of his people, as they were encamped round this hill Cumorah. . . .

This hill, by the Jaredites, was called Ramah: by it, or around it, pitched the famous army of Coriantumr their tents. Coriantumr was the last king of the Jaredites. . . . In this same spot, in full view from the top of this same hill, one may gaze with astonishment upon the ground which was twice covered with the dead and dying of our fellowmen. (*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, July 1835)

The *Messenger and Advocate* printed another letter from W. W. Phelps in response to Cowdery, which reads: "Cumorah, the artificial hill of north America, is well calculated to stand in this generation, as a monument of marvelous works and wonders. Around that mount died millions of the Jaredites In that day, her inhabitants spread from sea to sea There, too, fell the Nephites" (*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, Nov. 1835). In a second letter, Phelps referred to another area as the land of the Book of Mormon: "What the design of our heavenly Father was or is, as to these vast prairies of the far west, I know no further than we have revelation. The Book of Mormon terms them the land of desolation" (*Latter Day Saints' Messenger and Advocate*, July 1836).

In May 1838 Joseph conferred the name Tower Hill on a site in Missouri, "in consequence of the remains of an old Nephitish Alter and Tower" that stood there (Joseph Smith 1989, 184). Three days later, he discovered some stone mounds, having a square shape, which, he said, "were made to seclude some valuable treasures deposited by the aborigonees of this land" (Joseph Smith 1989, 185). According to Paul Cheesman, Joseph also identified the Book of Mormon city of Manti as Huntsville, Randolph County, Missouri (Cheesman 1978, 25).

In addition, there is a document in the handwriting of Frederick G. Williams, one of

Joseph's counselors, which Mormon scholars have dated between the years 1836 and 1837. This paper, which gives a description of Lehi's journey to the New World, has been attributed to Joseph, possibly as a revelation.

The course that Lehi traveled from the city of Jerusalem to the place where he and his family took ship, 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 south east direction and landed on the continent of South America in Chili thirty degrees south of latitude. (Cheesman 1978, 22)

Another copy of this statement was made by John Bernhisel after Joseph Smith's death. Joseph's wife Emma allowed Bernhisel to make a copy of Joseph's revision of the Bible, and the last page of Bernhisel's manuscript contains an exact duplicate of the above description.

Considering how specific this statement is -- giving the degree of latitude for both the location where Lehi set sail and the place where he landed -- it seems much more likely that it was the inspiration of Orson Pratt than of Joseph Smith. Orson was one of the original Mormon apostles, an intelligent man who was interested in mathematics, astronomy, and surveying. In his biography of Orson Pratt, Breck England says that Orson was in Kirtland, Ohio, in October 1836: "Business left Orson with some leisure for study, and he relished the winter hours with his copy of 'Day's Algebra' and his astronomy readings Spurred by his mathematical exercises and his former acquaintance with surveying, he became interested in astronomy, musing on the stars with the new measuring tools made available to him in 'Day's Algebra'" (England 1985, 49). When the Mormons later made their trek from Illinois to Utah, it was Orson who measured the longitude and latitude of the route which they used.

In 1840, when Orson was laboring in the Scottish mission in Edinburgh, he published a pamphlet entitled *Interesting Account of Several Remarkable Visions and of the Late Discovery of Ancient American Records*. In this tract, he stated that Lehi's group was "safely brought across the great Pacific Ocean, and landed upon the western coast of South America." He also said that the righteous Nephites separated themselves from the wicked Lamanites and "emigrated towards the northern parts of South America, leaving the wicked nation in possession of the middle and southern parts of the same." The people of Zarahemla had, in the meantime, "landed in North America; soon after which they emigrated into the northern parts of South America," where they were discovered by the Nephites. In addition, he placed the Jaredites in North America. Furthermore, he stated that the final war between the Nephites and Lamanites "commenced at the Isthmus of Darien At length, the Nephites were driven before their enemies, a great distance to the north, and northeast They encamped on, and round about the hill Cumorah, where the records were found, which is in the State of New

York" (Pratt [1840] 1975, 473-77). Orson's scheme seems to agree with the Frederick G. Williams paper.

In 1839 John Lloyd Stephens and Frederick Catherwood had journeyed to Copan in Honduras, where they discovered some Mayan ruins. From there they traveled to Guatemala, Chiapas and Yucatan, uncovering more Mayan sites along the way. Stephens published an account of their discoveries in 1841 in a book entitled *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. The *Times and Seasons* first took note of Stephens and Catherwood on 15 June 1841, reprinting an account of lectures delivered in New York by Catherwood. In September 1841 John Bernhisel sent a copy of Stephens's book to Joseph Smith. On 16 November 1841 Joseph wrote to Bernhisel, stating that the book "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 histories that have been written pertaining to the antiquities of this country it is the most correct luminous & comprehensive" (Joseph Smith 1984, 502).

