

JUMPING OUT OF THE TRADITIONAL BOX

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Hence we say, that the Constitution of the United States is a glorious standard; it is founded in the wisdom of God. It is a heavenly banner; it is to all those who are privileged with the sweets of liberty, like the cooling shades and refreshing waters of a great rock in a thirsty and weary land. It is like a great tree under whose branches men from every clime can be shielded from the burning rays of the sun... We say that God is true; that the Constitution of the United States is true; that the Bible is true.¹

—Joseph Smith Jr.

Because the Church has taken no position on Book of Mormon geography, it opens the door for multiple opinions and positions to be presented and accepted based on chosen sources. Many have been criticized for believing that the statements of Joseph Smith are relevant and revelatory when it comes to Book of Mormon geography. The fact that one might agree with the statements of Joseph Smith on geography does not mean that the Church or its leadership are wrong, nor is any individual who may support any other theory. Because of the belief that Joseph Smith knew what he said about Book of Mormon geography by revelation, rather than guessing, some have made the accusation that this belief in the words of Joseph about geography is tantamount to ‘steadying the ark’ or trying to correct the church.² This is not written with any pretension to correct or even suggest that the church or church leaders, in any position, need be corrected.

Those who choose to accept positions and theories contrary to the premise of this article or the statements of Joseph Smith on the Book of Mormon geography are not to be considered more or less faithful than any another member. Any statement of Joseph Smith (outside of canonized scripture) can be taken as fact or fiction, revelation or guesswork, by anyone—member and non-member alike. However, scripture is scripture. Steve Carr, vice president for the Book of Mormon Archaeological Forum (a forum supporting a Mesoamerican setting), stated in *The Salt Lake Tribune* that the statements Joseph Smith made about Book of Mormon geography should be considered invalid because, “He (Joseph Smith) was just guessing like a lot of other people.” Carr continued speaking of Joseph Smith’s statements and those who accept the Prophet’s statements on geography by saying, “A lot of things they take as revelation are just ideas, not revelation at all.”³

¹ *TPJS*, 147–48.

² *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 26, 2010, “Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy.” See also *Mormon Times*, “The Fight over Book of Mormon Geography,” Michael De Groote, 27 May 2010. Scott Gordon, president of FAIR, states, “We view this as a steadying-of-the-ark issue. We really don’t care where he picks for his theory on where the Book of Mormon can take place,” Gordon said. “What we care about is that he is implying that the church is not following the teachings of Joseph Smith. Which means the church leadership, the prophet—everything is not following. And we think that is a very, very dangerous position.”

³ *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 26, 2010, “Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy.”

This work has no agenda to prove or disprove a setting for the Book of Mormon. There is no vested interest of income or expenditure in the acceptance of one theory over another by this research and application. Where an individual might want to believe the setting of the Book of Mormon took place is of no matter. However, as the author, I am interested in the scriptures themselves and in the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Loyalties lie nowhere else. The ideas presented in this work reflect the author's opinion and interpretation of the scriptures and sources reviewed.

There are two things often omitted from a discussion centering on the Mesoamerican setting for the Book of Mormon. These are *first*, the actual statements of Joseph Smith, for the reader to make conclusion on their own; and *second*, a discussion of the prophecies and promises of the text about the Gentiles on the promised land. Instead, almost all discussion supporting the Mesoamerica setting is centered in the geographical interpretations and ruins found in that area.

Many people who have read the Book of Mormon experience the feelings and thoughts that the prophecies presented in the text about the “Gentile nation” that will come upon the “promised land” pertains to North America or the United States. When the prophecies about the “Gentiles who come out of captivity” and their “mother Gentiles” who will battle against them on land and on the sea are read, virtually every reader and *every* commentary agree that this is speaking about the Revolutionary War in North America. Yet our minds are conditioned by the conclusions of LDS authors to immediately think that the Book of Mormon took place in Central America and is limited to the Yucatan Peninsula. Of course, the argument that Central America is part of North America is valid to a point. However, the Book of Mormon speaks of a “Gentile *nation*” which seemingly places limitations which could be borders, boundaries, or perhaps even governments, on the prophecies of the land discussed within the text, rather than expanding the term “Gentile nation” to a hemispherical size to justify theory.

The accepted scholarly view today is that all of the Book of Mormon history has taken place within the general confines of Guatemala and the Yucatan Peninsula. This conclusion is founded on an intellectual exercise and conclusion—not by the indications of scripture and documented statements of Joseph Smith. Assertions recently published on this subject declare that “DNA scientists can be confident that all or part of Mesoamerica was where the Nephite and Lamanite peoples took on their historical identities and where their history recorded in The Book of Mormon was played out.”⁴ This restricted geographical theory is called the “Limited Geography Theory” (LGT) which can be found in many of the recent articles and books published.⁵ Because the major premise of this theory is that all of the Book of Mormon history took place in Mesoamerica—and in particular the Guatemala area—a second, but necessary, conjecture was created to align church history and the gold plates that were obtained in New York by Joseph Smith. This defensive invention is called the “Two Cumorah Theory,” which seems to be an attempt to legitimize a speculation that is divorced from the scriptural and historical accounts.

Many Latter-day Saints have been preconditioned to believe—if nothing else by the plethora of articles and books about the Mayan ruins of Guatemala—that Mesoamerica was the setting for the Book of Mormon. This tradition has found its way into Mormon art and audio visual productions, pamphlets, pictures and print, which just enforces the trained acceptance of a theory, without question, reservation, or research. John E. Clark, an anthropologist at Brigham

⁴ John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper article: “Before DNA,” *The Book of Mormon and DNA Research*, edited by Daniel C. Peterson, [Provo Utah, Brigham Young University, 2008], 32.