In February 1842 the *Millennial Star* ran an article with these headlines: "Ruins in Central America. Ancient Monument at Copan." This article was a reprint of a review of *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. At the conclusion of the article, the paper stated:

We publish the foregoing for the purpose of giving our readers some ideas of the antiquities of the Nephites--of their ancient cities, temples, monuments, towers, fortifications, and inscriptions now in ruin amid the solitude of an almost impenetrable forest; but fourteen hundred years since, in the days of Mormon, they were the abodes of thousands and millions of human beings, and the centre of civil and military operations unsurpassed in any age or country.

What a satisfaction it is for the lovers of intelligence to realize, that while the minds of Mr. Stephens and many others of the learned world have been and still are enveloped in mystery, impenetrable, dark, and drear on the subject of ancient America; and while they contemplate the ruins of a nation, whose very name they say is lost in oblivion, and whose history they say has not come down to us; we have their entire history,--their origin, laws, government, religion, wars, and lastly their destruction; lately discovered in their own hand-writing

The "mystery" which Mr. Stephens and the wise men of Babylon acknowledge themselves entirely unable to fathom, has, by a God in heaven that revealeth secrets, been opened, brought forth from amid the mouldering archives and sepulchral ruins of a nation and a country before unknown to the other parts of the world. It is a striking and

extraordinary coincidence, that, in the Book of Mormon, commencing page 563, 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 cotemporaries.

The very cities whose ruins are in his estimation without a name, are called in the Book of Mormon, "Tancum, Boaz, Jordan, Desolation," &c.

In September 1842 the *Times and Seasons* also heralded the *Incidents of Travel* as confirmation of the Book of Mormon and published long extracts from the book, concluding:

Let us turn our subject, however, to the Book of Mormon, where these wonderful ruins of Palenque are among the mighty works of the Nephites

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.

Who could have dreamed that twelve years would have developed such incontrovertible testimony to the Book of Mormon? (*Times and Seasons*, 15 Sept. 1842)

A second article in the paper entitled "Facts are Stubborn Things" stated 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 [Panama]" (*Times and Seasons*, 15 Sept. 1842). The following month, the paper declared: "Central America, or Guatemala, is situated north of the Isthmus of Darien The city of Zarahemla 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" (*Times and Seasons*, 1 Oct. 1842). The article went on to suggest that the ruins of Quirigua were those of the city of Zarahemla.

Orson Pratt said in August 1843 that the Book of Mormon gives a "history and names of cities that have been of late discovered by Catherwood and Stephens" (Joseph Smith 1976, 5:552).

In the *Millennial Star* (15 November 1848), Orson said that the Jaredites were the "first great nation that anciently inhabited Yucatan." He then continued:

The last great nation that inhabited that country and passed away, have also left their history, which was discovered, translated, and published in the English language nearly 20 years ago by Mr. Joseph Smith. . . . The Book of Mormon says that in the 367th year after Christ, 'the Lamanites'--the forefather of the American Indians--'took possession of the city of Desolation,'--which was in Central America, near to or in Yucatan . . . the Nephites being the nation who inhabited the cities of Yucatan In the 384th year, 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, where the whole nation perished in battle. (Cheesman 1978, 28)

In later years, however, Orson reverted to his original scheme. In a speech delivered in Salt Lake City on 27 December 1868, he said:

They [the Jaredites] landed to the south of this, just below the Gulf of California, on our western coast. They inhabited North America

After the destruction of the Jaredites, the Lord brought two other colonies to people this land. One colony landed a few hundred miles north of the Isthmus on the western coast; the other landed on the coast of Chili, upwards of two thousand miles south of them. The latter were called the Nephites and Lamanites. . . . Nephi and the righteous separated themselves from the Lamanites and traveled eighteen hundred miles north until they came to the head waters of what we term the Amazon river. There Nephi located his little colony in the country supposed to be Ecuador

... the Nephites fled again some twenty days' journey to the northward and united themselves with the people of Zarahemla (*Journal of Discourses* 1964, 12:341-42)

Orson reiterated his interpretation during another speech on 10 April 1870, and then two years later, on 11 February 1872, he elaborated the theory a bit further:

[The Nephites] came still further northward, emigrating from the head waters of what we now term the river Amazon, upon the western coast, or not far from the western coast, until they came on the waters of the river which we call the Magdalena. On this river, not a great distance from the mouth thereof, in what is now termed the United States of Columbia, they built their great capital city. They also discovered another nation that already possessed that country called the people of Zarahemla

The Nephites and the people of Zarahemla united together and formed a great and powerful nation, occupying the lands south of the Isthmus for many hundreds of miles, and also from the Pacific on the west to the Atlantic on the east, spreading all through the country. The Lamanites about this time also occupied South America, the middle or southern portion of it (*Journal of Discourses* 1964, 14:325-26)

Orson also stated, "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" (*Journal of Discourses* 1964, 14:325). Valparaiso is at latitude thirty-three degrees south; again, this fact seems to link Orson to the F. G. Williams paper. Orson also reaffirmed his belief that the Lamanites had pursued the Nephites all the way from the Isthmus of Darien to the hill Cumorah in the state of New York.

In 1879 Orson divided the Book of Mormon into chapters and verses and added marginal notes which interpreted the text in accordance with his geographical model. These notes stated that "the land of Nephi is supposed to have been in or near Ecuador, South America," and "the land of Zarahemla is supposed to have been north of the head waters of the river Magdalena, its northern boundary being a few days journey south of the Isthmus" (Lamb 1887, 311, 101). These notes were included in subsequent editions, until they were removed in 1920.

However, Brigham Young declared that the site for the St. George temple in Utah had previously been dedicated by the Nephites, while Moroni had dedicated the site for the Manti temple, also in Utah. According to Paul Cheesman, Brigham "also identified St. George as the site where the Gadianton robbers were found" (Cheesman 1978, 25).

It is apparent from the statements which Joseph Smith made between 1834 and 1838 that he had no conception of the geography of the Book of Mormon. He simply took whatever sites or artifacts which he happened to come upon as evidence of Nephite occupation. He never once mentioned either Central or South America, but referred to both Illinois and Missouri as Nephite lands. Although W. W. Phelps had linked the Book of Mormon to Central America in 1833, he continued to identify the land of Desolation with the "far west" and Cumorah with the hill in New York. Orson Pratt seems to have been the only one who recognized that the Book of Mormon outlines a very definite geography which cannot be disregarded. It is also evident that after the publication of John Lloyd Stephens's book, the official line which everyone, including Orson, was expected to support was that the Nephites lived in Central America. Nonetheless, Orson later had his own way and seems to have become the principal interpreter of Book of Mormon geography.

However, other people engaged in mapping the Nephite lands and theories proliferated, perhaps spurred on by the confusion resulting from statements which place Lehi's landing either in Chile or a little south of the Isthmus of Darien, while Zarahemla was either in Guatemala or Colombia. By 1890, there were so many different interpretations that George Q. Cannon, who was a member of the First Presidency, was forced to state: "When, as is the case, one student places a certain city at the Isthmus of Panama, a second in Venezuela, and a third in Guiana or northern Brazil, it is obvious that suggestive maps prepared by these brethren would confuse instead of enlighten For these reasons we have strong objections to the introduction of maps and their circulation among our people which profess to give the location of the Nephite cities and settlements" (Reynolds and Sjodahl 1958, 3:310).

For the most part, the traditional Mormon interpretation has embraced the broad view, holding that the Book of Mormon lands include most of North, Central, and South America. More recently, however, Mormon scholars have been quietly revising this view. They have realized that information presented in the Book of Mormon about distances traveled does not support the belief that such extensive territories were involved. Sydney Sperry, for example, says in the preface to *Book of Mormon Compendium*: "In this volume I have reversed my views, held many years ago, that the Hill Cumorah, around which the last great battles of the Nephites and Jaredites took place, was in the State of New York. The Book of Mormon data are very clear and show quite conclusively that the Hill (Ramah to the Jaredites) was in the land of Desolation, somewhere in Middle America" (Sperry 1968, 6). Fletcher Hammond also concluded that "no amount of juggling of the Book of Mormon text can place the hill Ramah-Cumorah in what is now New York state. It was somewhere in what is now Central America" (Cheesman 1978, 34).