⁵ *Ibid.* John L. Sorenson and Matthew Roper, “Before DNA,” *Journal of Book of Mormon Studies* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2003), 3. Reprinted and available on fairlds.org

Young University, dismisses any setting other than a Mesoamerica theory with a humorous, yet common, intellectual attitude toward new information by stating that any North American theory “has almost nothing going for it” even though he admits that he ‘hasn’t spent much time analyzing’ it.⁶ The belief in Mesoamerica as a setting is founded on an intellectual endeavor and theory rather than a textual conclusion based in scripture. Of course, those who espouse the Mesoamerica theory use, as a scriptural base, the geographical passages found in the Book of Mormon to aid and legitimize conclusions that connect them to the natural geography of Central America.

John L. Sorenson noted in particular the difficulties both he and others encountered while undertaking the task of using scriptures to determine a setting for the Book of Mormon:

Of course it is [a] truism that studies of an ancient text should begin with the text itself. Yet most studies in fact neither begin nor end so...My own book [from 1955] cites Book of Mormon verses over 960 times. But even so many citations does not mean the text is “speaking for itself.” For *who can doubt that I chose those verses and the interpretations I provided for them while omitting others. Other people too have chosen their verses and their interpretations.* We cannot get far if mere opinion determines which set of verses we rely on, whether it is 1000 or 10.

We need instead to *use the entire scripture, without exception.* Selectivity should be avoided like the plague. We must understand, interpret and deal successfully with *every statement in the text*, not just what is convenient or interesting to us. That can only be done, I believe, by doing our level best to approach the words of the Book of Mormon *having to do with geography without preconceptions.* I admit that my own (1955) model was tainted by preconceptions. So has everybody else’s been.⁷

Brother Sorenson correctly concluded in the statement above that the researcher should “*use the entire scripture without exception*” and review “*every statement in the text.*” However, Sorenson then limits those passages to those “*having to do with geography,*” which will lead to a geographical conclusion or determination that can only be based on a personal decision and personal interest. The fact that there are over 150 different maps created by researchers using *the same geographical passages* should be proof enough that this method is inadequate for the determination of a physical setting for the Book of Mormon. Every researcher has their own individual set of “filters” through which they view things. Filters strain and restrict the ability to see and process new information and analyze new concepts. The filters, whatever they might be (where one served a mission, monumental ruins, landscapes, tradition, training and education, etc.) could create a personal and particular view on everything encountered, including passages of scripture. As history and scripture has taught over and over again, the darkest and most blinding filter is often one of tradition (see Matthew 15:3–9; Mark 7:8, 13; Colossians 2:8; D&C 93:39).

Without question, the geographical passages cannot stand alone as conclusive evidence for *any* geographical determination for a setting of the Book of Mormon. George Q. Cannon, a member of the First Presidency, wrote the following in the *Juvenile Instructor*:

...the brethren who lecture on the lands of the Nephites or the geography of the Book of Mormon are not united in their conclusions. *No two of them, so far as we have*

⁶ *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 26, 2010, “Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy.”

⁷ John L. Sorenson, *The Geography of Book of Mormon Events*, [Provo; FARMS, BYU, 1990], 209–210.

learned, are agreed on all points, and in many cases the variations amount to tens of thousands of miles...

How is it that there is such a variety of ideas on this subject? *Simply because the Book of Mormon is not a geographical primer. It was not written to teach geographical truths.* What is told us of the situation of the various lands or cities of the ancient Jaredites, Nephites, and Lamanites is usually simply an incidental remark connected with the doctrinal or historical portions of the work; and almost invariably only extends to a statement of the relative position of some land or city to contiguous or surrounding places, *and nowhere gives us the exact situation or boundaries so that it can be definitely located without fear of error.*⁸

Current scholarship has taken the ruins of the Mayan civilization and then made geographical connections based on the interpretation of ‘geographical passages’ in the text as a primary source or witness for the theory of Mesoamerica. The archaeological remains and the ‘geographical passages’ have been used to make an interpretative determination of a setting to the neglect of the many other prophecies and promises found within the text. These are *prophetic passages* that define and discuss the “Gentile nation” that will exist upon the same land to which Lehi was led. It is by these prophecies that we begin to see a connection with the Book of Mormon and the United States. But first, a discussion about the statements that Joseph Smith made on the subject of Book of Mormon geography is needed.

An in-depth discussion of the words of Joseph Smith, and a defense for a possible setting for the Book of Mormon, will not be an endeavor of this work. The object here is to present as concise as possible the statements that Joseph Smith made, including the reports of those who were closest to him. For those who would like to expand the discussion of a setting other than Mesoamerica, founded on the textual evidence of scripture and the words of Joseph Smith, the reader would be referred to a previous work entitled *Prophecies and Promises*.⁹

Joseph Smith and Book of Mormon Geography

The Prophet Joseph Smith’s views and beliefs about the geography of the Book of Mormon can be learned from his ‘documented’ statements that are recorded in journals, and accounts prepared and published by him, and later by the Church. These accounts give substantial clues to his knowledge on this matter which are directly connected to the Gentile prophecies and promises found in the Book of Mormon. There are articles in the *Times and Seasons* that reflect a Central American setting which many attribute to Joseph Smith, even though there not a consensus among scholars about the authorship, nor is there any documentation about the articles’ author or origin. These will not be presented here, as this work will seek to use sources of which there is no question. There are two key concepts espoused pertaining to the statements of Joseph Smith in the extensive amount of geographical discussion that has taken place over the years by Mesoamerican theorists. These concepts are presented by John L. Sorensen and have become the foundation upon which others rely. They are:

One, Joseph just didn’t know, or was unaware of the geography of the Book of Mormon,

⁸ George Q. Cannon, “The Book of Mormon Geography,” *Juvenile Instructor*, 25:1 (1 January 1890), 18–19.