Sorenson's Map

Nonetheless, there has been a diversity of opinion regarding the best location for the Book of Mormon lands. Territories which have been proposed have included southern Mexico and Guatemala, Yucatan, Costa Rica, and South America. It would not be possible to examine all of these theories here, but one of the latest is the view presented by John Sorenson in his book *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon*. Sorenson was chairman of the Department of Anthropology at Brigham Young University. A first reading of his book is quite impressive. In fact, three top Mormon scholars have endorsed Sorenson's work in the Foreword to the book: "It will become required reading for all people interested in the antiquity of the Book of Mormon. Those who comment on the historicity of Book of Mormon accounts henceforth are irresponsible or uninformed if they ignore or neglect Dr. Sorenson's present work" (Sorenson 1985, ix). Sorenson himself expresses confidence in his interpretation of Book of Mormon geography: "I am personally assured that the Nephite map is now known with quite high probability. Furthermore, no other map correlation will do; all others known to me contain fatal flaws" (Sorenson 1985, 47).

Readers of Sorenson's book may feel intimidated by his identification of Book of Mormon cities with specific archaeological sites. But, in fact, it is not necessary to know anything about Central American archaeology to assess Sorenson's scheme. What is required is that Sorenson's map agree with what the Book of Mormon tells us.

In simplest terms, the Book of Mormon describes a land northward and a land southward connected by a "small" or "narrow" neck of land. On Sorenson's map, this neck of land is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which lies between northern and southern Mexico: "The only 'narrow neck' potentially acceptable in terms of the Book of Mormon requirements is the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico. All LDS students of Book of Mormon geography who have worked systematically with the problem in recent decades have come to agree on this" (Sorenson 1985, 29-30).

The one and only river mentioned in the entire Book of Mormon is called the Sidon. It, therefore, is an important geographical indicator. Sorenson says that the river Sidon "flowed northward from Zarahemla." Concerning the headwaters of the Sidon, he states: "Its origin was deep in the wilderness above the highest Nephite city on the river, Manti (Alma 16:6). Zarahemla was downstream" (Sorenson 1985, 10, 23). On his map, Sorenson correlates the river Sidon with the Grijalva River, which originates in the highlands of Guatemala near the border with Mexico, on the Pacific or "western" side. It flows through southern Mexico and empties into the sea on the Caribbean or "eastern" side. Sorenson says further: "Manti was, of course, at the uppermost point of Nephite settlement on the Sidon. Immediately beyond it rose the headwaters of the Sidon in the wilderness that separated Nephite from Lamanite territory" (Sorenson 1985, 254).

The Book of Mormon also contains an index heading which reads: "Sidon, River--most prominent river in Nephite territory, runs north to sea." But, of course, this is the point to be proven. Does the river Sidon really flow northward?

Sorenson's description of the river Sidon seems to be based primarily on two references in the Book of Mormon. In one passage Alma says to Zoram, "Behold, the Lamanites will cross the river Sidon in the south wilderness, away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti. And behold there shall ye meet them, on the east of the river Sidon And it came to pass that Zoram and his sons crossed over the river Sidon, with their armies, and marched away beyond the borders of Manti into the south wilderness, which was on the east side of the river Sidon" (Alma 16:6-7). This establishes the fact that the river Sidon extended beyond Manti into the south wilderness, but it does not tell us in which direction the river flowed. A second passage refers to both Manti and the head of the Sidon. We are told that the territory of the Lamanites "was divided from the land of Zarahemla by a narrow strip of wilderness, which ran from the sea east even to the sea west, and round about on the borders of the seashore, and the borders of the wilderness which was on the north by the land of Zarahemla, through the borders of Manti, by the head of the river Sidon, running from the east towards the west--and thus were the Lamanites and the Nephites divided" (Alma 22:27). This passage is anything but clear. It could be interpreted to mean that the head of the river Sidon was near Manti. But, the subject of the sentence is the "narrow strip of wilderness," which ran from east to west, passing through the borders of Manti and by the head of the river Sidon, so that the head of the Sidon could be anywhere along the strip of wilderness, either on the east or on the west. We must, therefore, look for other clues.

In Alma 56, we learn that the Lamanites had captured some Nephite cities, including Manti, which were all located to the west of that stretch of the river Sidon which ran by Manti. Helaman was preventing the Lamanites from turning northward to attack Zarahemla: "Neither durst they march down against the city of Zarahemla; neither durst they cross the head of Sidon, over to the city of Nephihah" (Alma 56:25). The Book of Mormon very clearly places Nephihah on the east coast: "And thus he went on, taking possession of many cities, the city of Nephihah, and the city of Lehi, and the city of Morianton, and the city of Omner, and the city of Gid, and the city of Mulek, all of which were on the east borders by the seashore" (Alma 51:26). Thus, if the Lamanites had to cross the head of the river Sidon in order to reach Nephihah on the east coast, it seems that the head of the river would lie somewhere to the east of Manti, rather than south as Sorenson claims.