⁹ Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum, *Prophecies and Promises*, [New York:Digital Legend Press, 2009].

Two, he never claimed inspiration on the matter of geography.¹⁰

For this reason, the statements made by Joseph Smith will be presented for the reader to make his own determination and textual judgment. The statements of Joseph will be organized in a chronological manner for a better understanding of the prophet's beliefs.

This chapter is not meant to be an exhaustive study on the Prophet's statements that might outline arguments for, or against, any one geographical theory. Nor is it intended to debate the implied meaning or authorship of the accounts reviewed.

The "authority" of scripture—prophet, person, or law—in a person's life is completely dependent on the reader or listener's acceptance or rejection of that authority. Likewise, the scriptures have no authority in anyone's life unless the individual gives scripture that authority. Nor do the words of a prophet, modern or ancient, have any authority or bearing in someone's life unless the decision is made to accept the prophet and his own words as authoritative. Likewise, the decision must be made by the individual to accept or reject the statements Joseph Smith made about a setting for the Book of Mormon.

"This Continent"

The Prophet Joseph wrote that when the ancient prophet Moroni appeared, he taught Joseph about a book "written upon gold plates." Joseph was told by this angelic messenger sent from God that this record gave an account of the "former inhabitants of *this continent*" (JS–History 1:34). Granted, to some readers the words "this continent" could mean the whole hemisphere, and to others it might be just North America, which would include everything from Canada to Panama. Joseph was in North America at the time this experience occurred, so North America would be the logical conclusion for the meaning of "continent." However, to infer that it was meant to specifically include Mesoamerica is somewhat of a stretch, as will be seen as the other statements of Joseph are reviewed.

Lucy Mack Smith

The earliest account of the life of Joseph Smith and the events that surrounded the Smith family during the prophet's youth are recorded by his mother, Lucy Mack Smith. She described the family gatherings when young Joseph rehearsed those things that he had *learned from the Lord and the messengers* sent to teach him of this great work. It is important to remember that the timing of this account is after the "First Vision" but before the retrieval of the plates by Joseph from the hill Cumorah.

From this time forth, *Joseph continued to receive instructions from the Lord*, and we continued to get the children together every evening for the purpose of listening while he gave us a relation of the same...

During our evening conversations, Joseph would occasionally give us some of the most amusing recitals that could be imagined. He would describe *the ancient inhabitants of this continent*, their dress, mode of traveling, and the animals upon which they rode; their cities, their buildings, with every particular; their mode of warfare; and also their

¹⁰ John L. Sorenson, *An Ancient American Setting for the Book of Mormon* [Salt Lake City and Provo:Deseret Book Co., Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1985], 1. "The historical sources give no indication that Moroni's instructions to young Joseph Smith included geography, nor did Joseph Smith claim inspiration on the matter. Ideas he later expressed about the location of events reported in the book apparently reflected his own best thinking."

religious worship. *This he would do with as much ease, seemingly, as if he had spent his whole life among them.*¹¹

Joseph Smith's mother stated that he "*continued to receive instructions from the Lord*" and she described that his insights and inspiration were as though "he had spent his *whole life among*" those who were the "ancient inhabitants of *this continent*." There is not another person, anthropologist, or archaeologist, then or now, who would know more about the details of the day-to-day life of the Nephite and Lamanite cultures than Joseph Smith.

Mission to the Lamanites

As revealed in the Title Page of the Book of Mormon, this record was to be taken to the "remnant" of the seed of Lehi—to convince them that Jesus is the Christ. Almost as soon as the Book of Mormon was published and the church was organized, the Lord instructed Joseph that this book and gospel was to be taken to the Lamanites. The Lord, through the Prophet Joseph, instructed Oliver Cowdery to "go unto the Lamanites" and that he [Oliver] would receive revelations about this important mission to the Lamanites but that he was not to write them down as part of the latter-day revelations and commandments. The logical assumption is that the Lord knew where the Lamanites were located and also where a "remnant" of Lehi would remain upon the land.

And now, behold, I say unto you that you shall *go unto the Lamanites* and preach my gospel unto them; and inasmuch as they receive thy teachings thou shalt cause my church to be established among them; and thou shalt have revelations, but write them not by way of commandment. (D&C 28:8)

Using the same logical assumption that the Lord knew the location of these people, the Savior later instructed Joseph and the brethren that the city of Zion should be built on the border by the Lamanites, and that they were to take their journey among the Lamanites.

And now, behold, I say unto you that it is not revealed, and no man knoweth where the *city Zion shall be built*, but it shall be given hereafter. Behold, I say unto you that it shall be *on the borders by the Lamanites*.