In Alma 43 the Lamanites had gathered in Antionum and were planning to attack Jershon, but were stopped by Moroni: "they durst not come against the Nephites in the borders of Jershon; therefore they departed out of the land of Antionum into the wilderness, and took their journey round about in the wilderness, away by the head

of the river Sidon, that they might come into the land of Manti and take possession of the land" (Alma 43:22). Again, the Book of Mormon clearly establishes the fact that Jershon was on the east coast: "Behold, we will give up the land of Jershon, which is on the east by the sea" (Alma 27:22). Another passage refers to both Jershon and Antionum: "Now the Zoramites had gathered themselves together in a land which they called Antionum, which was east of the land of Zarahemla, which lay nearly bordering upon the seashore, which was south of the land of Jershon, which also bordered upon the wilderness south, which wilderness was full of the Lamanites" (Alma 31:3). All of the "which" clauses apply to Antionum, because we know from other passages that Zarahemla lay in the center portion of the land. Helaman 1:27, for example, says, "they had come into the center of the land, and had taken the capital city which was the city of Zarahemla." Thus Alma 43:22 tells us that the Lamanites went from Antionum, near the east coast, through a wilderness which took them by the head of the river Sidon, and that they then continued in the direction of Manti. It would be reasonable to assume, therefore, that the head of the river was east of Manti. Sorenson indicates that the best route for the Lamanites to take after leaving Antionum was to follow the Usumacinta River and then approach Manti from the south. However, the Book of Mormon does not refer to another river. Sorenson also places Manti at the center of a confluence of two or three streams, so that it is surrounded on both the east and west by the river. The Book of Mormon, however, never mentions any river west of Manti.

Moroni was informed by Alma that the Lamanites were marching through the wilderness towards Manti. Alma had received this information from the Lord. Moroni left Jershon immediately and marched to Manti. Looking at Sorenson's map, we discover that Moroni would have to cross the Sidon/Grijalva twice before reaching Manti--once after leaving Jershon, and again before arriving at Manti. However, Alma 43 does not give any indication that Moroni had to cross the river Sidon anywhere between Jershon and Manti. His journey seems to have been very rapid and direct; in fact, he arrived at Manti ahead of the Lamanites.

Moroni then left Manti and took his men to a valley on the west bank of the river Sidon. The text describes the deployment of his men: "Therefore, he divided his army and brought a part over into the valley, and concealed them on the east, and on the south of the hill Riplah; and the remainder he concealed in the west valley, on the west of the river Sidon, and so down into the borders of the land Manti" (Alma 43:31-32). The Book of Mormon consistently uses the word "down" to mean "up" or "north," and the word "up" to mean "down" or "south." This corresponds to biblical usage. Thus, since Alma 43:22 says "and so down into the borders of the land Manti," we must conclude that Manti was slightly north of the valley. Now, if Sorenson is correct, the Lamanites should be approaching Manti from the south. But, the text clearly indicates that Moroni fully expected that the Lamanites would come into the valley from the north, because his men were placed on the east, south, and west, leaving the north open. And in fact, this is what

happened: "And it came to pass that the Lamanites came up on the north of the hill, where a part of the army of Moroni was concealed" (Alma 43:34). If the Lamanites had to cross the head of the river Sidon before arriving at Manti, as the text says, and if the head of the river was south of Manti, as Sorenson claims, then the Lamanites certainly would not come up on the north of the hill Riplah. But, the description in the text is fully consistent, if the head of the river was to the east of Manti.

Let us consider another passage from the Book of Alma: "And the land of Nephi did run in a straight course from the east sea to the west. . . . And thus he cut off all the strongholds of the Lamanites in the east wilderness, yea, and also on the west, fortifying the line between the Nephites and the Lamanites, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi, from the west sea, running by the head of the river Sidon--the Nephites possessing all the land northward" (Alma 50:8, 11). This passage seems to place the west sea and the head of the river Sidon at opposite ends of the line of fortifications, so that the head of the river would be near the east sea.

Thus, we seem to have established, as clearly as the text will allow, that the head of the river Sidon was east of Manti, not far from Nephihah, south of Antionum, and near the east sea. All of these bits of information are consistent with each other, and therefore, increase the probability of our conclusion.