And thou shalt assist to settle all these things, according to the covenants of the church, before thou shalt take thy journey among the Lamanites. (D&C 28:9, 14)

In the same month the Lord instructed that Peter Whitmer and Oliver Cowdery were to assist as the first missionaries to take the gospel and words of the record to the Lamanites as declared by Christ in 3 Nephi. The exact location of this mission was given by instruction and revelation from the Lord a short time later.

Behold, I say unto you, Peter, that you shall take your journey with your brother Oliver; for the time has come that it is expedient in me that you shall open your mouth to declare my gospel; therefore, fear not, but give heed unto the words and advice of your brother, which he shall give you.

And be you afflicted in all his afflictions, ever lifting up your heart unto me in prayer and faith, for his and your deliverance; for I have given unto him power to *build up my church among the Lamanites*; (D&C 30:5–6)

¹¹ Lucy Mack Smith, *History of Joseph Smith by His Mother* [Salt Lake City:Stevens & Wallis, Inc., 1945], 82.

In October 1830, two more missionaries were called to assist in the teaching of the Lamanites. This first missionary force now had the addition of Parley P. Pratt, Ziba Peterson, and the Lord Himself as a companion among the Lamanite remnant they were to teach.

And now concerning my servant Parley P. Pratt, behold, I say unto him that as I live I will that he shall declare my gospel and learn of me, and be meek and lowly of heart.

And that which I have appointed unto him is that he shall go with my servants, Oliver Cowdery and Peter Whitmer, Jun., *into the wilderness among the Lamanites.*

And Ziba Peterson also shall go with them; and *I myself will go with them and be in their midst*; and I am their advocate with the Father, and nothing shall prevail against them.

And they shall give heed to that which is written, and pretend to no other revelation; and they shall pray always that I may unfold the same to their understanding. (D&C 32:1–4)

The four missionaries—Parley P. Pratt, Oliver Cowdery, Peter Whitmer, Jr., and Ziba Peterson—left immediately upon the Lord’s instruction and commenced the very first mission of the church west of New York “into the wilderness *among the Lamanites.*” The *History of the Church* described the events of this Lamanite mission after these revelations were received in these words:

Immediately on receiving this revelation, preparations were made for the journey of the brethren therein designated, to the *borders of the Lamanites*, and a copy of the revelation was given them. They bade adieu to their brethren and friends, and commenced their journey...¹²

The mission to the Lamanites as declared and described by the Lord in the Doctrine and Covenants clearly reflects that Joseph sent the missionaries to the exact areas that the Lord had revealed and directed. Also, the scriptures imply that not only were they Native Americans on this continent, but they were also a remnant of the seed of Lehi—described by the Lord as “Lamanites” in the Book of Mormon and Doctrine and Covenants.¹³

Parley P. Pratt also spoke of this first mission to the Lamanites in these words, even listing the names of the Native American tribes to which he was sent to preach the gospel:

Thus ended our first Indian Mission, in which we had preached the gospel in its fulness, and distributed the record of *their forefathers* among three tribes, viz: the Catteraugus Indians, near Buffalo, N. Y., the Wyandots of Ohio, and the Delawares west of Missouri. We trust that at some future day, when the servants of God go forth in

¹² *History of the Church* 1:120.

¹³ The writers of the articles at fairlds.org have concluded that perhaps these revelations were not directly from the Lord but just Joseph’s choice of words and therefore cannot be taken at face value without secondary interpretation. FAIR wrote, “Many readers assume that revelations in the Doctrine and Covenants in which Joseph Smith speaks in ‘God’s voice’ are direct ‘quotations’ from God. Joseph didn’t claim to be hearing a voice, and he didn’t claim to be quoting God or ‘taking dictation.’ Rather, impressions would come to him, which he would put into words. Joseph clearly did not consider them ‘direct quotations’ from God, since he was quite happy to revise them, edit them later, etc. ...This means that ‘Lamanites’ to describe the American Indians was Joseph’s word choice.” It would appear that there is a need by FAIR to maintain a legitimacy for the Limited Geography Theory (LGT) by also writing, “The few personal statements he [Joseph] made on Book of Mormon geography indicate that he believed it took place on a hemispheric scale, so it would be natural for him to believe that all Native Americans were pure descendants of Laman, and hence were literal ‘Lamanites.’” See http://en.fairmormon.org/Lamanites_in_the_Doctrine_and_Covenants accessed 3/4/2009.

power to the remnant of Joseph, some precious seed will be found growing in their hearts, which was sown by us in that early day.¹⁴

Elder Pratt walked about “fifteen hundred miles” and preached the “gospel to tens of thousands of Gentiles and two nations of Indians.”¹⁵ The Lord knew, and therefore Joseph knew, where the Lamanites were located and that a remnant was left in order to fulfill the prophecies and promises that are revealed in the Book of Mormon. There is no indication in church history to think that these men did not preach to the “Lamanites,” as directed by the Lord.

The Wentworth Letter

In 1841, at the request of John Wentworth, Joseph Smith wrote a letter describing the rise of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and a proclamation of the basic beliefs that would distinguish the Church from other religious factions. It is from this letter that the Thirteen Articles of Faith are canonized, as well as parts of the First Vision and the Joseph Smith History. The Wentworth Letter was written in Joseph’s own words and signed by him personally before it was sent.

The statements below clearly relate “this country” [that is, where Joseph is at the time] to “this continent” and the inhabitants and prophets who lived there. Again, the interpretation is left with two distinct possibilities. One is that “this country” and “this continent” are linked, as Joseph implies, to the same area. Another meaning is often construed from these statements to be a hemispherical setting, while linking the word ‘continent’ to all of North America, including Mesoamerica. The latter interpretation is necessary to help legitimize the intellectual endeavor that supports Mesoamerica as a setting for the Book of Mormon.

It is important to note that the statements of Joseph contained in this letter also testify of his inspiration and the revelations on matters pertaining not only to the record and the history of the people, but also the land where it took place.

On the evening [of] the 21st of September, a.d. 1823, while *I was praying unto God and endeavoring to exercise faith in the precious promises of scripture, on a sudden a light like that of day, only of a far purer and more glorious appearance and brightness, burst into the room.* Indeed the first sight was as though the house was filled with consuming fire. The appearance produced a shock that affected the whole body. *In a moment a personage stood before me, surrounded with a glory yet greater than that with which I was already surrounded. This messenger proclaimed himself to be an angel of God, sent to bring the joyful tidings that the covenant which God made with ancient Israel was at hand to be fulfilled...I was informed that I was chosen to be an instrument in the hands of God to bring about some of His purposes in this glorious dispensation.*

I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country [America] and shown who they were, and from whence they came; a brief sketch of their origin, progress, civilization, laws, governments, of their righteousness and iniquity, and the blessings of God being finally withdrawn from them as a people, was [also] made known unto me; I was also told where were deposited some plates on which were engraven an abridgment of the records of the ancient prophets that had existed on this continent.

¹⁴ *Autobiography of Parley P. Pratt*, 56–61. See also Andrew Jensen, *The Historical Record*, Vol. 7, 1888, 389.

¹⁵ Andrew Jensen, *The Historical Record*, Vol. 7, 1888, 387.

In this important and interesting book *the history of ancient America is unfolded*, from its first settlement by a colony that came from the Tower of Babel at the confusion of languages to the beginning of the fifth century of the Christian era. *We are informed by these records that...The remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country.* This book also tells us *that our Savior made His appearance upon this continent after His Resurrection; that He planted the gospel here in all its fulness...*¹⁶

The Prophet revealed in the above quote that the remnants of the people in the Book of Mormon are the “Indians that now inhabit *this country*” [not all natives in the western hemisphere]. The Prophet Joseph then continued with the statement that “*this book* also tells us that our Savior made *His appearance upon this continent* after His resurrection; that He planted the Gospel *here.*”¹⁷

In 1833 Joseph Smith sent the following letter to N. C. Saxton, the editor of a Rochester, New York newspaper, which was written, as Joseph Smith later indicated, “by the commandment of God.”

The Book of Mormon is a record of the forefathers of our western Tribes of Indians, having been found through the ministration of an holy Angel translated into our own Language by the gift and power of God, after having been hid up in the earth for the last fourteen hundred years containing the word of God, which was delivered unto them, By it we learn that our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and that the land of America is a promised land unto them, and unto it all the tribes of Israel will come with as many of the gentiles as shall comply with the requisitions of the new co[v]enant. But the tribe of Judah will return to old Jerusalem. The City, of Zion, spoken of by David in the 102 Psalm will be built upon the Land of America and the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to it with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads, and then they will be delivered from the overflowing scourge that shall pass through the Land. But Judah shall obtain deliverance at Jerusalem see Joel 2:32. Isaiah 26, 20 & 21, Jeremiah 31:12, Psalm 50:5, Ezekiel 34, 11, 12 & 13.

(Signed) Joseph Smith Jr.¹⁸

This publication by the Prophet Joseph explained that “our western tribes of Indians are descendants from that Joseph that was sold into Egypt, and the land of America is a promised land unto them.” Joseph is making it just as clear that the remnant of Lehi were the western tribes of Indians as he did in the Wentworth letter, saying that “*the remnant are the Indians that now inhabit this country.*”

Noting that the letter he had sent on January 4 to the Rochester newspaper editor appeared in abbreviated form, Joseph quickly addressed Mr. Saxton on February 12, urging the importance of publishing the document in its entirety. The Prophet realized his responsibilities to make sure that his statements that are published are to be doctrinally sound and correct and that a misunderstanding could not be construed. Because of this responsibility, the Prophet Joseph wrote again to Mr. Saxton:

¹⁶ Joseph Smith, *Discourses of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, compiled by Alma P. Burton [Salt Lake City:Deseret Book Co., 1977], 275–276.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, compiled and edited by Dean C. Jessee [Salt Lake City:Deseret Book Co., 1984], 273–274. See also *History of the Church* 1:301 and D&C 87:1.

I was somewhat disappointed on receiving my paper with only a part of my letter inserted in it. The letter which I wrote you for publication *I wrote by the commandment of God*, and I am quite anxious to have it all laid before the public for it is of *importance* to them...

—Joseph Smith Jr.¹⁹

The reply of Joseph to Mr. Saxton leaves little doubt that the explanation that was first sent to the newspaper was inspired. The affirmation of the Prophet Joseph to Mr. Saxton was that it was written by “*commandment of God*” and, therefore, revelatory in nature.

Zion’s March and Zelph

The statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith that should *not* be overlooked or forgotten are those about Zelph, which also pertain to a geographical setting for the Book of Mormon. These important statements were made during Zion’s March. These include the Zelph account and the letter written by the Prophet to his wife Emma. These sources have been, and will continue to be, a point of discussion and dispute for many Mesoamerican theorists. Many articles have been written that are contrary to the words of Joseph Smith and try to cast doubt on the validity of these statements and the inspiration claimed by the Prophet. The Zelph account and the events pertaining to it are discussed here as they give legitimacy to the inspiration and knowledge of Joseph Smith, the Wentworth Letter, and the Doctrine and Covenants.