As already noted, Sorenson says that the river Sidon flowed northward from Zarahemla, but this is a point which needs to be examined. The existence of a stretch of the river between Zarahemla and Manti is definitely indicated by the text. In addition to the passages already cited regarding the river near Manti, other references inform us that the river also flowed between Zarahemla and Gideon: "Alma . . . departed from them, yea, from the church which was in the city of Zarahemla, and went over upon the east of the river Sidon, into the valley of Gideon, there having been a city built, which was called the city of Gideon" (Alma 6:7). Alma 17:1 tells us further that Gideon was north of Manti: "as Alma was journeying from the land of Gideon southward, away to the land of Manti . . . he met with the sons of Mosiah journeying towards the land of Zarahemla."

The river Sidon is mentioned in connection with another city called Melek. Sorenson states: "Alma left Zarahemla, on the river Sidon, to preach in Melek on the west edge of the settled land (Alma 8:3-5). From there he turned northward, parallel to the west wilderness (Alma 22:27-28), to reach Ammonihah (Alma 8:6). This place, like Melek, was near the western periphery, as demonstrated by Alma 16:2 and 25:2" (Sorenson 1985, 21). Thus, Sorenson places both Melek and Ammonihah north of Zarahemla, near the west wilderness. The text, however, does not seem to support this.

Alma 8:3 says that Alma, who was in Zarahemla, "departed from thence and took his journey over into the land of Melek, on the west of the river Sidon, on the west

by the borders of the wilderness." Sorenson has made a subtle change here, placing Zarahemla on the river and Melek to the west. The text indicates, however, that Melek was on the west of the river Sidon and near the border of a wilderness, but it does not make clear what wilderness is being referred to. Alma 2 describes a battle between the Nephites and the Amlicites on the west bank of the Sidon, opposite the valley of Gideon. The Amlicites were routed: "And they fled before the Nephites towards the wilderness which was west and north, away beyond the borders of the land . . . they were scattered on the west, and on the north, until they had reached the wilderness, which was called Hermounts" (Alma 2:36-37). This indicates that there was a wilderness northwest of that part of the Sidon where the valley of Gideon was located. We know that the valley of Gideon was east of the Sidon, north of Manti, and south of Zarahemla. The wilderness of Hermounts should, therefore, be in the direction of Zarahemla, and Melek could thus be both near Zarahemla and the wilderness. But Hermounts does not seem to be the wilderness area which bordered the coast of the west sea.

The Book of Alma tells us that the people of Ammon, who were originally given Jershon to live in, were removed to Melek. Later the Lamanites launched a two-pronged attack, both on the east coast and on the west. From the west coast, the Lamanites pushed inland all the way to Manti, and in between, they captured the cities of Zeezrom, Cumeni, and Antiparah. Of these cities, Antiparah was apparently the farthest west, because Alma 56:31 says: "And we were to march near the city of Antiparah, as if we were going to the city beyond, in the borders by the seashore." This Lamanite attack so alarmed the people of Ammon, that a number of their young men took up arms and marched under the leadership of Helaman to the city of Judea. Judea was to the north of the captured cities, because Helaman says, "we kept spies out round about, to watch the movements of the Lamanites, that they might not pass us by night nor by day to make an attack upon our other cities which were on the northward" (Alma 56:22). Thus, we can assume that Melek, where the Ammonites lived, was also north of the captured cities, and probably north of Judea. But, in order to fix the position of Melek more accurately, we must consider its relationship to other cities.

Alma 8:6 says: "when he had finished his work at Melek he departed thence, and traveled three days' journey on the north of the land of Melek; and he came to a city which was called Ammonihah." Thus, Ammonihah is placed to the north of Melek, but we do not know whether it was directly north or to the east or west.

Sorenson cites two passages which he says demonstrate that Ammonihah was near the west wilderness. The first of these reads: "the armies of the Lamanites had come in upon the wilderness side, into the borders of the land, even into the city of Ammonihah" (Alma 16:2). This reference does not tell us where the wilderness was, but let us continue. The Lamanites also attacked a neighboring town called Noah and carried some captives into the wilderness. As we have seen, Alma told Zoram, "Behold, the Lamanites will cross the river Sidon in the south wilderness,

away up beyond the borders of the land of Manti. And behold there shall ye meet them, on the east of the river Sidon" (Alma 16:6). If Ammonihah was located north of Zarahemla on the western periphery, why would Zoram, who was apparently in Zarahemla, cross to the east side of the Sidon and march to the south wilderness to meet the Lamanites? This reference seems to prove that Ammonihah was actually to the east of Zarahemla.