On June 2, 1834 the Prophet Joseph Smith, along with several members of Zion’s Camp, crossed the Illinois River and camped on the west bank. The next morning, Joseph and several other brethren visited a prominent mound on top of the bluffs, overlooking the river which had been located the previous day by a reconnaissance party. This location today is approximately a mile south of Valley City, Illinois and is now known as Naples Russell Mound number 8.

Joseph’s experience while standing atop the mound was recorded as follows:

...on 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. ²⁰

Joseph then requested a shovel, and after excavating down one or two feet, revealed the skeleton of a man.

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 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. He was killed in battle

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 275–276.

²⁰ *History of the Church* 2:79–80.

by the arrow found among his ribs, during *the last great struggle with the Lamanites and Nephites*.²¹

Wilford Woodruff, Heber C. Kimball, Reuben McBride, Moses Martin, Levi Hancock, George A. Smith, and other men all bore record in their personal journals of this event and each gave similar accounts. The journal of Joseph Smith recorded the event in the same way and same words as do the journals of those who were there. One congruent fact in all journal accounts is the inspiration attributed to Joseph as a revelation, just as the Prophet stated, that the “visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty.”

Joseph received a revelation from God, and a vision of the past, indicating quite precisely where events of the Book of Mormon took place. This great prophet Onandagus was known “from *the Hill Cumorah or eastern sea* to the Rocky Mountains.” This information may also help to establish a location for the “eastern sea” mentioned in the text of the Book of Mormon. Also, Joseph declared that this was the area of “the last great struggle with the Lamanites and Nephites” (not the last battle) and not Mesoamerica as the Limited Geography Theory would demand. The Lord, through Joseph, could not have been more clear that this very mound was within the boundaries of the Book of Mormon lands. Even though these statements do not necessarily agree with the Mesoamerican consensus on geography, they should not be cast away as frivolous statements. There are more witnesses than one that testifies of Joseph’s inspiration on this occasion.

Donald Q. Cannon, a respected and reputable church historian and scholar, has expressed similar feelings about the statements of the Prophet Joseph Smith. Cannon addresses the rejection of the Prophet statements about the Zeph mound by current L.D.S. scholars, as found in the journals:

The journal accounts of Joseph Smith’s activities and his letter indicate that he believed that Book of Mormon history, or at least a part of it, transpired in North America. What does one do with such a prophetic statement? Some have dismissed it as a joke or playful exercise of Joseph’s imagination. Others have chosen to emphasize discrepancies and possible contradictions in the source accounts, thereby discrediting what Joseph Smith said.

It seems to me that either approach carries heavy risks. When one chooses to state that Joseph Smith can’t be taken seriously on this issue, the door is opened to question his statements on other issues. Where does it stop? Does the First Vision, with the discrepancies in the primary source accounts, also come under the doubt and skepticism applied here to Zeph? Why can’t we simply take Joseph Smith at his word?²²

Letter to Emma

²¹ *Ibid.* See also Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, 3:239–240. Heber C. Kimball is quoted in his journal as saying, “While on our way we felt anxious to know who the person was who had been killed by that arrow. It was made known to Joseph that he had been an officer who fell in battle, in the last destruction among the Lamanites, and his name was Zeph. This caused us to rejoice much, to think that God was so mindful of us as to show these things to his servant. Brother Joseph had inquired of the Lord, and it was made known in a vision.” Joseph Fielding Smith goes on to state in the same reference that: “In the face of this evidence coming from the Prophet Joseph Smith, Oliver Cowdery, and David Whitmer, we cannot say that the Nephites and Lamanites did not possess the territory of the United States and that the Hill Cumorah is in Central America. Neither can we say that the great struggle which resulted in the destruction of the Nephites took place in Central America. If Zeph, a righteous man, was fighting under a great prophet-general in the last battles between the Nephites and Lamanites; if that great prophet-general was known from the Rocky Mountains to “the Hill Cumorah or eastern sea,” then some of those battles, and evidently the final battles, did take place within the borders of what is now the United States.”

²² Donald Q. Cannon, *Church History Regional Studies*, BYU Department of Church History and Doctrine, Regional Studies, Illinois, “Zeph Revisited,” 97–109.

While on the Zion's Camp march, just two days after the vision regarding Zelph on the mound above the Illinois River, Joseph Smith wrote a letter to his wife Emma. This letter by the Prophet dated 4 June 1834 revealed his feelings and thoughts about Book of Mormon geography that may have come from the vision and inspiration two days before at the Zelph mound.

The whole of our journey, in the midst of so large a company of social honest and sincere men, *wandering over the plains of the Nephites*, recounting occasionally the history of The Book of Mormon, *roving over the mounds of that once beloved people of the Lord, picking up their skulls & their bones, as a proof of its divine authenticity*, and gazing upon a country the fertility, the splendour and the goodness so indescribable, all serves to pass away time unnoticed.²³

Writing to his wife Emma, Joseph linked the 'mound building culture' to the Book of Mormon people, as he described himself as "wandering over the plains of the Nephites" and "roving over the mounds" of the same culture. These few statements seem to leave little doubt about the promised land of Lehi being the same land upon which Joseph Smith was familiar.

This personal letter and the Zelph account—which he testified came to him by revelation and inspiration—explain what Joseph Smith knew and believed about Book of Mormon geography. The statements above give no indication that the Prophet was unsure, confused, or unaware where the history of the Book of Mormon took place, or that he had 'no inspiration on the matter.' Joseph Smith is consistent, clear, concise, and inspired, leaving no doubt about his thoughts as to the setting of this sacred history. This being the case these statements cannot be set aside as they become a primary witness along with the scriptures.

According to journal accounts, the Prophet Joseph also declared that the Book of Mormon city of Manti was not far from this area. In 1836, the Prophet Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and others found it best, on account of apostasy and bitterness, to leave Kirtland and go to Far West, Missouri, where the Saints were endeavoring to establish themselves. On September 25, they passed through Huntsville, in Randolph County, and reported that the prophet told the brethren that this place, where a stake of Zion had been established, was the area of "the ancient site of the city of Manti."²⁴

The camp passed through Huntsville, in Randolph County, which had been appointed as one of the stakes of Zion, and *is the ancient site of the City of Manti*, and pitched tents at Dark Creek, Salt Licks, seventeen miles. It was reported to the camp that one hundred and ten men had volunteered from Randolph and gone to Far West to settle difficulties.

The following account of the same event is taken from the daily journal of the Kirtland Camp, written by Samuel D. Tyler:

September 25, 1838. We passed through Huntsville, Co, seat of Randolph Co, Pop. 450, and three miles further we bought 32 bu of corn off one of the brethren who resides in this place. There are several of the brethren round about here and *this is the ancient site of the City of Manti, which is spoken of in the Book of Mormon* and this is appointed one of the Stakes of Zion, and it is in Randolph County, Missouri, three miles west of the county seat."²⁵

²³ Joseph Smith, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith*, comp. and ed., Dean C. Jessee [Salt Lake City:Deseret Book, 1984], 324.

²⁴ Andrew Jenson, *The Historical Record*, Vol. 7, 601.

²⁵ Joseph Fielding Smith, *Doctrines of Salvation*, edited by Bruce R. McConkie, [Salt Lake City, Bookcraft 1954], 3:239.

The Prophet Joseph, according to these diary accounts, revealed where the Book of Mormon city of Manti was located. This is not the only ancient city mentioned in this dispensation that has a link to the promised land in the Book of Mormon. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord told the Prophet Joseph Smith that a city was to be built opposite the city of Nauvoo on the west bank of the river. However, speaking of “new” cities and “old” cities, the scriptures record in Ether:

Behold, Ether saw the days of Christ, and he spake concerning a New Jerusalem upon this land.

And he spake also concerning the house of Israel, and the Jerusalem from whence Lehi should come—after it should be destroyed it should be built up again, a holy city unto the Lord; wherefore, *it could not be a new Jerusalem for it had been in a time of old*; but it should be built up again, and become a holy city of the Lord; and it should be built unto the house of Israel.

And that a New Jerusalem should be built up upon this land, unto the remnant of the seed of Joseph, for which things there has been a type. (Ether 13:4–6)

These verses teach that if a city existed before—and that another city should be built by the same name elsewhere—it should be called “New” as in the case of Jerusalem. Thus a city that is to be built named Jerusalem in a different place must be called “New Jerusalem,” because there was another city by that name in another time and another place. Likewise, if there were to be a city built by the name of Zarahemla in a different place than the ancient city, it should be called New Zarahemla. In the Doctrine and Covenants the Lord declared that “Zarahemla” should be built west of Nauvoo. “Let them build up a city unto my name upon the land opposite the city of Nauvoo, and let the name of Zarahemla be named upon it” (D&C 125:3). This Zarahemla could be a “New Zarahemla,” except the Lord’s instructions for the naming of cities with the same name would at least imply that Zarahemla might have been in the area west of Nauvoo. However, there exists no direct and sure statement that would leave—without doubt—that the ancient city Zarahemla was west of Nauvoo, except for the implication as explained above.

A Nephite Tower

During the Prophet Joseph’s visits into Missouri, and specifically the Grand River area, he extended his trip for the purpose of “laying off a stake” and making “claims to lands to facilitate the gathering of the saints.”²⁶ The Prophet wrote in his journal for the date of Saturday, 19 May 1838, the following:

This morning we struck our tents and formed a line of march, crossing Grand River at the mouth of Honey Creek and Nelson’s Ferry... We pursued our course up the river, mostly through timber, for about eighteen miles, when we arrived at Colonel Lyman Wight’s home. He lives at the foot of Tower Hill (a name I gave the place in consequence of the remains of an old Nephite altar or tower that stood there), where we camped for the Sabbath.²⁷

Here the Prophet explained, in his own words, that there existed at Adam-ondi-Ahman, not only an altar he stated was from Adam, but also the remains of a tower or altar that belonged to the Nephites. This site was a sacred, holy, and chosen land to all the generations of righteous who recognized the Lord’s work upon the land of promise. Once again, the Prophet Joseph made a

²⁶ *History of the Church* 3:34–35.

²⁷ *Ibid.* See also *TPJS*, 122.

documented statement about the Nephites upon North America lands, which supports his understanding, and the scriptures that he translated.

The Sac and Fox Indians at Nauvoo.