Sorenson's second reference also does not demonstrate that Ammonihah was on the west. The Lamanites had crossed over from the land of Nephi to the land of Zarahemla: "But they took their armies and went over into the borders of the land of Zarahemla, and fell upon the people who were in the land of Ammonihah and destroyed them" (Alma 25:2). This really tells us little about the location of Ammonihah, but there is again an indication that it may have been in the eastern half of the land. Many of the invading Lamanites were slain, but the survivors "fled into the east wilderness" (Alma 25:5). Would they have fled into the east wilderness, if Ammonihah was far to the west? This passage, like the previous one, also seems to indicate that Ammonihah was not a great distance from the southern boundary, since the Lamanites had come from the land of Nephi in the south. Therefore, Ammonihah, it seems, could not be north of Zarahemla.

The Book of Mormon establishes a chain of interconnections between Ammonihah and other cities. Alma 8:13 says that Alma departed from Ammonihah "and took his journey towards the city which was called Aaron." Alma 50:14 says further: "And they also began a foundation for a city between the city of Moroni and the city of Aaron, joining the borders of Aaron and Moroni; and they called the name of the city, or the land, Nephihah." Thus, there is a clear progression from Ammonihah to Moroni.

Sorenson claims that the cities of Ammonihah, Aaron, Nephihah, and Moroni "stretched west to east across the land north of Zarahemla" (Sorenson 1985, 21). In fact, Sorenson's map places Nephihah and Moroni far to the north of Zarahemla. But, Moroni, we are told, "was by the east sea; and it was on the south by the line of the possessions of the Lamanites" (Alma 50:13). Thus, Moroni was near the southern boundary which separated the Lamanites from the Nephites, and we have already seen that the line ran from west to east, passing by Manti and the head of the river Sidon, which, even on Sorenson's map, are south of Zarahemla.

In addition, Alma 56:25, which states that the Lamanites, who had captured Manti, did not dare to "cross the head of Sidon, over to the city of Nephihah," indicates that Nephihah was east of Manti, and Manti was indisputably south of Zarahemla. Another reference establishes a relationship between Nephihah and Manti. Alma 59 says that people from the cities of Moroni, Lehi, and Morianton had fled to Nephihah and were being attacked by the Lamanites: "Yea, even those who had been compelled to flee from the land of Manti, and from the land round about, had come over and joined the Lamanites in this part of the land" (Alma 59:6). This

seems to suggest that Nephihah, like Manti, was in the southern portion of the land of Zarahemla.

Sorenson justifies placing Nephihah and Moroni northeast of Zarahemla by saying that the south wilderness stretched all the way around from their location in the northeast to Manti in the south. However, in order to maintain Antionum's position east of Zarahemla, Sorenson is forced to place that city below the line which separated Moroni from Lamanite territory, so that Antionum is not only south of both Nephihah and Moroni, but also in the south wilderness.

It is true that Alma 31:3 states that Antionum "bordered upon the wilderness south, which wilderness was full of the Lamanites." But, we must determine what constituted the wilderness south when this statement was made. The cities of Nephihah and Moroni did not exist at this time. The text says that "there were many Lamanites on the east by the seashore, whither the Nephites had driven them. And thus the Nephites were nearly surrounded by the Lamanites; nevertheless the Nephites had taken possession of all the northern parts of the land bordering on the wilderness, at the head of the river Sidon, from the east to the west" (Alma 22:29). A number of years later, Moroni cleared all of the Lamanites out of the east wilderness.

Moroni caused that his armies should go forth into the east wilderness; yea, and they went forth and drove all the Lamanites who were in the east wilderness into their own lands, which were south of the land of Zarahemla. . . . And thus he cut off all the strongholds of the Lamanites in the east wilderness, yea, and also on the west, fortifying the line between the Nephites and the Lamanites, between the land of Zarahemla and the land of Nephi, from the west sea, running by the head of the river Sidon--the Nephites possessing all the land northward (Alma 50:7-11)

It was at this time that the cities of Moroni and Nephihah were built to fortify the east wilderness, which had been taken from the Lamanites. This territory had not been included in the land of Zarahemla previously.

In order to determine what Alma 31:3 means by the wilderness south, we have to consider that at this time the Nephites possessed all of the land north of the head of the river Sidon, except the east wilderness, and we have determined that the head of the Sidon was near the east sea. If Antionum was east of Zarahemla, as Alma 31:3 says, there does not seem to be any part of the land which could be referred to as the wilderness south except the coastal area between the Sidon river and the sea, where the Lamanites had been driven by the Nephites. We must assume, then, that Antionum was actually north of this area, and that the boundary line south of Moroni was established later, after the Lamanites were expelled. Thus, Sorenson is wrong in placing Antionum south of the dividing line, and in fact, it must have been

north of Moroni. Furthermore, since we have already determined that the head of the river Sidon was near Nephihah and south of Antionum, Nephihah should also be south of Antionum.