Late in the summer of 1841, a group of Native Americans from the Sac and Fox tribes had been displaced from their homelands and were living in present-day Iowa. They specifically crossed the Mississippi to Nauvoo and came to visit the Prophet Joseph Smith. The meeting was recorded in the *History of the Church*:

Thursday, 12.—A considerable number of the Sac and Fox Indians have been for several days encamped in the neighborhood of Montrose. The ferryman brought over a great number on the ferryboat and two flat boats for the purpose of visiting me. The military band and a detachment of Invincibles [part of the Legion] were on shore ready to receive and escort them to the grove, but they refused to come on shore until I went down. I accordingly went down, and met Keokuk, Kis-ku-kosh, Appenoose, and about one hundred chiefs and braves of those tribes, with their families. At the landing, I was introduced by Brother Hyrum to them; and after salutations, I conducted them to the meeting grounds in the grove, and instructed them in many things *which the Lord had revealed unto me concerning their fathers, and the promises that were made concerning them in the Book of Mormon*. I advised them to cease killing each other and warring with other tribes; also to keep peace with the whites; all of which was interpreted to them.²⁸

This account of the visit of the Sac and Fox tribes to Joseph teach two important concepts: *one*, that *the Lord had revealed* things to the Prophet concerning their fathers; and *two*, he taught them about the *promises that were made concerning them in the Book of Mormon*. Respectively, these statements are indications of the inspiration and revelation that Joseph Smith received, and that he knew and understood that these Lamanite remnants were the recipient heirs of the promises of the Book of Mormon.

Many claim that Joseph Smith’s belief in a setting for the Book of Mormon changed or evolved as he grew near the time of his death. However, just a few days before his martyrdom the Prophet taught that his view in relation to who the remnant Lamanites were had not changed. In May of 1844 the Prophet recorded another visit by the Sac and Fox tribes in his personal journal wherein he again restated that the Lord told him:

1. P.M. held council with the Indians Sac & Fox &c in my back kitchen. They told me (Joseph) “*You are a big chief. We are sons of big men, and Priests as ever inhabited this land. You preach a great deal so say great Spirit. You be as great & good as our fathers that will do. Our worship is different, but we are good as any other men.*”

I [Joseph Smith] Replied. Great spirit wants you to be united & live in peace. [I] found a book, (presenting the Book of Mormon) *which told me about your fathers & Great Spirit told me. you must send to all the tribes you can, & tell them to live in peace, & when any of our people come to see you treat them as we treat you.*²⁹

Joseph explained to the Sac and Fox that the Book of Mormon taught about ‘their fathers’. Joseph then explained to them that the Lord (Great Spirit) “told me” that the book must be given to all the tribes. Just a few days before his death, the Prophet Joseph reaffirms his testimony and

²⁸ *History of the Church* 4:401.

²⁹ Joseph Smith, Diary kept by Willard Richards, 23 May 1844, LDS Church History Library.

actions that the Native North Americans were the Lamanite remnant prophesied in the Book of Mormon.

It is evident that the Prophet Joseph Smith had revelations and inspiration about the “ancient inhabitants of this continent,” as Moroni declared in the Pearl of Great Price. Joseph Smith also stated, “*He [the angel] said that the Indians were the literal descendants of Abraham.*”³⁰

Inspiration

The words that Joseph and others used to describe his inspiration specifically about a Book of Mormon setting in North American are listed below. Each of these phrases are used in conjunction with the statements Joseph Smith made about the geographical setting of the Book of Mormon and loudly declared that he received this knowledge through revelation and inspiration.

“things which the Lord had revealed unto me”

“Joseph continued to receive instruction from the Lord”

“the visions of the past being opened to my understanding by the Spirit of the Almighty”

“this publication I wrote by the commandment of God”

“We are informed by these records”

“It was [also] made known unto me”

“I was also told”

“the angel said”

“I was also informed concerning the aboriginal inhabitants of this country [America] and shown”

“I was informed”

If Joseph Smith knew, then he was clear and concise in his declaration of inspiration and in his knowledge of the geographical setting for the Book of Mormon. If he did not know, then the questions should be asked, why did he say or write the things he said and wrote? And, why would Joseph claim inspiration if he were ‘just guessing’ as Steve Carr believes?³¹

The words of Joseph Smith are presented here that they might be known as this discussion continues about the land of promise and the Gentile nation ensues. These prophecies and promises that are made by the Lord—in person and by inspiration to ancient prophets about a chosen land—are one of the major messages discussed in the Book of Mormon. The statements by the Prophet Joseph about the setting for the Book of Mormon and the prophecies about the land within the text support each other. The Prophet Joseph Smith and the scriptures should be allowed to speak for themselves to the reader, without forcing explanations or a filtered commentary based on a personal agenda which clouds one’s view of the intended meaning of the text. The Book of Mormon, *first*, contains the Gospel of Jesus Christ; *second*, it is a record of a

³⁰ *The Diaries and Journals of Joseph Smith*, ed. Scott H. Faulring, 1989, 51.

³¹ *The Salt Lake Tribune*, March 26, 2010, “Book of Mormon Geography Stirring Controversy.”

fallen people; and *third*, it is a scriptural history of a few groups who are led to the same land that play a part in the restoration. The Book of Mormon is a '*prophetic history*' of four migrations to the promised land—the Jaredites, the Mulekites, the Lehites, and the Gentiles—who come out of captivity. Joseph Smith's words and thoughts, declared by him as inspiration, stand as a powerful second witness to the setting of the Book of Mormon and the message to those who lived, and will live, upon the land of promise.