Thus, the text firmly fixes the location of Moroni and Nephihah southeast of Zarahemla, and since Nephihah was between Moroni and Aaron, and Aaron was near Ammonihah, it is difficult to see how Ammonihah could possibly be north of Zarahemla and on the western periphery, as Sorenson claims. We have seen, in fact, that all of the textual references indicate that Ammonihah was east of Zarahemla, and since Melek was three days south of Ammonihah, it surely could not be north of Zarahemla.

Melek, as we have seen, was on the west of the river Sidon. Ammonihah is also linked to that part of the river which passed by Manti, because Zoram crossed the river in pursuit of the Lamanites who had departed from Ammonihah and Noah. The route which the Lamanites traveled from Noah suggests that they went along the west bank of the river Sidon, until they crossed to the east side south of Manti. But, if Ammonihah was east of Zarahemla and the Lamanites remained on the west bank of the river while traveling south, this would imply that the Sidon bent around south of Ammonihah, rather than continuing on north of Zarahemla. Otherwise, the Lamanites would have had to cross from the east bank to the west after leaving Ammonihah, and then cross again from the west bank to the east after passing Manti. A bend in the river south of Ammonihah is also indicated by the fact that Moroni did not have to cross the river on his march from Jershon to Manti. It does not appear then that the river Sidon extended north of Zarahemla, as Sorenson claims.

Thus, if the head of the river Sidon was in the east, approximately on a line with Manti, as we have already determined, the river must have flowed northward for a distance, passing by Nephihah, and then turned west in the direction of Zarahemla. It would have flowed to the south of Ammonihah before bending around southward to pass by Gideon and Manti. Beyond Manti, it must have extended into the south wilderness, and thence into the sea. The river would, therefore, be somewhat like an upside down horseshoe in shape.

There is another matter concerning the Sidon which we should consider. When Moroni was battling the Lamanites along the Sidon near Manti, the text says that "they did cast their dead into the waters of Sidon, and they have gone forth and are buried in the depths of the sea" (Alma 44:22). We are never told where the river emptied into the sea, but if the bodies floated downstream from Manti, it seems that it could not be a very great distance. If we identify the Sidon with the Grijalva River, however, the bodies would have to drift nearly 300 miles before being discharged into the sea, which seems very improbable.

The picture of the river Sidon which we have derived from the text does not agree

in any respect with the Grijalva River in Mexico. Sorenson's river originates in the south wilderness, flows northward past Manti and Zarahemla, and then bends around south of Nephihah and Moroni in the northeast and empties into the east sea. We, however, have determined that the river Sidon actually originates near the east sea, southeast of Zarahemla near Nephihah and Moroni, bends around to the west, and then heads south, passing by Gideon and Manti, and flows through the south wilderness to the sea.

Another discrepancy between Sorenson's map and the text is the placement of Minon. Sorenson locates Minon north of Manti, but the text indicates that it was in the land of Nephi. Alma 2 describes a battle between the Amlicites and Alma's forces near the hill Amnihu, east of the river Sidon. The Nephites pursued the Amlicites for a whole day and then pitched camp in the valley of Gideon. Alma sent out spies, who returned the following day and said, "in the land of Minon, above the land of Zarahemla, in the course of the land of Nephi, we saw a numerous host of the Lamanites" (Alma 2:24). The valley of Gideon, we know, was north of Manti, but Alma's spies had followed the Amlicites south ("above the land of Zarahemla") to Minon, "in the course of the land of Nephi." If Minon were north of Manti, it would be in the land of Zarahemla.

Apparently, the Amlicites had crossed to the west of the river, because the text says that when Alma's people left the valley of Gideon and crossed the river to the west bank, the Amlicites and Lamanites, who were rushing back northward, came upon them. Therefore, Minon must have been west of the Sidon and close to the border separating the land of Zarahemla from the land of Nephi.

Thus, there is a definite lack of agreement between the text and Sorenson's map of the land of Zarahemla. He is unable to identify the one major river in the Book of Mormon, and his placement of the cities of Melek, Ammonihah, Aaron, Nephihah, Moroni, Antionum, and Minon seems to be entirely wrong. And, as we shall see, there are other problems with Sorenson's description of the land of Nephi.

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